Words Unanswered

by rednightmare

Summary

The most terrible thing you can do to a writer, Bilbo is sure, is answer words with silence.

Sweet-bittersweet, comedy-angst, movie/book fusion. Set in a reclaimed Erebor full of dwarrowdames, constitutional monarchy, assassination attempts and new Durins -- all brought to you via a completely neutral and factual firsthand account utterly expurgated of bias. Also expurgated of questionable narratorial rambling, curiously tender descriptions, marginalia complaints, annoying sayings, and irrelevant hobbitish asides. Candidly, Master Baggins is just trying to finish this book and go home.

STATUS (11/8): Status update! I've restructured and rewritten *everything* I had for the next update in order to make the future chapter re-arranging I'd been stressing about completely unnecessary! I feel the final act is much more logically-organized now, and this new structure means I won't need to pull any weird post-release maneuvers, risk spoiling my own work, or beg for your understanding mid-finale. I've made WORDS half my NaNo project, so I expect to have an update posted at the end of the month. You can check my WIP Trello via my profile for updates. Thanks for all you do!
For tigerbalm01, bestie and beta.

This is an elaborate Everybody Lives, but with a few tweaks and mutations. It’s not a true Fix-It (no one gets a perfectly happy ending), but it is a Patch-It-and-Kiss-It-and-Give-It-a-Candy.

GOAL ONE: CHARACTERIZATION COMPLEXITY. Due to the constraints of writing for cinema, characterization in adventure movies tends to be one-dimensional, highlighting one or two major qualities for each character. Don't get me wrong; Martin Freeman aced Bilbo, but by prioritizing Bilbo's fussiness and smallness, I feel The Hobbit films lost a lot of his meaningful character growth; likewise, Tolkien's Very Important Dwarf was at times eclipsed by Jackson's gruff loner king. Consider the characterization in "Words Unanswered" to be a fusion of the book and movie personalities for most characters.

GOAL TWO: DWARVEN CIVILIZATION ENRICHMENT. You might consider this a dwarf government AU with a probable dwarven extinction at its nexus. Here's the AU tweak list:

1. Dwarves have a tiny population, which I don’t take to be uncanonical – but it's still worrisome and fishy. To intensify the sex imbalance anxiety, I threw in some inexplicable rising rates of miscarriage, stillborns, maternal mortality, and birth defects. Maybe this is the result of lineage-obsessed inbreeding, or maybe Eru woke up one day and was just like, you know what, dwarves, you guys had a good run.
2. If we accept this, the mass-devastation at Erebor was pretty much a nail in the coffin for the species. Its reclaiming is thereby that much more emotionally significant, and the quest (and attached population cost) thusly controversial.
3. I am pretty sure Tolkien did not intend for the dwarves to be matriarchal, but I’m sick of the overwhelming presence of super-masculine-mega-testosterone-macho-nacho civilizations in fantasy settings, and my hand slipped. Don’t worry – the hobbits and the humans are still real freaking patriarchal and sexist – gosh.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Bilbo wrote six letters.

All right, if you really must hear it, fine: he was not the most respectable lettersmith in Arda.

He didn’t scribble one off, bowtie a pigeon and slingshot it into the courtyard or anything. He waited an appropriate amount of time. He bought some decent iron-gall ink. Actually, to be candid, he began that first one almost right away, flattening paper across his knees one night with Gandalf roasting chestnuts on their meager campfire beside him and the Lonely Mountain looming oversoulder like some sad colossus in the scant cover of clouds. But he waited a good few weeks to send it—just to be sure he hadn’t accidentally written in some unfortunate dwarfish offense, or made a dismal reference to gold, or babbled the daftest Shireling thing that popped into his head at any given moment. Such as the fact he was just now remembering how to worry about what his thieving cousins had done to the silverware. Or that he’d discovered the all-powerful wizard couldn’t even stew respectable rabbit-and-carrot dumplings. Or where all the leaves had gotten off to (wasn’t summer just yesterday). Or my, how clear the sky is up here in the ranges, like little wafts of white smoke in the sea, and have you ever seen a blue shriek of sky like that. (These all, save perhaps the last one, being typical things hobbits tend to fuss about.)

Look, the point is: they were edited letters, you understand, carefully edited. He hadn’t been rushing or nasty or cavalier. Given way he had left the king’s court—that is, the circumstances and concerns and conditions and considerations and probably a plethora of other reasonable-sounding words that begin with c—Bilbo thought he should be very mindful with the language, because you must know that if nothing else, he didn’t mean to cause any trouble at all.

For being a writer of horrible monsters and noble characters, Master Baggins was not very eloquent when handling the unfantastical truth. He was always a better dreamer of stories than a maker of what is real.

The second time Bilbo wrote, it was primarily to let everyone know he’d survived the long winter’s journey home—no need to fetch my effects from the bottom of some trollcave (hahaha)—and to reiterate, just in case that painstakingly tenderfooted first letter had been lost, that he really was not cross with Thorin or anyone for that matter, not in the least, and here is the jovial tone and smart levity to prove it. Hobbits, you know, are not very good at holding grudges, he wrote. Bilbo said all that might merit forgiveness have already been forgiven. This was merely the culmination of a well-thought-out personal decision, and by now, surely everyone has come to realize it’s for the best.

He was excessively friendly. He slid in a joke about the Erebor-Shire trek going much faster when you’re not spending it getting chased in circles by wine-drunk elves. He inquired after the health of Prince Fíli and the behavior of Prince Kíli; no mention of sickness; he’s sure everything is just fine.

He signed:

Cheers,

Bilbo
and he sealed it up and sent it off.

That done, Bilbo got down to the long business of waiting.

Early springtime in the Shire, if you’ve never partaken of it, is really quite breathtaking—but in a quiet-heeled way, a way that sneaks up on you like a silly cousin clapping her hands over your eyes. It happens gradually, then all of a sudden. The first good snowmelt waters the tenderest, halest baby grass, and then the pastures, yellow with the crunch of Solmath, blink out from under their frost. Soon tough, deep-rooted weeds begin to perk up. Soon comes thistle, valiant purple struggling at the edges of the wood. Soon daisies, brave against the cold, unbroken white and quite heroic. Soon new shoots in the sweet potato patches, new leaves on the crabapples, new buds on the pink scattering of dogwoods. Soon the sunwarm earth rolls over and lazily throws one foot out of bed, then the other, and before you know it, the wildflowers burst and the fresh mint mornings are upon you again.

Bilbo brought his writing outside. After months spent shuttered up in his study—watching Tomfool Rethe puff on his window panes, sipping chalky milk teas that now seemed pitiful and bland in the wake of all that distressingly spicy dwarven food—a writer began to let himself breathe. He aired out his whole house and broke out the cinnamon broom. He sang while scrubbing the dishes and folding the towels. He took to sitting on the front bench again at daybreak, one leg tossed over the other, biting his thumbnail or swigging chamomile-with-honey, crossing and crisscrossing his sluggish imagery and his mixed metaphors and his weak-ankled diction that didn’t get the pictures through. He’d wave at surly Grandmam Peabody next door. He’d have the delightful Primula and the dull-but-wholesome Drogo over for luncheon. He’d eye daggers at Lobelia whenever the Sackville-Baggins clan passed him during Sunday market. And he would live on, my dear, much as he always had—but with a little less fear in his clever voice, and a little more fear in the darkest, most secret meat of his heart.

He put his dwarfish things away under lock and key. He cut his caramel curls short and proper around the singlet war braid he’d earned. He got lax about sharpening Sting, weary of smoothing his mithril coat, and let an inch of newfound muscle sigh a little softer, until the lines of his ribs were safely ensconced and hobbitish again.

This is how Bilbo came home.

Home, as it turns out, had some minor reservations about having him back.

Oh, it was understandable. He’d given them quite a sight, returning on his lonesome—bristling with the spotted snowcat collar of his coat, the elven sword at his hip, the glimmering hauberk and the angular dwarfcopper shield on his back—and you can imagine the jaws swinging then. And you can imagine them swinging when he’d stomped right up the cobbled road to the auctioneers swarming about his estate and said, in his best blacksmith’s language: Excuse me, but what by Mahal’s giant swinging stones are you all doing on my lawn.

Hobbiton huffed and grumbled as gentlehobbits will do. They complained with their snippy teeth and mumbling tongues that Bilbo Baggins—vagabond gentry is he!—has come back, and become completely improper. The way he walks about town these days, jaunty like a summer jackrabbit, not right for a hobbit of his stature. Add it to those ridiculous rumors: dragon-hunting with dwarves. Rest his poor father’s soul. Where do you suppose he got all that money, anyway? Banditry, quite likely. Banditry or burglary, I hear. Not respectable in the slightest—hardly decent—yet he doesn’t seem to care. And I beg your pardon but have you seen his hair!

Well, they were right about that: Bilbo had faced evil and he had witnessed beauty and he had
braved death, and he found he just didn’t care a fig about propriety any more.

And when anyone asked what he’d been up to that whole year-and-some-quarters, Bilbo would merely pop his suspenders, shrug, and say, “Off hunting dragons, so I hear.” You should have seen the tuts and the chortles and the ungraceful whisperings that would get. He let the cuffs of his trousers get a little dirty. He rarely stammered and often slouched; he took up more space than he had before, letting his elbows loose and his legs stretch; and, my dear, he wore that skinny rat’s tail of braid tight along his neck, just behind the ear.

They thought he was something of a bounder, to tell true, and to tell truer, it’s possible Bilbo enjoyed his scoundrelly reputation a tad. He didn’t mean to be a complete snot. But incidentally, when you’ve charmed a red drake in the gold-gilt belly of a dwarf vault, when you’ve growled down a white warg still dripping royal blood from its chops, and when you’ve held the heart of a mountain glowing a thousand-and-one blues inside of your smallish, trembling hands, it’s a little bit difficult to be all that impressed by harping Shirrif Stomper Gullybrass down the lane.

And, incidentally, Bilbo was still a wealthy and eligible bachelor, even if he was a bit of a scoundrel.

He had gone from being a considerably well-to-do and well-named bachelor to a reprobate bachelor who was rolling in it, as a matter-of-fact, and for all the high society that decided Master Baggins was no longer acceptable company, handfuls more caught one whiff of affluence and came a-calling. He had strange and vaguely offensive marital status inquiries arriving from Overhill, nosy neighbors peering over the hedges, invitations to elite parties he’d no interest in attending, baskets of hot baked bread left on his stoop left by some poor old seamstress with a single daughter of an entirely unsuitable class (but who knew if bizarre, wayward Bilbo even cared about class anymore), and once he’d even peeled an embarrassing drawing off his study window from some so-called admirer who never introduced themselves. No one seemed to know exactly how rich he was, but rumors ranged from to richer than the Thain himself to filthy rich as a filthy-rich dwarven prince.

And it’s true Master Baggins didn’t much need to work any longer. Even his little bookbinding and mapmaking hobby seemed extraneous with a cellar full of gold and gemstones, one-fourteenth’s-worth of treasure hand-picked by Dori from the pile. Frankly, between the fat coin chest, his exceptional armor, his oiled furs, his elven weaponry, three handfuls of loose sapphires and the fine buckler Balin sent him away with, Bilbo suspected he’d carried off more than a fair hobbit’s-share. Now what! the writer asked of his bookcases and kettle cabinets and the line of Baggins portraits, stuffy and proper on his wall. They had no answers for him. He arranged and rearranged. He dusted his mother’s rosy cheeks with his palm heel and he sighed.

And through all of this, there was that uncomfortable, wind-in-the-willows, waking dream sense Bilbo had—a gentle suggestion that maybe something yet was coming—though he could think of nothing that ought to be.

He wrote:

*Dear Balin*

*Dear Bofur and Dear Bombur*

*Dear Óin*

*Dear Ori, Dear Dori, and Dear Nori, too*
Oh, he didn’t expect a response right away. It was an agonizing journey from this humble patch of Shire to the mighty Lonely Mountain, and Bilbo was mostly sure Balin had been teasing when the old dwarf said that the Ravens of Erebor comprehend Khuzdul.

But then, one day, not so long after he had mailed it: a tap-tap-tap on the window. A letter, sealed with rich tallow and sleeved in ram leather, dropped on the stoop. And a handsome black bird sitting on the postbox, preening patiently with its fearsome beak.

Oh, hello, Bilbo said, holding wide the door. "Hello and good morning, my fine dwarf-bird. Would you like to come in for a bite to eat?"

Apparently they did not understand Common—but all birds, of course, understand the language of biscuits.

Balin wrote lovely letters. Long, moseying, friendly letters on parchment that smelled of beeswax and a musty desk. He prattled on in his stubby, tutting penmanship about the ridiculous rise in the price of lumber and the Thousand Rose celebrations in Dale and how beautiful the bloodreds were coming in this autumn. Bofur wrote jokes in chicken scratch, conveyed Bombur’s dictations, and scribbled in the margins to make Bilbo smile. Ori sent dozens of charcoal sketches for the book. Óin wrapped up a guide to eastern plants. Dori sent him some personal recipes for healthsome dwarven tea. Fíli and Kíli were not very good about returning letters, so Bilbo wrote to them only on particular occasions, and rolled his eyes at the sloppy cursive and grease stains he got back.

Of course, he was thrilled to receive word from any of them. He could not stymie the bubbling when talons and casing gave way to coarse red dwarven paper, and would never make it back to his study. He’d flick a finger and pop the seam and devour them right there in the glare of greengrass Shire morning, box hinges squeaking, pages rustling, pupils scurrying, desperate to hear in the back of his mind the slow, deep voices of dwarves, always speaking of what was old-and-true. He would hurry to write back right away. He opened new ink bottles and lit good candles to work through the evening. He even began to get used to those big, ominous birds—and from the way they would perch on his sill and crumble his sweet breads and haw-haw-haw, Bilbo got the sense they were judging him.

Thank goodness ravens only speak Khuzdul; they couldn’t read over his shoulder and notice the writer’s letters simply weren’t all that good.

He wrote:

Dear Balin,

Thank you for the eloquent

Dear Bofur and Bombur,

Now that you’re famous I do hope you’ll come visit me before

Dear Ori,

The drawings are exquisite. That one in pen looks just like me though I thank you for being a little bit
kind to my ears, if you know what I

Dear Dori,

I've tried the recipe and you'll be happy to know

Dear Nori,

Very funny

Dear Óin,

I never knew one could apply bearberry as a

Dear Kíli,

Well, you can just tell His Majesty Prince Fíli that I said

He would bundle up every one of those letters and every one of those names and send them off. In the time it took bunch of six-week daffodils to go from buds in Bilbo’s garden to a vase on Bilbo’s desk, the ravens would be knocking at his glass again.

He wrote:

Dear Thorin

Astron, Thrimidge, Forelithe, and nothing. A handful of crocuses plucked from the front yard and a bushel of first harvest cauliflower from the Gamgees across the way.

I mean, it’s not as though he had literally nothing to keep his time. There was a book to be written, and besides that, domestic troubles needed sortening. Several of Bilbo’s possessions had gone missing or been auctioned off, and those that could not be immediately tracked down turned up in the strangest of places: an antique hand-mirror in a satchel of tradehouse yarn; his father’s snuffbox wedged in the fore of an abandoned fishing boat; a West Farthing sugar cup propped on a pasture fencepost, sitting pretty for the sheep. He had a lot of backtaxes to pay. He had the business of the gentry to do.

And you know, it’s not as though Bilbo didn’t have family to think about.

Aunts and uncles, uncles and aunts! Aunt Linda was about to hitch herself to a Proudfoot (which adds one more uncle to the Baggins tree), and honestly who ever knew what Uncle Bingo was up to. And the cousins! Do you have any idea how fast an extended family of hobbits produces cousins? Come back from a long visit to the loo in Hobbiton and you’ve got five or six new cousins. Well, Bilbo had been away for more than a year, and he had babies to visit and shower gifts to give and
condescending letters piling up from busybodies who claimed relation, somehow.

Add all that to that the cousins he already had, who ranged from saintly and preachy to deplorably behaved. Dora, who had hardly spoken to Bilbo prior to his departure, kept writing him longish letters as though they were famous old friends. Lobelia was always about—hovering, sniffing. Dudo couldn’t make heads-or-tails of his farming equipment and assumed Bilbo, having run off with dwarves, could now fix anything with a tweak of a lever and a thump of his hand. Drogo asked for financial advice. It was really a little transparent.

Primula, he said. Prim, my dear, when you get a minute, and I hope you don’t think me odd, but I would really like to teach you a thing or two about the use of a sword. You being ready to start a family, such as it is. No, no; I don’t expect trouble. It’s just that it’s a very big and dangerous world out there, and you never do know what might happen, do you.

Who knows what he was waiting for—maybe just for winter to come again.

Dear Thorin, he wrote:

If I have to suffer one more tottering West Farthing pumpkinmonger asking me to procure them a dwarfsword I think I shall go pretty well mad.

Look, it’s not as if I am opposed to the notion of a domestic lad preparing himself for the worst of the world—because obviously, I’m not—but I’m opposed to the standing fact they don’t have a lick of sense as to what to do with it. Forgetting that I can’t, in fact, produce a dwarven weapon from vapor by snapping my fingers, let’s consider this a moment, shall we. Imagine you are a gardener’s boy, or a shepherd, or a cotton-grower or what have you. Your profession is incredibly dull and your brain is roundabout the size of a robin’s egg, so you join the Shirrif’s Watch, and mostly to tote around a big club while sneering at old people. You want to graduate from a wooden stick fashioned for chasing off crows to, what, a falchion? Oh, sure, and shall I get you a dwarfsteel pollaxe, too? I ask you. Who will they stab, anyway? Rabbits? And I’m sorry, but what do you fancy a potato-picker to do with a sword but hurt himself on it.

I suspect what they’re truly after is for me to teach them technique. Believe you me, I have seen these lads—they’re absolute idiots—and I think their fathers are worse, so I have no plans to do that any time soon. “Think of the township, Bilbo,” the Shirrif tells me. Well, I am—thinking specifically of the poor hobbit lasses. I’ll not train up a bunch of ill-behaved boys with swords so that they might terrorize girls with them. Sergeant Stomper (that is really his name) is quite cross with me over it, but a Baggins no is a flat-out no, and there’ll be no iffing or stipulations about it. I’d sooner shave my feet.

What sort of person rears violent boys, I ask. On my life, if I were ever to have a son, he should know how to hold a blade and not be a complete clot about it.

And how fare your boys? I wrote to Kíli not too long ago, but I suppose the both of them have better things to do than bother with long letters from some retired sneak-thief. (And I suspect Gandalf may have slightly overstated my burglarizing talents to you at the outset. Which I would apologize for, but I think you’ve already gleaned that the crooked old man is madder than a marsh hare.)

You know, it was never made abundantly clear to me what sort of role a dwarf prince plays in his government. Is it purely hereditary, or must they perform functions to retain their eligibility for
heirship? Hobbits have a somewhat convoluted inheritance process. We split our lineages this way and that way in just a generation or two, so it’s a bit more complicated than direct descendancy. Nothing is very direct among hobbits, I’m afraid. There is a great deal of who-said-whatting and this-and-thatting involved. It’s a minor nightmare, and heavens forbid the paperwork isn’t exactly shipshape. I’ve no notion of what will happen to Bag End when I’m gone. It certainly won’t go to just any old cousin. I’ll smash the plates, sell the porcelain, pink the walls and find an orphan to sign it to before I let a Sackville-Baggins get her grubby little paws on it. But I am sure none of this is of very much interest to a king.

Dwarfsword. Spare me. To top it off, if you remember, mine is an elven blade—so they have indeed never seen a dwarfsword.

Besides all that, I’m doing fine.

And you? I’m thinking that maybe you should have a strong talk with your bird, because he’s taking his jolly time to get here. Did you receive my letters? I’ve not heard from you and am a bit concerned. I suppose someone would have written me if you died, yes? Certainly I hope so, because I shouldn’t like to see a dwarf funeral; I bet they are horribly serious and sad affairs. Optimistically, am thinking the post just got lost.

Quite a decent spring. My rutabagas came up nicely. Hope you are well.

And he signed:

With Utmost Regard and Loving Respect,

Yours Truly,

Bilbo

You see? Not much of a letter, at all.

With that, ex-Burglar Baggins sent off his third message to ex-Company Leader Thorin, took a plump stack of paper and mug of dwarven tea to the backyard, and waited and waited some more.

He said Drogo, mate, I don’t know what to tell you—why don’t you write to the moneylender in Bree.

He said you know, Dudo, and I hope you won’t take offense, but I can’t help. Should probably buy a new wagon, don’t you think?

He said for the last time, you rotten boys, you’ll get nothing from me — and if I see you skulking about my property again so help me I’ll give you all the combat lesson of your lives!

He said look, Shirrif, with all due respect, it’s really not that difficult. If you’re fighting Big Folk, all you need to do is dart through the legs, yeah? and then you swing! just there. Cut the tendon at the back of the knee. Give the insole your heel, and when he’s down, why then it’s just—it’s very simple, really—you need only—it’s just a little thrust from the shoulder—what it is, really, is just having a little guts.

He said oh do you know what Lobelia, if that’s how you feel about it, if that is how you really feel,
you can just go piss on somebody else’s fence for a while.

He said is this the way of it?

He said Prim, Primula, my dear, don’t you know I just want you all to be ready for anything in the world.

He really needed to buckle down and finish this book, Bilbo decided. Then maybe the past would feel like it had closed, the back cover had shut, and there wouldn’t be this incessant, childish, heartflutter hoping for one more page before the end.

He said you know I just I fear I don’t know anything really. I’m afraid I don’t know one half as much as I knew I did before.

Mid-year, Afterlithe, Wedmath. The leaves on the honey-peach trees went brittle and brown.

For the longest time, there was no word from Thorin—no word!—terrible thing to do to a writer, that. But Bilbo didn’t let himself worry overmuch. Lots to do in Erebor, he is sure. Lots to be thinking about and lots to keep you busy, with your eyes focused forward, not back.

And then: a package.

Oh, it was definitely dwarven—that Bilbo could tell from the heavy iron on the cylinder, a dark and handsome polished wood. And he could double-certainly tell from the dramatic way it had smacked into his door. Master Baggins answered, brought the tube inside, set out a seedcake for the exhausted bird, melted the sealant with a candle, and fished out a stout paring knife to wedge it open.

Standing in his living room, tossing the knife aside in a most irresponsible fashion, Bilbo took a deep breath. And he smelled the rich scent of insulation—the perfume of thick, black dwarven-cured fur.

But he’d opened it upside-down, apparently. Before Bilbo could unpack the contents in a more reasonable fashion—as he stood there, smoothing the pelt with his thumbs, welcoming one small vestige of the luxury of dwarrow—something weighty and bright unrolled from it and banged right on the pecan floor.

A dwarven sword.

More of a sidearm, for accuracy’s sake. The wide, stubborn dagger had been downsized to suit someone of Bilbo’s lackluster limb length, straight-lined and sharp. Silvery white dwarfsteel, two-edged, with an ebon crossguard, red leather grip, and brilliant greenstone set in the pommel (Bilbo, who was not well-versed in gems, supposed it for an emerald or a bit of jade). There was no reading the gold runes along the fuller. He tested the angry point in one palm and dammit-and-blasted under his breath.

Not bad, Bilbo decided, trying on a stance. He sucked in his breath and steeled his stomach; he gave it a mean thrust forward and a clever thrust back. ‘Not too bad; a little heavy; my arm’s gone soft.’

He’d practice a bit more later. (He’d have to give it a proper stand-up to Sting, though a prudent hobbit might keep his comparative summaries regarding elven/dwarven measurements to himself.) For now, Bilbo found himself lunging for the pelt, whisking it up and turning it over. He grabbed the tube and shook. He stuck his hand all the way in and fumbled, with increasing frustration, sure he’d fingernail the trapped parchment off its sides soon enough.

No letter! Bilbo said. No, see here, that can’t be right. But he scraped and he groped and he squinted and he peered, and there was nothing else—nothing more—just darkness inside of a now-empty
The fourth time Bilbo Baggins wrote to Thorin Oakenshield, he was feeling a little bit shorter than the last, and opened:

*Dear Thorin,*

*I understand you are not entirely pleased with my declination of the generously offered court seat but I am really not trained for all that, no offense meant, and considering the demands and addendums and *quid pro quos*, it was both impossible and irresponsible to accept. I am sure Dwalin is serving much more adequately in the role and you have to admit, a hobbit King’s-Guard looks a little ridiculous.*

*How are the new dwarven lords adjusting?* he said. He said I do hope all is well. He said when you get a moment—and please don’t rush—but when you get the time I would really like to hear from you.

*He said*

*Thank you for the sword. It’s very fine.*

*He signed*

*In Friendship and Patience,*

*With an Extra Helping of Patience,*

*Bilbo*

Halimath, Winterfilth, Blotmath, and then he had the long greenless winter again.

It was Foreyule before the second parcel arrived. This one was lighter than the last, and Bilbo searched for a letter before he undid the stout square of fur. There was no word. There wasn’t even a chain on the medallion he’d received—a rising sun of poured gold, ringed with celebrated Erebor silver, livid and just too large to curl his fingers around. Unreadable runes circled the edge; an unknown symbol blackened the back, looking harshly official. Bilbo turned it over and over. There was an eye of a red fire opal set in the middle, and the deep, angular engraving sunk around it was just distinct enough to suggest a mountain’s peak.

Never a letter. Not even a note.

It is in this silence that the grim notion comes to Bilbo these are not gifts, at all.
Dear Thorin, he wrote.

How is Erebor? Hope you are well.

Bloody cold here. Snow to the knees, and I’ll need to scrape ice off my windows by morning, but I keep a mean little fire going all right. The roads are a plain mess. Which is a predicament, it is, because it’s nearly Yule now—so of course, everyone’s poor pony is sliding to and fro from town, bogged down under a cartful of grainsacks stuffed with presents. That’s a bit of Shire tradition for you. Come the sixday Yuletide, you’re expected to buy gifts for all your relations. Which wouldn’t normally be unpleasant and I must sound to you like a choleric baron, but I’m sorry, do you have any idea how many relations your average hobbit has? Such is Yule season. Glut and gut.

(That and cranberries. Cranberries everything! Cranberry flatcakes, cranberry pies, cranberry butter, cranberry biscuits! Good cheer to you sir and can I interest you in a cranberry tea with a handful of cranberries in it? I tell you, it’s nutty, I’m through.)

If you’re not familiar with Yule, and I see no reason why a dwarfking would be, hobbit holidays are different variants of what is essentially the same celebration. Which is to say they are all paper-thin excuses for weeklong dessert nibbling, the encouragement of screaming children, and excessive drinking. (And the cranberries, I tell you! Halfling madness. Completely barmy.) I’ve been invited to a few parties, but I don’t believe I’ll attend any of them; gentlehobbit parties are dodgy affairs. My mother swore she was poisoned once at a Baggins-Goodbody reception, but my father said it was only Uncle Togo’s green bean lasagna. Tooks have always had what you might call a proclivity for wild imaginings.

I don’t suppose you have anything like that, lacking the sodding cranberry shrubs and whatall, but nevertheless I hope you are enjoying winter, and it isn’t awfully bitter in that mountain. I imagine it must be drafty. I don’t much fancy the thought of you all walking along on some windy high wall somewhere and finding yourselves blown about, so take care and all that.

Someday I think I should like to see a proper dwarf holiday. Regrettably, my only Durin’s Day was lacking in seasonal cheer.

Is there much singing at the dwarf new year? Well, I bet you don’t show up on some unsuspecting gent’s doorstep in the middle of an otherwise perfectly peaceful evening and trill Snowfall Joy Joy Joy at him. (Yes, there are really three joys in the title.) It is a tragic tradition of my species. Wouldn’t be half so painful if the musical merrymakers were actually singers, but not so. They’re just any annoying snot down your lane with an overabundance of energy and a need to express their happiness, aggressively. I’m sure dwarves would make it sound much lovelier, but you’ll have to trust me: it’s torture. Worse: if you’re accosted in your own blasted doorframe, neighborliness demands you clap your hands, pinch the fauntlings’ cheeks, and serve them all hot cider. We call it “a-caroling.”

(You know who would like it? Bofur. I’d bet my last pumpkin Bofur would a-carol. And Kíli, though mostly to look into people’s houses.)

Anyway. For what it’s worth: Happy Yule.

Please do not send me any further payment, unless it’s a letter, because really that is all I ask.

Cordially,

Your Friend,
P.S. I can appreciate why you might be disappointed, but I really cannot be onboard with the *EXCEEDINGLY RUDE* not speaking to me.

Feeling especially irritated with dwarven melodrama, he underlined both *exceedingly* and *rude*. He even went back later and underlined *rude* twice.

The third payment Bilbo Baggins received did not come in a package at all. It was a raven-borne key—no note, no explanation, no suggestion of what to use it on. Bilbo was so confused and irritated he did not even bother responding to this. If it was some mysterious dwarfish sentiment, well, the writer didn’t get it, plain-and-simple, and so the key collected dust on his mantle, its metals silent and cold.

Then, nigh six months later, came the trunk: dwarfiron, wagon-carried, unsnappable dwarven hinges and an unbreakable dwarven lock.

Bilbo dragged it inside and put the key in the slot and it opened.

Scale! Glistening, threatening, evil black scale—obsidian like the eyeshine of cats in the dark. Such a shock it was and so clearly valuable, he lurched up to pull the shutters and latch the door, feeling immediately and intensely as though no hobbit should have such a thing. It was lying in a bed of timberwolf fur and cold to the touch when Bilbo reached in. A pair of vambraces and shinguards, count two.

He did not put it all on. That would have looked ridiculous. He held a greave, curling it over his lower leg, just to see. He strapped one brace over his forearm to try. He studied it, and measured it, and lifted it, and when a bolt of low summer sunlight lanced his curtains to scatter on the surface, that wet blackness exploded into fierce red-gold.

“*Dragon* scale,” Bilbo said, to no one.

There was no word.

Master Baggins had won his final payment. One fair share of a kingdom—it glistered in the sun like fireglow on an ancient jewel.

The last letter Bilbo wrote:

*Dear Thorin,*

*Winter is over and the whole green place is green again.*

*The odd thing is that, lately, I feel a little sick of green. Perhaps it’s that, when you’ve been away from something for so long, your eyes begin to forget how to see it, and no color is ever the same as it once was.*
I suppose I’ve about run out of things to say except for this. I cannot understand how you justify acting as though I’ve been disloyal when everything I have done since putting my name on that paper has been for the sake of the Durin family.

Frankly, and I hope this is not too much of an affront, but if it is, oh well: the terms of my contract have been exhausted a thousand times over.

So since you’ve chosen to end our friendship over a job appointment, I really don’t have much sympathy for you. Don’t bother writing.

The last joke of it is that I left because, like you, I wanted to return to a place I belong to, but maybe I don’t belong anywhere anymore.

I would try to make this mean more than it does, but do you know, these days I find I don’t much care for riddles.

Happy Durin’s Day,

Bilbo Baggins

The last package Bilbo received was not a package at all. It was an envelope, and it housed a single brass button. No letter, no notice, inside.

This piece, at least, the burglar understood. He went back to his satchel (still packed with the stray adventuring bits and bobs he’d never need), dragged it out from the broom closet, and pulled from its contained mess that sad, battered vest—the one he’d run away from home with—now balled-up and grass-stained, cranberry red.

He was surprised this poor thing had subsisted, even if the fabric was unseemly and the overcoat long-gone. Its whipstitches sagged. Its tail cinch had broken off and the flat clasp dangled. Its lapels, stained with noseblood and speckled with sweat and overstarched, gave easily in his hands.

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The top button? Lying at the foot of a rainy cliff in the Misty Mountains somewhere, he supposed.

Bilbo laid the new one in place. There was no design, the acorn forgotten. Its edges were too intricate rather than worry-worn smooth. It was a bit shinier than these old soldiers clinging on.

It was not quite right, to put it bluntly. It was a close approximation, a long shadow. It was something to cover a hole.

Well, he said.

He said I suppose that’s that.

The End, he said.

And, The End settling in his lungs and his belly and the back of his tongue, the burglar stitched the missing button back into his shirt, and he decided there was nothing worth waiting on anymore.

Then, for Bilbo Baggins, it is summer—a dreaming, timeless summer, soft and sleepy, contentment unending, one that seems to last even through the next bleak winter snow.
He had left Erebor in young autumn, early morning, when the snowhawks were circling the bright sun of the dark mountain, and there was not a wink of green to be had.

He had not wanted any fanfare, Bilbo said, packing and repacking the journals into his loved buckleather bag. He paced the barren bluffstone of his cleaned-out lodging and swept and reswept and palmed the ancient walls of this before-time place as he went. No horns, no drums, no retinue, no crowd to miss. No need to make a fuss and embarrass me. He said just let me get myself ready and send me off. No sad old dwarven songs.

He said I don’t want to keep you. He said I’ll not make it a scene. He said every name of every dwarf before him who had once pledged, tongue-in-cheek, their service on his doorstep—and who had upheld every word.

Well, he had said. I suppose this is good-bye.

Bilbo stood before his friends with the far-flung sight of a person who wants to remember every detail but see none of it right now. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the barren foot of that unscalable mountain with their wizened looks, foolish smiles and low, solid brows. He said don’t do anything horribly stupid. He said I’ll be very cross with you if I hear of any more nonsense with dragons. He said be well, my friends, my dearest friends, be well, and if nothing else, he knew they would watch him go until he could be watched no more. He would not see any unseemly tears or catch any outrageous headbutts or add any unnecessary difficulty. He would not see Kili’s wild waving fade into a daydrenched blotch across the stomped-down yellow plain. He would not see Thorin there at all with the doubtful eyes of some great wounded mountain cat unsure of its footing. He tried to see as much and as little as he could through the blustery, sun-touched wind and the overgrown hair in his face.

If you ever find yourselves out west, Bilbo said, tea is at four. It isn’t so far.

He said and you’ll not the lot of you forget about me, will you. You promise, then. I’ve warned you. You had better not.

Right then, Bilbo said.

He dipped his head and closed his eyes and stamped his fist over his heart as dwarf warriors taught him. And he kept them closed, too tightly—and he grabbed for the king’s confused arm and shook hands, too stiffly—and he said good luck, good luck, really I think you’ll do fine.

Good-bye! Bilbo said sunnily, and divorced himself, and, without looking again, patted the king’s vambrace, turned from the Mountain, and left promptly—down the great gray steps of Erebor and down the wide red tundra road and under that dizzily blue sky with the stomping dwarf boots and the cheering dwarf voices and the brilliant dwarfsong in his wake and my dear, he did not look back at anything, for anything, at all.
It is during his fifth year home, five springtimes Back Again, that Bilbo’s book reaches its end. Almost. As it turns out, there is one more letter in him, after all.

It says:

Hellos and Salutations,

I know I said I wouldn’t write again, but the book is finished and considering this occasion of note I thought I would offer the royal family the chance to formally review it before the account is set and bound, for accuracy’s sake.

Obviously, it is easier for me to come to you than for you all to come to me, so I propose this: the manuscript (myself included) travel eastward to Bree, where I will then link up with a willing caravan going the old road route through the Dwarf Nation.

I cannot rewrite the entire book, of course, but I vow my best effort to revise or omit as you suggest. In that interest, I’ll arrange my stay as is required by the editing project, or until I am no longer welcome.

If this is acceptable, please do let me know.

I Remain,

Bilbo Baggins

And there was no word.

There was, however, a noise.

One fine Forelithe morning, two whole sunwashed months after he had written the letter, and that wispy midwinter breath of a chance had been well enough pushed into the wastebin with the chicken gristle and the clotty ink, Bilbo had just settled down to breakfast when one more page came along.

Crisp and thunderous and arrestingly clear: KNOCK.

He froze at the kitchen table with the curls around his earlobes and the apple cake in his mouth.

The writer did nothing right away. He listened. He watched the motes hanging in the goldwood kitchen in the stale early light. He sat in his place, teeth touching, jaw set, holding the napkin to his collar and waiting to see if had really happened at all.

Hello? he said, almost too quiet to hear.

No answer, but KNOCK. KNOCK. KNOCK.
Bilbo got up. He smoothed the crumbs off his robe. He set down his tea dish. He scooted from the table, made to walk across his den floor, quite forgot about his pushed-out chair, and crept up to the emerald door.

And he opened it.

What waited there on his humble stoop, between his potted marigolds, quite near snatched the last of Master Baggins’s many words.

Dwalin, he said.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

So they walked, mother and son: Bilbo, named for a sword; Belladonna, named for a flower that makes you dream.

Bilbo, you know, has always been particular to his father’s sayings.

In all the Shire, you’d never have met a more respectable hobbit than Bungo Baggins. The original Master of Bag End had to his credit every dimple and mole of propriety a hobbit might want in a neighbor: he had sensibility, calmness in abundance, amiable humility, responsible cheer, and then a hearty dose of sensibility again. He was a loving husband, faithful and steadfast. He was a fine and understanding father – firm about the matters of housework and bedtimes, but not in the least prone to yelling. He was a friend you could count on to spot you a bit of coin in a rough patch. He was an excellent investor. He was really the best example of hobbitness you’d ever hope to meet.

Bilbo – when he was a smart, bookish young lad with greenish-bright eyes and clean fingernails – used to sit at a hand-me-down desk in his father’s study and play at investments himself. He would read trades treatises. He would fill out documentation and frown as though he comprehended all the accounts. Bungo would point out changes to the galena export or the average cost of sweet bread, his son’s serious scowling over one shoulder, trying to take it all in. “Down every winding road is a good turn coming – if you can walk it long enough. The trick to security isn’t intellect, but patience,” Father would say. “Therefore: when there is no one best thing to do, then do the second-best thing, my boy. Wait and See.”

Bilbo waited.

The silence persisted. The morning was sunwarm. The six o’clock daybreak glinted over the far green hill, forked over the sunflower field across the dirt road, and rolled up the soft gray cobbles to Bag End, where it threw the dwarf’s considerable shadow into Master Baggins’s house.

“Need to get your door fixed,” gruffed the King’s-Guard of Erebor, thunking his steel boot toe into the wizard scratching there at the foot.

Bilbo blinked with his hand on the knob and snapped his loose jaw shut. “Uh. Yes. Yes,” he admitted, “I suppose I do.”

The tomato plants tittered in the garden plot. The hinges could’ve used some oil. A fat yellow jacket annoyed his visitor’s overlarge ear before inviting itself inside, put-putting right over Bilbo, who couldn’t even scrape together the distraction to care.

“Would you like to come in?” the burglar asked, realizing he was still standing on the stoop.

Dwalin grunted the affirmative, ducked his head, and stepped forward, leaving Bilbo at the handle with his eyebrows in his hairline – like a person suddenly shaken awake from a dream.

Bilbo waited; Bilbo wasn’t sure what he saw.

It took some readjustment. Some reacquainting, as it were, to see a dwarrow inside the distinctly
undwarrowlike dimensions of his smial parlor, from the delicate coat rack to the tiny window panes to his mother’s handmade reed windchimes hanging over the little pewter basin stand, just beside the welcome mat. Dwalin, who Bilbo always suspected didn’t entirely care for him, was incidentally the last dwarf he’d expected to see on his doorstep. He was also, to put it plainly, a giant, and it’s not as though the hobbit had forgotten this – but you sort of lose your cool around mass like that, if you’re not used to it. After five years and a blink. It’s not that hobbits are a paranoid folk, but they just don’t much care for too-big things. It seems excessive to them, to have to be made so big; it’s uncouth to suggest to someone with your mere presence how easy it might be to pick them up, maneuver them, and toss them around; and it reminds them, unpleasantly, of the great-big rest of the great-big world. You have to remember how to be comfortable around these mountain people with their lofty voices and tallish strides.

Said guest likewise was struggling with comfort. Dwalin, who was not only dwarfish in diametrics but quite nearly the height of a rather short Man, had to scrunch beneath the goldwood crossbeams. His movements were elephantine in this normal-sized home, and they sent Bilbo in patchwork robe hopping squirrelly out of the way.

“Make yourself at – at – at –” But it was no use saying, for the dwarf was already through the light-rinsed hallway and into the happy kitchen, where heather dried over the stove.

Just in case, Burglar Baggins stuck his head out the door and into the dewy Shire morning, its hills shamrock with lowland mist. And – just in case – he looked this way, that.

Nothing but morning glories. Nothing but a sleepy farmer making rounds in the distance, sprouting clover, and the faraway jingle-jangle of belled sheep.

He pulled his head back in and closed the door.

Dwalin, in usual form, had wasted no time seating himself at the table. He was a touch different than memory’d kept him, but you’ll find that people usually are. The King’s-Guard of a Lonely Mountain! – all polished up for the role. Grander, that is: fuller-colored, better-pressed, and (for hobbits have a sense of these things) just a bit softer around the gut. Most noticeable, though, were the tattoos. Elegant blacks and golds swept the half-globe of his head, new color transposed over faded stamps of yesteryears; two thick curls of ink started beneath his ears only to sharpen, like diving birds, into harsh points above low eyebrows. His deer-brown bramblebush of beard had been wrestled at its middle into a heavy bronze clamp; his hair had been combed into one fat braid extending from the knob of his skull to the gully between his pauldroned shoulder-blades. And his banditish red foxfurs, which had always reminded Bilbo of storybook highwaymen and fairytale thieves? They’d been swapped. For Dwalin of Erebor, it was not roguish pelt, but royal metals – an iron-studded, silver-belted surcoat, blue leather lined with plush wolf wool. He clanked when he walked and the tail of the jacket suggested a proper cape.

Well, the chair was much too small for him. Dwalin loosened his weapons belt with much finger-fighting and set it aground, axeheads aglitter with dwarven brass buckles, as though at any moment a troll could burst through the door, hello-how-do-you-do.

His fists, on the petal white tablecloth, were ridiculous. His elbows struggled to find purchase between the platter of breakfast cakes, the gently steaming kettle, and the milk pitcher. The mighty dwarf, in an attempt to fetch himself a pastry, narrowly avoided killing the vase of purple lilac clippings, one large palm fumbling blueglass back into place. Bilbo trailed after at a perplexed, troubled distance, and couldn’t shake himself of the shock.

“How,” mumbled the hobbit. He wandered into his own kitchen, pussyfooted, afraid moving too fast might spook the daydream away. Bilbo was speaking in threes. “How, how, how are you here?”
“Just like this,” Dwalin told him smugly, stuffing a hand cake whole into his mouth.

Master Baggins stood there in the threshold a moment, then two moments, then five, tying and retying his robe sash, trying to make sense.

“I mean to say – why? Why,” the hobbit corrected himself, with none of the malice of the first time he’d asked this but with all of the wonderment and awe, “are you in my house?”

This Dwalin did not answer right away. He drained the milk pitcher in six incredible gulps, then looked for something to wipe his mouth on. When nothing came up, the King’s-Guard reached for a doily – and, remarkably, thought better of it. One massive hand hovered in indecision before Bilbo, lightning-quick, tossed a napkin beneath. “Because,” said the dwarf, dabbing to make sure his beard was still dry. “I was hungry, and I know where it is. I’ve been up and moving through the night to get so far. Sore-arsed halfling cobbles, won’t lie straight. Damned buggy woods. This journey has been twice too long.”

Bilbo finally – finally – sat, first gingerly, then dropping into the chair all at once. Dwalin’s eye obviously caught the jingle of war-braid in burnished gold curls. It was the same pattern, albeit less skillful, as the one he-himself wore, and the King’s-Guard made a chuff of derision.

“Seven months!” Master Baggins finally said. He moved anxious hands from table to lap and back to the table, staring without being able to stop. “You must be ready to drop. A wreck, I bet. I bet you’re bushed. I bet you’re ready to sleep for a–”

“Two,” Dwalin muttered around the sugared apple slices in his mouth, stuffing in another even as he chewed the first. Crumbs scattered down his front when the big dwarf did so, and Bilbo was mildly relieved to see not everything had changed. “I’ve come from the Blue Mountains.”

So they sat in silence for a moment. There was a tipsy coo-coo of whippoorwill outside. “Visiting relations?”

The King’s-Guard scowled as though this was the stupidest thing he’d ever been asked. “Training the King’s Army, burglar. It takes a decade to make good dwarven swordsfolk. Which means it’s at least a fiveyear until they’re serviceable at all – and that’s for dark-stone mountain dwarves, not the hills-living pups I’ve got to work with. These overstone lambs born aboveground. But I do what I am ordered with what I have.”

He gave a headshake that clacked the small steel rings stapled along his large ears, five or six in each ridge. These surprised Bilbo more than the rest. Earrings are not entirely practical for a warrior – but while Dwalin has always been the picture of a practical war-dwarf, he remained beneath that ferocity a regular dwarf, and dwarves (as you know) are a little too preoccupied with their appearance.

“I was three years into meting proper Guardians out of them, no more than that – and what now? Bring them in, post them! Never mind that training! Dress the sorry lot in Erebor blacks and blues and call them an army. It’s a disgrace. They’re not fit. Not fit to serve my king. No fault of my own. I was doing it the old world way. I meant to do the job right,” or so our burglar was told. Bilbo flicked out a finger to push his unfinished glass of melon juice across the tablecloth; Dwalin demolished it in one go. “And I still would be, did I not have to go plodding off on this damned diversion.”

“You have business here, then? Here.” It seemed improbable at best. “In the foothills?”

The last cake was snatched, stuffed, and swallowed. “Business! My business is with soldiers. My business is the betterment of the bulk of the dwarrow. My business is, apparently,” Dwalin said, “ewe shite.”
Bilbo suspected Dwalin was perhaps still a bit tender about a hobbit having been offered his job.

“As long as you’re stuck with the bumpkins. You’re welcome to lodge with me,” our hobbit offered casually, legs dancing with an excess of energy, trying to hide his Tookish hope with his powerful Baggins sensibility. Baggins sensibility is stable, reliable, never a risk. Tookish hope, on the other hand, can swirl up big, doughy, irrational dreams that leave you with a mighty hard sore over your heart. “No sense in bunking at the inn; they’ll gouge you. They will; you’re a foreigner. But I have a guest room that’s very serviceable. Drafty, is all. Needs some dusting. Curtains are ugly; my grandmum Laura’s; came with the house; nothing I could do. But it’s clean, it’s dry, and I won’t charge you. Well, you can fetch me some firewood if you like. I’ll not protest if you wanted to patch up the crack in the smoking room ceiling, either. You being able to reach it. Still, that’s an easier price to pay than any rates you’ll find at—”

“I’m not staying,” he cut.

You couldn’t blame Dwalin, really, for feeling slighted about that job – what with their comparative years of service, military experience, and (to put it bluntly) relative sizings, none of which measured favorably in Master Baggins’s corner. (Alas, the tradition of Durin wisdom, he has found, varies greatly by generation, and rather fantastically fails under the significantly less-talked-about tradition of blatant Durin favoritism. Provided you’re valorous enough or heartful enough or stupidly lucky enough to stumble into the favor of one.)

Unfortunately, Bilbo’s Tookish hope was merely damaged, not disarmed. (Generally speaking, dwarves need to put up a little protest before doing much of anything, barring the eating of bread-based foods.) “Not even the night? There’s plenty more to eat where that came from. I’ve got a carrot cake in the pantry. For dinner I’ll put in a pot roast,” he haggled, because hobbitish manipulation comes in culinary form. He remembered the napkin stuffed in his neckline and tugged it out, balled it up, dropped it between the silverware. He bit the skin inside his cheek. “You can do better than a lumpy cot and a licey—”

“Neither,” said Dwalin, “are you.”

Then there was a heavy cutlet of nothing. There was, from outside, a distant bickering of goats. There was a hummingbird buzzing around a candy-orange burst of butterfly weed just beyond the kitchen windowglass, poking at the hanging pot, making a greedy nuisance of itself.

Bilbo said what.

Bilbo said I’m sorry.

Bilbo said what?

“We leave by the East Road before the dark,” the dwarf told him.

Leave where?

Dwalin leant elbows-forward on the table, flicked his eyes up, and afforded the hobbit a long, grumbling, browy sigh.

*The Mountain, halfling.*

*The Mountain.*

*Where else,* Dwalin said, *but there?*
As it just so happens, Mother had a saying, too.

The first time Bilbo left home, there was hardly any light at all. He was a mite cross about it, too. But perhaps he’s not to be blamed for that – not entirely – because, on that auspicious day he stepped beyond the farthest-flung Hobbiton hill, Master Baggins was underprepared. He was standing in a crunchy-gold barley field with his hands stuffed in his pockets, frowning mightily. He was fourteen summers old, and still had Lithe-week freckles sprinting slapdash across his forehead and his nose.

“Come on, Bilbo,” Belladonna called from the oaks ahead, waiting, heels in the baby-green ferns. “Don’t be a toad.”

No wonder if he was a toad, because Mother’d shaken him out of bed at four o’clock in the morning with no explanation – just secretive, pestering whisperings to get your jacket on, Bilbo, here; drink your tea lickety-split; stuff this scarf in your pocket, just in case. Then she’d led him tip-toed down the hall, through the door, out beneath the vanishing stars in the fair blue before-dawn mist, and they walked. They walked and walked and walked until the little one’s calves were beginning to smart and no amount of whining deterred her.

You’ll find out, she’d say when he demanded to know why. Where’s your sense of adventure, seedlet?

He’d heaved a great sigh. He’d pulled at his top buttons and fought with his shirts. But he’d followed her, sullen and grouchy and adolescent and tired, in equal parts because she was his mother and because, why, she’s Belladonna Took. And in Hobbiton, when Belladonna Took says come on, a Baggins is to set aside his tax work and come trotting along.

Listen, Father would advise him, kind eyes behind brass glasses, wrists balanced on his desk’s edge. He would not humor any criticisms regarding his wife’s unserious reading or her tendencies to run about with twigs caught in her forelock. He would warn Bilbo gently, as he did all things: To your mother. She is really the most correct person you will have the good fortune to meet.

Well, Bilbo was no longer an unkempt little boy splashing through creeks and dashing after dragons nobody else saw. He was growing into a proper hobbit. He had learned to roll his eyes and tie his own ascot and sneak a puff or two from father’s unattended pipeweed that made him inevitably but satisfyingly ill. He was garbage with an abacus but could print most admirably. He was a Functional Member of Society and what they call a Respectable Youth. Even Grandmam Chubb admired his penmanship and said in front of everyone Mark My Words But Young Bilbo Will Make Some Thain a Fine Scribe One Day.

Which meant he had increasingly little patience for his mother’s foolish expeditions, her hardly-brushed hair, or her tendency to walk around with no purpose, no particular destination – just walking, as she’d say, just for the hell of it, for no sensible reason at all.

The sun broke as they plodded past the edge of old Brandybuck’s five-acre farm, sprouting sweat beneath their armpits, tossing Bilbo’s scarf over a fence post to pick up on the way back. An early harvest left the cut fields rough and stubby, and they stopped all of a sudden, flat land rising into pretty red cedars, lush ladyferns, bluebells. On a clear, crisp day like theirs, once the fog settled, you could stand in this unremarkable spot and stare straight down the East Road.
"The Path to the East!" Belladonna announced, spreading her arms out wide, feet on that path and palms face-up to catch the sun. As though he couldn’t infer that from the name. As though she thought The East might come bandying down it any old morning – all the way out here, past where that brave dwarven stone foundered hundreds-of-miles-ago to ramshackle cobbles, then foundered again to the blithe dirt.

"Yes, very nice," he agreed in a tone some other mother might have popped him one for.

"Are you just going to stand in-spot brooding?" Belladonna dared him, fists on her hips. She’d a head of always-snarled black curls and mysterious black eyes and a lover’s mole right on the middle of her top lip. The canopy shade fell scattershot over her face and her tawny day dress got caught in some field scraggle. "Oh, come off it, sweetheart. Don’t be a pussycat. Come stand on the road with me. It’s five big steps away."

Bilbo stood there glumly and scrunched up his face, knowing a different version of himself might just now be rolling out of bed for a plate of rabbit sausage and toast. "It’s just I don’t understand why we’re here. I don’t see any reason I had to wake up at that ridiculous hour and slog all the way out to the other side of the—"

"So I," Mother told him, "could show you this."

Bilbo snuffled.

"Well, I’ve seen it," he said.

"Will you just button up for a second and look? Look here."

Forfeiting with a great groan, our sensible lad crunched out of that uncomfortable, wide-open barley and onto the soft forest ground. Bilbo watched as his unreasonable parent drew a line in the loose, sun-dry earth with one toe.

"This," Belladonna explained, balling a handful of skirt in her fist as she stepped over to his side. A damselfly whizzed by and made Bilbo swat wildly before settling nonchalantly on the back of her head. "Is the farthest point of the Shire. Which means this," she went on, extending one foot, then hopping once more over that breach like a billygoat. "Is the big-wide world."

Our hobbit, a casual student of cartography and a reader of serious fare, preferred maps set in ink. He did not much care for lines one had to draw and redraw by themselves.

*What’ve you done that for,* Bilbo began to ask, but she beat him to it. "Flex your mind muscles, won’t you? For your purposes, my dear, you’re looking at the entrance to the world, really."

Belladonna reached out to brush away a broken bit of wheat stuck in her son’s ringlets. "It’s a rite of passage, you might say. Anyone coming in and anyone going out has to cross right over this line. It’s inevitable. And, by the way: It’s also my personal best limit."

"Personal best? Mum."

"Personal best," she declared. "As far as I’ve ever gone. Used to come out here all the time when I was your age. Test my nerve, watch for travelers. Still do now and again before you and your Da get up. Seeing as you’re along with me this fine morning, though," she figured, judging the the road, the rich-bright trees around them, the smell of meadowsweet and wild blue lilacs in the breeze. "That’s a unique advantage, I should think. Now that I’ve got a henchman, I thought we might press a throw farther today. Press our luck. A little bit farther from home, and together. What do you say?"

"Are you quite certain we’re safe out here?"
“Decently confident, Bilbo, but never certain – and wouldn’t the world be a dull old place if we ever were.”

At the mouth of the highway with his shirtsleeves and linens, feeling the no right down to his knees, Young Master Baggins indeed was suddenly not so sure. “I think we should turn back.”

Ever the Tookish bounder and a great seeker of what is both unexpected and good, Madam Took-Baggins ruffled her child’s smoothed-down hair and pinched a little red in his sallow cheek, then she reached her hand for his own. “It’s fine, Bilbo!” Belladonna swore, laughing. Not a nasty, spiteful laugh, but the same laugh she used when she dropped a fresh dish of porridge or stubbed her pinkie or kissed Father in public and made him blush, or when she’d heard a far-flung, never-going-to-happen, not-in-one-million-years story she liked. Bilbo thought perhaps he realized, then, what made Old Took’s dark daughter so remarkable. She wanted to go forward, always, when everyone else knew the proper thing would be to go back home.

“It’s fine, my dear. And so,” she promised, taking his fingers and squeezing them tight. “Will we be.”

So they walked, mother and son: Bilbo, named for a sword; Belladonna, named for a flower that makes you dream. They walked until the almond trees thickened to maples and sunlight slanted through latticed leaves, until the tangled grasses curled towards their bare ankles. After a while – after they’d walked and walked and walked again – Belladonna discovered a stout, mossy rock where they might sit side-by-side and watch a while.

What now, mother? he asked of her. She said Darling, who knows? Anything could happen. Anything could. So let’s wait, shall we, and see.

“I don’t gather there’s anything coming today,” he observed, finally, and shook some dust off his three-button vest.

Belladonna lazed about on that boulder with tangles behind her and elbows propped, nose sunburning gently, content. “No,” she agreed. One hand patted her son’s crunched-up kneecap. “But it’s fun to think about, isn’t it. And. I mean—” Bold, wiggling brows. “—you never do know.”

“Seems to me like a lot of time wasted just to never know.”

This Belladonna thought over a moment. Her fingers, absently rummaging the moss, found a crack with one petite dandelion weed in it, like something a writer made-up.

“The first time I met Gandalf the Grey, I was out here watching for him, you know?” Mother mused. Son answered with a shake of his head. “Only I didn’t realize it was him I’d been watching for until he was already galumphing up the road. Taught me a valuable lesson, Bilbo, my bug. No matter what you do or who you choose to be or what you tell yourself, you never can know,” she told him. “You never know what you’ll find, who you’ll meet, or who might come looking for you. If your ears and eyes are open.”

“Father says,” Bilbo countered (needlessly), “that ‘the two keys to security are Wait and See’.”

“Does he?” She broke off a tickling bit of wild grass and stuck it in her mouth just to taste the plantiness. There was a red-helmed woodpecker tapping over their heads. “Well. That rather covers all the options, doesn’t it?”

But there’s one thing, Bilbo recalled. He sat up straight, ignoring how the rock was making him achy, and turned his face from the east to look instead at her. “Mother, there’s one thing I don’t
understand. Gandalf – when he comes here – always writes ahead. If he’s going to visit, even just for a party or a holiday. He’s always writing you, mum. So you know in advance, don’t you? You know who and when and where. Why do you still come out here, then?”

Oh, she said.

You know, she said.

**Just for the hell of it,** Belladonna would say, and she picked him a dandelion, and tossed it right on his head like a kiss. “For no sensible reason at all.”

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Where else but the biggest place in the big-wide world, indeed.

The Mountain, Bilbo said – just to be certain he had heard it in his ears and not merely dreamed it in his head, because you know how Tookish imaginings are.

"Aye, hobbit."

The Lonely Mountain?

"Confound it, halfling," groused Dwalin. “How many mountains do you have business being taken to? I’m damned sure not taking you to the Mountains of Mandos. If you’ve even got the fainting thought of making a joke of me, there will be no going anywhere at all."

Bilbo stuck his little finger in his ear and twisted, twisted, twisted.

Well before Master Baggins could scrape together the wherewithal to say *excuse me*, the dwarf, as dwarves do, trampled through. “I’m not lying about among these squatty turnip-miners wasting my time one more hour than I’ve got to. Wasn’t for nothing I rode all night to be here. We leave as soon as we can manage the walking. We leave today,” Dwalin snapped. His fist banged a period point into the end of his sentence, and into the end of the table, too.

Everyday Bilbo would’ve scolded him. Everyday Bilbo would’ve ribbed Dwalin for his minor butchering of “faintest thought.” Everyday Bilbo would’ve caught the rogue teaspoon that flipped up, stuck it back into the peach marmalade, and griped *now you had better put a stop to that punching of my furniture yesterday*. But – and this is the odd thing – he instead found himself, all of a sudden, standing-in-place. He went ghostly, fingertips on the edge of the tablecloth, unsure of where on earth any part of him belonged.

Bilbo breathed out and breathed in and could feel warm, bright air all funny in his pipes. He frowned into his own face. He heard the bee that trundled in earlier searching his drying dishes for an exit. He tried to say *now hold on*, but only choked instead.

Dwalin was still bear-growling: “Why else in Mahal’s backhalls would I be out here, weeks out of my way, in this sodding bunny hole? *Fetch the burglar, will you. Important issue. Must attend. Should not be delayed,*” the King’s-Guard ruffed, a litany of orders he mocked for himself. Then, turning an eye on Bilbo, the fold of that great brow twitching up like a suspicious and hound’s: “Do you not have ‘official matters’ with the crown? Pressing business? *Priority concern?* Or have I picked up my armies and made this thrice-damned slog for nothing,” he demanded, about to be several leagues angrier than he already was about the whole fetching-and-slogging affair.
Bilbo said but when did you leave.

Bilbo said but I’ve had no word, not from anyone.

Bilbo said but this isn’t at all expected.

Bilbo said but, but, but.

Bilbo said – stretching down with his sword arm, plucking the escaped spoon off the floor, and setting it back on the table, leaving one wet splotch – I’m sorry, really I am, but no.

“No?” Dwalin dared.

“You come hulking up here, heavy-hand my door, invite yourself to my table, read me a long list of gripes – few of them, by the way, I take offense to – and then to top all that off, you dictate itineraries at me. It’s impossible. It’s insulting, actually. Where in the hell do you get off?” Bilbo wanted to know. “I didn’t receive an invitation. No one deigned to inform me of this. If all that business wasn’t enough for me to say no outright, which I am, in case it’s unclear, you expect me to spring up and leave? Dishes in the sink? Before luncheon? That is,” the burglar told him, “absurd. If I am going anywhere at all, which I’ve yet to confirm or deny, I’ll require some time.”

Bilbo said I’ll need supplies.

Bilbo said I need to plan. I need to prepare, such as it is, for a venture like that.

And, Bilbo said, of course, I’ll need to pack.

The yellow-bee trapped in his window: tap-tap-tap.

“Well then you had better get to packing, hobbit,” Dwalin grumbled. “I was not asked to wait for you.”

For the moment, Bilbo didn’t say anything at all.

Then, rising, letting his chair leg scrape the floor, the sometimes-venerable, occasionally scoundrelly Master Baggins planted both palms on his breakfast table among the nutmeg and the jam and hunkered forward and with narrowish eyes he said I Guess I Had Better.

He said lots of work to be done.

A moment or two, he said, if you please.

And then the burglar ran.

“I’ll just need a few personal effects,” Bilbo was shouting from where he’d scuttled off to. The packing whirlwind began in Bag End’s master bedroom, and its master’s voice could be heard only over a flurry of paper-shuffling and drawer-banging and the clunking ruckus of two dozen bits and bobs flung into a leather sack. Dwalin, left behind in the kitchen, resettled himself on fine West Farthing furniture; he reached out his legs, and burped. “It’ll take at least two hours, possibly three. I need to get my estate in order.”

So he did – blank books and fine quills and ink bottles and charcoal sticks; a climbing rope and a fistful of linens; one sewing kit, full of needles and horsetail thread in the likely event someone might need stitches; wool mittens and his thickest overcoats; an extra scarf or two. There was a study down blanket rolled up in somewhere in the cellar. Bilbo scrambled through the contents of father’s old armoire, and without too much forethought, glanced and grabbed.
When the burglar emerged again, swinging back out into the west vestibule with a gaping backpack, trailing clothes behind him, searching eyes and racing mind halfway to calamity, the King’s-Guard did nothing to help. He’d stood up from his anchorage at the dish-laden table and wandered, large steps with furred boots, into the atrium. Mellow daylight gazed in through the rose-windows, slipping beneath the dangle of foxtail grass from the hill overhead. Dust motes, disturbed by this unusual hobbitish haste, glittered in the smial air.

“Do you want any of these things,” Dwalin grunted, jerking one thumb at Great Aunt Pansy’s hibiscus tapestry on the oaken wall, which he was not squinting very kindly at.

“What? No,” Bilbo tsked, barely bothering to stop. He passed Dwalin by and with a glance that bounced the curls over his ears was already heavy-heeling off through the attached hall. “Why would I bring that? I’m not carrying my house around. Not to decorate a guest room. Besides, I’ll not be staying that long,” he called back. This dawned oddly upon our hobbit, though. He stalled mid-step in the parlor threshold and twisted his chin about, brow furrowed. “How long am I welcome, by the way?”

“I was sent to fetch you, hobbit, not diplomacize you.”

“Well,” Bilbo figured, turning about. With a heave-ho and a stuck old hinge, Mater Baggins was opening a wall closet and pulling out serviceable luggage: a trunk; a satchel; a stout-and-fit lockbox he would protect from the rain with cured leather lining, fill with manuscript pages, and carry childlike under his arm. “Well, I’ll just take a case or two. What else do I bring? What do I wear? Do you have the space for all this? Can we carry it?”

“It’s been taken care of.”

“Oh, good. Do you have enough food to make it ‘til Bree? I can have the grocer—”

“It’s been taken care of,” Dwalin grunted, no less enigmatic about it.

By this time, Bilbo had already made short work of the hall cupboards and entryway hutch and the glass display case where he kept his illuminated folios and rare books. He came and went, dragging out this trunk and that bag, pulling out this pair of gloves and that set of cufflinks, flinging this cowl and tossing those pens, depositing everything in an incongruent heap just beside the door mat. Dwalin perused his host’s decor and looked quite glum about it all, as he was wont to do.

Finally, after much shelf un-arranging and trinket eliminating and stowing away, Master Baggins himself went thudding one last time out of the drawing room, bringing a healthy, pulpy breath of fine parchment behind him and hugging a potted fat-leaf fern against his chest. He was pinkish in the face and had a cross, determined aplomb about him, like someone about to supervise the construction of a soldier’s camp or the dismantling of a bridge.

“I’ll have to give my plants away,” the burglar complained to himself, one arm curled around the hideous yellow pot, the other patting its base. “Which means I’ll need to run out for a moment, drop this off and perhaps see the constable, too. I don’t fancy coming home to a looted house. Let me get a few papers together. Find my family ring.”

In that interim – in which Bilbo took a jewelry box apart for his signet, retrieved one lily, and gathered two more ferns – Dwalin had rounded the atrium twice. He finished narrow-eyeing the collection of hobbitish tapestries, and, like any worthy critic at some hoity-toity gallery opening, had now moved on to the living room. It was a snug little nook – goldwood was a bit dingy (its master had procrastinated on the polishing) – but still cozy, finished with iron pokers in their basket and rosemary wreaths on the mantle. Unlit by candles in a Forelithe morning, the den seemed brighter
and emptier than it had been those years ago, in that bitter-cold night where the Thirteen huddled at a sweet cedar fire and made this house hum with deep-sad magic of dwarfsong.

Did they remember it? Did Dwalin? Surely not with the same crystal-clarity that Bilbo did. Not the smoke plumes in the air or the chittering of Ori’s loose bootstraps as he carried his wobbly stack of plates. Not the rude rasping of knives and forks. Not the horrendous smacking of dishes and the faint chimes of dwarven beads in war-braids, dancing. Or the arguing. Or the disappointment. Or the stark-raving craziness of the word dragon and the answering thwack of his head on the floor. Or the stories. Or the promise of stories. Or the intense black of Thorin’s hair, blacker than any black a hobbit believed he had ever witnessed; his strides too certain, the voice too dark and unsparing; the whole of him existing too forcefully. The most glamorous and large-i Important person well-to-do Master Baggins had ever met, laden with so much glamour and import he was dreadful to be around, Bilbo decided, looking dismally into his own parlor and thinking ‘I have never seen somebody so dramatic in my life and I shall be pleased enough if I never do again.’ Or the grief of harpstrings. Or the stormy silence after he sang. Or scent of foreign pipesmoke in his den and the luxuriant furs against his chairs and the accents of the faraway East in his ears, and the magnanimous king and the sprightly princes and the goodly wizard and the terrible monster and uncountable gold, all of it suddenly so much like everything his mother had ever dreamed for, ever. Or the suggestion of something momentous, something writeable, about to happen.

Whether he remembered that night or not, the King’s-Guard, farouche without a king to guard, lumbered back-and-forth to judge every painting along each wall. A long line of Bagginses, all with that same weak-chin, the same smart-sharp responsibility. All delicate-haired and round-faced; all of them looking like they’d be jolly-fine prats to keep around. His bootprints were smashed into the blackberry weave, and he peered above the fireplace. Stately Bungo, gentle-hearted and bespectacled; enchanting Belladonna, freckled and black-eyed like she had a secret; and, finally, Bilbo’s very first picture, done up when he was some five years of age and loose-toothed and buttoned in bonnet-blue. He was smiling too aggressively, like a little dog bearing his teeth.

Dwalin, Bilbo called.

_Hrrm_, he said.

The burglar was about to deliver some charming, mildly self-depreciating factoid about Tookish portraiture fashion, but thought better of it, and instead asked: Do you remember?

"Do I remember what, hobbit."

Being here. That first night.

“I remember you were a cocky little shit about your silverware,” Dwalin observed, leaning away from Master Baggins’s pluckish baby face, giving a harrumph that was not actually malicious.

Bilbo – suddenly feeling much better about everything – was happy enough to grin, giddy enough to sing, and excited enough to lance right down Main Street doing it, even with so much unknown and so much unanswered. He was bright enough to vault a pasture fence and fly off into who-knows-where.

“Here,” he said, dashing off only to emerge six blinks later with a glazed pecan from the pantry. He fobbed it off to his guest. Dwalin took the passed pie in one paw. “Here,” Bilbo twice-said, just to really get the point across. “Have that.”

The dessert fork he handed the fierce Mountain Dwarrow was of Hill Hobbit size and entirely inadequate for dwarf fingers.
Dwalin forewent the silverware and scooped out honeynut filling with his index. And this good Master Baggins! He was shrugging out of his housecoat, too hurried and too adventure-seasoned to blush about being seen in an undershirt anymore, roughly tossing on a pheasant-red coat. He did not even bother with a vest. He just buttoned his jacket right up to the neck and turned to the door.

“I,” he announced, "must go into town. Make yourself at home. Help yourself to the cookie jar. Have a nap. Hope you enjoy the pie.”

The King's-Guard did nothing to stop him, so Master Baggins was off – under the archway, down the path, walking faster than usual, still fastening sleeves and sounding displeased as he went.

*I cannot believe,* he muttered, *I am just rushing off like this again.*

Imperfect silence in Bag End: summer morning, the pecan-munching of Dwalin of Erebor and the obstinate bee.

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Bilbo’s mother, you know, was a story all on her own.

Once upon a time, Thain Gerontius Took – in accordance with his dashing good-looks and his family name – wedded a pretty little wife called Adamanta Chubb. They settled down in a lofty smial and, out of great attraction and great hobbitish duty, proceeded to produce not nine, not ten, not eleven, but twelve healthy springy-headed heirs of affluent fortune and excellent stock. Of course, the truth is a bit twistier and more complicated than that, but for the sake of a story, let’s believe.

Of the three lovely and brilliant daughters of Old Took and Grand Mah Chubb, the first and cleverest went by Belladonna. Belladonna Took was a lass of a different cut. She was mysterious and smiling. She said yes when everyone else said no. She was awake at night and slept long into the day. She preferred dinner to breakfast, desserts to supper, and would much rather chase rabbits than cook them. At her littlest, where another fauntling might bang his knee and cry, dark-headed Belladonna would laugh and laugh and laugh as the blood dribbled down her shin.

She was, frankly, incorrigible. Her grinning and gallivanting won her the hand of the gentlest boy in town, but even so, Belladonna never did calm all the way down. With a belly full of baby, she would walk off the side of the well-swept streets just to crunch leaves with her heels.

One year, not long after Bilbo was born and Bungo and Belladonna forayed into parenthood, a dread winter crept upon the Shire. The last harvest got stuck in the ground. The still-green walnuts shriveled. The perch and the bluegill went cold in their ponds. Such a winter had not been seen for many decades; the cedars bowed with ice, the silos froze shut, and the deer died among the sleeping apple trees.

And then – because the rodents had starved and the fish perished and the tall, meaty elks had moved south – came the wolves.

There are no wolves about the Shire. They prefer the cooler temperatures and more worthwhile game of the eastern pine forests, for a halfling is crunchy, cantankerous fare compared to a fatty whitetail or a delicious clutch of baby boar. The greatest threats your average hobbit village must worry about are badgers getting into the chickens or sheep wandering out of their pens. But in this winter – the Fell Winter – their chickens had bitten the dust and their sheep had kicked the bucket, their goats had left, their cattle were lost, their geese had migrated, and their pigs – poor piggies! – became pork roast, for
there was nothing else to eat.

Except, that is, for the hobbits themselves.

Came the wolves, indeed.

The first to be taken was not a Took at all, but a Brandybuck lad of thirteen. He had flat-footed off from his doorstep one day just like normal and never came back. Nobody knew what happened straightaway. The search party scoured the thickets with torches and turned up a battered glove, a missing hat.

The second one to go missing was Old Missus Peona. She went out to knock the snow off her saplings one morning and evaporated. Then it was Rinco Brownlock, gone on his way to market. Then one pig-herder – then two – then four, plus two more children, a woodcutter, and three baby sisters on their way down a cricketing street to fetch the evening post. And then nobody went outside anymore.

The pantries shrank; the gardens grew brittle with death; the people cowered by their tiny fires.

That winter, they lived in fear. They weighted the windows with pots and pans and slaughtered their daughters’ house bunnies for meat. They would run lickety-split to the edge of the pastures to grab branches for burning and pray for a carcass, an old potato, some fallen pecans. They ran out of candles and let their homes go dark. And they learned, these hobbits, that the sound of death is a hungry, scurrying sound -- a sound always in the back of their heads. The howling, the yip-yips, the tongue-breath, waiting. They heard it, more than anything else, at night: the fervent skritch-scratching at the spaces under their doors.

House bunnies: soft, plump rabbits you keep, shivering, indoors.

But here we have Belladonna Took.

Mention the Fell Winter and you’ll hear this story five dozen different ways from five dozen different hobbits. Bilbo is only one hobbit, so he can only tell it to you as one hobbit can. Fond of facts that can be verified, he offers the short version: Belladonna left home. One morning, finding the cereal canister empty and not a jar of preserve to be had, she tied back her hair. She strapped on the largest satchel she could carry. She picked up the nastiest fire poker, and ran for the silo at the end of the dead wheat field.

Darling, come quick! gasped the neighbors from their windows, nails bitten to the quick. Look there. Isn’t that Belladonna Took? Belladonna Took! Running like a jackrabbit straight off the griddle. What’s she doing? Tooks! – great fools! I don’t fancy seeing a fool get eaten; I’ll not watch it! No, wait – what’s that pack she’s got with her? It’s not but a pack - she’s got corn!

Packs of white kernels – weeks of soup flung through her door – all while her husband slept off a flu, while her one-year-old babe sucked on a withered carrot from the living room carpet. By her fourth trip, she had Lulabelle Bracegirdle’s young husband with her; by the fifth, three leggy Bolger cousins; and by the time they made their twelfth run to the silos and back, keeping wolves at bay with loose shovels and creaky pitchforks and tin pans and the brute force of their voices, a dozen hobbits had tossed grains, beans, and corn to every house within sprinting distance of Bagshot Row. Belladonna herself, they said – sweating like a hog and pregnant to the popping point barely sixteen months before – got nipped in the calf but kept running, not even stopping to bandage it, fresh blood clotting down the back of her leg. They said she didn’t call off the siege until there wasn’t a single empty sack left on the street. And (after he was old enough to doubt the details of this story) many a Bolger swore to Bilbo that Belladonna Took-Baggins once saved his life by clubbing a wolf with a
Bungo, it was said, slept through the whole thing. Belladonna dropped her last cornbag in front of the fire, limped back to the bedroom trailing mud and breathing like a race horse, kissed her feverish husband on the nose, and said *go back to sleep, muffin – I was just seeing about breakfast.*

Some days, Bilbo doesn’t understand why he did any of it. A writer isn’t made for mathematics, and doesn’t understand the equations and the tabulations of himself. He only knows that, Baggins or not, he puts pen to paper and sees his mother – Belladonna Took – her foolish, fearsome optimism – a courage that makes the long teeth in her leg less sharp and less bright than the fierce little teeth in her mouth.

Bilbo, you know. Maybe he’s always been following that.

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When Master Baggins returned home, a box of brawny locks under one arm and a folder of papers under the other, he found Dwalin napping in his armchair. This would normally cause your everyday hobbit some offense (they are a possessive people), but before Bilbo could bother getting snippy about it, there were the neighbors to deal with.

“Well!” – from over his shoulder while our protagonist was fiddling with his front door.

Bilbo effected an uninterested face, but what was the point, really. He was well accustomed to being side-eyed by his compatriots on the Row, who were varying disdaining or amused by young Master Baggins’s swift and dramatic decline from Respectability. At least Daddy Twofoot next door was more inclined to chuckle than whisper behind his hands.

“Good morning,” said Bilbo, smiling rigidly, politely biting together his top and bottom teeth.

Old Daddy was leaning, cocksure and wink-eyed, with both elbows propped on the picket fence and one heel tossed behind the other. The pose made him look much younger than he was. Daddy was well, "curious" was probably the kindest word - a severe sufferer of the chronic condition of hobbitish curiosity. Gray tufts of hair jutted out from his brimmed driver’s hat, making him look like a stout, nosy pony nickering out from a stall. “Good morning, Master Baggins. A bit early for a gent your age to be locked out of his own house, isn’t it? Shall I fetch a pick.”

As the finest tinkerer (or at least the most persistent) on Bagshot Row, Daddy Twofoot had pretty much been inside everybody’s home; Bungo had even hired him to assist in laying Bag End’s flooring all those years ago. But he had put just enough crinkle-eyed emphasis on that *good morning* to make his neighbor distrust the proposition.

“No,” Bilbo told him, a little crisper on the upswoop than he meant. This particular neighbor had played a pivotal role in lengthening the life of a particularly snickering rash of rumors regarding our hero’s – oh, shall we say – creative interpretation of reality. Besides, the sun was hot on his neck, and the new chain he’d just installed needed more testing. “No, thank you. I’m not, in fact, locked out. Or I should say I’m locked out on purpose.”

Daddy removed the pipe from his lip, crow’s feet deepening in his sun-tough skin. The jowliest wrinkles had a private snicker at Bilbo’s expense.

“I’m making a few property upgrades. Security,” Master Baggins amended, realizing he looked
strange standing out here at eight o’clock in the morning, jangling keys and thumping one shoulder into his door frame. Second breakfast preparations should’ve been well underway by now, and a proper hobbit would be inside, sautéing sausages and warming up rolls – not on the front lawn attempting to run through his own locks. Daddy’s windows were always open to let in interesting sounds; he must’ve overhead. Each dull thud nodded the periwinkles bunching up his wall, got the bumblebees mumbling. It made Bilbo’s war braid jingle behind his ear. “Father always said ‘a piece of coin in the morning means peace of mind at night’.”

“Save up your thinking for night, do you? Curious.” Daddy fancied pointing out curiosities in other people’s families.

“Anyhow, good morning,” Bilbo told him again, turning about with the finality of someone hoping to end a conversation.

A Twofoot, of course, could be counted upon. Daddy was not only the most decorated fixer of shingles and patcher of pipes in the neighborhood; he was also the oldest bachelor this side of Hobbiton; and he went out of his way to enjoy this freedom by gossiping more than five hardworking fishwives combined. “Saw you coming up the road at a decent clip. Where were you off to in such an upright hurry, I wondered.” He flicked a ladybug off his tweed lapel. One hand, nimble but knotty from decades of hammering nails and rebuilding stairs, grabbed a fencepost and held on. Bilbo went back to shaking the handle and fussing with his door. “Come back with a box full of rattlers, too. Might think you were hiding something in there, dear boy. Is Lobelia getting vicious? Got a cellar full of booby-traps?”

“If you’re interested –” The burglar thumped his door a little harder. “I had some business with Sergeant Stomper.”

“Ah, finally going to throw in with the Shirrif’s Watch after all this time, is that it?”

Thump.

“Ready to take on the pumpkin-snatchers?”

Thump.

“Do your soldier’s duty?”

Thump-thump-thump.

“Going into the wilds to round up some beasties? Going to reform? Going on,” Daddy pondered, grinning innocently, twisting the knife just enough, “an adventure?”

“Actually,” Bilbo said, because his patience was wearing thin and his shoulder getting sore. “Going on holiday.”

Before he could thump again, the handle turned, and the rest flung open.

Dwalin opened the door.

“Damn it and blast it, hobbit,” the King’s-Guard snarled, earrings clinking, his shoulders and shadow consuming the whole of Bilbo’s house and then some, “with that racket! You noise like to stir a dragon from a five-hundred year sleep! How long have you been at that clamor, and why are we not halfway down the road to Erebor?”

Poor Daddy Twofoot took one look at the furious dwarf, dropped the pipe out of his mouth, and
bolted back down the lane faster than Hobbiton had seen him move in a small age. The slam and
shuttering of his door gave Bilbo’s morning glories one last definitive shake.

“Hobbits,” Master Baggins granted, having been shouted at by the fearsome and terrible Dwalin too
many times to be upset by him. “I was just getting in a little last-minute work around the estate. I’ve
not even been back from town long. You looked so comfortable sleeping there, I didn’t want to
wake you.”

“I was not sleeping.” There was still a bit of sleep in his eye. “I was thinking.”

“You were snoring.”

“I was breathing.”

“Well,” Bilbo agreed, “I apologize for interrupting your breathing.”

There was no moving aside Dwalin, so the burglar merely squeezed in under one of his arms,
promised everything was nearly sorted, then disappeared into the smial for a last once-over and to
finally get his walking breeches on.

When he remerged, Master Baggins discovered his dwarven guest had remained in the front
vestibule, choosing for himself the most uncomfortable bench so as not to nod off. It was nearly
afternoon now; the sun was high enough to start feeling hot, the early summer dew had dried from
the well-kept greengrass, and pretty light patterns were thrown through the round windows to waltz
slowly across Bag End’s blondish floors. When Dwalin finally uncrossed his arms to notice the
hobbit standing there, he squinted, gave a scrutinizing chuff, and lurched all at once to a stand.

Had you known Bilbo the Bookkeeper instead of Bilbo the Burglar, you might not have recognized
him here. He stood glittering ankle-to-chin. The buckled mithril hung an inch below the outrageous
surcoat, black hide lined with dappled catpelt, its sleeves tucked neatly into those fierce vambraces.
Fiercer still were the armaments. Sting sat smartly at one hip; meanwhile, the dwarfish dagger had
been sheathed and belted visibly down the slat of his right greave. What’s more, would you look at
the face!: swallowed up to the jaw in all that silvery fur, with the gall to look unaffected, as though
nothing at all had changed. He had put a dwarven shield on his back. He’d combed his too-short
curls down his neck as best springy hobbitsh genes allowed him, and it made the war-braid that
much more apparent (and that much more irritating to Dwalin, who had never very much liked it
there to begin with, doubly so after the job offer fiasco). It was exorbitant and unjustifiable. The inky
eyespots on his fur collar looked pompous in this mild season – oddly wintry and hawkish there
among the pottery and the knick-knacks and the country curtains – and the dark drakescale went to
fire whenever he stepped under the sun.

“Expecting a war party, halfling?” the King’s-Guard wondered in a way that was not completely
serious. Bilbo, feeling not just a little bit mighty, shrugged.

“Last time I ran off in my shirtsleeves. This time I’m coming prepared.” So vowed Master Baggins
of Bag End, looking important enough to be funny, less like a gentlehobbit and more like a toy
prince.

Then:

Well, Bilbo said.

That’s that, Bilbo said.

I suppose I am ready to go now, he said, provided that you are.
Dwalin did not say anything special. There was no ominous tale or four-foot contract or dramatic song. He merely grunted, shouldered both of the halfling’s large traveler’s trunks, and began the journey – and Bilbo, hefting into his backpack, stuffing the last case of luggage under one arm, shooved the bee out of his kitchen and followed.

He made it as far as the postbox before twisting about, pulling his keys, and scurrying back.

Oh, Dwalin, our hero called. Hold up, please. Hold up just one moment. If you don’t mind.

He said I just realized I forgot something important.

So it was up the cobbles and down the hall and into his living room one more time. Just long enough to remember something he had not thought of before, but that dawned upon him suddenly – a thing Bilbo needed badly, more than most of these other, more practical things. He rounded the sofa and dodged the ottoman and reached it. There, on the end table beside Master Baggins’s armchair, never untouched quite long enough to leave its dust footprint: a portrait in a small, standing circlet. Mother, of course, depicted in miniature. It was not the finest likeness. The dark hair was smudged and the curls indistinct, suggesting an artist not quite sure what to do with two shades of black; the facial shape was a bit off; the dress buttons lacked detail. But the eyes were perfect. They were warm, mysterious, young and wise, all at once – Belladonna’s alive as she had ever been sitting on the fence just outside. Father had put his modest mark at the bottom corner: B.B.

Thinking it's not any trouble to take; thinking Mother might interested to know to what the Kingdom of the Dwarves looks like; thinking above all else I can’t bear to lose this, Bilbo peeled the picture from its frame. He left the backboard, pinched the portrait between two fingers, and hurried back outside.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he called to Dwalin, wiggling the deadbolts shut again. "Slight delay. Sorry about that. Second time’s the charm."

Then they were past the lane and by the buttercups and through the gate and walking, quite steadily, dwarf and hobbit, down the street that would take them away.

“Good-bye, then!” Master Baggins shouted, waving his palm wildly at Daddy Twofoot’s stout yellow hutch next door, beaming like the cocky little shit he was. “See you next spring!”

And with no more watching and no more waiting, Bilbo found himself on the Road East again.

This time, Belladonna, just for the hell of it, he said. For no sensible reason at all.

But Mother, he’d wail.

When he was only a tiny thing – dimple-faced and scrappy, covered with tree cotton, trousers bunched to his knees and creek mud splashed up his calves – Bilbo would charge into the kitchen and latch to her calves. He’d ball his fists in the skirts or wrap his arms around her shinbones, and let Mother walk him around like that, like she was a giant and he a bitty babe. But mother, mother, mother, won’t you come look at what I found?

Belladonna, she would correct him. "Belladonna, my dear. Just once-in-a-while, if you please. Between all the mummas and mums. One little Belladonna, slipped in every now and again, would
suit me picture-perfect – it is, after all, my name."

But you’re my mother, he’d said.

"Of course I am, my parsnip – but I see no reason why I can’t be that and still be Belladonna, too."

It was Belladonna, too, when they would play together. He would stage duels with carved animals in the garden while Mother dried dishes as fast and as sloppily as she could. Then, when the wife-chores were finally finished, when he pretended not to expect it, she would throw open the door and shout, "Dragon! Did you see it?! There’s a dragon in the Brandybuck barn!" She would toss him a mop and flourish a broom and say, "On your guard, you scurvy Pirate Prince! I am Lady Bell of Gondor and I am here to end your salty reign of terror!" She would drop an old Yuleday wreath on his head and hoist him on her shoulders, bolting outside to find unicorn prints in the snow.

"Who are we now?" Bilbo would ask, wanting the story for everything he did.

"Why, you’re the king, my dear," she would answer. "You’re the King of the Forest, and I am your loyal knight. A king is nothing without his knights, obviously. A king who can’t find the knights to defend him is going to wind up an awfully lowly ghost."

She was never the ogre holding branches to her head and chasing him into the brush. It was always Belladonna the Dauntless, the fearless Lady, coming to cast down the villains. It is always this Belladonna he swears to – his out-beyond, after-death listener he lets himself pretend can hear him.

When Belladonna died – a lazy Forelithe morning, utterly unremarkable, like any other morning in the world – she had eaten a plate of salted eggwhites, put on her favorite blue sunhat, and gone out for her daily stroll.

“I think you ought to wait until a little later, mother. Wait and see,” Bilbo called from the kitchen, drying the breakfast skillet and hooking it back on the wall. “It feels a bit hot for you to be walking around.”

“Does it?” she asked unseriously, tucking a few pepper-gray curls at her temples beneath the wide-brimmed hat. “If you ask me, it feels a bit hot to sit in a study and waste it.”

“Better to stay, I think. Get a tea and sit in the garden. I’ll take your chair outside, shall I.”

“How terribly boring. I’ll lie there and bake like a bird.”

“Better than withering like a turnip.”

“Must keep my youthful constitution,” she reminded him, to which Bilbo merely lifted his eyebrows and huffed. “I’ll not be long.”

There was no talking Belladonna out of anything she didn’t already desire to be talked out of, so Master Baggins toweled clean his hands and went to see her off. She had him hold her bag while she put on a light jacket. She fished for her scarf. Then, not pleased to delay any longer, Belladonna shooed him back to the study, opening windows as she went, shushing his complaints with "My dear, really, you won’t even notice I’ve gone."

Before she left, she kissed his nose and said: My love, don’t wait too long.

Sometimes it is unclear to Bilbo why he went along with it at all.

There is something to be said for optimism like this – the kind that let Belladonna look like a writer
does. She saw just a little bit more than what you can knock with your fist or scrape with your fingers. She’d look at a dead tree and see a family of badgers that would winter inside. She’d look at an old barn and see a good ghost story. She’d look at the packed dirt of the barely-walked path where it persisted among ferns and thistle, and she'd see what might be coming up it.

“Wait,” Bilbo had hollered, words caught in his throat as he ran through the cold morning fields, getting grass stains on his knees and wheat seeds in his curls, following the slow-sad singing of dwarves on the East Road. “Wait,” he had screamed. I’ll go. I will. For you, I will. I will, Belladonna, for you.

The heaviest grief Bilbo carries is his memory has nothing to do with goblins or hoarded gold. It is that Belladonna the Remarkable became Belladonna the Mother too fast. She never left the Shire, and so he has carried her. Bilbo has lived his entire adult life asking himself what would Bungo do – but then, softer, and what about Belladonna? He has stored it all up and he has taken it with him, always there, raring to go in the trove of his dreams.

When he was six, and she would sing off-key shanties about faraway lands. When he was sixteen, and she would embarrass him by hopping on the fallen trees, balancing herself by snatching his hand. When he was sore to the bone at a dwarfish camp, suffering, weeping quietly under his furs because it should have been her; why is it me here and not her; it was supposed to be her all along.

Bilbo let the magic out of his life and the stories go to everyday cold. But everything he knows and loves and knows to love he has learned from watching her.

So it isn’t much of a question, is it - why he became who he did, after all.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Bilbo had taken in so much magnitude and so much beauty and like a proper dwarf he wanted to keep it all.

Chapter Notes

This is where it gets Bagginshieldish – but since this is hobbit-POV, please be forewarned that it does so in a secretive, in-denial, occasionally verging-on-homophobic kind of way. (Not in the “hobbits are raging bigots” sense, but in the “hobbits are order-addicted traditionalists who pretend divergence from their agrarian norms doesn’t exist.”)

Good hobbits do not especially care for adventure, if it’s all the same to you.

We must break here for a note about hobbits – an explanatory tidbit in the defense of hobbit culture, if you will. Proceed:

- It is not that they are a squirmy, cowardly folk. (Any reader of Shireling history will quickly cite as proof of the opposite our own hero’s ancestor, old Bullroarer Took - who was, you’ll agree, a most adventurous fellow with a most adventurous name.)
- It is not that they have no rowdy skills at all. (Conkers, if you’ve never played it, is a rather boisterous and violent game. I have; I wouldn’t let my fauntlings.)
- It is not that they worship meekness. (Oh, they don’t.)

Understand it is not that hobbits hesitate to defend what is theirs, or that they do not, when pressed, rally as much courage and feel as much fire in their bloody little hearts as you-yourself might. It is just that the natural state of a hobbit is comfort. They are a cozy people, you see – home-makers and pumpkin-keepers – who take pride not in swordplay or exploration, but in plump brandywine tomatoes, an elegant dish set, a clutch of buttercups in a blueglass vase. They do not much care for drafty stone castles or warsong or growing out their hair. When it comes to wildness, a good hobbit will pass. Their idea of completion is not bravery. It is a nice-smelling household full of pheasant pies, soft sheets, almond flour biscuits, and guests who can’t resist one more slice of spicy peach cobbler with apple tea.

It is not that they are a race of dormice, you understand. It’s just that their way is not the way of other peoples. A proper hobbit, if asked “Pardon me, but would you be interested in an adventure?” will say no, thank you, I would prefer not to.

But, as you know by now, Bilbo Baggins did not remotely resemble a proper hobbit.

“Snap my pipe and bowl me down a hill; that is not happening,” our adventurer said.
Dwalin did not bother persuading. Indeed, he did not even glance back. The King’s-Guard of Erebor adjusted a bridle buckle, cracked open a footstool with one throwaway kick, and hefted himself astride the single largest horse Master Baggins had ever seen in-person.

It was a long-shinned, bony-nosed, cream-white beast with a runny snout and itchy withers. Hobbiton’s stalls were too small to house such a creature, and so it had been roped to a hitching post in front of the barn, presented a repast of three grain baskets and one pig troth of water. Bilbo could not reliably remember the size of the elven horses, but this one looked fit to pull fortress stone. It wore a bobbed tail and stood on draftish hooves, with a spray of gingery spots on its legs and two bristly inches of fleabitten brunet for a mane.

“That,” Master Baggins announced, stepping warily around the daisies at the edge of the barn as Dwalin pulled a sled through those heavy double-doors, “is a Manling horse.”

“Keen eyes on you,” the King’s-Guard muttered. He loaded Bilbo’s luggage and in twenty seconds had tethered the full lot on.

And then the only thing left was to climb up.

When Dwalin landed his armored rear aboard, the horse merely snorted, this great dwarfish weight a minor discontentment. The stirrups creaked and the metal shingles of his surcoat jangled. One of those massive equine feet lifted just to stomp a patch of grass.

Well, the dwarf groused, get up here.

“Sincere regrets,” Bilbo informed him, “but there is really no way in hell.”

Gnnr, said Dwalin.

“Don’t noise at me,” Master Baggins snapped back. His mithril coat was beginning to sweat beneath the snowcat fur, his legs were being compressed by the scale greaves more than was comfortable, and the it plainly wasn’t going to happen.

“It’s a pony,” Dwalin said.

“It’s a good lot bigger than a pony and you damned well know it.”

“It’s faster than a pony.”

Out hobbit, unconvinced, was wheedling backwards with the flats of his hands shaking no. He watched Dwalin’s caterpillar brows sink closer to the eyeballs, drawing fuzzy cattails over the warlike face. It was not a patient expression. Master Baggins made to twist about and walk away.

“I’ll, uh – I’ll have a quick visit with the stablemaster – they’ve got some fine colts this year – roans, I think. In fact, I was meaning to buy myself a good little gelding anyway – for going into town and such – so I might as well – I might as well – SWEET GALENAS,” Bilbo said, because all of a sudden both of his feet were alarmingly high off the ground.

Dwalin had put a premature end to the conversation by grabbing the top strap of Master Baggins’s backpack and simply lifting him up, setting him down. Their horse clip-clopped in place as the reins were loosened and slapped. Then the war-dwarf clucked his tongue, the animal picked out a rough, determined walk off the scraggly crabgrass and onto the turkey-red road and Bilbo, petrified, latched onto the woolen cantle like hawk’s feet, putting in his best effort at not losing his marbles before they’d left the stables.
And then they were plodding across the strawberry farms, past the wheelwright's, beyond the beekeeper's, by the goldenrod thickets, towards those flaking cedar trees at the hip of the wood.

Once Master Baggins determined he was not about to die of a broken neck, things calmed considerably. No one chattered. At that steady pace, they broke the city traffic before long, speeding up to an irritable trot that had Bilbo's hands fisted fearfully in the dwarf's coat tail and his teeth banging around in his jaw.

Then suddenly, all-at-once: forest. Mulchy cedars rose to bitter cherries rose to shaggy hazels rose to noble poplars and skinny-trunked sugar pines. Dwalin kept to the road. Minus a few breaks during which the dwarf dismounted to unstick their sled from tangly undergrowth, leaving poor Master Baggins fitfully juggling the reins, they rode for three hours in such a way. The hobbit did not bother asking "until when." He supposed they looked foolish, like some sort of horribly behaved knight with a bad spitting habit toting around an itty-bitty curly-headed prince.

"I apologize if I was stringent, or peculiar, or uncompromising or anything," Bilbo finally said as the road took them over a shoddy handmade bridge straddling an unimpressive creek. It pitched upward just after, leading to a steep hill, at which time a King's-Guard found burglar hands knotted in the back of his furs again. "It's just that I wasn't prepared."

"Did you not write my brother a dozen times bellyaching that you wanted to visit the Mountain?" (Dwalin outright refused to give Bilbo the horse's name, first lying that he did not care enough to name the animal, then claiming it was a Khuzdul word – no matter that Bilbo had already overheard a handful of Khuzdul, having lived with dwarves for a year-plus. So he renamed it, in the privacy of his own mind, Pokey.)

"I wasn't bellyaching, but yes, I did write. Though we never made any plans. I couldn't be positive it would happen one day. Just one day, out of the blue," he mumbled, bronze war-bead knocking forward and swinging back to hit him in the cheek. "I wasn't sure I'd ever see you again. Ever again, any of you. Wasn't expecting, you know? It's been a long while."

"A few years is not 'a long while,' halfling."

"Not to you. You've had an army to train," Bilbo reminded needlessly. Pokey pushed out an irritated breath, high-stepping the last few yards to the summit. The sled rattled behind them and Dwalin gave his heels a sharp inwards press in the final heave-ho. Master Baggins sucked in a chestful of air, grabbed whole fists of coat, and held on.

"You've had a kingdom to rebuild," he said.

"You have responsibilities," he said.

"To me," he said, "it feels like a terribly long time. To be sitting and waiting, aimlessly. After all that adventure. To be just writing. Writing words to myself. It's been a long while since I've seen any—"

And at last, they were over the hill and through the tallest spillage of firs, and below them the clearing broke open like a dropped purse of gold.

"Dwarves!" Bilbo cried, and his mouth was all agape and his heart hopping high in the gulley of the hobbit's throat.

There was a whole battlement at the dwarfish camp – an army of sixty Guardians clad in the colors of Erebor. Their blacks and blues decorated the greengrass knolls lying ahead of Bilbo; their dwarven laminar and fur-topped boots threw sun into each other's faces as they milled about.
Weaponry, too: a full cart laden with dwarven crossbows and dwarven hatchets and dwarven spears. Cavalry: mountain rams and leathered ponies. Technology: three dwaven repeating ballistas and a dwarven ribaudkin, hiked high on spiked wheels. Three covered wagons, teeming with food and mead, crowded the smoky fires; cooking spits were alive with the smoldering scent of spiced pork; powder kegs sat carefully still. And one armored carriage, black-shelled and hunkered low to the ground, had parked there like an instrument of war.

Dwarves hurrying. Dwarves bickering. Dwarves laughing at each other’s expense. And all of them, working – chopping trees and carrying firewood and packing and unpacking, patching clothes and polishing axe bits and fixing armor, feeding mounts and skinning rabbits – nobody works like the mountain folk. They sang while they went and made the wind teem with secret dwarven words.

“Look at them all,” he said, pointing foolishly around the side of the very dwarf seated in front of him. Evening broke against tall trees behind them and turned the field pink like upending a bottle of raspberry wine.

“The King’s Army,” Dwalin agreed, darkening immediately. “Sorry bunch of pincushions.”

Perhaps sixty does not seem like an army to you. But sixty Durin’s dwarrow all in one place – let alone sixty Guardians – was quite a lot of dwarves by those days, my dear. It did Master Baggins’s restless spirit better than all those lazy summers had, one after another, until they all began to look and feel the same.

“No turning about at this point, I suspect.”

“That’s lucky news, since I sure as the raven rock am not taking you back.” Dwalin, reliable, leaned over to spit on the toughening grass. But Bilbo was too pleased to mind with anyone’s spitting just now.

It looks like something from a book, he said.

It’s like, he said, a fairy story.

Dwalin would’ve growled some dubious words at that, but just then, Pokey whinnied, wanting very much to be back among its fellows, where they all might comfortably sleep.

“Best get down there,” the King’s-Guard grumped, and so, with Bilbo hanging on the back, they went.

Now that you know so much business about hobbits, I hope you will not be too eager to judge poor Bilbo, who – true to his Baggins name – often felt less than adventurous on the historically noteworthy Quest for Erebor. There were gray, misty mornings where he would miss his armchair terribly. There were shivering, hungry evenings where he would miss his armchair terribly. There were shivering, hungry evenings where he would will himself back over all these miles, through the thorny woods, across the rocks (so unkind to his bruised feet), beside a sleepy fire at Bag End. There were nights when Bilbo even wished, head-hurt and so very tired, for a bit of magic to remove his name from that contract – to close the last page of this little book, to unwrite the burglar, to take himself out.

“Oh, what am I doing,” Master Baggins was wont to say. He would hear wolfhowling in the bitter dark or gawp at a cliff he was meant to climb or cringe while a dwarven warrior was scolding him.
for some accidental offense, apologizing profusely, though poor Bilbo never had any idea what he was apologizing for. He would drag his hands down the sides of his face and breathe out and feel quite crazy. “What on earth was I thinking. Whoever thought I had any place being out here?”

But – when his heart went homesick and knees feeble, when his pack got too heavy and his neglected stomach complained, and our hero began to feel like no one so small had ever been foolish enough to throw in with something so great – Bilbo would stop a moment, and he would look.

Not as in a glance or a glimpse, but a really good, long, nourishing look. He’d look with writer’s eyes, and listen with writer’s ears, which see and hear just a little bit more than other folk might. He’d look at four-leafed clovers and listen to snowhawks cry from the pines. He’d look into the sky – an uninterrupted, startling sky that seemed colder than the sleepy cornflower blue of the one above the Shire, not yawning over wheat but shrieking over moorland and the hearty purpleclusters that winked there. He would look far into the starry night, over the red-crackling fire, and he would listen to the dwarves sing their sad, old songs.

Really, sometimes it seemed to Bilbo that all he could successfully do out here was look and look and look.

“Something the matter?” Bofur would ask him, tapping Bilbo’s shoulders whenever he’d stop, stone-faced, stuck staring as the rest of the company walked on.

“No, no. No. Nothing. I was just thinking. I was having a thought. Never-mind it, anyway!” so said our hobbit, feeling embarrassed, not knowing how he would ever go about explaining such a thing or a feeling to anyone else.

For being so concerned with vanity and story, dwarves, Bilbo has found, are not especially conversational creatures, and they do not hold much back. So it was very difficult to communicate what all this meant to him. He was not sure how to explain to these Folk what it did to the blood in his head and the breath in his lungs to see so much and come so far. He had no easy way to teach them that hobbits are averse to public displays of emotion - that his wide-eyed silences and the hand curled against his chest said more than anything else he could manage. He was not sure how to convey without offense that it would be impossible for him to yell as they do, or embrace as they do, or fold his fist upon his heart and weep as they do when their king quiets their merriment to sing ancient tales of dwarven greatness and dwarven loss late into the cold night air.

And so you have the essential misunderstanding. Here you’d have the orphaned heir of a lost homeland, the leader of a fierce and dramatic people, singing with the deep sorrow of mountains and the excellence begot by a lifetime of training their saddest and most sacred lamentations. Here you’d have The Wound-Eye Monody, Farewell for a Quiet-Child, Laznîth Mashgul sung by a prince who once sang for the Kings of the Dwarrow. Here are the mournful Folk in their ritual crying, remembering their might by remembering how they have endured such catastrophe. Here is The Erie of Queen Invís and The Far-Starred March of the Undying.

And there is Master Baggins – chin-in-fist, ho-hum off to the side somewhere, like he’d rather be sleeping, and maybe like he was a little bit bored.

It wasn't so. And if he has, perchance, fallen asleep to The Lion Door or ‘Aimugalikh Amrâl, in his defense, Dwarfsong trends to the longish side, and Thorin made everything sound like a good-night, good-bye.

It did not so much matter, Bilbo decided, what it looked like. Even if he seemed to a dwarf as though he cared for nothing at all. Because he knew what he had. He had looked, and he had seen some things that were truly special - things that lifted an ounce of his heaviness and brightened the
muzzy red hue of his heart, and – like any adventurer knows how to do – he bundled that gladness up, and hung it, like solstice berries, inside of him. And no amount of loss or fear can take that away, my dear. Nothing can rob you of what you know you have seen.

“What by Mahal’s ripe sidemeat are you always staring at,” Dwalin grumped at him once, coming up behind our burglar in camp one day all of a sudden – and Bilbo choked and nothing-nothinged so fitfully, he thought he’d swallowed his tongue.

A Baggins doesn’t stare – staring is rude – but he was not exactly discreet about being caught up on something great, and why should he be? If seeing what is beautiful and recognizing it as beauty makes you ashamed, you might want to settle down and take a good hard look into yourself. What else is there, he wonders. Now, that the terror has passed and the mirific dragon is rendered to shinguards and bones, he has time to wonder.

Thorin, who rather thought he deserved to be stared at, would merely ennoble his chin and whip his mane dramatically and stride on.

So that is how your hero did it, you see. It is not so remarkable, and perhaps, if one day your own heart is sore for home and your back begins to hurt, you might do as Master Baggins did, too. It is not wizardry merely to look around and allow yourself to see things. These things would help him find a pocket of bravery hidden, here-and-there, inside of himself – pockets Bilbo never knew before – and when the clouds grew dark, and it all began to taste hopeless, he would break one open, like a peanut shell. And he would feel a little bit better about everything after that. He would look at Thorin play music in the night and listen to the morose beauty of harpstrings and not feel like such an awfully foolish person at all.

They tell the truth, you know – your fairy stories.

Especially this part:

“Whoops!” Burglar Baggins said, shutting the carriage door as fast as he’d just swung it open.

A hand struck out to stop him. A be-braceleted, squarish, irrefusable hand - a hand attached to a strong, brown, elegant arm – that reached out from under the clacking of its silver armlets and just about stopped everything, actually.

It grabbed the door by the corner and wrenched it back open – and with it, wrenched Bilbo back, too.

“Oh, hello,” the hand's owner said, very friendly, very sunshine-grinned, and all-around very pleased with itself.

More than anything else: very female.

Bilbo stood there, road-harried and sweaty under the armpits, before the first dwarrowdam he had ever met. His bare toes were perched on the lip of the carriage; his one palm was flat on its roof and his other still hooked on the wide-flung door; his braid stuck to his face; and his heels were dirty. She waited expectantly. He stared.

Sorry, he said, so sorry, really I am – and tried to close her up again.
The dwarrowdam's hand didn't budge. Even had he dared, there was no way Bilbo could outmuscle this she-dwarf. Powerful shoulders were apparent beneath the ruddy plum color of her velvet gown, and though its sleeves overspilled like a noble's, there were calluses toughening her thumbs. Calluses and old scratches, dusted like mementos over each knuckle. Given his status as an outsider and his nonexistent experience with Durin's Ladies, our Master Baggins thought he might like to have that hand a little farther away.

But, for whatever reason and thank Mahal: she was still smiling. She was pouty-nosed and narrow-faced and dimple-cheeked. Those warriorlike arms easily carried pounds of pure, beautifully etched silver on each wrist. She had a red bowl of figs beside her on the cloth-draped seat; she donned a ruby-tipped torque; and her hair was no windblown mane but a full field of soft, immaculate teakwood rows, woven closely along the scalp until they draped all-together in her lap. There was a daub of dusky hair burnt at the very tip of her rather attractive chin. And she had the strangest mismatch of eyes: one purely cinnamon, one mostly green, like the bronze sib sloshed over her nose to throw some extra shine.

She was by herself more than enough to snatch the tongue right out of your mouth. And there was another dame across from her, too. But this one was quieter, younger, a wispy halo of saffron around a dubious gray stare.

“Did we scare you?” the first wondered, still grinning hello. “You must be Master Dwalin’s guest.”

Bilbo cleared his throat as properly as he could and, knowing no etiquette for the meeting of dwarrow females, awkwardly dipped his head. The curls spilled forward and the bead knocked out from behind his ear. “Yes, I am, and I apologize for the rudeness with the door, but I didn’t realize you were in here, or that you were ladies.”

The second dwarrowdam hurriedly palmed a smear of fig juice from her cheek. There was something at once childish and guilty about that face; the stare was sidelong, curious, very to-oneself. She had a head full of sun-white gold whorled into a braided bun, topped with a net of silver strings that shivered with emeralds. Unlike her more talkative, more glamorous counterpart, she wore a shapeless white cotehardie that looked vaguely marriageable. (By hobbit standards—who knew what sort of dresses dwarves liked to marry in, but they were probably rotten with gaudy gold and fur. On second thought, in her light-lace with only a bit of blue mink around the trim, she was downright churchy, for a dwarf.)

“We didn’t realize you would be so—” She covered her feather-light moustache with the tips of ringed fingers and hummed, unsure of the appropriate word. The dame's voice was unexpectedly tiny. She finally decided on: “Small.”

“Actually, I’m quite a respectable height, by hobbit standards.” Here he finally thought to give a dip and bow his head. “I beg your pardon! Very impolite of me, to just burst in here and start blabbering. My name is Bilbo. Bilbo Baggins,” Bilbo Baggins said, filling the door, both hands gripped overhead. “Of Hobbiton. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Though I’m afraid no one told me your names.”

The pair watched for a moment longer. They were lush and handsome all at once and Master Baggins was a little confused by this beauty, not that a little confusion is necessarily a bad thing.

The first sat back, then, looking unconcerned with impressing anyone at all. “Galinyah,” she announced decisively, releasing the door and tossing both elbows back upon the divan, grand as a duke’s little sister. There pleasure in revealing her own name to someone, making the robust, lyrical alto go honey instead of fruit. “Daughter-of-Valdah, Daughter-of-Kām.”
The second was more sotto and ahem-hmmed. “Azírë. Of Ered Luin.”

“Both of us, and both soon to be of Erebor,” Galinyah of Valdah of Kām agreed. “The pleasure is ours.”

It was that interval, my dear, a sudden spider clenched Bilbo’s back. His eyes peeled wide and his fingers clamped the carriage and there was a reflexive pitch forward to counter the heavy heave away. Dwalin’s overlarge mitt was fisted in his coat and hauling him backwards. The burglar detached.

“Two minutes. Two minutes,” the King’s-Guard snarled. “I turn my back, and you—! If there is trouble to be had, you’ll find it. You,” he spat, teeth gritted, inordinately angry, “will be walking, not riding, hobbit.” All this growled out as though he’d been very foolish to suppose anything else, peeling with a final yank Bilbo’s last few fingers away.

In the space between Dwalin releasing him and Master Baggins’s whole self hitting the ground in an ungainly thump, Galinyah made up her mind. She leant out of the carriage just enough to spit a fig seed, then sat back, dragging all those locs round one shoulder until they were looking just as proud pooling in her lap. “Oh, sure he is,” she decided, dismissing all other notions, getting another fruit from the bowl.

“We don’t mind,” Azírë said.

Bilbo, dropped there on his bum in his miniature-prince furs and his glittering sword belt and his clinky dwarfmail, felt a little bewildered. “I don’t want to be a bother,” he demurred, curls about his keen-bright face, just pleasant and modest as a freestone peach.

“You’re not bothering anyone, Bilbo Baggins,” Galinyah told him, quite without room for any argument from any one. She turned her gaze up from the disheveled halfling in the grass and right on the King’s-Guard. “Is he, Master Dwalin?”

And, from his current position – thunked unflatteringly on hand-heels and buttocks upon the stamped-down clearing earth – Bilbo watched Dwalin transmogrify into a roasted beet.

He went stiff and dull like a board. He looked down at his feet. He did some funny fumbling with his hands, suddenly lost in front of him like a scolded faunt's; he mumbled something inarticulate; he was blistering from the nape of his neck in the glittering surcoat to the glossy apex of that great dome. You could even see a blush through the brambly brows.

“I agree,” Galinyah said, comically earnest, nodding judiciously to whatever it was poor Dwalin had not even come close to getting out. “In peace, khulz, you may go from us.”

And, just like that – unhinging Bilbo’s jaw the rest of the way – Dwalin of Erebor went.

“Come, then,” she bid him, opening the door wide, turning her violet slippers out of his way. “Make room.”

“Well, thank you,” said the writer, and he did.

Though the full count of dwarrowdames he’d met now numbered two, Bilbo gathered you oughn’t dally when one extends you a friendly invitation. He did his best job of dusting off the dry dirt and loose dandelion seeds, wiped his feet in a fresh clover patch, hiked up, and climbed inside the comfortable dark of the carriage.

It was dim and close and immediately more pleasant. The benches were tossed with rich dwarven
satin, that mournful dead-of-night Erebor blue, a texture would spoil your fingers if you let them spend too much time upon it. He let his eyes adjust to the change of light and focused very seriously on not staring at anything. It felt safe and cool in here. Bear pelts had been tucked about in abundance, necessary in winter but not so needed now, when they served as pillows instead of blankets. They smelled of black chocolate and some strange, musky perfume that reminded Master Baggins of faraway realms he had read about, perhaps, as a child, but never seen.

Azírë gathered her gown so that Bilbo might sit beside. The emeralds along her hairline trapped slanted daylight into a pretty, vaguely magical glow in the darkness. There was nothing a hobbit might consider a window – too much of a structural weakness? – but many long, thin slits in the thick carriage walls, squinty eyes to let in fresh air and sun as its occupants pleased. Which was apparently not a great deal at present, because the moment he’d settled, offering a close-lipped, nervous smile to the dame next to him, Galinyah latched the door.

“This is fascinating,” she remarked, thumping his backpack beside her, making no effort not to study him. “They didn’t tell us you would be a halfling. We assumed you would be a free-dwarf.”

“An un-dwarrish dwarf, that is – free-families – living among other peoples, long apart from the Folk. Who would have supposed from the stories you might actually be a hobbit. Not that it’s unwelcome,” Azírë added, tucking a few floating strands behind one large ear. It made the gems along her headdress twinkle, like dragonflies you might snatch out of the air. Though they wore nothing that might be considered face-paint (impractical for the road), the jewels took its place, drawing the eye and preserving the grandeur these long-suffering dwarves thought proved their strength. “It is merely surprising.”

Bilbo placed a hand over his front, where a gentlehobbit might loop his thumb in his vest pocket – only to remember he was not wearing a hobbit-vest, but a dwarf-coat. There were no pockets to be had. He had to satisfy his mannerliness by placing both palms on his knees and looking attentive. “I do appreciate it. Please forgive me if I offend you somewhere here. I am tired, sore, dirty and all the rest, but rest assured I don’t mean it. I confess, I’ve never met a dwarrowdam before, and I don’t know how to behave.”

“If you offend us, rest assured, we shall have you chucked under the wheels immediately,” Galinyah promised. Then she tendered her wit with a smile so Bilbo might catch the joke. “Your manners are only as good as ours. We didn’t expect you’d be who you are, either. Or so charming.”

“Or so heroically dressed,” Azírë added, taking the arm straight off Bilbo’s lap so that she might scrutinize its stippling of scales. “What nature of material is this? I’ve never seen such a thing before.”

Galinyah swatted her kneecap before Master Baggins could even begin to answer. “Don’t touch him,” she hissed. “Mahal’s back hand. This is the first halfling you’ve met! Maybe halflings don’t like to be touched.”

Azírë looked a little scolded. She did not think to release Bilbo’s arm until a moment later, where her embarrassed fingers came away all at once. “I was just looking at the craftsmanship of his coat.”

Galinyah held her contemptuous, disbelieving look for another few seconds. “I apologize for my undiplomatic sister-dwarf. The dwarrow are a handsy folk. We are making a poor impression of the females of our species.” The dame, as if in apology, then placed her large bowl right on his thighs. “You must be famished. I am fully aware Master Dwalin would starve us all if we didn’t make him stop for a cook every now and again.”

“Oh, that’s all right; you get used to it,” Bilbo shushed, not sure if he was referring to the arm-grab or
the King’s-Guard and his mulish forward-march. “I’ve never seen Dwalin back down from a notion so quickly. You must be nobility?”

“What an odd supposition. I’m a silversmith,” Galinyah said.

“I’m an embroiderer.”

“Ah, that explains the high dwarfish regard: craftsfolk.”

The embroiderer gave him a bit of a funny look. “We are females,” she said, as if the answer were obvious as that.

Bilbo fretted for a moment he’d asked something off-putting, and in the interest of not blathering, stuck a fruit in his mouth. It was offensively sweet and bizarrely chewy, just as he remembered.

(“Even your produce is excessive. How do you all not rot your teeth right out of your mouth,” Bilbo had wondered once in a half-rubbled kitchen of Erebor, finding the bite distasteful. Before Fíli could whip up a lying tall-tale of the cultural significance of figs or before Thorin could extol the superiority of dwarven dentium, Ori had happily taken his basket away and gone to munch and draw in peace.)

To be polite (and because he truly was hungry), our hobbit ate a few more figs, bothered by the way their sweetness made his own tongue taste sour in comparison. By the time he’d opened fruit number three, Galinyah was looking ponderously upon the overstuffed bag she’d taken up for him.

“What brings you,” she wondered, not suspiciously, but not too placidly, either, “to the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo Baggins? As for us, we are re-homing – but I imagine you must have some serious purpose, to come so far from yours.”

“I am writing a book, actually.” He gestured for his pack, set the bowl aside, and rummaged for a notebook to prove his purpose, giving the thing a here-it-is shake. “To document the Quest for Erebor. For posterity. Or just to share it. With the rest of the world – my world, that is – west of the Dwarf Nation. Obviously, you’d have little need for a hobbit’s perspective on dwarven affairs; others, I think, might learn something from such a story. Adversity, character, heroics and whatnot.”

“Are there no hobbits stories for you west-folk to learn from?” It was not an unkind question; it is merely the nature of dwarrow to challenge until they understand.

“Certainly there are hobbit stories, but most hobbit stories are about other hobbits. My people are not greatly interested in the goings-on beyond our borders, and I think that fact could stand to change. Everyone, I’d like to suppose, would come away better. I, for instance, am better-off.” The measurement of Bilbo of Yesterday against Bilbo of Today is really the very best testimony he has. “Than I would have been, had I stayed in my home and done as I was supposed to. Like your Folk, I have some interest in great figures and great deeds. Personages and events of world significance, that is. I suppose you might call me a historian, of sorts.”

“You are finely dressed for a historian, though,” Azírë threw in by way of apology for her earlier grab.

“Payment,” Bilbo explained. He smoothed a clutch of loose pages and closed his book carefully than before. “For a deed or two of my own.”

Galinyah settled one leg over the other, tenting the rich purple gown, bobbing the toe of her compact dwarfish foot. (Little things, dwarf-feet. Small and squarish and really quite darling, not that you’d do well to ever tell a dwarf that; Master Baggins found some humor in the observation that such an
overlarge, hair-flaunting species would lack both size and hair in the one domain his did not.) “I am pleased to hear that the Court of Thorin II pays generously. Which is not in-keeping with the buzzing we’ve heard, but bodes well,” she slid to her sister-in-travel, “in the event either of us happens to perform a heroic deed for a dwarven lord.”

“And you, Bilbo Baggins – are you a hobbit-lord?” Azírë asked, incidentally a little late.

“I suspect hobbits don’t have lords like dwarves do. We’ve not a king, or really any nobility, for the most part. We’re a self-ordering populist electoral—” Already they’d stopped listening. Galinyah was studying one of her wrist bangles, scratching at a splotch of sweat discoloration, and Azírë’s look became distantly polite. “My family is one of the wealthiest and most well-regarded families.”

The embroiderer seemed disappointed by this well-regarded revelation. “I had thought you were a burglar.”

“I,” Bilbo said, “am something of an anomaly.”

Then, returning the bowl Galinyah – two-hands to two-hands, good dwarfish etiquette – he put his papers away, and he held out a treasure from the posh fur of his coat.

“Speaking of deeds. Can you read this?” our historian-burglar-lord hoped, passing the fat gold medallion to the dwarrowdam next to him.

Azírë took it into her palm, where the thick sun of metal fit much more easily than in his. She gave it a little toss to weigh it. Then, satisfied – or perhaps merely disinterested – one of those mindful, decorated hands flipped to the inscription, turning it several times round-and-round with squinted eyes. “This Mark,” the embroiderer began, snowflake of a voice becoming firmer and monotonous in translation, “Herein Lain Upon Bilbo Baggins of the Western Hills and all His Heirs, Thusly Named Dwarf-Friend, for Valor, Cleverness, Fortitude, Trueheartedness—” She showed no sign of stopping. “—and Courage Unrivaled in His Outsmarting of the Fire-Drake Smaug, the Routing of the Enemies of the Dwarven People, Defense of the Crown, and—” Still no stopping. He felt his leg threaten to jiggle and his heel itched to tap. “—for His Role in the Restoring The Lonely Mountain to the Rule of Durin’s Folk, by the Undying House of Durin Witnessed and Declared. It Is Known.”

Well, Bilbo admitted, modestly.

“It is a Dwarf-Friend Emblem.” Galinyah popped a fig half ho-hum into her mouth. “It testifies to your allyship of the dwarrow race, and gives the bearer permission to move freely throughout the Dwarf Nation. No lawful lord may deny you shelter or detain you. I’ve never actually seen one, for the dwarves don’t make many friends.” Her mighty arms slipped off the back of the bench and she leaned forward, then, reaching lazily for it, scarce light skipping along her jewelry, casting teasing shapes along baubles and long hair. “Do you mind? I have a wee cousin in Erebor. A jewelry-maker. If it’s the art of his workshop—”

Bilbo please-do’d, so Galinyah removed a curious tool from a satin pouch on her thick-waisted belt. It was a tiny tube of polished brass, nicked strangely along the edges, filled with what appeared to be glass lenses one might slip out or slide in. She twisted its middle with four bewilderingly fast motions Bilbo was sorry not to have better-seen. Then the smith held it up to one eye and closed the other, wincing down at the medallion now perched on her knee.

“It’s the make of no smith-family I know,” she decided after some contemplation. Lowering the view-lens, Galinyah retracted the tip of tongue she’d thoughtfully stuck out, wiped her tool with a sleeve and flung it back into its parcel. “The inscription is a little long-winded, to be honest. And the silver could’ve been hotter when it was poured.”
“I’m afraid it’s just been in my dresser. Haven’t had much occasion these days to prove my friendship to any dwarven lords,” he joked – then realized he wasn’t exactly sure what he was joking about.

Galinyah harrumphed, dragging her locs back round one shoulder, forefinger-and-thumb thoughtfully stroking the stripe of beard on her chin. She gave them emblem an unimpressed shake in the direction of Master Baggins’s nose. “The Undying House of Durin ought to dismiss whatever apprentice they’ve put at the Royal Forge. This is third-rate work, not that you’d know it if you weren’t a dwarf. Perhaps the Ironfoot mastersmiths are delaying their arrival, which would be just like them.” She smiled at the hobbit, then – a genuine, shut-eyed, happy cat smile – offering a favor entirely in her power to give. “When we are settled, I’ll fix it for you, if you like.”

“Thank you. I might be a touch premature in my writerly assessment of dwarrowdames, but you are all very nice people, I think.”

“And I take hobbits for a most worldly and open-minded folk.”

“That I fear you’ll not find accurate. We are downright clannish and suspicious, and sort of petty, to boot.” He took the medallion back and slipped it back in a fold of his coat. “But we can be very friendly when we stand to be fed.”

“And amusing, too. What luck. Now that I leave my friends and family at the Blue Mountains, I must make them all anew. I should like a hobbit for a friend, I think. So let’s not chuck him yet,” Ganlinyah suggested, and as usual, it took her sister-dwarf two of those half-sure glances to ascertain she was merely at play again.

“Might I see your side-arm?” Azírë had already extended a hand for it.

“If you’ll tell me its name. No one offered to translate for me,” Bilbo countered lightly. It is poor form not to show a new friend your weapons – of dwarfish culture, he knew that well – for a warrior’s weapon communicates much about how he protects his friends. And so he unsheathed and presented the dwarrow blade, fingers balanced beneath the fuller and the hilt. The steel was cold and heavy and the dark emerald in the pommel blinked awake.

She read the inscription quickly. "You would say I am Fool's Courage."

“I confess I know too little of weapons to tell you how well this one is made,” Galinyah added, eating another piece of fruit. Bilbo returned the sword to its place. They did not offer to show theirs, and he did not ask, for Bilbo had no notion if asking after a dwarrowdam’s weapon was uncouth or if they even carried weapons. He couldn’t see any, but there was ample room beneath the gowns. “Dramatic name for a knife, though.”

“And its sister?” the embroiderer beside him had noticed Sting, as well. “The shape is strange. Is it elvish?”

“Indeed, it is. That’s a good eye.” Bilbo was a mite prouder to show this one, and held it up exuberantly, sprightly and more familiar to his hands. (After all: It is rare, in our writer's experience, that dwarves express much interest in less-than-dwarfish things.) “Though I suppose it’s hobbitish now. I’ve forgotten how to say the proper name.”

“Know you many elves?” Azírë bid him as Galinyah made only a courteous ah-hmm, disinterested as she was in military effects.

Master Baggins made sure to be appropriately demure about putting all his stabbing implements away. “Not many, no. The few I picked, I did pick well. Though I’m not sure your Folk would think
favorably upon audiences with the Elvenking.”

Her brows ascended – and the silversmith’s too. Galinyah leant forward suddenly, look sharper, and an raindrop of amethyst earring slipped from behind all that lovely coiled hair. “You? You met the Elvenking?”

“I stole from him!” Bilbo swore, the plucky thing. “But that was before I knew him personally.”

The dwarrowdames glanced sternly at each other all over again – as though they’d realized-but-not-realized this funny little Burglar Baggins had really been the Burglar Baggins, munching figs and yammering away in the car with them all along.

“Would you,” Galinyah wondered, ”since you mean to write the Quest, be willing—” And for the first time in his life, Bilbo was asked the question every writer, in the meat of their heart, hopes for: “—to tell us a story, right here-and-now?”

“Oh? Of what?”

“Elves,” she dictated, and Azírê, pressing closer beside him, smelling like satin and black tea and everything magnificently East of the homely West, nodded yes, please do. “Dwarfish stories I have aplenty. If what you seek is teaching through tales, Dwarf-Friend, then I’d like to hear an elvish one or two.”

Well, he said. I would be delighted to.

Where shall I begin? Bilbo asked. Shall I tell you all about the kinds of candles on Lord Elrond’s table? Or the taste of Mirkwood wine? Or what sorts of flowers and bones adorn the Woodland Throne?

Or are you more interested in the elves themselves? In their living walls and rock towers? If you’d like, and if it wouldn’t scare you, I’d even tell you all about elfish dungeons, crawling with roses and spiders and thorns.

Ah – I’m getting a bit ahead of myself, aren’t I?

"First," he said, and he cleared his throat, and from that very long thread, he untangled where to start. "I shall need to introduce the characters."

“Dori, Nori, Ori, Óin, Glóin, Bombur, Bifur, Bofur, Fíli, Kíli, Dwalin, Balin, and Thorin Oakenshield!” Bilbo counted, whispering furiously to himself, hiding in a birdcherry bush as all his dwarves were roped and marched through this black forest to meet the Elvenking.

Well – despite the darkness of Mirkwood, the lateness of the hour, and the thickness of these maidenhair ferns (which quite wholly engulfed Bilbo and ate up to Dwalin’s hips) – it seemed the elves had snatched every last one of them. They appeared from the ether of nighttime trees, tough as saplings and pretty as girls, then proceeded to chase everyone into a circle. It was a confusion of deer hooves and the snorting of skinny, quicksilver colts. It was stomping dwarf boots and shaken dwarf voices and dwarf metal scraping out of sheaths. It was a fierce, fire-eyed resentment in the Dwarfking’s face; it was a prickly surrender; and then it was a long length of elven rope, smelling of aster and hemp, knotted around the dwarves’ wrists, linking them all together, prisoners in one
stumbling, grumbling, lumpy and long-haired chain.

And it was Bilbo, right there, crouching in the undergrowth, saying *oh, no – nono – nonono – no, this won’t do at all.*

“Identify yourselves!” said the elves.

Bilbo Baggins – who was, just to remind you, right down on his elbows in the underwood, not three fathoms away, and not only a little bit afraid – mouthed one last set of *ohnononos,* then covered his mouth with a sleeve, trying not to breathe noisy breath.

Their leader, blond and irritable and bony – beautiful in the fair, gullish way young elves tend to be before they lose their jejune impatience – flourished before his small line of captives. He was aggressive and flinty astride a snippy roan heart. He did not dismount. Instead, he studied the dwarves, finally settling his gaze with alarming ambivalence upon Thorin – who was, to put it mildly, unhappy about being tied at the wrists.

“By the order of the Elvenking,” proclaimed the elf, holding his stag at bay, its carven antlers flashing in the mottled canopy light. “All who pass through these trees shall present their throats before the Autumn Throne. We seek no blood for your trespass, but if you deny us, we can.”

The Dwarves of the East had been thoroughly trounced. Oh, it was an embarrassing thing to endure, to be sure, something a hiding hobbit cannot quite appreciate when his continued existence is currently in question. They’d not so much as brandished an axehead or pointed a scimitar before they’d been shouted down and spear-stopped and ordered to surrender. Bilbo had only a matter of moments to dive into the ferncover and a flash of angry, mountainous faces to see. The outrage of Glóin! The threat of Bifur! Nori’s quick, yellowbird eyes scouring the twigs for mean stones! The brackish curses Dwalin had snarled into the void! – those, my dear, cannot be committed to print.

This grievous insult in mind, no one had been more surprised than Master Burglar Baggins when it was Thorin Oakenshield Durinson to first lay down his arms and surrender, haughtily, his fisted hands.

“Quickly; you answer to a Prince of Mirkwood. I am Legolas of the People and I have asked you your names, dwarves,” said Legolas of the People, who’d no idea he’d just imprisoned himself a king.

Thorin, of course, could be counted upon. “Perhaps we have no names, elfprince,” so suggested this Son-of-Thráin-Son-of-Thrór, who would not tilt his head up or down to look at anyone. He jutted his chin and blinked at them, ponderously uncooperative, hands tied at the belly but proud-as-ever, giving all his heavy hair a shake. “Perhaps it is,” he went on, “we dwarves are sprung from the rocks, nameless.”

The bound dwarves about him snickered, thinking this a very good joke on their king’s behalf. The Prince of Mirkwood was not so entertained. He paid Thorin’s mockery no mind, but snapped for his attendants, who came with weapons and lockets and personal effects that had been stripped (most unwillingly) from the Company. Bilbo watched with a thin heart in his mouth as Prince Legolas took Orcrist from the archer who had taken it from Thorin, who had, if you remember, taken it first from the trollcave floor.

“You carry a sword forged by the Noldor, Nameless One. If you will not answer me a simple question, then you will tell us who you have killed, cheated, or robbed to steal such a thing.”

Dori fretted. Ori gulped aloud. Bofur bent to pick up his hat, knees bending ever-so-slowly, trying
not to startle a javelin into anyone’s guts. Óin and Bombur looked at their big solemn boot toes. Balin’s grim face saw only the two heirs, and, chewing his poor lip to ruin, Bilbo did, too. Fíli glared smugly and boldly as a posturing crowned prince could. Kíli, however, could not bridle his fear – his dark forelock whipped left-then-right, scatterbrained, eyes wide and mouth agape, unable to keep all the liquidlike Sindar and willowy Silvans in sight.

“Your elf-eyes fail you. It is a found blade; me and mine have attacked none of yours.”

Bilbo did not understand why Thorin, Lord of the Lonely Throne, Son of the Deathless, One True Claimant to the Dwarven Crown, and so-on-and-so-on, could not just have said “we found it in a trollcave,” but alas, bullheadedness to ruin was Thorin’s way.

“Perhaps it is we come to beg,” wondered the Dwarfking, incidentally; Bilbo balled his hands into fists in the milletweeds.

Prince Mirkwood’s voice was a fine cleaver’s edge as he turned the Noldor saber this way, that. Elf-eyes, Bilbo noted, were a rather unnervingly rich velvet blue. “You are a well-dressed dwarf for a beggar.”

“Perhaps it is you are an uncomely scout, elfprince.”

“He is a noble, milord,” said the fire-hair closest to Bilbo. She swung one leg over the back of her dappled gray, woody and pliant as the rest of them, a pair of deerskin boots dropping to the ground. That hair was messier, somehow, than the others’, looking like it might crackle in the wind, reminding him of brushfire. Her steed’s feathery tail danced much too near to the burglar in the weeds. “Listen not to his diversions. I espied the signet ring.”

“Man cadhad, Tauriel?”

“The same one, milord.” She pointed her long, swanlike arm at Thorin, who paid no attention to this rudeness, busy as he was threatening the elfprince with his daring, dwarfish eye, its quality less of velvet and more of cold, deep water. “It is so, though I could not read it, gornhoth as it is. Yet the symbol is on the tallfinger; I say again, he is nobility. As,” she said, nose sprightly, face high, “are these.”

With that, the scout seized Kíli and Fíli by their bundled forearms, towed them forward, and deposited them before her commander’s stag. Prince Fíli walked on his own and tried stubbornly to shoulder her off. Prince Kíli was towed like a terrified, dewy-eyed child. His patchy jaw went loose, his elbows went slack, and he he stared at the stomping red elf as though she might any second call a wyrmling from the skies. She did not look back to him.

Well, Bilbo quite nearly came bounding out of the lichens and roses, then – quite nearly snapped, “I BEG your PARDON, excuse me, but do you have ANY idea? – any IDEA whom you’re manhandling?”

But the elf-maid stopped. She released her handful of Fíli’s ram’s wool coat, leaving the Crown Prince jostling and scowling as though he’d broken free of his own accord. And she hoisted Kíli’s limp-scarred hands before this Legolas so that he might view her proof: there, on what a hobbit would call his business finger, sat the brave, squarish, blackgold Durin ring.

That would do it, wouldn’t it.

The sonorous elvish, a language that reminded Bilbo of wind in willow leaves, came in tuts and whispers. Then came the Khuzdul: a lathery language, words like the giving of an eve, rocks
slipping down a mountain’s face. None of it struck our writer as particularly friendly.

“A good eye, captain, as ever.” And the elf prince turned back upon Thorin to scold. “A noble beggar, then. You have trespassed and lied. If you do not wish to speak as gentry, dwarves, then you will plea for pardon before the Elvenking. I give one more chance: declare yourselves and your purpose, or wear your silence and walk to Mirkwood in chains.”

It was majestic silence, as far as silences go, but you must realize silent majesty won’t satisfy a royal who has just asked you a very basic question. The dwarves glared and bit their tongues. And so the elves murmured amongst themselves – all of them, green like southern songbirds, strong like weedy maples, livid like sap from a tree. Legolas waited. The captain swung back atop her mare and it whinnied, disgruntled, stamping ever nearer to the grass where the hiding hobbit lay.

Bilbo is not sure how he managed to do it, what with the ropes and the height difference – but Thorin Oakenshield, King of the Dwarrow, Prince of the Silver Fountains, et cetera-et cetera, somehow managed to look down upon the elfprince sitting on his deer.

“Perhaps it is,” said he, “we are the Sons of Durin the Deathless, and we come with fire to watch your paltry thicket burn to the ground.”

Bilbo actually thumped his face on the dirt and said it into the earth: oh no, no, no, no, no.

The dwarf warriors cheered. The dwarf king smirked proudly at his own sass. The littlest dwarf prince’s bottom lip trembled, and he looked everywhere for help at once, seeming so terrorized that Master Baggins felt the need to bring the lad some tea and tell him a fable or two.

Prince Legolas’s brows climbed swiftly. That was all.

“Off we go, then,” Ori sighed, shaking the downtrodden fringe from his eyes.

And they were. The prince gave a stern string of orders. The red captain slapped her reins and snapped yah! And then the elves were off, simpering back into the dreary boughs from which they came, their saddlebags full of seized weapons and a string of defeated dwarrow at their back.

Bilbo’s heart, my dear, was racing, all pitter-patter in the leaves.

He watched them go. What could he do? The burglar watched a sorry lot of elves steal all of his dwarves in plain daylight and well, he was quite sore about it. He watched Thorin toss all that outrageous hair of his and stick his nose in the air and take the first striding step. He watched Dwalin spit in the dirt. He watched the others, linked one-to-the-next, follow, until he was watching Bofur worry last-in-line.

He watched Bofur lean over to Balin with low, nervous eyes, and whisper: “They can’t leave off yet; we’ve got to stall them. We don’t have—”

“Shh. Don’t help them, lad.”

“Bilbo’s out there,” the toymaker said.

They looked back into the foliage with fretful faces and hoped into these darkening trees for a sign.

Then, before our hobbit could think of anything to do or say, the rope pulled, and the dwarves walked.

And then he was quite alone.
Here we must leave Master Baggins a moment for one more addendum about hobbits. For being such an isolationist lot, suspicious of strangers and (I’m sorry to say) downright standoffish to Big Folk, they are very dependent upon fellowship. A solitary hobbit, my dear, is a terribly depressed hobbit, watery-hearted and green about the gills. It is just no proper way to live.

Fortunately for our hero - who, though hobbit himself, had never celebrated the chatter and stylings of hobbit company - Bilbo found that Mountain Dwarves suited his peculiar sensibilities just fine. They were marvelous storytellers (very dramatic), and they didn’t even know what a cravat was (so they did not notice Bilbo had, somewhere roundabout Bruinen, repurposed his into a handkerchief). He even learned to withstand their recklessness with the dishes after a while.

Having said this, and having freely admitted that our writer’s own people had always found him a little insular – "bit of a stray Shire rabbit, Master Baggins is, and a little bit queer" – we must confess: he is still not the independent wanderer we’d like him to be. I am afraid he his not so special. Bilbo, like most hobbits, very much disliked the concept of being left all alone.

“Ah, and there is my hobbit-friend,” Galinyah welcomed him, leant back on her palm heels in a stomped-down field, raising one plucked daisy for a toast. “Come, let’s see what you have.”

They had evening in Bree. It was a sleepy summer five-o-clock, gilt at the fringes and the right sort of warm to make you grin. The dwarfish army had built their camp at the edge of a far-flung cotton farmstead, where they might rest without bothering or being bothered. As for the attached farmer, he’d been dubious about the arrangement only until Master Dwalin thrust into his paws an ingot of Lonely Mountain silver. (Strange qualities, Ereborean silver – like Ereborean gold – dense and swirling and unreflective, absorptive, blackish with the light it devoured. A preciousness you might get lost in, should you look too hard to find yourself there.)

Dwalin and Bilbo, once tent-pitching was underway and the roaming commons cows had been shooed, went into market for supplies. They’d a wagon of dry goods packed and delivered. They arranged for barrels of goat sausages and crates of crusty bread. Bilbo exchanged a tiny greenstone for a box of caramels to please his new friends. Then, at Galinyah’s request, they ventured into a tavern for drinks. It was a ramshackle, slumping cabin at the periphery of upright Bree, and from where Bilbo had stopped outside to knock a couple peaches off the overstuffed yard tree, he could just see white smoke rising from dwarven fires. Drowsy bumblebees pottered about, and the battered dirt farm roads were dotted with folk plodding home from town. In the air: dangling bells attached to floppy-eared donkeys; chattering fathers returning from market; young women with pretty, pain faces and pretty, plain skirts carrying wash baskets and seeing whose eye their long hair might catch. The grass was a little crunchy and brown, and the pale sky strangely open, a break inside the western forest. Clutches of cotton grew over the wooden fences and dandelions abounded under the pot-bellied pink sun.

By the time they were walking back, careful not to spill the steins of mead meant for Azirë and Galinyah, beef chucks were roasting and a passable dinner was underway. A dwarven camp, my dear, is more vertical than horizontal; they stay near to one another, sleeping and working and chatting in tight circles, so that no matter where you are, you are always watching someone’s back while knowing someone else is watching yours.

Except for the dwarrowdames, that is – reclining comfortably in the middle of all this, one-and-two on their own. They had settled in a wide clearing upon a large throw of furs and kicked off their
slippers, sprawled idly, waiting to be served supper. No one approached or spoke to them. Indeed, Bilbo found it rather amusing how everyone in this otherwise bustling camp gave them such a large berth of peace when they were just lounging there, bored and contented like sleepy cats. A bit too clever, perhaps – bit swollen with a lazy, undermining sort of superiority – but nothing to be so afraid of. They were doing hair, for Yavanna’s sake. Galinyah had put two flat, deceptively simple plaits on Azírë and was just now ribboning them together behind her back.

When they stepped inside that magic fairy circle to deliver the mead, Dwalin, hitherto in-step with Master Baggins, had to steel himself. While he pussyfooted, Bilbo went right up and handed both drinks off.

“I’m sorry it took us so long,” the hobbit apologized. He reached into a pocket of his dwarf-coat and produced the peaches, sitting them on the blanket, mindful not to make bruises. “We were—”

“Delayed,” grumbled the King’s-Guard, eyes pitched down at the metal caps on his boots.

The truth was that the Bree inkeep had taken one long, bewildered look at Dwalin and their three-soldier entourage, then turned right to Bilbo in his catfur and scale and said, “I take it you’re the leader of this lot?” The dwarflord’s cheeks went black with anger and Master Baggins had to ask after the restroom to bolt outside and laugh into his own hands.

“There was some confusion about the payment,” Bilbo put it graciously.

Azírë picked up a peach and sniffed it. She wore her new braids very nicely, and though Bilbo was unsure if Galinyah’s spiraled rows came undone just-like-that, they too were most charming with patterns of blood phlox stuck-in. In the spirit of picnics, the dames had shed their belts and jewelry for spacious blue gowns – the younger in cornflower, the elder in a richer midnight – not a hobbitlass bodice or a three-button vest in sight. Odd how everyone behaved as though they’d snap their fingers and off-with-your-head a poor dwarf one day. Odd, too, the way the King’s Army marched around them, squinting with hands perched on their axe hilts as though someone might fly down from the hills any moment to snatch their females away.

“Join us,” Galinyah offered, patting the pelts – then, after a murmuring consultation with Azírë, turned her gaze to the King’s-Guard. “You, too, would be tolerated, Master Dwalin. So long as you don’t throw a shadow over our good mood.”

Bilbo was beginning to pity the five shades of red the big warrior turned whenever the dwarrowdames addressed him. He wondered if there was some particularly extravagant dwarfish attraction about these two, or if it was merely in Dwalin’s nature to melt down in the company of females. Whatever the reason, it had him mumbling into his beard. The break in that nose was all but glowing, and the tops of both ears positively burned beneath the rings.

“—should be seeing to—never-mind the—foolery about—wagons,” he got out, bowed clumsily, backed away and was gone.

“Poor sod,” Galinyah said, tapping her goatee, watching him lurch away like she was talking about an ungainly, slightly-slow child.

“He is really very impressive. Once you get to know him,” Bilbo vouched, because he felt like he ought to give the fearsome Dwalin of Erebor a hand. “Just a bit shy, is all.”

“So bald.”

“Unkind, sister.”
“It isn’t unkindness if it’s plainly true,” Azírë protested, blinking with doughy innocence that suddenly did not seem quite so real. Galinyah dealt her thigh a punitive pinch, and the embroiderer had the gall to look sour while rubbing it out. (Bilbo knew only enough of dwarfish standards of masculine beauty to know it is considered very unfortunate to have an uncovered head.)

They offered him a few things to nibble on. Though dwarven curries and peppermeats do nothing for a hobbit’s stomach, dwarven tea is quite good, if you put a little honey in it. He drizzled a generous helping into a mug of his own.

“Continue your story,” Galinyah of Valdah bid, sipping the apple-sweet mead foam like a little lass who always eats the whipped cream off her dessert first. “From before. Of the Dwarves of Erebor and the pretty elf-prince.”

Master Baggins, who could never say no to will you tell me a story, settled cross-legged on a fluffy patch of fur. He plucked a peach and flicked the bit of stem off. “You remember where I left off?” wondered our writer. “With the capture in Mirkwood?”

Azírë swallowed a mouthful of drink. “And the hobbit in the grass.”

Yes, Bilbo said, exactly.

And all the while, the hobbit in the grass.

So he shivered there, did our hobbit, belly-down and paws over his mouth like a bunny in the green.

Time passed. Time does, my dear, even when you believe you very much need it not to. As the footsteps faded, the chirruping of crickets and quibbling of hoot-owls resumed. The moist earth crawled into his waistcoat, making Bilbo uncomfortable. The dew plicked from the bushes he’d huddled in, gathered on gentle leaves, and thwacked him rudely on the brow, cheeks, nose, wettening his curls and the backs of his hands.

Indeed the poor hobbit was afraid. But you must realize, my dear, that fear – though never shameful – is not always helpful. And so it was with Bilbo in the mucky weeds that day.

‘Well, no sense in dawdling,’ Burglar Baggins figured, finally – and, finally, he got out of the bushes and stood up.

The light was no lighter. Bilbo could not even tell if it was night or day, for the canopy of Mirkwood grew so thick and so sodden that all was smoky mist. Our hobbit crossed his arms and hugged himself. Leaves dangled from broken stems where the slender elven horses had passed, drops of dew pirouetting to the dirt. It was silent and quite chilly, too, what without the baker’s dozen of dwarves stamping about – who, all woolen-lined and well-insulated and dressed in five species of fur, were each small furnaces in their own right.

(Cultural Note: Mountain Dwarrow, he has learned, detest being wet and cold almost as much as Hills Hobbits do; the eastern dwarves are merely more accustomed to handling mean weather than their summery distant cousins, mainly because of, you know, the mountains. Hobbit tailors are more concerned with gentle frippery and comfortable trousers than martial glamour or winter hoods, which is why poor Master Baggins was so often sneezing and underfoot on the road. But it was not all a bad thing, because if the Fallohides had landed all those ages ago in a harsher, stonier place, maybe
they’d all be as furry as dwarrow, and Bilbo didn’t have the mandible to look half so fine in whiskers as dwarves do.)

Alas, there was no finding the road from here. But if he looked closely, Bilbo could just follow the trampled dirt and parted brushes left behind. So follow our hobbit did. He removed the machete from his belt. He chopped down some suspicious-looking, spidery weeds. He clambered bodily over a fallen cypress trunk, struggling against the weight of his pack. Sullen and desperate and out-of-breath, Master Baggins stood atop that log as much as he dared and realized, panting, that he could no longer see the train of bodies winding through ferns or hear the horses noising. Now there was only the whisperiness of his scared breathing in the forest dark and the watching trees.

My dear, Bilbo may or may not have been feeling the cotton-throat urge to cry as he dropped over his perch. It is possible he was on the verge of giving up and shouting for someone to find him. And he might have – I’m not saying he was, mind you, but he might have – been regretting everything just about then, thinking anyone else in the whole wide world would have been able to keep up and save them.

And then he found it, lying sharp and sober upon the buggy ground: one iron bead.

Then another.

And another.

And – beckoned forward step-by-step, picking up a trail beads as he went – Master Baggins realized he’s read something like this before.

So he followed, of course, as he’d learned to. He collected metal for hours until, through a dense thicket of mulberries and over a sharp bed of creek rocks, Bilbo found them again. They were hunkered down to sleep, surrounded by elves but otherwise unbeleagured - and as he counted, their names coming tearfully into his head with relief, our burglar was not amiss to the fact most were missing half the beads from their braids.

Well, you can bet Burglar Baggins didn’t lose them again after that. He spent one night on his own, hidden far from the nickering mares and the magic-kissed campfires of elves, shivering in a tangle of wild rosebushes, sleeping in twenty-minute bursts. He ignored the thorn scratches on his ankles and face, hoping they would deter anything that might find a snoozing hobbit a delicious proposition. He chewed handfuls of blueberries and a few dandelions he found. All the health they’d regained at Beorn’s had just about starved off them, and our burglar tried futilely to quiet the rumbling of his stomach, afraid elfish hearing was as un-dupable as they said.

If he’d had any courage leftover, Bilbo would’ve slipped on his lucky ring and snuck into the elven supplies. They fed their prisoners sparingly. A clay plate of grains, a roasted potato. It was more food than their lost Company had been getting before, sadly to say, and the dwarves wolfed what they were given with glum desperation. For the most part; Thorin merely turned up his nose. If the king worried after their missing burglar, he did not show it, huffing and posturing spectacularly, looking like he’d love for Prince Legolas to try interrogating him again.

But the elves had no interest in talking anymore. They split their captives in small, secure groupings and kept a tight vigil, appearing so unconcerned as to be mildly offensive. Perhaps they’d begun to develop some inkling as to who they’d got, too, because Thorin was separated from the others and treated with a smidgen less animosity, brought hot soup and watered wine he dramatically refused. Bombur twiddled his fingers and fretted. Nori poked at the ground with a stick. Glóin argued virulently with the elf who’d confiscated Óin’s earphone until his face went pink said elf gagged him. Bofur and Bifur did their best to console Ori. Dwalin growled at everyone.
Balin sighed and ate his potato and grimly shook his head.

The littlest Durin, though, was by far the most miserable. Prince Kíli sat cross-legged next to Prince Fíli, managing none of his brother's defiance and all of his worst-nightmare imaginings. The lad's nose kept running and his eyes stayed wet, scraggly hair falling dismally forward; his thoughts raced to chains and guillotines. Indeed, with no proud king-uncle near enough to snap hush up, he wept and sniffled and worried freely. Poor Kíli felt so badly for himself that the mean red captain - squinting harshly from a log beside Prince Legolas's fire - broke her loaf of bread, and flung one half each at their snuggly-furred dwarven boots.

"Stop your crying, winimo," she scolded, looking twice as mean to compensate for her kindness. "We elves do not kill our prisoners."

Kíli flinched at the sound of the bread on the ground. But he picked up and dusted it halfheartedly, struggling to stop crying, wiping his nose in the crook of his sleeve. "I feel sick," he lamented, hiccuping midway through. "Why did you take us out here? I want to go sit with my uncle."

Fíli smacked him in the leg. "Mahal's stones, Kíli. Don't talk to them! Don't tell them things."

"But I'm sick! I feel feverish and my head is all stuffed and I feel so cold," said he, and with that for an excuse, the small prince was back to his crying again.

Meanwhile, the red captain had just taken a swirl of tea, and Bilbo heard her swallow turn to rocks and go all the way down. She winced guiltily into the wooden cup. The lines of her neck stood out when she did – reedy, awkward and full of gristle – and her hands were long around the drink in a bony way, as though she wasn't quite sure where to put them at rest. To put it politely, she was a little ungraceful for an elf.

"Here, dwarf," she said, standing weedily, taking three crisp steps over the leaves and thrusting the cup at the still-crying prince. She was strong like a tough birch and just about as sensuous, too, which is to say not at all. "Drink this for your and head and be silent."

"It's poison," Fíli announced, a snotty harrumph. Poison or no, Kíli scooched up on his knees and took it, wary of the elf but grateful for the warmth. Bittery liquid shivered in its cup. He settled carefully back down with it and nursed, no longer crying, still looking like someone had butchered his favorite lamb.

"I was just drinking. If it were poison then I have poisoned myself."

"How dare you speak to me," Fíli informed her, but he also ate the bread. (He chewed as rebelliously as he could.)

She did not say anything back. The red captain about-faced, pointing her long nose and long feet to fetch another dip of drink from the community pot – but as she walked, she rolled her eyes. (Bilbo thought he'd probably have the best luck sneaking around that one, to be honest. He thought she was a little bit less like the elegant woodland royalty around her and a little bit more like, well, him.)

But the burglar never found a sneaking chance. Every time Bilbo thought he'd edge near enough to cut the ropes from clever Nori's wrists or let loose the fury of Dwalin, there was an elf or an elk in his way. And the only time he might have signaled Thorin – tossed a pebble or waved a suspicious leaf – the great and mighty Dwarfking was propped against a rock, hands folded over his stomach, mightily asleep.
Indeed, before any escape attempt could formulate: morning. Bilbo startled awake on the pillow of his folded arms, a stinging briar caught in his cheek and a beam of unlikely daylight piercing the branches. The elves had saddled up to depart. And the dwarves, with nothing else to do, came with them.

The staggered bunch walked again - lean scouts, lean horses, grumbling dwarrow, single halfling skittering after. The unbeaten path led through shallow rainwater and sticking mud, over lichens and under sumac vines. Finally, after walking all that way, over spiky grasses and slippery mosses and twisted trunks with snarled roots, they came to the city at noon.

Or they came to what Bilbo assumed was the city, for from his low vantage in the brambles, he could see nothing beyond the incredible wall.

It was stone and mortar - as high as the overhigh hemlocks leaping up around them in every direction, curtained with heavy webs of flowering grapevines like shots of silver through rock. The wall stood immutable with the oldest, blackest trees.

They drew the great gate, did the elves, and – before Master Baggins was even close enough behind them to consider making a run for it – they shut it again. He lay on his belly beneath a bunch of honeysuckle, watching the tower cranks work and the locks clack back into their time-worn place.

The burglar slammed his fist into the ground.

"Bollocks," said Bilbo.

Why then, you might ask, did Master Baggins insist on going through with it all?

He might have done something differently, you know. He might have waltzed right up to those moldering gates, dealt them a knock, and introduced himself to the elves as a waylaid merchant who needed help. He might’ve been treated to nice sheets and a supper of chewy elven sweetbread and berry paté. What business had he ever had out here, anyway, following along after a bunch of homeless Mountain Dwarves?

It was really too bad for Bilbo that he had gone and become fond of them. In fact, somewhere, one evening – and he could not say precisely when – Bilbo was on the road, writing about hobbit cutlery and minty hobbit breakfast teas, and it dawned on him, all of a sudden. Somehow, at some time – maybe all at once as avalanches go, or building gradually like spring rains, or unpredictably, like sunshowers – a little of his hobbitness had been swept away. It was like the movement of a river against the earth. He just hadn’t room for so much hobbitness, you know. Not in the core of him; not overgrowing him, supplanting the realest him and who he was; and not at the expense of taking in everything else. Bilbo had taken in so much magnitude and so much beauty and like a proper dwarf he wanted to keep it all. He had touched Rivendell lilacs and tasted mountain snow. He had heard dwarfsong and listened to their secret mother tongue. He had ridden a brisk pony up a craggy cliffside and had not even died. He had delighted in the finest flutists of the unimpeachable Lord Elrond’s Court, and he had stared a white warg in the face with kingsblood on its mouth and a smarting little sidearm in his hand. How, then, are you to hold teacups and linens and gentility in your head when you have the wealth of all that?
So Bilbo Baggins dusted some of that old custom out. He’d done away with the unneeded stuff. He had spent too many nights lying in his bedroll unable to sleep, blinking at the roofless enormity of sky, realizing for the first time that – although hobbits are indeed very small – the truest truth is, my dear, that *everyone* is small. Dwarf and elf and troll and then some – ladies and gentlefolk – you and I – all immensely, incredibly small – so very tiny and small and, like flashes of fireflies in darkness, both brilliant and brief. Bilbo had known more of the language of fireflies when he was a child. And it came to the writer’s attention, then, that he was only now remembering it: the feeling of being called by them, of running in the damp summer grass, reaching for those points of brightness, condensed like diamonds in a great black sheet, for no particular reason but because they are beautiful and because they are the both of them here.

And it was on that imprecise evening, with pen in his hand and the fireflies just beginning to murmur, that Bilbo realized the crucial importance of his life had stopped being about hobbitness or hobbit books or hobbit propriety or hobbit ideas about happiness. The most important thing in the whole-wide-world had become seeing Prince Thorin of Durin standing in a hall of olden, impeccable stone, with diamonds in his hair and that ancient crown upon his head.

And any amount of blunted butter knives and inferior tea was worth that, wasn’t it.

Investigating the crumbling mortar, probably one thousand years old, our hobbit slung and refixed his sword belt over one shoulder, feeling Sting between the blades of his back.

“Well,” Bilbo supposed to himself, “no sense in standing around.”

He put his hands on the wall and then his feet and then Burglar Baggins was stepping up, one fistful of vines at a time.

Belladonna once told him being short gives a climber an edge. Something about gravity or cling or something-something. Bilbo couldn’t remember exactly what his edge was, but figured that must make hobbits just about the finest climbers in Arda. Theoretically comforting - not so much in-practice, with green shavings crammed under his nails and bees about his face and his toes trying to hang on. He kept getting mouthfuls of ivy, but was too apprehensive to machete them away. Our burglar went slowly, shimmying along and pulling up with his forearms and straining his calves, knees getting stiff and hands growing sore. The steep incline and the thick foliage shielded him from elf-eyes, and the stems were easy to grip. Every so often, he paused to take several deep breaths, reminding himself not to look down, having no inkling of how far left he’d yet to climb, but sure he had to keep going – because by now, my dear, it was either up or down.

It took the better part of two hours. Eventually, though, he reached the top – first the tips of his fingers, then head-and-shoulders, then one leg thrown over the brim, sweat in his curls and sword on his back. And then he saw the grape-wrapped city threaded tightly before him. Mirkwood: cobbled streets twisting through red bark buildings; spirals of limestone with orchids growing through the cracks; mushroom-lit alleys, shelf-lights glowing bright up the sides of the tall-roofed houses; towers, tall and gray and daunting, like spires made of ash trees. Bilbo could do nothing but sit in the damp air and try to catch his breath.

Unable to quite catch it, feeling weak and weary and a little too light, Master Baggins slipped on his lucky ring and start scaling down the other side.

“Never again,” he promised himself, incidentally, releasing the last handful of vines as his furry toes again welcomed the solidness of paved rock. “Never again with the climbing.”

Inside the city, now - no longer above it - everything was suddenly very close and high around him. Our burglar backed himself into the nearest shadowy outcropping to think, tucking his body beneath...
a oaken veranda, hiding among many barrels of something sloshy and heady (probably wine). The vertical build of the place was perplexing angles jutted around and up in every direction, unfriendly architecture and flaky bark buildings hugging close. The malaise of liquor and blood from the butchery he was squatting by stirred Bilbo’s complaining stomach. The sounds of wind chimes and chattering finches and elfish laughter came from everywhere and disoriented him. Too silent for a city, too narrow, too sugary-sweet and too near. And all of it shrouded by grapes – fat, black, large as sheep’s eyes, threatening drunkenness with just a taste.

Beyond the elves’ wall: the terrible forest was still waiting, claustrophobic and empty-bellied around them.

And then, just around the corner: a swash of flame-red hair.

The red captain walked swiftly, eyes-forward, stiff-kneed and on her own. She was headed somewhere in-particular and Master Baggins didn’t miss his chance. He twisted the golden ring on his finger, begging it not to run out of luck, and followed that red color like a fire in the boughs of a pine.

He followed, it turns out, right to the prison, where the quest for the Mountain was shut in a steeple of rock.

“You must have been very brave,” Azírë noted, swishing her feet in the creekwater, recalling that weeks-old tale as though they’d just spoken of it six minutes ago. “In your story of the elves.”

The dwarven caravan was camped for a three-day on the woody edge of Loudwater River. Perfect weather for them, too – sunny and breezy, the world glimmering a gold-green that made Bilbo’s heart light as dew – but Dwalin’s iron-jawed pace was tiresome. It drove the horses raggedy and made the rams grumpy. It had the armored carriage wobbling one wheel. As for the King’s Army, they celebrated a rare opportunity to rest their feet, shine their armor, tell wild jokes and fish.

As for the dwarrowdames, Azírë had invited Bilbo to a peaceful outlet of the river, where she and Galinyah planned to spend this cricketing morning washing their robes and catching frogs. "Peaceful," that is, besides the ten Guardians who went with them. Warriors moved through dogwoods and hazel in heavy armor as the embroiderer and the silversmith walked in nothing but their oldest slippers and worn undertunics, kicking pebbles away, picking some shallows to sit in. It didn't take long to find a shady spot. They dropped their laundry with a mighty, sloppy splash.

Well, Bilbo said to her, they didn’t make me a Dwarf-Friend for my bounteous head of hair, I should hope.

“When we get to Erebor,” Azírë said, pulling an armful of dress into her arms and setting to it with a bar of lavender soap. All that white hair hung limp and loose down the sides of her roundish face and cascaded into the dwarrowdam’s lap. “I would be very curious to meet the rest of this company, if you would introduce me.”

“If I can manage to get them all in one room again. They’ve a way of scattering. Like kittens.”

The vest in his hands suddenly seemed a little too weighty. Rolling his shirtsleeves, coat tossed safely over a low-hanging bough, Bilbo plunged it into the rocky shoal and focused on a stubborn grass stain. The water was clear and cool and its gentle sounds restorative. As he and Azírë cleaned,
Galinyah – less interested in tending to her clothes as she was in relaxing – sat a little farther up the bank, swirling her finger in a pool of tadpoles, watching them burst and recollect.

“Of course, we know Thorin,” the silversmith added, lest this helpful halfling think arranging a royal introduction was in order. She pulled her hand out and gave it a drying flick. “My mother and I have lived in the Blue Halls for many years. I was only a babe when the Mountain was lost; I’ve been working metal in Ered Luin as good as my lifetime. Azírë was born there. I think he’ll not complain we’ve come.”

“Were you not invited?”

“Pah!” she chuffed, the proposition of a male asking her anything like that striking Galinyah as awfully cheeky. Her damp hand dried the rest of the way in a wad of work-tunic that left her fierce, freckled arms in the sun. Those red-brown rows were bundled and knotted up high as they could hold on her scalp, but their weight had already started to pull free. “No. We move as we will. Though we did, obviously, send word ahead. I admit we didn’t expect quite this much accommodation.” Her wrist twirled to indicate the attending Guardians, who were still scowling at nothing, as though the trees themselves might be considering an abduction.

“How many of you are there,” Master Baggins wondered, “to merit an army for two?”

“In the Blue Mountains? We are all of us some eight thousand left of Erebor. Of females, we are thirty-one.”

Bilbo, who had just taken a sip from his water canteen, choked.

“But how do you live?” he marveled, wiping his mouth. The back of his hand smacked the single braid away. “How do you – what’s the word – subsist?”

“It is a fearful question, Master Hobbit, and not one to be answered just-so.” Azírë had started in on one of her sister-dwarf’s luxuriant gowns. “There are few females to be found among the dwarven people, and fewer still to be found in the Durin Halls. The great many of our mothers and grandmothers perished in the dragonfire. Of those who did not, most chose to leave Thráin’s Court in preference Grór’s in the Iron Hills, where it was thought we would be safer. Our ancestors were among the few who did not – or could not.”

Galinyah’s hmph interrupted the strange pip of an ache in Bilbo’s heart. An odd, fragile, snowy pain – frosty old sorrow at the thought of the Durin Blue Halls, cold with ice and inferior stone and exiled to the periphery of the world, no mothers or sisters or daughters to brighten them. He knew of the Trouble With The Dwarves, of course. But it did not seem like such a close, sad thing until now, thinking of tall hearths in a barren fortress, empty of females, the space left by their absence like a gust of wind through a drafty manor house. He redirected his energy into that stain until it faded two shades lighter than the crimson around it.

“But I like Thorin,” the silversmith announced, a bit defiant in saying so. “I think he has a touch of the madness, but so did my foremothers to have stayed out there. And so do I.” She picked up a pebble and hurled it dramatically down the creek. The splash sounded like a livid carp. “If he is willing to take fourteen against a dragon for the memory of Erebor, then I am willing to brave its ghosts. Provided that we don’t find his rule too objectionable, now that he is a proper king. Abundant power has a way of ruining males for anything else.”

“I rather thought that’s what kings were for,” Bilbo said, to which Galinyah snorted mightily again.

“The Dwarfking,” Azírë told him, squeezing some wetness from the silversmith’s sleeves and laying
the heavy gown beside her on a sun-warm rock, “is the leader of the males only. He speaks for them in our Chief Council and rules his own domain, but not the females in it.”

“Have you ladies a parliament, then?”

“We—” Galinyah sounded a little annoyed to repeat something that was just now said. “—have a Chief Council. We call them The Six. They are gathered in Erebor to advise the Durin Family and to dictate how the Dwarven Kingdom will function inside of itself. It’s rare for them to overrule a king – or I should say, it’s rare for a king to stand against them when they are all united at once. But they could, if they chose. I can’t imagine what the Dwarfking would do about it.”

It was news to Master Baggins. No one had told him much about dwarven government, let alone dwarven females and their role within it, for it was not unreasonable to presume he would never meet one. Of course, the presumptions of Bilbo’s life had a tendency to unravel like a scarf on a flagpole.

The embroiderer, taking care not to worry any stitches, chose a flat stone with which to smooth water-wrinkles from her dresses. The writer was not so careful and climbed out of the creek, trouser cuffs sopping, to chuck his laundry over the arm of a tree. Galinyah lay on the bank with both hands folded over her belly and basked. She had not washed a single thing.

“Mind,” Azírë mentioned, rolling the stone in her thoughtful hands to heat it. “The overwhelming majority of dwarfdom is male, and so most of our Folk are the king’s to command. But he has no jurisdiction over the individual dwarrowdames. He could, though—” She rolled a bit faster. There was an aftertaste of nervousness to the word, and though her eye contact always suffered from a touch of shyness, that smoky look was now quite intently fixed at the bones in each thumb. “—refuse us from his home.”

“Azírë. I tire of telling you this. Don’t be stormy.” Galinyah twisted her waist to prop up on one elbow and peer at them. The twin tones of her stare took on a coercive quality, and the rich voice tightened, ignoring for this moment that Bilbo was even around to hear anything like strife. “The males won’t clap their hands and approve of their king turning us out. What’s more: you are young, and you are, of course, exceptionally pretty. Don’t protest! He will welcome you, no matter how he feels about it. And why shouldn’t he – you’ve done nothing to offend him. Not personally. Not as you are.”

Azírë looked glummer still, sitting with bare heels in the current and all her slack, fair hair shadowing the sorry look. “Yes,” she muttered. All the cynicism of the world was hers. “A lucky thing dwarves care so little of the issue of names.”

On a sigh, Galinyah pushed herself to stand, dropped both ankles into the water, and sloshed over to where her companion sat among their wash. She gathered her linen skirts up and tossed them to one side. Then she sat herself, right on the slick stones, draping a protective arm around Azírë and pulling her over until the silversmith might rest her chin on the embroiderer’s fine blond crown.

Bilbo did not ask. He is no dormouse, but he can tell, as a writer should, when his questions are unwelcome, and when the full story cannot really be told.

“Writer,” Galinyah bid, holding her downcast sister-dwarf with the firmness of someone able to both carve delicate trefoil and to bare-handed shove hot metal away. “Tell us more of that tale with you and the elves. I think a story of bravery,” she suggested, patting Azírë’s folded knee, “would suit all this sunshine just fine.”

In that case:
Bilbo Baggins, he said, *at your service*.

Bombur looked up from his fingernails and gasped.

“Bilbo!” he cried, standing up, arms high and joyous at the hobbit’s clever hello.

Everyone else in the jail said *SHHHHHHH*.

It took Master Baggins many hours to find his dwarves. He followed Captain Tauriel about, eating those ominous black grapes when he couldn’t bear the hunger anymore, kissing his ring over-and-over so as not to wear out the luck. Luck must’ve minded, because nobody saw him, and nobody snagged him – and, eventually, he would up exactly where he needed to go.

Thranduil’s prison tower was strangely beautiful. It jutted up from a misty dungeon belly to heights unknown, the architecture narrow and craggy, reminding Bilbo of a rook for crows. Its stairs were strange, hugging the corners and sometimes offering so little clearance the elves themselves had to walk shoulder-turned. All yawned perilously open to the central drop. Who knew for certain how far down it went? Roots pushed through the dirt mortar. Fruit flies buzzed. Dew twinkled in torches like sad starlight. Tree vines – blooming with delicate, fragrant whites and pinks – draped down from the apex like ropes, and indeed our writer could imagine elf captains descending them in a hurry if they’d any cause.

Bilbo breathed deep the earthy-sweet dizziness of flowers, wondering how he might go about freeing a dozen-plus-one dwarves.

As it turned out, the slippery holding cell into which Prince Legolas had deposited the Company of Thorin Oakenshield was easy to find, and its ironwood bars were spaced just wide enough for a hobbit to squeeze side-a-ways through.

Which Bilbo was slightly regretting having taken advantage of, since – after shouting Bombur’s overloud exuberance down – the entire group of dwarrow overtook him. Our burglar found himself being ruffled up and passed about. They were all hushed celebration and crinkled cheeks and sharp, smiling eye teeth. Dori clapped as quietly as possible. Bofur danced around. Bifur spoke some very encouraging nonsense and pinched his cheek. Fili and Kili cheered in miniature. Balin breathed out a great sigh of relief – a whoosh of *My dear lad, we had just about given you up for bug-food* – and Glóin actually swooped him up like one might a baby, announcing *Little Bilbo! Alive yet!* and dropping the frazzled halfling right into Óin’s arms. (Óin apologetically put him down.)

Between all the rough pats on the back and jolly thumps to the gut and stinging head-butts, Master Baggins counted, murmuring and frowning, a tally all to himself: *Dwalin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and* —

“Where’s Thorin?” Bilbo asked, suddenly aware the sullen voice and excessive mane were nowhere to be found.

Nori, sitting cross-legged on the floor and picking his teeth with a bird bone our burglar had no intentions of asking about, answered. “They took him to the Elvenking. Diplomatic talks or something.”

Balin’s brow twitched and his mouth tightened he gave that tutting, knowing shake of his wispy
“White head. ‘This will not go well.’

‘When?’

‘Only just before you came. That makes for really terrible timing, doesn’t it? Oh, but – Master Bilbo – do you suppose —’ Ori dropped in. He clutched protectively to a binderful of sketches, papers, and poems the elves hadn’t seen fit to yank away. A finger and thumb risked it, though, to pinch at the hobbit’s sleeve and give it that signature psst-psst tug. ‘—if you hurry, you might make it to the throne hall, and find out what Elfking Thranduil wants? We don’t even know what’s going to happen to us.’

“We are Durin’s Folk and we go nowhere without our king,” Dwalin snarled mightily from the shadowy corner he’d been haunting, not that anyone was suggesting leaving Thorin behind.

Prince Kíli, who’d recovered from his malady of self-pity, raised a pointer to speak. He was sitting against a crumbly bit of wall with arms wrapped around his shins, both knees propping up the sharp chin. ‘What do you think—’ His finger crooked mid-air. ‘—are the chances of Thranduil having a nice chat with uncle, realizing this was all a big misunderstanding, and turning us out?’

“Given the ongoing political tensions between our people and the Elves of Mirkwood?” Ori cocked his head to mull it over, effecting the most ponderous, thinking-dwarf’s frown. It spilled that choppy scruff all to one side in a way that reminded Bilbo of a shaggydog pup. ‘I am no expert on elfish history, my prince, but according to my humble guestimations, and the variations between dwarrish and elvish diplomatic dressage, the chances are approximately—’ He cast his moonish face up and chewed on his lip to calculate. ‘None.”

Balin chuffed with that knowing, displeased look of his. ‘Less than none. Thorin is doing the diplomacy. Which means we’ll more likely be flogged.”

“That’s no use arguing about now,” protested Dori, flattening a hand on the burglar’s stomach to stop him from running off. The poor dwarf looked a bit bedraggled with his braids cast free, underbrushed and sea-sick. A few of them did, actually; Glóin’s great bushy beard was not quite the same, and Nori’s hair struck him as lopsided. “Better not to get caught, if we stand any hope of dodging this place before Durin’s Day.”

“Lucky for you, I have no intention of getting caught,” Master Baggins, with no small amount of cockiness, said.

He reached deep into his pocket and procured a full handful of dwarven beads, then. Dwarrow swarmed the open palm like faunts to an offer of candies, and soon, the whole group of them were twisting and separating and snapping locks back into place.

“All this talk is useless.” And so Fíli was the one to finally make the announcement. With both feet grounded and chin set stiffly, putting forth his best approximation of a mighty Durin face and a lofty Durin voice, the golden prince he addressed them all from the meager jail. The register in him was too deep to seem natural, a sobriety that appeared too grim and too black for a head of jangling yellow braids. “Unless we also have a plan of escape. Else we dispute our captivity for nothing. Dwalin is right. We go together. So the first we must do,” their junior-king decided, “is find out what the elves want of us, then find out if we will answer them – and if not, we hasten that much more to find an exit.”

There came a round of hear-hearing and some supportive ayes, allowing Fíli to feel pleased with himself. Once this excitement settled down, though, came the stickier discussion of how the Dwarves of Erebor would go about these tasks. They debated in hushed voices. They stroked their moustaches
and rubbed their beards. They agreed and disagreed and thought aloud and mulled in silence – and, by the time anyone thought to ask a burglar’s opinion, it was a good throw later.

“Bilbo,” Fíli realized, turning about with a ponderous expression, like he had just stumbled upon what might become a very good idea. “What would you say if I asked you to—”

But Bilbo, my dear, was long gone.

ooo

The Elf King, with his crown of thorns and chokeberries and his endless sunwhite hair, was by far the most glamorous person Bilbo had ever seen. Thranduil of Mirkwood moved like an outlet of calm, clear water. He was ghostly in his white stone throne room, striding from some private antechamber into cool halls as a wisp of smoke does, effortlessly moving among the living colonnades of aspen. Wicker-thin, upright, and too pale-eyed - less an animal than a branchy extension of lines - his shoulder parted the muslin curtains behind the royal dais. He wore little jewelry. Merely a ring, a tumor of an emerald twisted with a tiny freshwater pearl on the littlest finger. And the strange robe he wore – smart, sharp silks of a confusing and temporary color, alike reflections in water. As Thranduil ascended the winding stairs to his throne of pale oak and ivy leaves and deer bone, knee boots making no leathery sounds, the train of this great garment swept the polished stone and glimmered, harkening to some sea snake with an infamous name. His eyebrows were alarmingly strong on a narrow, high face.

“Thráinson.” He greeted Thorin in this wry, sideways tone that was not very welcoming at all. Thranduil's eyes, oyster-like, flicked toward his prisoner with immense condescension and a twist of dislike. “My son told me he was sassed by a grandiloquent dwarf lord lost in the woods. I had thought it might be you.”

Dwarfking Thorin, formerly the most glamorous person Bilbo had ever seen, made a most unfriendly showing of his sharp dwarfish teeth, at which Elfking Thranduil settling in his sinewy chair looked like he might laugh.

It seemed being glamorous tended to make one proportionately rude.

Thorin skipped the polite parlay. (Of course he did.) You couldn’t spot the guards, oh no, but they were surely there, as sure as the elven rope still laced tightly around the Dwarfking's wrists. Jaw stiff and posture grounded as a piece of rock, he looked at the King of Mirkwood as though he were a spider's web - unpleasant, pause-giving, but an obstacle that might be charged through.

“You will see me on my way, elf,” said the Lord of the Silver Fountains – whose Ereboran accent, with all its whorls and drops, had never been thicker than when he was speaking to an elf. “Or the Folk will fall upon your crumbling keep like the shadow of a mountain.”

Thranduil stood up, suddenly and mightily – then, and there is no other way to say this, the Elfking doubled over and burst out laughing.

It was uncomfortably long, awkwardly loud laughter. Child’s laughter, a playgame tickle. He curled his elegant arms around his ribcage and laughed freely like it was neither disconcerting nor inappropriate to do so.

This seemed to alarm Thorin – who blinked, face blank with a flash of taken-abackness – before
recovering with an even angrier and stiffer scowl than before. It certainly alarmed Bilbo. From his hidey-spot beneath an ivy-draped longtable, cloaked with all the magic you could wear on a finger, our burglar smelled sugared plums and fermenting grapes, and wondered if it might be possible the Elvenking was a little drunk.

The laughter dropped – just as suddenly – into a sneer. He stood at full height and stared with immense, eternal derision. Thorin glared back and puffed his furry shoulders like an affronted owl waiting to be furious.

“You are lucky I do not feed you to the spiders,” Thranduil said.

Then the Elfking sat, plopping down all at once back into his throne, tossing one knee over the other and flinging the half-empty goblet left on his armrest to the floor in a disdainful splash.

Oh, yes, Bilbo decided, definitely drunk. Plastered, really.

“Why,” he asked, unsmiling now. The chucked-aside cup rolled precariously close to the table hiding the halfling beneath. “Are you here?”

Thorin chose this moment to be silent.

“Come, then,” Thranduil egged, swirling his longest finger in lieu of the glass he’d just thrown to the floor. The tip of his handsome boot tapped the air contemplatively. Drunk, but articulate. Drunk, but not silly. He did not have Thorin’s dramatic ordering of language, and spoke more directly, with a pinch of disdain. “Am I to guess? Strange timing, dwarf, to happen upon us during the Feast of Starlight. I doubt you have come to raise a cup to the elven heavens. Let me see – you are here, then, to make some sort of deal? To peddle a cart of lowly Luin gemstones, is that it?” he dug, falsely ponderous, not even bothering to watch his captive’s predictable dwarfish temper rise.

The Dwarfking said nothing. He stood, hands-tied before him, with that mighty frown of his - the one which would go so stubborn as to hide anything else – and Bilbo wondered, with a shock of tenderness chasing his own fear, if Thranduil had managed to scare him.

“Have you come—” the Elfking dared, a tilt of the head and a spill of salt-gold hair. “—to offer tribute?”

This last barb caught fast in Thorin of Thráin. He inhaled sharply, finding his heavy voice again – and even humoring the emotional need a dwarf might have to flaunt their dwarfishness in elfish company, this brogue of ‘r’s was ridiculous. “We come to retake what is ours, elf, through steel and fire if we must. I say again: you will release us.”

But alas, he did not. Thranduil sat unperturbed in the Throne of Greenwood, rolling his forefinger and thumb together like one might do during deep thought, or in the effort of making a spitball. It was with a sedate malice the Elfking asked: “Have you sons, Thorin of Thráin?”

In that moment of choosiness, that catty face and particular fancy, Bilbo imagined what his life was like. And when he got to know Thranduil a little better, Bilbo only imagined more: being King of the Green Wood, watching that lovely spring color around you wince into a wet black, until you can no longer use its name without being laughed at. Favorite trees would dry and fall. Loved elks and foxes and songbirds would catch ill and die. Servants would bring wine day-in, day-out. It is always the same nauseating, light flavor, the honey of dark grapes. Did it take the highest sting off his mourning, wondered our writer? Is the missing of a wife the sharpest grief – the inescapable memory, like fluid in the lungs, intermingled even in the pure joy of seeing your son’s face? Or is it the endlessness of that missing – knowing age would not come for you, lacking even the most mortal assurance?
Drinking, drunk, but never foolish, never forgetting the press of the sun’s arc of crown atop your head. It must be torture, being such a king. So it was that Bilbo could never bring himself to dislike Thranduil, not after anything that passed, no matter how cruel or how selfish or harmful his aims. He could not possibly hate half of a heart.

This question caught Thorin off-guard. Sensing a trap, the dwarf did not answer – or, at least, he did not answer in time – for Thranduil, studying the nails on his left hand, pressed on. “That is a shame. A king is a better king for having them. You would know, if you did,” said this better-king, and it is here a lazy insult grows dangerous. His unworried tone was that of a snake who knows its mouth is an instrument of promise. “The gravity of hearing one’s child has been threatened. You can tell when he is in peril and you can appreciate, before you act, the cost of what you might say.”

Thranduil paused. Perniciously: “My captain tells me your nephews are here.”

Bilbo does not speak the lofty language of kings. And he finds, as our writer has met more and more of them, that he does not care for it at all – speech with the power to trade lands and people as easily as books on a shelf. No words should be that immediately powerful. Words should have to at least percolate a bit before they take you.

It isn’t really a threat, what Thranduil says – but it could be – it has that immediate, insoluble, kingspeech power to be – and the knowledge of this put a chill in Bilbo’s blood like little else.

Thorin took some time with the insinuation. His response was what you might expect.

“Your captain and your son,” the Dwarfking informed him, “are a thief and a whore.”

Bilbo sat up so quickly his head thumped the underside of the table and sent a candlestick rolling off.

They spared the it only a glance, lucky day. Our still-hidden burglar clasped the smarting top of his head with both hands and bit his lips into his mouth.

It’s a difficult thing to offend an elf. Thorin had given it his best shot, but Thranduil shrugged the slander off like an adult ignores a petulant child. The Elfking’s satisfied blink looked more at place on cats considering bad behavior than on a woodland dignitary. “And yet - a prisoner they've made of you,” he observed, uncrossing his knees to place both elbows on them. The king steepled long fingers and his stare was frank. “I have the Durin line of succession moiling in my dungeons, and you deign to bark your legless threats at me? I tell myself I will no longer be amazed by dwarven insolence, but without quarter, the Folk continue to surprise me.”

Thorin, perhaps sensing the difficulty of insulting a king while you are wearing his chains, decided to try some diplomacy. “No quarrel have I with you this day, elf,” he announced, as though there were actually anything to be preening about besides the fact his hair was still just as black and just as long. “Though if I choose, I can. We do not come to engage your people. We seek passage to the Long Lake.”

The Elfking chuckled, softly, as that gently disbelieving adult does to that petulant child’s tall-tale. “You are in the wrong part of the wood.”

“We were—” Thorin admitted, frowning, embarrassed, out of other things to say. “—turned about.”

“Lost,” Thranduil inferred.

“No. We momentarily did not know where we were.”

While the Elven King was laughing his whimsical, inebriated laugh, Bilbo settled back to both
elbows, peering closely for any glimpse of what might be a key. Thranduil’s sleeves pooled over his wrists upon the arms of the sinewy throne – and they spilled forward as he rose from it, descending the curve of stairs, glancing down to be sure he did not trip. He crossed the floor to his long dining tables, drawing closer and closer to our hobbit, kicking the upset candle out of his way. And Master Baggins went afright for a moment – sure he had been discovered – but then, easily as anything, the steps stopped. Bilbo covered his mouth to control his breathing as he came face-to-face with the Elfking’s glossy brown boots. He could have reached out and tapped them. He could almost see his face in the shiny toe.

Thranduil turned his back on the Dwarfking with a casualness that in anyone else would’ve been foolhardy. “You think to return to the stronghold – and for what? To scavenge?” he wondered, lifting a silvery carafe and pouring himself another gobletful. Bilbo heard the gentle clanking of dishes above him. The Elfking did not offer one to his guest. “To steal away an armful of gold? You cannot even find a mountain; how will you find its door?”

“We seek to rest our dead,” Thorin lied.

“Do not lie to me, child; I can see behind your eye. You think if I knew your purpose I would not let you go. But I do not seek to keep you. The lost Hoards of Erebor hold treasures precious to me, as well – gems a thousand times more rare and delicate than Durinul-gold. A selfish lord would usher you to your grave, if he’d a chance to see such gems returned. But I am not a selfish lord. I am generous; I wish to give you a warning. My consul, from one king to another. Should you unseal the door your father closed, Son-of-Thráin, what took the crown from those before you shall too take yours.”

Dishonesty, my dear, is not made for people who feel so strongly; this is all it takes to undo the king’s deception. His voice swelled in his chest and began to threaten the calmness of this place. “The crown is mine, elf. The doors are mine to open. It belongs to me. And I take no consul from craven cowards. Keep your consul,” he said mightily, a curse of a no. “Tell it to the bones of dwarrow children elfish gutlessness left for dust. I am the son of Durin and the crown is my right.”

“It was Thrór’s right,” Thranduil snapped. Mirkwood’s king would not be baited, and would not waste the force of his fury on words. He sipped once from the full chalice and put it down again. “Coward I am, I warned him of what his greed would bring upon your Folk. He would not listen. Will you? If the Folk still wish to levy blame, put it first upon your ancestor, and second to the dragon that taught him price.”

“The dragon is dead,” Thorin swore, as he had done so many times, in so many tones – and the anger, like an old pain, put its break in the depths of his throat. If you looked closely, you could see it move there, like something solid caught in the windpipe, a bright red feeling that tried to rise up.

“How do you know this?”

“It is my Mountain. I feel it,” he confessed, with a rap of fist-to-breastbone, for this was all he had. “In my heart.”

“A pathetic answer. A drake would eat you and your heart whole.”

Thorin bristled. If there is one thing Bilbo has learned about speaking to the last surviving Son-of-Thráin, it is that you should never dash the dreams in his heart, no matter how pie-eyed or blazing. Nothing is as likely to turn the crown against you as pessimism. Nothing is as sure to lose his respect.

“You,” said the Dwarfking, “may tell me nothing of pathos. You, elf, who stood with your back to a kingdom you were pledged to war beside. You, who turned your cheek to the ruin of what you
declined to defend. You, who sat in your wood-made keep, drinking, while dwarves and men suffered the wrath of dragon’s-fire!”

“Do not speak to me—” Thranduil promised, and the boots turned, first one and then the other, until that great sweep of a robe swirled behind him, and all other sound ceased. “—of dragonfire.”

Bilbo cannot really describe this next bit, he fears. Or perhaps he fears he will be able to describe it – that he might call the sight of the Elfking’s true face back into his mind and never be able to shake it out again. It was like a crumbling of ash from hot firewood. Magic fell from Thranduil, and then so too did the shape of his nose, the fine edge of his chin, the dark left brow. Loveliness sifting from the bone, like hourglass sand. The dissolution of an eye, bleaching and then collapsing, bare socket beneath stripped flesh. Gold hair seared to leave a stripe of snow-white skull bare and horrible beneath the leaves of sycamore trees. You could see through his torn-apart cheek the chewing teeth along the jaw. You could see through his neck there stretched a shocking, fluttering pulse of blue.

“Do you desire your crown so badly? Look upon my flesh and bones,” said he, sweeping his half-face low, “and know what awaits you, Durin-son, if your heart is wrong.”

Perhaps he might better describe Thorin’s face, then, to witness such a sight – and this Bilbo swears on any stone – the Dwarfking’s eyes went wild-wide and his mouth in horror was hanging open.

Then the Elfking swept upright again, bitterly composed, and the loveliness regrew over his sundered scalp like a painful settling of paint over skin.

“It was your grandfather who last wore that crown,” Thranduil remembered. With those words and the bright image of his terror of a face, he stepped back to the throne, scaling the winding steps, be-done-with-it-all. This time he did not sit. He spoke one last bleak consul, leaving Thorin standing on that empty floor, heart thumping with the ghastliness of memory, and struck with the proof of dragons larger and fiercer and deader than his. “He lost his mind in it. You,” the Elfking said, “are just like him.”

“I am King Under the Mountain,” yelled the Son of Durin at no one.

Thranduil but lifted one hand – and you could still see it for a flash – the curl of a fingerbone inside the wineskin of beauty he showed the world.

“You are a prince who cannot find his way.”

Then:

“I have tried to speak reason to you, dwarf. Perhaps you will feel more reasonable after a week in a cell. Remove him,” said the Elfking, and from curtained eaves at the swish of his palm came Thranduil’s watchmen, their faces thin and stoic as toothpick blue cedar trees.

To this, Thorin said nothing – for the soldiers had already guided him out with a harsh elven word and a shove to the back that made Bilbo feel very brave, indeed.

_Listen here, halfling_, a new voice said. _That’s not how it went at all._

“I beg your pardon,” Master Baggins said, making fists in his wooly red ram’s reins and twisting
about to rally a glare Dwalin’s way. “Between us both, which one was in the room?”

The King’s-Guard’s answering growl was mostly for himself.

They had found the dusty, dull path on the short blue plains of Old Ford, a remnant of the Ancient Forest Road built by the Dwarves of Yore. It was perfectly walkable, dotted here and there with strawberries and wild onion, which drew pretty wild pinto ponies and false-eye butterflies, tempting rabbits to dart between thatches of clover.

Some weeks remained before they would reach the newly-laid greystone of the New Forest Road – which was, Azírë explained, Erebor’s incomplete effort to secure a large western trade route without the cooperation of elves. The city’s stoneworkers had spent many months chopping gnarled root-growth from their forbearers’ highway, burning back the poison vines, filling in the sunken marshes with dirt. They’d only made a dent, such as it was, with the army fighting spiders and centipedes off the entire way. King Thorin had been recently forced to recall them after a collapse in the coal mine beneath Ravenhill – fairly disastrous structural failing, he understood; people had died – but no one exactly felt sorry to go. Further work had been suspended until next spring, which meant it would take three weeks of forest-trudging for Dwalin’s complement to reach the new cobblestone, provided they stuck to the path this time. (They would definitely stick to the path.)

“That is a dwarf road,” Dwalin insisted when Bilbo supposed Thranduil couldn’t be pleased about a bunch of dwarrow building a stone’s-throw south through his woods. “It has always been a dwarf road. We aren’t laying new routes; we’re only restoring the one we’ve always had.”

(On the bright side, Bilbo’s tale of elves was much more effective with the dusky, black-elm shadow of Mirkwood darkening sunrises at their horizon.)

But there was no use being gloomy about what lay ahead. They had open air now, and meant to enjoy it. Tired of the close confines of their war-carriage, appreciating the mild pink evening, the dwarrowdames had climbed out to ride for a spell. With Azírë on a fluffy blue goat and Galinyah astride one of the tough brown highland ponies, they ambled forward, plodding up dust and chatting, encouraging Master Baggins to go on.

Except for Dwalin, that is - astride proud, plump Pokey and with the axe at his back, bringing up the rear with a snort.

“Thorin wouldn’t’ve done that.”

“Wouldn’t have done what?”

“Jeopardized the quest.” To the best of Master Baggins’s understanding, Master Dwalin was Thorin’s second cousin thrice removed or something, and defended everything his king-cousin did with the hostile blindness of family. He took everything said about the Crown very personally, as a matter-of-fact, and did not at all appreciate the insinuation his little royal coz had flubbed it with the Elvenking. “Told that elven bastard anything but the Mountain curses laid on his name. He’d not say all those other things. On account of the needlings of some simpering twig-legged strumpet.”

Bilbo shot another brattish scowl Dwalin’s way and smacked a horsefly off his ram’s neck, sore about being interrupted. His feet felt a little too tight in the dwarfish stirrups. He just kept the toes in.

“Thorin wouldn’t let his pride get the better of him and ruin a diplomatic talk?” A chuff. “Yes, he would.”

Galinyah, riding just ahead, chuckled loud enough for them to hear it. From where the dwarrowdames rode before them, their heavy fur-trimmed skirts draped over either side of dwarfish
saddles, it was hard to miss. Her mount’s braided tail swished in the thin, primrose-sweet air. “Yes, he would!” she laughed, not even turning her head. The silversmith’s locks had been brass-pinned to one side of her scalp and outlasted Azirë’s water curls in this scraggly flatland wind. “Is the king’s name Durin? Is a Durin the full-blooded son of a dwarf or not?”

Dwalin, flushing, didn’t respond right away. The hobbit cleared his throat into a fist and let his eyebrows do the one-two hop of someone burdened with usually being right.

“Continue your tale, Bilbo,” Galinyah bid. “Lest we think we think you never made it out of that elfish dungeon, and are rotting beneath Thranduil’s table as we speak.”

“Well,” Bilbo sniffed. “If you are sure.”

“We are,” she agreed.

“Yes!” said Azirë. “We are.”

“Then,” the burglar said. “I had better speak a bit about names.”

It took Bilbo a while to understand it – all this fuss the dwarves make about their names.

Hobbit lineages are not like dwarven ones. Hobbits cast their families wide, drawing scattered and spread-out blood maps like prairie grasses. When he thinks of the name Durin, though, our writer imagines not a field but a mighty tree: dark wood, uncuttable roots. It’s more a willow than an oak. But Bilbo cannot simply read down the line of numbered Durin names and know how the magic of stone makes them, as dwarrow say, Mountain-Made. He’s just a storyteller. He can only tell you what he knows the people to be.

In that, he knows there are the names Thráin I and Thorin I. Náin I, Balrog-fighter and Martyr of Moria. Náin II, a long-watcher whose fair eye glimpsed the first shadow of dragon wing in the older days. Then there is Thrór, that stately silver drake, tender and flawed enough to demand all the dwarven people thought they deserved. Thráin II, a captain fierce as a nazgûl, a king for a battlefield so lion-blooded he did not even need a crown. Thorin II, a great beauty with a black voice and a heart whose fatal flaw was that it believed in stories too much.

(Bilbo doesn’t know much about the dwarven queens, obviously, though he was abundantly informed that the Durin family is considered exceptionally well-made, which – given their royal claim to the dwarrow gene-pool – shouldn’t be surprising. Old King Thrór was said to be quite handsome in his youth, and there was much bittersweet sighing about the lovely late wife of Thráin.)

This naming leads us in a neat-enough line to the much-talked-about princes Dís and Thorin. The name Dís, who means rain in the night, and the name Thorin, who means thunder. The Folk had much praised a sister and brother born free of defect, said to be clear-sighted and raven-black in the same image of Durin I himself. Tall Lady Dís of the opal-eye, they said, and Thorin II with his dark lungs. Better days for the dwarves, they said. They were proud of their princes, and had got them just before dwarfdom most needed something to be proud of, something that reminded them of what their kingsblood used to be.

So it follows that no one wanted to shut off about it.
Thorin seemed a little too aware of this reputation, if you were to ask Bilbo (not that you would; what does he know). The king spoke as though his voice had been handmade specially for dwarfsong; as though it were a god-given boon to be granted generously or withheld at his will; and Mahal forbid you were not appropriately stricken at his artful two-beat vibrato on windless Mirrormere. He strode about in mostly the same sort of way. Not a flaunt, so to speak, but a drama of motion – an elevation of the chin; a demolishing sweep of the eye below the lid; a momentous forward-step; a slow and purposeful turn of the head. And, of course, there was all that hair, employed outrageously to excessive effect. He seemed to think the world itself was always looking at him. For legends, perhaps? or maybe it was looking for some sort of proof. Perhaps the whole wide world was looking for a dwarf-prince to show that, despite his forbears’ catastrophic failings and despite the long sickness of the dwarven people, he deserved what he has been given, and too what he has lost.

A bunch of clichés, it’s true, but what we most often call beauty usually is. More important, my dear, is that dwarven beauty actually means dwarven healing, you see. It means an end to the missing of the dames. It means no more dead daughters and no more sons born without lungs or incomplete spines. It means red blood and a good, pumping heart, one that won’t collapse, but will keep-on, surely and steadily as an Erebor drum. It means the enduring dwarves – perhaps, and after all – will survive.

So less talked-about – and less written-of – are the quieter things, about princes. The unplanned and unorchestrated stuff. Where a writer finds more beauty and more truth is not in the legends, but the unconscious: the personal tenderness of not knowing exactly what you are.

Truer than the legend was the living required for it. Less obvious than the beauty of long hair in the wind was the care it demanded of him – the endless brushing and braiding and re-braiding, and then the irritated, corrective puff he would make when that aforementioned wind would suddenly change directions and whip him in the face with it. The overwhelmingly mortal angle from the mandible to the collar to the shoulder. The gentle crowding of a few teeth on his bottom jaw which you would only see if something got him to wince. The rise of his eyebrows when he sat up, suddenly, from sleep; the three oddly harmless blinks of confusion in which the sleeper must remember he is the king. There was a quiet tease in his voice when he would, eyebrows-up, make what struck him as a joke - his jokes were only funny because of the obvious planning he put into them - and there was the sedate ahhh he would concede with when met with a cleverer repose. He would worry the family ring on his tallfinger when it seemed no one was paying attention. He was cursed with a brattishly downturned mouth that would have been on a female very bewitching. And he had an overall fairytale-ish-ness that, if he had been a lass, really would have been quite easy to find oneself besotted with, or for some especially beauty-susceptible people, even impossible not to be.

Of Lady Dís, Master Baggins had never met her, so he cannot tell you how tall she is or how thick her lashes or lush her bosom or whether or not her stare truly shines like midnight moonbeam through purest sapphire, etc. etc., blah-blah-blah.

He can tell you, though, that with all of this slavish crowing about majesty and excellence, the Durin Line probably did not consider the imagery of its princes and kings locked away in a cell.

Thorin, when Bilbo finally found him – shut away near the tower-top in a small, private cell – struck him as strangely withdrawn. He was sitting standoffishly cross-legged on the farthest edge of his threadbare cot, red-wristed from where he'd been bound, trying to touch as little as possible. He did not remove his heavy coat. His steep-capped boots left prints on the bed. The Dwarfking spoke to no one, and when the patrol guard who came to feed him – the one Master Baggins was following – tried, he was sent away.
"Tell your craven master, elf," Thorin said, as Thorin did, "if it is my fealty he waits upon, he will wait for it a thousand years. One thousand years I will remain as rock below a mountain!"

This received no answer. Bilbo dodged the departing guard, and Thorin refused to watch him go, observing instead the elven walls with side-eyed, noble derision – as though if he treated it with enough scorn, with enough dwarfish haughtiness, the bars would evaporate and his extreme problem would cease to exist. His breath came in deep, self-calming intervals. He sat there, grooming pathetically, trying to brush his hair straight with his fingers.

Why Bilbo did any of it, anyway, is really anyone’s guess.

“Begging your pardon,” our burglar quipped, slipping off his secret ring, his one shoulder propped against the gate looking as spry and nonchalant as a stable-boy on a fence. "But you might want to check your schedule on that next thousand-years.”

Thorin blinked his waking blink as though he wasn’t quite sure of what he saw. Then the king stood up all at once.

“Upon my word,” he said, moving quickly, reaching between bars too narrow to be slipped through and lifting Bilbo by the pits of his arms to knock heads. (Thorin’s headbutts were thankfully less deadly than, say, Glóin’s, who’d wallop his skull into yours so hard he’d about knock it in. Bilbo suspected it was some dominance thing.)

Then, holding the hobbit up at a distance, the dwarf tilted his head thoughtfully to peer at him. “You are real, then?” he checked, squinting a tad. The humid light caught the undersides of the blues in his eyes in an askance way that made them look very pretty. “Not some elvish sorcery, I think? – lest it be very fine sorcery to be so lifelike.”

Master Baggins was suddenly extremely busy squabbling, glowering down and away, twisting rudely at the king’s hands for want to be let down. “Don’t be stupid,” he snapped.

Ah. Real, Thorin said, with certainty, and set Bilbo back upon the floor.

“Well, I’m not made of dust and elf-hair,” he grumbled, feeling harsher than he meant to be, wondering with some anxiety about the darkness in here versus the present color of his face. His uncut curls were immediately there in his eyes and undoubtedly full of leaves and dry dirt and foresty things, and for lack of good scissors, had gotten unhandsomely too long. “I’m not a really hard piece of air.”

“My heart gladdens. You cannot blame my surprise when you appear suddenly as a thrush on the sill.”

It really was a very, very beautiful voice, Bilbo will hand him that. Performative even when he wasn’t singing with it. Not rumbling drums, but lucent - glasslike and solid and steadily sad - a voice that slid easily up or down, or held strong like a low cello note inside a deep golden bell.

“You mean a halfling in a bog. And it was a good job getting in here, too. Getting up here, as it were. I mean I actually climbed the wall. With my feet and hands. Besides the rest of it. This forest is the most miserable I have ever imagined, ever. All these damned bugs - and the snakes! Snakes I can't begin to describe. But—” He was babbling, Master Baggins, and he couldn't help it. His lungs had ballooned with the tickly moth-wings of energy that comes from storytelling, and his throat was all shot with pride.

“But,” Bilbo said a second time, firmer than the last.
“But,” he announced, hooking his thumbs in his suspenders and stretching them, feeling at least two feet taller, the boast making his eyes go narrow and his smile all cocked-up and foolish. “As fine hobbits before me have said: when the going gets tough, *a Baggins gets going.*”

“I had known you would come,” Thorin concurred, not recognizing Bilbo’s bragging for what it was. The burglar released his suspenders and they landed with a snap. “But you come late. Easier by far to make our escape from an elven camp than an elven dungeon. Why wait you so long?”

“Well,” Master Baggins answered, a thorn of annoyance creeping in now – because no matter how it felt to see Thorin Oakenshield behold you with a little shock, our hobbit was not, really, anywhere near five feet tall. “I had a little disadvantage.”

Then: “Here,” he snapped, fumbling the pack from his back and passing a loaf of dark bread through the bars. His own stomach was unhappily stuffed with intimidating black grapes, reminding him that the king had been obstinately refusing elfish food, and hunger will make anyone think they’re going a wee delusional. “Here, take that.”

“Stolen from Thranduil’s table,” he observed, but took it without further fuss. “Better to steal a key.”

“I am working on it. *If* you don’t mind.”

Apparently, it was not the elfish food that turned Thorin’s nose, but that the elves had offered it. He cracked the bread in two. There was some sort of apple-brown butter inside that smelled oddly, airily sweet – as all the meals here seemed to be. Though the king made a face as though he did not like it, down it went nonetheless.

“Listen; I’ve found the princes already. Found all of them,” the burglar reassured. Thorin startled mid-bite, brought his jaws together too hard, and had to wipe the corner of his mouth with a thumb. “They’re fine to the last and waiting to move. As soon as I’ve got keys. Well, mostly fine. Few bruises. Dwalin’s in a bit of a mood.”

Master Baggins was grateful when Thorin stopped eating to cut short this nervous rambling. He swallowed mightily, the pain of having not taken enough time to chew. Bilbo noted the darkness circling his eyes, the leanness beneath the cheekbones, and regretted not hunting down something with meat in it. He really could have used a pot of tea to put the color back in him, but figuring out an elven samovar wasn’t exactly high priority. “Well and good to have found them, but it is not enough to have a key,” he explained needlessly, gripping the bars with his great hands, for there was nothing else they could do. “We must first have for us a plan.”

“You don’t have to worry,” the hobbit answered, closing his smaller, smarter hands just below the king’s. “I’ll find a backdoor to get you all out of. Nori says he’s on it if I can nab him a couple barrettes. Don’t ask me what for.”

“Let us out, and we will break like twigs any fool elf to stand in our way. But we cannot fight an elfish arrow,” Thorin swore, as though Bilbo – who had oh-not-so-long-ago fought a damned wolf due to a failed dwarven charge – was going to suggest they just heft up their axes and tally-ho. “This is why Men say the elves cannot be outrun. They see as daylight the darkest witch-hour and can read our steps in the earth, so we must be sure we are far from here before they notice we have gone.”

“Look, I hear what you’re saying, but I don’t know it can be done. What am I to do about a fortress of elves – cry *look, over there!* Am I to dress you all up like kitchen boys? Hide you under a blanket?”

“You must find a way,” Thorin pressed, gravely – as Thorin did – and the king closed his palms over
Bilbo’s knuckles on the bars.

“I’m going to Thranduil’s manor-home. To look. Maybe I’ll find something there.”

“Thranduil is a snake,” the Dwarfking spat, because it was Thorin, and someone had said Thranduil’s name. He released Bilbo to make some unnecessary vengeful slicing motions, and it was only then – seeing his remaining hands alone on the bars, where the king’s had been clasped over them a moment ago – our hobbit’s heart realized it should be afraid. “You must not let him catch you, for if he does, he will fill your head with lies. You do not know these elves as I do. So you must know from me that they are not like those of Elrond’s Court, who, though meek, are at least honorable. Mirkwood elves are clever and vicious. Their king vomits falsehoods as he does wine and would turn you against us, I am certain. If he espies you, do not listen to him, I pray you.”

“That will be difficult,” Master Baggins noted, not so confident now, gulping his heart-spasm down. He focused on his own two lonely fists until they bothered him no longer – until the heart itself settled back in the snug cove of chest where it belonged. “Considering I’m going to wait until tonight, get some rope, and break in through his bedroom window.”

The Dwarfking’s brows ascended. He blinked again, bewildered, fists now at his side. “You will climb into a king’s bedchamber while the king is asleep in the bed?”

“Burglar,” Bilbo said, incidentally.

“Then you must go,” Thorin decided, sternly, leaving no allowances for dispute. “For if they find you, all is lost.”

And here Master Baggins truly felt he ought to say something – something wise, or really brilliant, or something lovably plucky that would help to ensure their fate stepped forward in the right direction – but he couldn’t for the life of him think of anything, so our hobbit merely stiffened his mouth and nodded, once then twice again. He peeled each of his ten fingers off the jail bars. And, just like that, here-I-go-to-rescue-everyone, he turned to leave.

“Bilbo,” the king spoke, and Bilbo turned back at the sound of his name. Thorin stood away from the gate and watched him go. Though the eyes warned do not fail, the dark voice said only: “Do not fall.”

“Gravity. Hobbits have excellent centers of gravity,” Bilbo remembered, and was off.

“From his delicates,” the writer pronounced, his pipe in his clever fingers, his head tilted back ‘gainst the carriage cushions to blow a mouthful of smoke. “That’s where it was, wasn’t it. I snatched it right out of his small-clothes drawer.”

Mirkwood and the earliest frissions of autumn were upon them. Stunning, still: the sudden gulp of these gnarly trees, the hum of the locusts, and the creaky-cellar sighing of branches overburdened with moss. Cobwebs curled in canopies; smoky vapor rose from wet mushrooms; itching poison seeped from the swamp blue-blooms. Anywhere else in Arda, it was yet too early to mark the yellowing of the trees - but here, what matter are seasons? In Mirkwood, the leaves are reliably unreliable, and the soil is slippery, and soon the Erebor-bound dwarves were forced to lead their mounts on foot. There was little game but snapping badgers and mangy hares. The dwarrowdames remained in their carriage, now pulled by hand.
It was slow-going. Long hours frittered away like cotton flowers. Five or maybe six times a day, they were forced to stop for machete-work. Another three or four times, to dig the caravan’s wheels out of some blackish mud. Master Baggins tried quite insistently to pitch-in, promising he could at least help keep watch and fight off spiders, but Dwalin no’d all that talk. Actually, what he said was “I’ll not be blamed for you getting carried off and crunched by a twice-cursed insect, halfling - not because you fancied feeling more useful.”

So our hobbit, in the interest of Dwalin remaining blameless and himself remaining uncrunched, was relegated inside. (Just as well, though he felt very annoyed to be so dismissed.) As wheels moved over the rough remains of the Old Forest Road and under low-hanging boughs, Bilbo could hear Mirkwood spitting around him: the constant flick of toxic nuts dropping overhead, the buzz of heavy stinging flies, the limbs scratching the carriage’s armored sides. He also – though he did not share this with his lady companions – identified the brief, clamoring rain of fawn bones collapsing from a haggard spider’s nest and pelting the roof above them. They played cards in a nervous silence. They ate salty yam soup, beef jerky, or dried apricots. They kept the heavy curtains rolled mostly down.

Galinyah took particularly poorly to Mirkwood. The silversmith had latched onto Bilbo’s arm when he’d offered to help Dwalin guard, shooting him a severe you-can’t-mean-it look. She was nervous; her friendly confidence swung from to great grumpiness in the mornings to difficulty sleeping at night.

It was for this reason Azírë initially suggested the cigars.

To be fair, they were Dwalin’s cigars - but all it took was one polite request from the embroiderer to send him, flushed and mumbling, for a case of them. Galinyah burned hers down quickly, puffing and puffing like an archer on a wall. Azírë sipped, shimmied back in the velvet cushions to mull over the taste, then sipped again. Bilbo, who’d never seen cigars and found them – if you’ll pardon his hobbitish sensibilities – a little obscene, broke one into the mouth of his pipe and tried to blow circles. But the dwarrish tobacco was weak, and the taste of black cloves made his tongue feel furry and his lips buzz.

So, as he’d been wont to do through this second trip to Erebor, Master Baggins told another bit of his story instead.

“No!” Azire shushed, louder than usual, just bleary enough to convey she’d had enough smoking. She palm-covered her mouth, snorted, and then wrapped both arms around herself theatrically, drawing up the goat’s-wool blankets in a huff. Her head whipped a delightful (and quite toasted) back-and-forth no. “He did not keep them there!”

“I’m afraid he did,” Bilbo clucked, drawing another swift series of puffs.

“I don’t believe you! He did not!”

“Oh, he did, too.”

Where Galinyah trembled, Azírë – so anxious about vaguer, less-lethal, social things – was brave. She didn’t fret at a hoot-owl or two. She would let the silversmith grab suddenly for her hand when something sounded or smelled strangely. She rebound her hair into a safe plaited bun carefully every two sunrises, and when she was done, fastened up her sister’s, too.

(Bilbo’s hair, by the way, had gotten much too long, tickling the back of his neck and itching at the collarbone. He’d have liked to have asked Azírë to trim it stylishly for him, but that seemed wildly overfriendly. Instead, he borrowed a pair of pinking shears, stood over a bucket and chopped it himself, watching gold curls disperse across soapy water at every snip-snap. It was cut rather badly,
but no one commented, and it was simple enough to leave the war-braid alone.)

Galinyah, who had fallen asleep with her head pillowed on Azírë’s mass of blankets, opened a glazed and catlike eye – the greener one – to glare at her for moving too much. But she fell asleep right away again, leaving her carriage-mates snickering, giddy as chickadees.

“And really, it’s not so outrageous,” Master Baggins argued insincerely. “Where would you put your keys, I ask?”

“This reminds me,” the content embroiderer sighed, tapping a few cigar embers into her mug of leftover Bree pale ale, “of my own grandfather, who kept his prized war hatchet in a trunk of long-johns. He was very proud of it. A decoration, it was, for his service to the crown. You’d think it was his daughter, though, all wrapped in a cradle! Not wrapped - swaddled!” she laughed. “When he passed, we never did take it out, for fear of annoying his soul. It lives in my savings vault now. That case of leggings. It’s a sad totem to remember a fore-father by, and I was not born in time to have my own memories of him, but I think it a small comfort. To know our ancestors were as foolish as we are.”

Respectfully, pausing to let the smoke out of his lungs, to make sure his voice did not rasp: “How did he die?”

“He was killed,” she said, “at the Gates of Moira.” And - with mechanical, dutiful, confident distance - like response to a call of prayer: “Where he lays in service beside King Thrór.”

“I am sorry to hear that, my dear.” (A semi-suitable endearment for a dwarven friend, and a liberty he might not have taken if not for the smoke. In truth, they weren’t too dissimilar in years, but their lifespans put Bilbo at a comfortable middle age to Azírë’s tender young adulthood.)

“It is nothing to do with you, Master Bilbo, to be sure,” she reassured him, a little surprised, for dwarves have endured enough not to apologize for anyone’s dying. Then, realizing: “Ah! I must have that trunk shipped to Erebor, I suppose. If King Thorin receives me. Kakhf,” she huffed, a word that seemed for her uncharacteristically sharp. But then she giggled and was Azírë as he knew her again. “I hope no one looks-in. Forgetting the axe… how will I explain why I need a case of male underthings?”

“Wouldn’t your grandmother rather keep it?”

“I don’t know.” The embroider said it suddenly, as though this possibility was just dawning upon her for the first time in a very long while. She patted Galinyah’s head when the silversmith on her lap stirred and grumbled again. “We haven’t spoken freely since... well, it was a very long time ago. I was a child. Maybe thirty years! Or forty. And besides, I’d still be shipping a crate of leggings.”

“Does she not live in the Blue Hills?”

“Oh, no,” Azírë told him, shaking her head so emphatically that the fragile chains of diamonds always dangling from her lobes snagged onto loose wisps of white-gold hair. Her palms joined in to wave the no-no-nos. “And I’d not dare send any gift from the Durins to her. A weapon, too! Mahal forbid Lord-Prince Dis catch me. She’d have my—” She spluttered to a stop, noticing her fingers, jangling and sparkling excitedly in the air. “—hands, I suppose!”

“Hands!” Bilbo cried.

“My grandmother,” Azírë hushed, leaning forward a bit as she did so, as though he would understand her implication. The sluggish smoke lingered fragrantly around them, and some
Master Baggins had not yet gotten over the ‘hands’ issue. “Surely that’s not an offense likely to let a prince take off your hands?”

“My grandmother and her kin made no secret of being their foe.” She confessed it as blandly as one says my, the weather is a little bleak today. Though she’d lowered her arms, now resting there on the dam’s skirted kneecaps, he could not take his eyes off them all-of-a-sudden: the delicate indexes; the straight-cut nails; the protective, modest rings; the short, shapely thumbs.

“If I may—that is, if you don’t mind me asking—”

“I don’t mind!” Azírë had substantially more trouble courting the tobacco than Bilbo did. He sat there staring with furrowed brows and a toothy wince, disturbed by how her airiness had gone to sunshine, not liking this unsettled back-and-forth feeling of tidewater in his gut. “It’s nothing like a secret. Grandmother was well-known – and still is, I’d wager. She was a Chief Councilor in Erebor before the fall, in Thrór’s Court – the Consul of the Table of Bone, to be exact – a very respected and well-regarded seat. So you know she once had great love for the Durin family. But to lose the city, to lose her home – it made her into a different person, if you can understand, Master Bilbo.”

Master Bilbo could imagine.

“Brulírë did not ever, in truth, forgive King Thrór for that loss. Nor for the dragon,” she said. Azírë paused to finish the last foamy inch of Galinyah’s ale, dab her lips with a sleeve, and press on. “Had Menava – that’s my mother – not gone heavy with child – that’s me – Grandmother would likely have taken the bulk of our clan to join Lord Grór in Ironhill straightaway. The failing at Azanulbizar she blamed too on Thrór’s pride. So, when King Thorin returned to us with near none of the army, she assembled her allies, and declared Thrór’s heirs unfit to rule. Mind,” at Bilbo’s strangled expression. “Dwarves do not war against each other – we are too few – but there was a great tumult for many weeks. As close as we have been to dwarrow fighting dwarrow in a very long time, maybe. Grandmother armored her people, rode out to meet the Royal Party, surrounded their tents and demanded the king relinquish his power to what remained of Thrór’s old council, that the Durins might rule again only by their decree.”

The Retinue of Thorin II had forgotten to mention this blip in their accountings of his rise to glory. Master Baggins did not know what to say. Azírë shot him a small, stringy smile to prove this was all right.

“It was Ilanís that turned the odds, I think. Our military advisor, Consul of the Table of Steel. Had she not rode out with her Honor Guard and stood so loudly with the king, reminding them of their shame, it might have gone differently. As it was, Grandmother and her allies returned to Ered Luin as prisoners. Marshal Balin drove a wedge through their line and routed them. He is a very cunning tactician.”

Bilbo had never heard old Balin referred to as Mashal Balin before. He could not help it: What else, the burglar thought – sharp and shrewd in his self-pity, spikier in his loneliness – had they not told him? What else had been swept under grandeur and heroics, personal valor and greatness-in-peril? He could remember with a wallop of furious, disorienting fear in his heart like it was yesterday – how white-wisped, tender-eyed Balin had held back during the charge on Ravenhill, swept together a tight phalanx of Dáin’s flagging army, and sent them, with brutal efficiency, through the weakest gasp of space in a wall of orc iron, no longer the fretting old grandfather but a pragmatist ready to let one king die to save an ancient line.
“He is,” Master Baggins agreed feebly, feeling ill, because there was nothing else he could think of to say.

“Oh, and I don’t share her view; please, please understand that. My grandmother was wrong and deserved to be punished. She rained fire on the freshly-dead. She is a traitor to the Lonely Throne and to our people.” This she threw out in a bit of a rush. Azirë’s eyes swept upward anxiously, finding some invisible grounding point on the carriage ceiling, mindful enough even in inebriation not to skip the display of loyalty to the Durin Crown. “But all the same, she is my grandmother. I hurt for her. I think she just could not bear any more grief for any one litter of kings.”

“What did he do?”

“King Thorin,” she said – with that same mechanical distance - that far-off, anesthetized emptiness of look, “stripped us of our names and exiled them from his home. We are not Durin’s Folk anymore.”

He had his worst memory of Thorin, too – a glimpse of gold armor astride a black ram, a dull brilliance in the gray confusion of dust and sky that could not be reached in time – looking about at the world but not seeing you – not having fate turn his face the barest merciful fraction that might let you see it just once more – but instead turning away, one tiny gesture that would fuel eight or nine of the awfullest dreams Bilbo has ever had – lifting a sword and letting a scream, and flying up the dark hill with no strategy except the ferocity of his belief.

“I’m sorry,” Bilbo said, weakly, again. “It went that way.”

“You didn’t do anything.”

“Do you know,” he wondered - no reason to be sorry but tangled up in this bizarre shame - as though the Dwarf Kingdom’s problems were his to repair. As if there was anything a hobbit – even an important hobbit - which he was not – not anymore - might do about mending it. As if he had not helplessly watched Thorin’s back charging away into fire one too many times to stand it anymore. “Where they are now? Any distant relations out there? With Dáin, or something? If someone were to try, could you find them, do you think?”

“Menava wrote to tell me she and grandmother are still alive. They were a little village, all of them, settled near Laketown. Burnt to a crisp! Fwoosh. I suppose they’re in Dale now. And that is so close! Maybe, in time, I will be permitted to see them again.” A maybe that brightened the dam considerably until she remembered to add her operant if. “If King Thorin receives me. Think I lost a cousin when Smaug awoke. Though I’ve not many cousins I’ve met.”

“If! You haven’t done anything. I had thought the Durin family was supposed to be so fair and gracious. I had thought,” Bilbo demanded, feeling the steady boiling of anger behind tight molars like a hot pan, breathing too hard through his nose, “they were said to be just, and generous, and—”

“But they were. The height of generosity. I was but a babe at the time, and you know the trouble with dwarven females. So it was decided by the Council that I, in my guiltlessness, remain in Ered Luin, that I might one day take a husband and a trade. I cannot call myself Durin’s Folk; I am just Azirë. But my children might. One day.” She took another tiny, stuttering breath of smoke. Then added, as if to ease the sting, as if she had said it many times: “It was the Durin family wetnurse herself who raised me. A great kindness, and honor.”

“Separated you? From your mother - right off the tit? I’m sorry; I’m crude; but. My dear. That is no kindness. That's the most needless cruelty I have ever—”

“He had just been crowned. On a field. And so young to be a king. Younger than I am now, and I
am very young, as dwarves measure age. It was a merciful sentence. Truly. If you knew the Durins, you’d know. If you had known Thráin. If it had been Thráin...” She stopped herself, and that too-familiar what-if, quickly. “We are all lucky to be alive.”

“I’ll fix this,” the writer swore, and did it blindly, unthinkingly. But not-thinking makes neither sentiments nor pledges less true. “I don’t know how. But I will.”

“No! Don’t say anything, please,” she hiccupped, swallowing hard. One set of fingertips dallied over her lips. “They’ll think I am discontent with the Durin family. I’ve really said too much to you already.”

“I damned well hope you are discontent with the Durin family,” Master Baggins said, firm and righteous like slamming a book on the table, and with his head full of smoke he didn’t even apologize for the damning. “Your hands, incidentally – that’s the most brutish thing I can—”

“Let’s talk no more of it,” she pled. The cigar in her fingers had gone ashy-tipped and the embroiderer had developed a feather-light wrist tremble to belie a fraying basket of nerves. It made the hands she stood to lose apparent to Bilbo again, who steamed silently, mouth thin, breathing sharply out of his nose. “Let’s talk about something else. I’ve smoked too much and I don’t know what I’m saying.”

With that for a neat tie at the end of the tale, as though this would make him forget it ever happened, Azírë unlatched the door and pushed it ajar with one blue-slippered foot, letting smoke out. The stink was worse outside, though. It all smelled of decomposition and sulfur and fermenting fruit. She took a few grimacing breaths before removing her toes and letting it slam shut again. Galinyah grumbled something unfriendly and pulled an edge of the disheveled fur blanket over her still-sleeping head.

"You said it yourself. You want to see your cousins?” Bilbo dared, reaching to open it once more, flinging the rest of his pipestuff out the door. "See them. You have to let me try."

“There’s nothing more to say about it. Say something else, please. You’re going to wake Galinyah.”

“Nothing’s going to wake Galinyah. Does she know you’re afraid you’re going to get dismembered?”

“I said no more of it,” Azírë insisted, sharper in that moment, for even if she was a nameless dam she was still a dam. Her earrings jangled. The burglar squinted sidelong and leant back with his dumped pipe still smoldering weakly, cupped in one hand.

“Let’s just return to your story, please,” she gentled after a moment, hands smoothing soft blanket, trying to shake off the aftertang of leaf that had loosened her jaw. “You stole the keys. From the Elfking’s drawers.”

“Is this really what you want to—”

“Yes,” she hushed, that dulcet voice still a little too forceful to make the command in her voice sound sweet. “It is.”

Bilbo folded and unfolded his arms. Then, delaying - just to hammer the point home - the burglar cleared his throat, tilted his head back, and sulked a while, looking like he wasn’t sure whether he’d tell it or not.

“All right, then,” he said, finally. “If that’s what you want. But I’ll warn you. This is where the story really begins to get—”
“—ridiculous,” Master Baggins announced as he rounded the narrow squeeze of stairwell that took him back to the Dwarfking’s cell.

Bilbo had guessed a prisoner waiting on an escape would probably be pacing, ready to bolt at a moment’s signal. But when he got there, Thorin was asleep. The king had shunned his elf-made bed and was sitting in the small space between the foot of the cot and the tight row of bars, back against the wall, hair spilled over one shoulder, knees bent to keep him upright. He looked surprisingly like Kíli sleeping like that, which was jarring, because usually he never did.

Since no one heard his clever hello, Bilbo lowered the keys he’d been triumphantly dangling, and reached in to tap the king’s furry shoulder until Thorin woke up. (Dwarves, in his experience, usually just walk over and boot one another, but Master Baggins thought this mode of get-up rude and a little unkind, and honestly he hated to see it. It's bad enough when your royal family sleeps against rocks or on piles of sticks, which isn’t a suitable place for anyone. At the very least, you could wake them nicely.)

“Excuse me, sorry for disturbing you, but can you sleep later,” he asked unseriously when the king opened one eye, then two. “I’m in the middle of rescuing you.”

Thorin’s momentary disorientation cleared swiftly when Bilbo, for the second time, hoisted his cluttered key ring. He was on his feet immediately, suddenly full of haste, and his brow furrowed with concern at the sight of those thirty or forty bits of elven clank. He did not even say thank you.

As it turns out, scaling the manor house had been much easier than the wall (halflings really are good climbers, it turns out). Master Baggins climbed a young, strong shot of grape straight up twenty feet of shingled red planks. And you know, it's funny: he'd been sick with fear one moment, and then, simply not afraid at all, as though he'd forgotten to be in light of the mission before him. There was only one little anxious hop at the end where he had to jump sideways-ish from his vine and grab the window frame. Thankful for being a little scrawny at present, and thankful for the hard-won scrappiness of his arms, Bilbo’d caught the ledge and hauled himself into a heavy forest of silver satin drapes. He waited there until all sounds stopped. Then, peering carefully as though the magic in his ring might collapse at any moment, our hobbit crept out and cased the place.

Strange white stone, unmarbled; beautiful maid-woven rugs; a tapestry fragrant with live cedar leaves; and that livid reddish wood was everywhere. He crept on the balls of his feet, keeping his heels from slapping the floor. He eased open drawers and unlatched chests and rummaged in clothes. He felt around bookshelves and peeked in every jar. He stopped just short of picking Captain Tauriel’s pocket when she came in to be scolded by her liege-lord, and felt, by the end of it all, like a real proper tower-scaling jail-breaking cat-burglar, or like someone who had a princess to save.

Bilbo brought back every key he could find, for Thranduil had never exactly gone to bed. The Elfking merely drank until he nodded off in a cushioned chair with illuminated manuscripts scattered around him, so the burglar did not dally to explore. Presently, he tested each in the cell lock, giving it an experimental wiggle that made Thorin’s nerves climb. But Master Baggins knew he’d gotten it and frankly, my dear, he was on such a victorious high note, nothing could bring him down now.

“So. Not to heckle - really - but don't you think this sort of thing happens to you with alarming frequency? All this. With the cage and the peril and the odds and such. I'm just saying: it’s a little preposterous,” he continued, flicking another key down the row and wheeling a fresh one up. “I
mean the number of times you actually need the saving. Line of Durin. Just out here, plain as day, bounding about the wilderness. Princes, too. King-and-all. Respectfully. But oughtn’t all this adventuring business be beneath you,” Bilbo wondered, a third of the way through his ring already, showing no signs of panic now. "Oughtn't you be in a stone tower somewhere, or something.”

Thorin spared only the barest confused glance, for he was too busy watching the dim stairwell to pay attention to burglar-babble right now.

“What with the dragons roundabout, too,” our burglar clucked. The last key he tried click-clacked promisingly before it jammed and had to be jiggled free. “It’s asking for it, is what it is. And your retinue. Well, it needs work; that's all I'll say. I include myself in that assessment. Me being, might I say, not so brilliant on horseback. I mean I don’t even have the armor. Not very traditional. Not likely to be much of a valorous charge; not with this lot.”

“What are you talking about?” Thorin asked him outright.

Bilbo paused long enough for his blink to become a to-himself frown. “Stories?” he tried.

“Stories,” the king said.

Well, the hobbit said, yes.

Thorin peered himself into a suspicious squint, dagged his hair over one shoulder and, mildly annoyed, shook his head. “Where you come upon your strange notions, I do not know.”

“Oh, I probably read it in a book.”

The eighteenth key Bilbo selected didn’t slide in so easily as the others, but when he waggled, there was a soft clank, and Thorin lifted the gate so it would not scrape when pushed open. He was out all at once and the success flared so quickly burglar had to resist the compunction to throw his arms around the king’s middle and squeeze him. He even had to flatten out his self-satisfied grin at having done so well, for there was nothing jokey in Thorin’s expression at all.

“I hope you have not only a key but a plan,” the Dwarfking told him, boosting to his tip-toes to unhitch a torch from the wall.

“Something sort of like that,” Bilbo agreed. Then: “Oh, wait. I got you this, too.”

Master Baggins grabbed for his coat pocket and handed over a fine silver comb, its tines glimmering spotlessly in the low light. The pitiable image of Thorin trying to sort out his tangles with his hands had gotten stuck in the burglar’s head - and though he was certainly vain by anyone’s standards, dwarven vanity is a complicated, defiant thing. Any king would want to be presentable for his people. But for a dwarf, you see, presentation isn’t just vanity-for-vanity’s sake. The braids and the brushing and the jewelry and the inking is how a people who have been brought low and thinned out and expected to die off refuse to suffer as the world would like them to. This is how they remember the dignity of who they were - and still are, my dear. So much of the Folk’s belief in themselves rides on not having heroes with messy hair.

“Well, I stole it,” he added.

Bilbo held the torch so Thorin could take his worst knots out, opting not to mention the specifics of what lay just ahead. Neither did he mention the small fact King and Company were about to embark on a ride that would, more or less, render any amount of grooming moot. And, my dear, he certainly did not just yet mention how.
“Follow me to the others,” he said only. “I've got something figured out.”

“But how did you get thirteen dwarrows over a wall?” asked the young dwarf soldier of the writer, peering up with his fellows to where Burglar Baggins sat upon their parked black carriage, his legs swinging, banked by sun.

They'd eased out of Mirkwood without incident. Not “eased,” perhaps – for you never ease out of Mirkwood – it just plummeted, suddenly, from centuries-old black oaks to the windblown tundra. No one had seen any elves, but Master Baggins was fair sure the elves had seen them. What matter, though, for they now had the clacking comfort of a freshly-laid dwarf road. The cheers from the caravan as their wheels met smooth, perfect blocks of gray stone were something else. Bilbo even saw a few younger Guardians, who had hitherto heard of Mirkwood only in story, bow right over and touch their brows to the highway, thanks-be-to-Mahal.

Though the dwarrows emerged from those dark trees with no deaths (save for an ewe that wandered off and had almost certainly been eaten), the same could not be said for their constructs. Two carts needed spokes repaired, and the ribaudkin had slipped off a rock and cracked its axle, snapping in turn three projectile spears. Given the loss of the great and terrible Siege Workshops of Erebor, few dreaded dwarven war mechanisms remained these days – and given that it might take years (if not decades) to fully repair said workshop, the army engineer demanded they stop for repairs.

Their caravan spent one night and one morning still. The golden grasses, starbursts of purple thistle, cloudless sky and nippy blue air rejuvenated everyone’s spirits. Galinyah propped open the carriage doors so they might get a bit of breeze; Azirë wrapped a shawl round her shoulders; Dwalin and his engineer hammered nails all night; the dwarves welcomed daylight again. And Bilbo, my dear, resumed his tale.

As Master Baggins began talking, more animated than he'd been in a while to be out of that wood, he drew a soldier’s ear. A few of the Guardians began listening-in. Then two cavalry riders with their lunchbowls in their hands. And, after a bit, a neat little grouping had assembled in the stomped-down plain to hear what our hobbit had to say. Eventually, Bilbo climbed up on the carriage to get better bearings and, he confessed, felt a bit commanding up there, talking down at the King’s Army cluttered beside the New Dwarf Road.

“Well, now,” Master Baggins said, happy to be asked questions, hands propped on his knees. He rolled up a bothersome coat sleeve that wouldn’t stay put and leaned forward, braid knocking over his ear. “That, my lad, is a tactician’s question.”

A speardwarf harrumphed dramatically at this proposition, sipping the soup from his cup. “Better to go straight through it than over it, I wager. Elf-walls will fall to a belch and a hard sneeze! It’s why they walk around looking so pinched.”

“I’ll tell you the full story,” Bilbo promised, “pinched elves included. But I’m not positive you’ll believe it.”

“We’re dwarves,” shouted a good-humored Guardian, rousing a handful of chuckles. “We’ll believe anything that makes us look halfway attractive.”

“I’m not sure I would, in your shoes. The numbers don't add up. And the physics - that's a whole
‘nother story. It’s ridiculous; no lying about that,“ the burglar confessed. His audience looked a little impatient as Master Baggins sat there pondering, tapping his finger against his chin. He must tell you he was rather enjoying their attention. Though the attention of a crowd had never been something Bilbo Baggins, Book-Keeper and Respectable Hobbit, craved, he finds it is different somehow when you’re telling a story. It’s not like being a nit-picked person, but more like being a character version of yourself – a figure meant to model something – and our writer had to wonder if this is what Thorin felt like all the time. People expect something of characters, you know? They want someone who exists outside of their lives to admire.

“The whole damned quest was ridiculous,” the speardwarf declared, making a couple brothers around him laugh that unfunny, unlucky, in-the-face-of-disaster laugh dwarves do.

“It’s true!” Bilbo lifted the finger from his face so that he might shake it, heart hopping gleefully, shedding his satisfied smile to affect some anger. “Now that’s the truth, and I don’t see why any of you are laughing. You all had better stop right now. It’s the most ridiculous, far-fetched, crack-brained story I have ever heard, and frankly, we’ve no right to have survived something so ridiculous. It sets a bad precedent – I really think it does. The very least we could’ve done is died ridiculously.”

Galinyah grinned from where she sat in the carriage door, Azírë behind her on the bench, still holding their peace. “Master Bilbo, surely you’ve already gleaned that all dwarven stories are eventually ridiculous.”

“The dwarven people are ridiculous!” someone thundered, and this, more than the others, got everyone to hoist a fist and hurrah.

Bilbo, when they had quieted down a bit, took a sip from the water canteen Galinyah passed up to him and mulled it over. All right, he’d said, all right. Let’s not be pests, he’d said. He said you want to know how I got a gaggle of dwarves over an elf-wall? He said I would be happy to oblige you.

He said it’s all thanks, really, to the elven maker.

“For the Feast of Starlight?” Azírë asked.

"No," he said. “For making the elves such one-cup drunks."

Fine audience, dwarves are. It was a good while before they stopped howling to let him explain.

That sneaking isn’t appropriate for a warrior!” Glóin had growled, to which Nori spat "Sod your appropriateness". Fili ended all debate by hopping to
his feet and announcing "All right! – After you, Bilbo."

It was decided – since they were a preferable combination of strong and light-footed and really ought to be rescued first – the princes would accompany Master Baggins. Their path took them outside, through four weedy back-alleys, into the dank-smelling and algae-lined waterhouse, down some darkly sodden stairs, and ultimately to a rivertop loading dock, where it’d be easy enough to toss a few barrels of dwarrow and whisk them away. Our hobbit was too small for the prerequisite hauling, but Fíli and Kíli should have sufficed just fine. Except Dwalin outright demanded to go with – something about his sacred duty, yada-yada, honor-this and honor-that, whatever-have-you. To tell the truth, Bilbo was sick of listening to dwarves go on and on about their honor. He said well, come on, and they four went.

And they went fairly well, actually – which was a good spot of authentic luck, since Master Baggins only had ring-luck enough for one. (Hiding a bear of a dwarflord and two Durins in plain sight was simply not an option.) Only a single close-call: in the lily-cramped byway beneath the fletcher’s window, there was ominous rustling overhead that made Bilbo draw Sting and fling an arm out to keep the princes behind him. But it was only the fletcher’s cat in the sill, batting at bees and pawing flowers until being scooped up by the fletcher, herself. She pressed a kiss to the beast’s head and closed the shutters. The escaped prisoners escaped on.

By the time they’d sneaked into the damp wooden warehouse and down to the water-room, finding it deserted, there was a distinct air of amusement behind him that hadn’t been there before. Master Baggins wasn’t sure if the princes were amused because they’d all been startled by a cat or because they’d been protected by a three-foot halfling burglar. And he wasn’t going to ask, because this was at least a moderately stressful situation – stressful enough that Dwalin, after pulling fourteen sloshing barrels down from the storage rack, slipped into the stairwell with one hand on his salvaged club to keep watch.

It should’ve been easy for the three of them to puncture, empty, and ready each for occupation. Should’ve been – except when Bilbo turned about with a smarting dagger in his hand, just big enough to let out the drink without sinking the boat, Fíli and Kíli were standing immediately behind him, shoulder-to-shoulder, elven lanternlight in four eyes and mischief on two faces.

Master Baggins was tempted to take a step back. Though young, they were still Durins, which made them strikingly tall (for dwarves), and notoriously badly-behaved. But he stood his ground.

“What are you looming for?” the burglar groused, shoving his miniature weapon flatways against Kíli’s chest and gesturing for them to get cracking. Fíli cocked his head and squinted happily, mercilessly. The littlest Durin took the knife, but that too-toothy grin was now large enough to swallow his chin.

“Well, well,” Fíli began, those eyes still slatted smartly, voice betraying nothing. “Aren’t you the dwarf of the hour?”

“We just realized,” Kíli got in before the dwarf-of-the-hour could say *come again*? “On the way in here, we really haven’t thanked you. For the valiant rescuing.”

Conversing with these two was like watching a sporting ball hit speedily back and forth, the way they’d finish shared thoughts and play one-off-the-other – and if you weren’t careful, that rogue ball might suddenly shoot your way and whack you right in the nose. In an effort to avoid talking entirely, Bilbo found an orphaned cheeseknife, reached for a barrel, and struck the first blow.

Kíli leapt back when the liquid sluiced out, splattering his brother’s trousers and painting the floorboards a slick purple. Fíli, unbothered by wine-smell or the stains on his legs, stepped through
the gush to pull over another one. Erebor's canary prince yanked a pin out of his hair that turned out to be a shank-in-disguise and with commendable focus got to work.

But not before teasing:

“Indeed we haven’t,” supposed he. “And we want to correct that. Because you’ve saved us – you really have. You’re a regular champion, Master Burglar.”

“You’re our hero!” Kili threw-in, letting out another barrellfull of wine, melodrama somewhat hushed by the messy glug-glug-glug.

“You should be lorded.”

“Yes! A gallant lord is he. Sir Boggins the Brave!”

You’re welcome, Sir Boggins said, thinly.

Just then, Kíli’s finally depleted barrel tipped over with a hollow thwack! Dwalin materialized at the top of the stairs in a heartbeat, club-in-fist, ready to save his princes from certain death - finding them only dripping with wine.

“Keep it down!” the King's-Guard growled. He glared at them long enough for Fíli to deal his little brother a cuff to the back of the head and help him right his upturned oops. “Heirs to the kingdom and a pint-sized thief – can’t even move blasted furnishings without collapsing a roof on our sodding skulls!”

His stormy look intensified before Dwalin about-faced, shut the heavy plank door, and returned to his lifetime of vigil.

“Don’t mind him, Sir Boggins,” Kíli said, smiling like sugar, knees in the spill.

“He’s a bit grumpy,” Fíli admitted.

“Minor sore spot.”

“Professional jealousy.”

“Lingering sense of inadequacy.”

“It’s his life’s work, you see,” the crown prince extrapolated, pausing his barrel-breaking to gaze off sagely into that misty distance he always consulted to tell his tales. He mulled it over while Bilbo industriously struggled to drag another case into play. “Being the King’s-Guard, one has to guard the king. Keep the illustrious sovereign Son of Durin out of peril. And said king having been, you know. Imperiled.”

“Twice,” Kíli added, jabbing in his dagger, sending another ploosh across the ground. It was hard not to think back to all the goblin insides these two let loose in the maze-mine dirt.

“Double-horrors.”

“Little awkward for our big bloke.”

“But you? You, ah. The fox who gets the slow wolf's hen. You swoop in—” Here Fíli drew an easy arm around Bilbo’s significantly shorter shoulders, earning himself a dubious glance. Master Baggins never wholly trusted Prince Fíli wasn’t boldfaced lying to him about everything. His moustache braids, which kept their shape a little too well, never seemed to come undone, and that was suspect in
itself. “—during his misfortune. Rescue the day, protect the heirs, preserve the quest, save the king. You’ve shown Dwalin up, is what you’ve done. Completely trounced our native son on his own field. Some competition for that shiny office?”

“Compet—? With DWALIN,” he snapped. "I’d not compete with Dwalin in anything – except being puny – being tiny and crushable and - Have you seen Dwalin? He’s a great, big – giant! He’s a mountain, is what he is. Me! I’m – well – not that. And, if you haven’t noticed," the hobbit concluded with an exasperated dip of his head and a here-I-am spread of his arms, “I’m three bloody feet tall.”"


“Oh, you were so stylish!” Kíli gushed, dropping his emptied barrel into position too hard, resulting in another woodborne clatter that made Dwalin peek in to glare again. “I’m still thinking about it! That stance!” he cried, clasping his hands together, sweeping them to his cheek in the most waifish approximation of some storybook maiden a strapping young dwarflord could muster. “That growl. If I’d not been clinging to a burning spruce, screaming and slipping to my doom and all, I’d have swooned plum into your arms. Have you considered a career change?”

“A what?”

Fíli glanced up from the rhythmic chug of spilled wine long enough to give his hair-poker a shake in Bilbo’s general direction. It scattered grapey drops like blood. “Don’t think Thorin hasn’t noticed.”

“Oh, of course Thorin has noticed,” Kíli agreed.

“Personally,” said the crown prince, “and this is my private take, but I think he’s sore about Dwalin’s performance back there.”

“So sore!”

“Disillusioned’ is mayhaps the better word.”

“Disdainful!”

Bilbo swallowed in the privacy of his throat. Clearly, the Princes Durin already thought it quite the amusing anecdote, their encounter with the White Orc – but honestly, there was nothing funny about it at all. Master Baggins could never remember being so steadily afraid in his life. Worse than the heart-hammering, disjointed fear of actually seeing the Dwarfking in the wolf’s jowls was the long-run, unpunctuated fear that came afterward. For nights he laid bleeding under a sad half of a tent while the others crowded him despairingly, watching their king scream. Terrible screaming – sharp peals out of nowhere and protracted, agonized weeping and bruised, watery-eyed yelps. Thorin Oakenshield was born a crown prince and no one had ever allowed him to be hurt so badly in his whole life. They kept wiping the tears from his cheeks and the blood from the sides of his mouth.

Dwarves do not sit on their worries. Everyone did something. Óin tirelessly bandaged and re-bandaged. Glóin cut armfuls of reeds for poultices. Bombur boiled fresh water and oatmeal-mushroom stew. Bofur whittled arrow shafts and tried to stay merry. Bifur recounted and bundled their travelling rations. Dori and Ori tried to patch up the rips in everyone’s clothes. Balin loudly imagined how embarrassed Azog must be right about now, having been whipped by a halfling and a handful of cobblers. Fíli and Nori hunted obsessively; Kíli washed cloths soaked with his uncle’s blood, staring at them in his hands like a shocked child who didn’t understand what was happening. And there was Dwalin through it all, the sting of tears pinching his face, making them all miserable.
with his over-and-over mumblings of "This is my doing, it is." He refused to leave until Óin quite literally chased him away, and even then, hovered nearby, as if his watchful proximity was the only thing holding immediate death at bay. The King’s-Guard spoke like the king was dying before their eyes at every moment, as if he was sure Thorin would not survive and this was the fatal kind of punishment, lamenting – "If I hadn’t failed him! If I had been there!" – until Nori flat-out told him to shut the gaping hole in his face.

Bilbo was too afraid to elbow his way in. He didn’t do anything. He sat his bedroll as far away as he could, legs crossed, palm heels covering his ears to block out the king’s pain, and he lay awake through the dark hours and wee morning lights with a pillow flattened over his head. He had even used a very unkind tone on Gandalf when the wizard asked, "Dear Bilbo, no one has checked you; are you quite all right?", snapping back "Don’t ask me that, I’m not the one with warg toothmarks in me, I’m not the one with their guts shaken around."

“You should’ve seen the looks poor Dwalin got. Like this.” The little prince stood up tall and effected a mighty, sidelong, down-the-nose, resentful glance. Funny how much one could parody Thorin’s attitude without managing to actually exaggerate. “You know how he does.”

“Myself, I felt bad for him,” said Fíli. “This elf debacle has only made it worse.”

“Not that your unsolicited opinions aren’t relevant and fascinating, but. If you are through monologuing,” Bilbo snorted, wingspan stretched to its limit in an effort to scoot one of the makeshift floatables into place by the open water ramp. "You could give me a hand with the rest of these, theoretically."

Fíli made a halfhearted move to assist him, but our writer got it done himself. They moved to the dump the last few instead, and soon everyone was carrying, getting the last readied bits into place.

“We’re only saying this for your benefit. Play your cards right, Master Baggins,” supposed the eldest, wrapping a new barrel shell up in his arms “And you could reach the Mountain in fine shape. Few extra shares of the treasure?”

_Slosh._

“A bauble or two to carry away?”

_Splosh._

“Property deed, associated revenues?”

_Plash._

“Want a silver mine?”

“A silver mine!” Bilbo yanked his blade out of the very last barrel and stood up. The floor was doused, and enough elven wine had washed into the river to make some unlucky carp very drunk. “What on earth would I do with a—? If you tell Thorin I want a silver mine, I’ll kill you.”

The grin Fíli settled upon Bilbo was oddly patronizing, pitying. He’d seen similar looks used by high-town Hobbiton toms on silly little peasant girls whom they imagined didn’t know the slightest thing about the world. “I don’t think you understand how rich we are,” said this prince who had never once stepped inside the vaults of his ancestral home, who had grown up in poverty and famine, and heard of Erebor gold only via nostalgic description. “Bilbo, we’re dwarves. Incidentally, after this, you could get anything you wanted. It’s just a matter of asking for it correctly."
“Get a silver mine! What Dwarfking could say no to this face!” Kíli cooed. He was behind Bilbo out of nowhere, cupping a hand beneath the hobbit’s chin and mushing his cheeks into a minor disaster. Bilbo slapped the offending fingers away with a couple less-than-polite words.

“That’s it,” our hobbit spat, backpedalling to glower (especially at Kíli, whose mitt had left dust smudges his face). “You stop it, I mean it, both of you. This is no time to be horsing.”

"Brother. "The auburn one had the gall to look blindsided. "I think he's upset."

The golden one rested a so-sorry hand over his collarbone; he didn’t quite manage innocuous, what with oozing self-pride as he always did. “Have we misread you? The last thing we’d want to do is diminish your heroism, trust me. Dwarves love heroism. Heroism in the face of bloody, agonizing defeat is practically our bread-and-butter. It’s just we thought surely, you had to want something. But —oh, wait. I see.” Fíli gave the nod of a dwarf who’d come to understand where he’d gone wrong. “Why ask for trifles and trinkets when you could decline reward now and win a title later? Now that’s thinking big, Bilbo, you crafty thing.”

“Oh, come on,” the burglar snapped.

Fíli twisted to regard Kíli, eyebrows raised. He held a flat palm out at Bilbo like presenting a duchess to a ballroom. “What do you think, brother? Does this strike you as a Sword-Bearer of the Lonely Throne?”

“Sword-Bearer? You ninny. That’s Lord Boggins of the East, formerly of Dumpy Halfling Village, now Master of the Mountain Watch! And joint-owner of the most lucrative silver mine in Erebor, with those incredibly handsome princes.”

“Emissary Baggins, if you’ve a mind for games.”

“Sir Baggins Boldhearted, Honorary Dwarf!”

With a cuss and a heave, Sir Baggins shoved the last barrel-boat into place very much on his own.

With the last of the wine loosed and the barrels in-position, it was difficult not imagining the temperature of that greenish river running beneath them. Though the waterhouse was dim and darker still below, if he looked closely, Bilbo could see silvery longfish darting through spiny reeds. He wiped his drippy hands on his slacks and his sweating brow in the crook of a rumpled sleeve. He tried not to hypothesize about the probability of dense dwarves sinking like rocks. He tried not to dwell on how poorly it was he could swim.

“I’m only thinking aloud, mind you.” Fíli spoke while his little brother signaled Dwalin back in with a knock-knock-knock up the stairs. “We are a secretive and standoffish people. But times change, don’t they? Given our current status – well. Stranger things have happened.”

“Stranger things! So strange!” Kíli oohed and ahhed, returning with the King’s-Guard in tow. “Do you have any idea how bonkers things are right now in the Dwarf Nation?”

“What in the Five Hounds’ bloody halls are you blabbering about.”

“Silver mines, of course,” the crown prince answered Dwalin's snarl like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Then – with no thank-yous or hold-tights - Master Baggins took to the steps to collect their troupe. But before he could slip through the door and onto the streets, there was a creaking ascending behind him. There was a tap-tap on his shoulder. And that dimpled grin waiting behind it.
“Think it over, will you?” Kíli whispered, winked, and bolted him out.

ooo

Bilbo thought it over.

There was just no way to make it work. Firstly, he knew nothing about mining silver. (Fíli, if he was even serious, would be a questionable associate at best, and Kíli was kindhearted but right out.) Secondly, he knew nothing about shipping tangible materials; his arithmetical training was only in theoretical investments, not things you could pull from dark stone and touch with your hands. Thirdly, it was beyond foolish. Picking up a new business out-of-the-blue in the middle of your life is a ridiculous fiscal proposition, and there was no way to reconcile the issue of import/export – which didn’t matter a hoot anyway, because once all this adventure ballyhoo got resolved, Bilbo was not interested in staying away from home fifteen minutes longer than he had to.

He thought through all this rather distractedly, though, because thirteen dwarves and himself were currently bowling into the river under a smattering of feathery arrowfire.

It was a shock, that water.

Not because it was cold or fast, or even because he was dizzy from rolling down the loading ramp. It was a shock because – before he’d even realized he was in the water – Bilbo’s barrel upturned and sent him plunging open-mouthed into the damp deep dark.

There was a suffocation of sound and a faraway blur of motion. The movement of other barrels thumping into each other sent a woody confusion of bubbling all around him. Hands pawed through the riverweeds and wet hair flew. He hadn’t even had time to shut his eyes. If the submerged hobbit looked up through the sloshing, beyond all this upset silt and a hundred scattering minnows, he could just see suggestions of color: reds, blondes, Erebor blues. Voices shouted in languages he could not understand. Projectiles – arrowshafts – drove into the wakes around him, seeming surreal as they halted and bobbed harmlessly back up. There were bright, smarting flashes of raised steel and axe bits overhead. Someone who might have been Dwalin very distinctly bellowed "Cut the damned rope!"

It was so dark – too dark! – and then all at once, hatch unlocked and the sun hit them, and our burglar realized no one saw him fall.

He fought as hard for the surface as he maybe ever has fought anywhere else in his life. It was a combustion of light and noise.

“Oh, help,” Bilbo yelped, then burbled under, then came up wailing – because, my dear, you cannot be heroic all the time.

It was too much to be reacted to. He was gasping foam and screaming water and sinking and bobbing, surrounded by the zipping of arrowheads and drowned by the roar of tide all the while. Something fierce seized him roundabout the chest and pulled. Then an arm, long and lean, was around him, hefting the choking halfling out of the water and into a bitterly bright and beautifully-tasting burst of air.

“I’ve got you, Bilbo!” Kíli shouted, lunged halfway over the lip of his barrel and trying not to turn them both upside-down. “Hang on, then!”
With a great heave, the prince hauled Master Baggins up and in.

They spun recklessly with the shifting weight. It was horrible. He couldn’t see over the rim, and his head, my dear – his poor head was whirling so. One side of the improvised boat struck an outcropping of rock that sent both occupants bouncing painfully around. It was still frighteningly difficult to breathe, waves splashing over the edges and soaking them both, raining drops and spraying sand. Bilbo latched fiercely to Kíli’s sodden tunic and wept with gratitude, overcome by the pathetic quaking of relief.

It was roundabout this time Master Baggins became aware of the second volley, mostly because Orcrist went sailing tip-over-hilt over their heads. And then because an orc hit the whitewater, sinking among the light pip-pops of elven arrowheads.

Azog must have tracked them straight from the Carrock. The briefest brush of that name sent through Bilbo a horrific flash of white leather and a dwarf-hide jerkin. Azog – who wore the faces of dwarven kings and braided his mace with their hair – was all this time no more than three days behind them. Maybe less – maybe he had been skulking round Thranduil’s Walls for nights, waiting for the last names of Durin to leave. For Thorin II, who he would sack an elven city wrong-ways up a river to scalp and skin. It grabbed the burglar’s heart with a reactive bolt of fear for the king, but he couldn’t exactly hold in any more fear right now.

Our hobbit didn’t even noise this time. He clamped his eyes shut for a stinging, fearful moment, ducking into the relative protection of Kíli’s chest until he could regroup the cognitive wherewithal to act. Except the prince was a little too anemic at the moment to be much in the way of a bulwark. He looked nauseous, judging from his constant swallowing and the tight set of his teeth - but honestly, Bilbo hadn’t paid much attention, even while clinging to his tunic for dear life. Some burglar! He was petrified. He couldn’t seem to just shake the strands of his wet hair away. His arms were stone, though the whole of him felt brittle and dry and perilously light, like a leftover twig. He was absolutely no help to poor Kíli, so afraid of upsetting the barrel was he, and only came-to when the prince gasped: "Look at the bridge!"

Bilbo looked. The elven footbridge passed overhead. It was moss-heavy rock and crawling with orcs, their massive mitts hurling axes at the elven flood gates and carrying what must’ve been fire.

On second glance, though, it wasn’t fire. Furious red hair clashed with sunlit blades in the sullen lack of wind. The red captain was up there, Bilbo realized at the fringe of his conscious, fighting like a right tornado whose mother had just been insulted. Iron-wrought bodies plunged off it. When her scimitar stuck fast in a cracked breastplate, she pulled a dagger out of a flanking ranger’s hands, sliced him – and when that was taken away from her, drew back with bare teeth and punched him right in the face.

Maybe this should not have stood out when so much else rushed by, but my dear, you have never, never seen anyone fight like that, and if you live three hundred years, he doubts you ever will. She moved like a forest fire, surging with frightening unpredictability - not cool passionlessness, but clear-sight amidst flame. You cannot hold flame; you merely pass your hand through and come out burned. It was as though she spread out in several directions at once, scorching the earth so you dare not tread where the fire has just been.

You read about heroes parting a battlefield. "Oh, that’s not how battle actually works," you’d say. "That’s just poetic language and it’s completely unrealistic." Well, there was a time Master Baggins would’ve agreed with you, but he has witnessed it, and it's true. Monsters saw the look in her eye and drew away from her, like kindling afraid of being consumed.

Bards write legends about fighters like that. As for your writer, Bilbo had never seen or heard of a
female fighter before - but mostly, Bilbo had never seen or heard of anybody just up and punching an orc.

Apparently neither did the orc, because he looked more surprised than anything else. When her fistprint didn’t do much to stagger the warrior, Captain Tauriel dropped to a palm, evading his retaliating swing and sweeping one smarting boot forward to fold his knee from behind. He was dead before he hit the ground. Another grabbed her by the hair and she threw her head back, breaking its nose, horse-kicking another straight into the river. Those hunting knives found purchase in her captor's guts. They tore gory lines all the way down.

The last Master Baggins saw of that bridge was an orc with an arrow in its ribs. Then another, and another, at it occurred to him those arrows weren’t pointing in the right direction to be from the dock. They’d come from Kili – who had been the one to cry out, amazed, at the sight of her. He was firing one-after-the-other into the throng of orcs still ahead of the captain, a rote thoughtlessness to his shots, and it dawned upon Bilbo the prince might need some help. Though his knees were jellied and his jaw trembling, a hobbit can at least keep a hold on a quiver, can’t he.

So, with the tears and riverwash blurring his eyes, our writer forced himself to see. Kili was bow-drawn, grimacing with red eyes and a fearful wince, dripping like a soaked hunting dog as he struggled to line up a shot. It wasn’t like him, you know, to be so mindless with his arrows. *Maybe the river's got him green around the gills*, Master Baggins thought. But then he looked again, and the prince wasn't green, at all.

He was a very alarming shade of yellow.

Bilbo always figured Kili would be one to wail at the first touch of pain. He’d never really been injured; it would’ve been acceptable to carry on a bit. But he hadn’t made a peep. So when the hobbit searched downwards, wondering if something was wrong, it took him by surprise: the broken-off arrow shivering in the side of Prince Kili’s thigh.

It must have nailed him when he leapt over to grab ahold of our washed-away burglar. The head had disappeared completely into the meat of his leg, forcing cloth into tissue; the rest he’d already snapped off. One thick red rivulet snaked out. Bilbo wordlessly followed the fresh bloodtrail down to the cuff of his boot before he snapped up in a shock and cried *Kili!*

“I know,” the prince shot back, swallowing and swallowing, inaudible but for the reading of lips. If you had been in Master Baggins’s shoes, you, too, could’ve felt his heart bolting madly behind the bone of his chest.

Bilbo knew enough of field medicine by this point not to yank it out. He pressed his palms into Kili’s breastbone to take one more worried look, just to see if there was anything he could do – and he noticed, then, that the arrowshaft wasn’t smooth as an elf’s would be. It was splintered. And the wood was black.

This detail would make a world of difference later – but that’s a separate story, my dear, and for now, it wasn’t as important as the short-rapids they were about to go somersaulting down.

This next part goes a bit fuzzy. To be honest, Bilbo has no idea what happened for a significant chunk of time here; the world became an unsteady, senseless contradiction. There were sounds everywhere but none he could parse and sights everywhere but none he could somehow see.

They took on water. He was under it and over it and under it again. Kili, despite his best efforts, lost control of the barrel and at some point both of them went over. They kept together for a moment but then the current broke them apart. Fur and weeds and mud and rock bed swirling around like a
storm. He was looking at Dori’s face too frightened and too close for a moment and then blackness and then his fingers were scrabbling for purchase on Bofur’s arm and then he was tumbling and then looking at the underside of barrel binding. Someone grabbed a fistful of his hair and pulled him up. Something caught his disaster of shirt and tore him deeper. There was no sense of direction. He was only vaguely aware of the sense of falling, ever forward and ever down.

Then he opened his eyes, and realized it had stopped.

To make a dwarfish metaphor: life was looking through a pale old jade.

The first thing he saw that made sense was his hand. Limp fingers caught in suspension, hovering in the muted rays of light. The whole arm was floating lazily up, he noticed, a ghostly palm at the end of a cranberry red sleeve - but it wasn't scary, at all. It was sleepy, somehow. Peaceful, like being wombed inside a safe blanket while time went on outside. Like he had been put inside a glass bottle and turned upside-down.

For a distant-bodied, detached moment, Bilbo wondered if he had died, but then there was a little flutter of movement. A swishing of sediment. A ripple in the fabric. Or just a regular ripple – and well, that explained it: he was underwater. He should probably see about paddling to the surface soon, but for some strange reason, the notion didn’t strike him as particularly urgent. It looked less welcoming up there. The tides pushed sluggishly. A wood panel floated by. If he looked beyond all this otherworldly green, he could even see, too distant to be imagined, the hopeless face of a midmorning sun.

Drowning, Master Baggins has discovered, makes you terribly stupid. It is sort of like hovering on the cusp of a not-unpleasant dream.

Then big dwarf boots jumped into the river next to him, and he startled awake, head flooded with searing light, full lungs shot with pain as two fists hauled him out of the water and out of the mortal half-sleep.

“I have found him,” Thorin announced to the blisterly-bright waking world. “Look! – alive.”

“Praise be to Mahal!”

“Is he breathing?”

“Poor lad is in shock, he is. Stop waving him about! Put the burglar down and give him some room.”

The chorus of voices broke through the dark of his mind. Bilbo dully realized he was being suspended, yanked straight out of the river and held up by the ribs like some kind of prized fish, which might’ve made him laugh if he could just manage to suck in the air. But there was something blocking his throat, wasn’t there. He gulped, spasmed, and felt nothing – only the weight like a talisman of rock in his chest.

Thorin twisted him about to look worriedly at him. The next thing Master Baggins knew, he was being sloshed up to shore, indistinct faces fretting around him, muttering do-this and do-that. But before they could practice any old dwarven healing or get Óin at hand, Bilbo’s heels roughly hit the shallows, and he was violently doubled across somebody’s bent knee.

Then he was retching riverwater, heaving and heaving, like somebody stuck a pin in a poor canteen. (Or a knife in a wine barrel, if you wanted to be clever about it.)
When his vision cleared, and color returned to normalcy through the dripping wall of his pitched-forward curls, Bilbo counted.

Once more:

- Balin – check
- Dwalin – check, in the cattails, battered
- Óin – check
- Glóin – check
- Bifur – check
- Bofur – check, plus one (hat)
- Bombur – check
- Nori – check, double-check
- Ori – check, though very sodden
- Dori – check
- Kíli – thankfully, thankfully, check
- Fíli – check
- Thorin Oakenshield – check

“Never,” Bilbo rasped, spluttering over the king’s knee, pulling his claws out of Thorin’s leg to relieve some sand from his mouth and a stalk of reeds from his hair. “Nothing even remotely like that ever, ever again.”

The Company hurrahed.

Once he’d stood himself up and regained his footing, feeling the pinch of pebbles under his feet and the sun roasting the backs of his ears, Bilbo trudged the rest of the way to shore on his own. It was suddenly chilly. There was a pang in his lower back where the king had thumped it. His stomach was tender, and his esophagus was scorched, and the muscles from his belly-button to his collarbone ached.

But everyone had survived – and even made it out mostly in one piece – and he supposed a hero should think that made all this ridiculousness worth it.

It was a safe and sunny clearing on the outskirts of Mirkwood, this place they’d landed, where the river poured out to a mineral blue-green full of salmon and limestone. They moved into a thicket to watch for elves. They built a modest camp out of hatcheted saplings and bur branches. They found some bell flowers for Kili’s wound and dressed it. They speared some fish and dug up some clams and got a meager fire going, and sat Bilbo at it, where they told him to rest and draped him Bifur’s almost-dry cape.

He hadn’t meant to just sit there, honestly. He’d no mind to let anyone wait on him. Hobbits, while homey, are not-at-all lumps, not likely to lie about and do nothing while others do business. So you can believe our writer when he says that he really intended – once he’d finished warming and drying-out – on hefting himself up and shaking himself off and pitching his fair share in.

But before he could do it – before he could put on his stiff upper lip or his bravest face or the boldhearted stance of an honorary dwarf – Bilbo closed his eyes, and to the sounds of friends working, finally fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.
And by the time he’d finished his tale, the dwarrowdames were sleeping, wrapped up in fur as the dark carriage rolled on through the star-shot night.

Bilbo-himself found he could not. Instead, he cracked the door and breathed in.

It was not yet Foreyule, and no more than three weeks left by ground stood between the fortress and the army. Since they met the New Forest Road, Dwalin had not wanted to stop. Instead of camping overnight, they merely changed shifts, dozing in saddles or on the waning food carts, propping their heads on bags of grain or folded surcoats. They ate while they marched and took mead sparingly, if at all. The long march had just nearly everyone looking ragged and grumbling about rest, but Master Baggins didn’t mind. He didn’t mind, really, the listless feeling of a walking night.

Outside, the air was pure and cold and jet and clear, and the tundra sky opened up to immenseness as he knew only it could. He dropped to his feet and let the grass make him shiver. It was cold, and a feather-light frost was trying to take shape, but his dwarf-coat kept him warm. At this steady-slow pace, it was easy to let himself stare, too - so Bilbo did. He tipped back his chin and took stock of the starlight in that great blue-black face of the world. Thousands upon thousands of stars, uncluttered by cloud, winking brightly or holding his gaze. They scattered far over the moon-lulled glisten of the Long Lake ahead of them and River Celduín beside; they hushed above Mirkwood behind; and they split across the Lonely Mountain like a handful of first-winter’s snow tossed by a child into the sky.

Bilbo, of course, packed it all up and stored it away. He watched his breath curl thin mist into the air. And he looked at Dwalin plodding ahead of them, head bobbing, fighting too hard not to nod-off on the back of his horse.

It was really going to be very nice seeing the lads together again. It really-and-truly was.

Since everyone who’d wanted to listen was sleeping, Bilbo could not tell the last bit of story except to himself. No matter. It was only a humble ear of a tale. He hadn’t even written it down, because this was a book about dwarves – not hobbits – and my dear, in the long run, there are some parts of a story a writer must keep for himself.

What’s this? Bilbo’d asked, blinking at the little brass wink Dwalin had just dropped into his hand.

It was barely the first break of day where they had landed by that river. A groggy sun eked the tips of its fingers from beneath the quilt of darkness, making for the Dwarves of Erebor a fragile blue mornig with sleepy eyes. Gentle daylight wandered around these skinny birches without quite piercing through.

It was unusual for the Company to sleep much past first light, but given yesterday’s escape and subsequent aquatic battering, they gave themselves until nine. Except Master Baggins. Since he’d fallen asleep so early, Bilbo rose with plenty of time to cover dawn’s-watch, and sent a stringy-looking Bofur back to bed. He ran through his count. He looked in on the Durins where they had fallen asleep in their little lion-pride pile – Kíli tossed willy-nilly at one side, Fíli balled up on the other, Thorin dozing between them on the sprawl of his hair. He assumed no one else would so much as twitch for another two hours at least. And he had settled into a good watching place,
rumpled clothes and all, with a handful of fresh berries and a heart set on a moment of peace.

He hadn’t expected Dwalin would tramp over to him at the riverside, scowling and fidgeting like he had to deliver some unpleasant news.

The King’s-Guard grumbled as though he’d just been questioned by a willfully stupid boy. “It,” he answered grudgingly, towering over the burglar where he’d propped himself on a log with his other hand stuffed with blackberries and a bewildered look on his face, “is a war-bead, hobbit.”

Bilbo was still staring perplexedly down at his open palm. He thought somebody must have dropped it back there. “Whose?”

The snort Dwalin made would’ve been more at place in the snout of a bee-stung bear. He didn't look much better than our writer did, honestly. His knuckles were bruised and his beard was a fluffy, uncombed mess. “It’s yours. You’ve been granted the right to wear it.”

“Granted the – what?” Master Baggins will here admit he was not doing wonders for the ‘stupid boy’ analogy.

The dwarf sighed.

“I’m the war-leader of this party,” he growled out, still pretty ursine. “It’s my hand doles the honors, when a foe is felled or a feat is done. You did a feat. You’re being honored. Take your damned bead.”

“Really? I didn’t think – that is, I wasn’t aware dwarves – non-dwarves, I should say – I mean I don’t even know what I’d—” But the burglar’s tongue rolled up before the King’s-Guard could find himself a sourer face. “Thank you,” he managed, meaning it all at once. When Bilbo tapped it, the Khuzdul engravings simmered in daylight, and the war-bead felt solid and momentous in his hand.

This time, Dwalin’s bear-grunt was more of a sow with a bothersome cub. “Wasn’t my notion,” he started to say – but something in the way Bilbo held that bead in the crease of his life-line seemed to make him regret it – and he didn’t say anything, after all.

The hobbit was barely smiling, afraid to beam down at that thing, like he thought it might vanish if his look wasn’t warriorlike enough. “I don’t know how to wear it.”

“What, then,” Dwalin snapped. There was the old, gruff, to-himself bark. “You want me to fix your hair for you, too? You’ve got what you’re getting. And that’s all that you’re getting. So go on.”

Later, Óin taught him how to tie it. The old dwarf undid and relaced the war-braid he had worn for a century so that Bilbo might watch – and then, fingers feeling lazier than they ever had, the burglar tried his own. It was clumsy and came apart seven times before the simple pattern would hold. It was looser on some passes than others. The top was too slack and the bottom too tight, leaving an unruly gold tuft beneath the bead, delicate hair still too short to rest properly down one side of the hobbit’s neck. To tell the truth: for those first few weeks, it looked horrible, like someone’s idea of a joke.

No one said anything about his incompetent braid, though. They carried on as they ever had, their gratitude taking shape in pats to his shoulder and friendly barbs, and in the steadfast knowledge that if he needed them, they would be there, sturdy as true-and-real friends can be. No one told him if they had voted, or if there had been some kind of formal debate. Certainly no one owned up to it. But the burglar thought that, one evening at camp, Prince Fíli had smuggled him a special wink.

And eventually – after days passed, miles dwindled, and Bilbo had tied and re-tied his braid – the bead began to stick. The forest opened wide. And the adventurers, as every adventurer in every
fairytale must, stepped out of the wilderness, and into the long-lonely shadow of home.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Alas: when Bilbo put pen to paper and tried to think epic title – to think stone! dragons! crowns! – the best he could manage was something that sounded, if you closed your eyes and read it aloud, like a fairytale.

The title is going to be a problem.

Book, Page One, Header:

*The Quest of the Brave and Valorous Company of Prince Thorin II Oakenshield Son of Durin to Defeat the Dragon, Reclaim Erebor, and Restore the Dwarven Monarchy* (A Working Title)

*by*

*Bilbo Baggins, Professional Burglar, Company Hobbit*

It is a little unwieldy.

Bilbo had tossed around other designs. He’d tried *The Deathless Door* and *Sons of Durin*. He’d tried *Mountains on Fire – The Slaying of Smaug*. The *True Lost Dragon Raven King Returns. The Long March for the Heart of the Lonely Mountain*. Just *The Lonely March*. Or *EREBOR: THE MARCH!*.

He had even briefly considered *The Pretty Rock that Started a War*.

To be blunt about it: Bilbo’s writerly nature was hardly kingly, and it was anything but succinct. He was attempting to write history here, wasn’t he – important events, inspiring figures – stories that merited a momentous title. It ought to reflect the stalwart dwarven people the book contained. It should sound like a war horn, or a thunderclap, or a drum.

But alas: when Bilbo put pen to paper and tried to think epic – to think stone! dragons! crowns! – the best he could manage was something that sounded, if you closed your eyes and read it aloud, like a fairytale.

“Why,” Galinyah had mused as they walked through the flaxen fields strewn out before the Mountain, biting at a fuzzy stalk of field wheat she’d plucked, twirling it in that charming space between her front teeth, “don’t you just call it *The Hobbit*?”

“Real suggestions, please,” the writer said, and gave her a bit of a look.

When the slick spires and barnacle-bellied boardwalks of Laketown rose across the Long Lake, its glass lanterns guttering in the late gales of autumn, its new pine rising high from blackened stone and salvaged husks of homes, the King’s Army sped up. Bilbo felt the strangest whistling in his stomach at the sight of that new-old town. He wanted to take a closer look, but Dwalin refused to leave the click-clack of dwarf-road, which took them only as close as the far shore. He had to be content with watching Esgaroth as they walked. The fresh breath of sawn lumber and the garlicky whisk of cod cakes spiced the air, married to the sight of staunch and rustic lines over foggy blue water. A few fishers in their longboats, gliding expertly, watched distantly back.
And then, when they’d moved through the last lingering, bony oaks and the scrappy, scratchy firs – when they’d stepped out into the yellow plain, and when they were finally in full, unobstructed view of the Lonely Mountain - everyone stopped to thank whomever. There was a solemn flutter through the army that drew everyone’s hands to their breastbones and throats. They broke out in song, briefly, a glad and militant series of bars in their rocky language, to which Bilbo listened and not-listened at the same time. He could not separate Galinyah’s cinnamony voice or Azírë’s windchime hum or Dwalin’s highlands burr. For those few minutes, he could only hear the world stuck inside his ears.

It is really quite a sight, my dear, to see such a mountain, leaping tall and mighty from nowhere. You would always wonder in amazement where it came from, who put it there. Why it decided to grow all alone as it had. The snowpeak glimmered hawkishly against the fierce prairie sun – and when that sun set, when the rest of the gray rock went dark, its heights then shone in starlight. You could see amidst great blackness the fires glow along the golden door.

No one rode out to meet them. Instead, Erebor’s great horns sounded the peal of a friendly force approaching on the East Road, and the King’s Army hushed with the honor of being seen. Azírë’s nerves got the better of her as she scrambled out of the carriage to hike through the grass in her long white gown, announcing “I can’t stand it! I can’t.” Galinyah play-acted calm, chuffing "It doesn’t look so lonely." Dwalin, adamant not to let down his guard in the home stretch, pulled their sleepy forces in tighter. Bilbo squinted at the title of his book.

The Mountain, then: not a day’s march away.

They might have made it to Erebor last night if not for the dwarrowdames. Somewhere between passing Laketown and beginning the final stretch of road, Galinyah announced she’d ten hours of mercantile business in Dale that absolutely could not be delayed. (Bilbo suspected, from the suddenness of her proclamation and vague details therein, this more likely had something to do with Azírë.) Dwalin had not wanted to stop at all, growling about the security risk, but by now you know how it goes when Dwalin must disagree with a she-dwarf.

So: while they were camped outside Dale, a large division of Guardians preparing to accompany their dames into town, the King’s-Guard approached Bilbo to have what could’ve been an awkward conversation.

“You’re not riding into Erebor with us, halfling,” Dwalin chuffed, startling the hobbit where he sat contentedly on a log, eating his bowl full of tangy noodles.

Bilbo choked on the last bit of supper, wiping his mouth with the heel of his hand. “I’m not?”

The dwarf was uncompromising. He stood in his jangly blue war shirt with arms folded and all the gravity of delivering surrender terms. Late afternoon was lowering on the adobe and brownstone of Dale, casting shadows that lowered Dwalin’s brow, too, and the writer didn’t even bother trying to put up a fight. “No, you sure as a Weeping Tower rag are not. There’s to be a welcoming ceremony tonight. For the dames.” (Though a dwarf-party in the dwarrow capital could only entail extravagance and spectacle, nothing in that statement suggested Master Baggins had any reason to ooooh.) “I won’t show up to a citadel full of marriage-thirsty dwarflords with a foreigner bouncing between the females, chummy like a damned cat. Nobles won’t like it. Won’t like you.”

“Me?” Bilbo caught the insinuation, shameless and out-there and unhobbitish as a scream in a tea parlor. “That’s garbage. The thought I’d – I mean, it would be one thing if I was, you know – no one’s even—”

“Most of these lads—” Dwalin gave that chin of his a jerk to indicate the whole army around them,
and there they were: milling happily, a spring in their heavy steps, excited under the mass of a new home. They were smiling in this brittle yellow grass like a bunch of folks at festival. The siege engineer was charming a rather lovely melody from a reed flute; the chef was stirring a generously meaty vat of cheese stew; a gaggle of speardwarves were drinking soup and beaming around at one another, giddy as Shire girls, letting their cattle wander freely and letting the war-rams prance in this brisk air. “—are surface-born from Ered Luin. They don’t stand an arsehair’s chance with a dam anyway, and they’ve been raised different. Country goats. Open spaces. Makes the people unnatural. Bunch of apple-knockers, but they’ll learn. Don’t think because you got on well with a drove of shoddy soldiers that you’ve any notion what a stone-lord is like – not when it comes to females.”

“What business do they have? I thought she-dwarves picked their own mates and the males had nothing to do with it.”

“Aye, but you can’t be picked if you’re bleeding face-down in a puddle of your own vomit.” The King’s-Guard gave him a grim, unwavering look. “We’ll be in the city now, and I can’t be following at your heels every hour to protect you. There are those who won’t take kindly to you taking up a dam’s attention. Especially not that silversmith’s. And especially not with you furred up like a little damned diamond-lordling.” He cast a glance at Bilbo’s cat coat that wasn’t precisely complimentary. “So unless you’re hoping for a dagger in the guts, I’m damned sure you won’t need to make showing up here any harder on yourself.”

“But we’re friends,” Bilbo protested, because he couldn’t think of anything else.

“This is Erebor. ‘Tain’t what you’d call a friendly place.”

He shrugged noncommittally. Truthfully, the glimpse at this unseen side of the dwarrowfolk in their real home - a Folk that felt vastly different from the blazing loyalty and staunch brotherhood of all the dwarves he had known - was startling. But the way Dwalin put it, and the grumpy lack of flourish with which he said “protect you,” softened up Bilbo’s clever tongue a bit. “Oh, I don’t know about that. You’re pretty friendly,” the hobbit suggested. “For an Ereborean lord.”

“I’m special. Ereborean lords are the most trussed-up, ruby-biting, glittery bunch of tits you’ll ever find. Clinking peacocks, painting their eyes up in gold and strutting around, splitting each other’s bellies open for a lashy look and a stale whiff of the crust on a shivery dam’s underskirt.”

Bilbo took a last grim sip of his noodles, fully aware there was a point not-so-long-ago in his life where such a ripe strain of language would’ve killed him.

“Don’t ever change, Dwalin,” he said.

The King’s-Guard grrred.

“Go up ‘round the side-gate, and turnabout at the grayrock stairwell back of the statue of Durin VI. There’s a rampart with a watchtower. They’ll let you in through the wall there. Take a Guardian if you want him, and get out of my camp. Other than that, there’ll be a good ram for you to ride in on,” he said – dropped a silver whistle into Master Baggins’s uncurled palm – and that done, stomped off to prepare for the grand arrival, probably not to paint his eyes.

And then it was the writer, my dear. He sat on his lonesome for a while, watching in tall grass. As the sun changed, unhidden in this cloudlessness, the shadow of the Mountain grew.

*There and Back Again*, Bilbo noted, shut his journal, and off to Erebor we go.
All those years ago, when Master Baggins had mentioned – in passing – his plans to travel home, the dwarves looked at him like he’d just slapped himself in the mouth.

“Bilbo. You can’t still mean to return to the Shire, to be sure?” Balin asked, blinking boldly and tilting his head. Those cottony sweeps of beard moved as the dwarf did, hands folded tentatively over his stomach, leaning ever-so-gently forward as though he was a little concerned for the hobbit’s health. He always looked like somebody’s sweetest grandmum from Overhill when he did that, though you’d have to be awfully foolish to point such a comparison out to a war-dwarf. Looking in on you like maybe you’d given yourself a campfire scare or scraped your precious little knee.

But “Of course,” Bilbo answered. He’d even repeated the words - *I’m going home* - a hundred times in his head, like wizardry, to make sure they sounded right and nothing hookish got them caught in the gulley of his throat. Nothing had. “I’d not known it was even a question.”

Balin looked to Dori who looked to Balin who then looked back to Bilbo with an expression of mild horrors.

And so the Return Talk had been foisted upon him that sleepy evening as our hobbit idled in the alcove just outside the Great Library of Erebor. (Everything in Erebor seemed to warrant the attachment of a precurssory “the Great.”) Bilbo had been mighty enthusiastic about navigating the lost dwarven archives until realizing that the hundreds of surviving tomes were exclusively written in Khuzdul and absolutely untranslatable. (Which meant no one had offered to translate.) So he put himself to work. Bilbo scrubbed corners, dusted shelves, and restitched leather bindings for a week on end, buffing chair legs and polishing the scattered reading lenses he’d found.

Presently, this endeavor took him to the foyer; Master Baggins had been scratching persistently at some sprawling battle relief etched on the entry wall no one had bothered to de-soot yet. It was easy to get lost among such figures – the legendarium of the dwarves’ old battles, valiant and bloody, heroic and fated. You needn’t wonder what the product of all this gravitas was. You needed only look to King Thorin and imagine Prince Thorin, a royal child brought up in this storied place, learning to read and walk between these violent tableaus, already enamored with the romance of their doom and the nobility long-suffering is said to awake. You need only remember the possession of finality on his face when he met what he could not hope to win.

Bilbo always thought it was foolish of the dwarrow – to ornament their misery so. More than foolish. Reprehensible, to dream of your end so grimly – to pass such an obsession down to new generations as they witnessed the thinning of the Folk. Mountain Dwarves say their greatest defiance in the face of doom is to be beautiful and survive. Yet they have filled their children with such great, drumming destiny; what did they expect from such a joyless pride but for these beautiful, doom-facing children to look, always, for fantastic ways to die?

If he did happen to run into Old King Thrór’s ghost, Master Baggins imagined he’d have a few tough words on this topic for him.

But because he didn’t stumble into any royal hauntings, Bilbo got lost in work instead. The roteness was comforting. He focused closely, scritching and swirling until a soldier’s vambrace appeared, or a hammer’s head, or a ram’s hoof, or a set of orcish teeth. He did not let himself be sucked in by whispers of the whole picture or wonder what it might mean.

Balin and Dori, on their way back from a lords’ meeting, found him there. And thank-you-very-much, because Erebor is a lonely and overlarge place - its deep vaults and cascading gold, its dark sky fishnet with little silver stars. None of Ered Luin had arrived yet, and likely wouldn’t until late
summer. In the meantime, Dáin’s Army and Thorin’s Brave Fourteen hardly filled it up.

And, for the first time in a long time, in this place of wingéd heights and indelible riches, Bilbo felt his smallness again.

He knew intellectually, of course, that he was (by cross-species comparison) a little undersized. All the dwarves had a good foot or two on him, and were twice as wide across the shoulders; he was right about at a lady elf’s hipbone; don’t even ask about Men. This had disturbed Bilbo greatly in the Shire, when Gandalf and thirteen dwarves came banging into his appropriately-dimensioned smial. But he had since adjusted. If you keep your chin up and your back strong, Bilbo has found, being short has nothing to do with feeling small. As a matter-of-fact, the bigness of the world has a way of making you realize that you—yourself, small as you are, aren’t that much smaller than anybody else. And, as a matter-of-absolute-fact, he had never felt taller.

But now. Master Baggins wasn’t out in the big-wide-world any longer, was he? He was here, in Erebor—Erebor, end of the Road to the East at last—as east, my dear, as a hero of the kindly west can be. He would listen to the Lonely Mountain: whistling drafts; grumbling rock; rumbling chants of working dwarves, their voices wrapping around the long halls like spectres, ever-present but almost never found. He would feel this immenseness overhead and this glut of silence threatening to gulp him. He would still in his labor with an unreadable book in one hand and shiver beneath portraits of dwarrow princes, queens, and kings. He would turn a corner to suddenly glimpse one of his friends and feel such relief singing through him, such a desperate and disproportionate joy, the writer would have to hold his heels fast not to abandon stature and run for them. You stood to get lost here, he feared, like no other hobbit has before.

“‘To visit,’” Dori clarified for him, surely, a forcible crinkle of smile beneath his nose. “Oh, how nice.”

Bilbo stood in front of the half-washed engraving, balling his cleaning cloth in one hand and holding it politely behind him. His heavy red dwarf-tunic was sweltering and still too large, even with this dwarf-belt buckled its tightest around him. His fine hair, which would never stay neatly tucked behind his ears no matter how many more inches it grew, scattered at his shoulders and always seemed to get in the way. “I should think not. Returning, that is, to live. Though I’ll certainly come visit you.”

“My lad,” Balin said.

“Or you could come visit me! If you prefer. When there's time, that is. You’re always welcome at Bag End. Holiday for you; year off from the rocks. I’m a much better host than I let on, and it wouldn’t be fair for you to deny me a second chance at proving so.”

Balin didn't look much appeased. “Well,” the old dwarf started, then stopped, as though afraid of insulting Bilbo. “It’s only we thought you’d have surely changed your mind.”

The wizard had looked a little surprised, too, when he'd mentioned leaving in spring and Bilbo said "All right, I'll get my things together." Oh? Gandalf wondered, a bit of a dissatisfied pout, as he was wont to do when you didn’t behave precisely as he wanted you to. *I thought you were getting on rather famously among the dwarves*, he’d tutted, worrying at Master Baggins from beneath the brim of his well-loved witch hat. *Better to stay, I think, a little longer, don’t you? And don’t you hold an office?*

Well, yes, Bilbo had said to the first question.

To the second: Well, no.
To the last: No – well, technically, yes – but given out of obligation only, and frankly, I think you’ll realize, it’s more than a little—

*Ridiculous* is Bilbo’s hex of a word.

“A little homesickness is natural! Is that what's troubling you? It's only right to feel sick for your home.” The bronze beads in Dori's braided beard chattered with pleasant ease, but Balin was no longer smiling. “We Folk know all about that, don’t we? Why, yes, we do. The best antidote for homesickness is a good distraction. It's only that you ought to—”

But it was a strange sickness, this. It was not like it had been along the road, trembling for a warm blanket and the smells of a hobbit kitchen. He found this illness hurt him more complexly. Not a lonesome pang in the lower pools of his heart, no – but a panicky, gasping loneliness in his head and his lungs and his guts – one that made our burglar wake at odd hours, then sit head-in-hands by his stone bedframe on the floor, lamenting something he could not parse. An ending, maybe. A quality of endingness, like the final ten pages of a book that could not conceivably end well in so little time. An impossibility; a streak of sad ego; this sense that no one in the whole of hobbitdom had ever felt as he felt. It could not be chased off. No matter how soft his sheets or how savory the dinners or how distracting the conversation, it was there, a wounded something-ness beneath the bone of his chest. He felt like he might start leaking sickness from his nose and his mouth. He felt more alone than he had all those nights in his late parents’ bedroom, drying his mother’s best dishes, complaining to his dead father’s portrait on the wall. He felt as though he was bleeding from a lung and it only grew worse with time. Not better. It was worse than it ever was, ever. It was fever broken into delirium that made no earthly sense.

And worst of all, being a writer, was that he didn’t have words for it. It was not for language but more like music - like a fiddle or a mandolin or a harp. You can’t describe music to someone that’s never heard it, not really. Not cogently, not with the vocabulary this writer had. He sought his friends out constantly but the most they could do was hold this unsaid sadness at bay for a while. It would come back to get him in evening. It was not rational, not reasonable, not mortal, not natural, any of it. He felt just terribly hopeless. He went like dry leaves when he was far away, but the closer he drew to Thorin, the sicker and sicker he felt.

*Impossibility* is the only word that he has.

“You see. That’s just the thing,” Bilbo insisted, jaw tight, eyes merrily ahead. “About homesickness. I find it only makes me more restless, not less. So it’s been grand, honestly – I’ve never seen anything like it, and that’s the truth – and you all are, of course, wonderful neighbors – the finest neighbors any hobbit should hope for – but.”

But nothing around here looked right. The ground was too punishing, the beds too hard, the halls too dark, the smells all wrong.

But, Bilbo said.

But he did not even look like himself anymore. He would catch a glimpse in the overlarge mirrors of his room: hair too long, skin too pale, eyes not right in the light from torches and gold-glow. He would belt his dwarfcoat over his dwarf clothes every morning and frown at the wintry look it gave him. It had changed the way he walked. He wore a handsome half-cape that cracked impressively when he turned and bear-trimmed leggings fixed with heavy silver anklets and a bloodstone torque and an onyx sigil on his tallfinger it felt rude not to keep on. He did not move like a Baggins of Bag End under all that. He had picked up gestures that weren’t his own: a jut of the jaw, two thumbs at the buckle of his belt, legs that stood too widely. He had a set of twenty silver daggers cased in velvet and five hideously heavy candelabras musking up his bedchamber. He never cooked his own
food. He realized with what should have been great hobbitish scandal that perhaps he did not enjoy cooking all that much. He did not care. He did not even smell like himself – not sunlight and cut grass and pipesmoke, but black tea and oiled fur and the ginger perfume in his too-soft clothes.

But.

But it had been twenty nine days since he had even heard Thorin sing – and when he sang for the court, Bilbo found it wasn’t, somehow, the same.

“But,” he said. “I simply can’t stay.”

So he didn’t.

He put an end to his sickness, and went home.

It is this conversation Bilbo thinks about as he pulls away from the King’s Army caravan on a fast-trotting goat.

Believe it or not, for all that mess, he had not seriously considered what it might be like to see Thorin again. Bofur, certainly, and Kíli (his two fastest friends of them all, Master Baggins supposed). Fíli, too – and kindly Balin, and dear Bombur, and sweet Ori, and wry Dori, and patient Óin. And bold Glóin and thoughtful Bifur and clever Nori, as well. But of the Dwarfking, it was decidedly better not to think. It made him go a mite queasy, those thoughts, if he dwelled too long, though it all seemed very preemptive. (I mean, who knew if he even would get to see Thorin at all? He’s certain to be very occupied these days, ruling a kingdom and whatnot; Bilbo wasn’t sure whether this possibility made him feel better or worse than the likelihood the King of Erebor was five-years mad at him.)

But when he looked up from the field and saw a dark head peering over a high rock rampart, there it was: that unsparing sickness, like it was tied to the Mountain, and it at least had never left.

Bilbo had not taken a Guardian with him. The Lion Door was only a few-hours trot away, so he’d hefted himself into the saddle of a wooly blond ram, clipped his satchel in the sidebags, nudged its ribs with his heels and went off. He finished his waterskin on the way. He squinted a bit at the colossal kings’ statues to remember which one was supposed to be Durin VI, landed too early at Durin IV, then finally rounded his mark and found the shot of walking wall carved deeply into mountain stone. It was too high up to make much of anything out. He put the whistle Dwalin gave him to his lips and he blew.

It was evening by the time Bilbo arrived. The unshielded sun slipped low and red, making the cap of cold lake glitter behind him like gossamer full of stars, and a breeze pushed the tall yellowgrass against the hobbit’s knees. Perhaps because it was getting later - or perhaps it was because Burglar Baggins’s eyes were never truthfully that keen to begin with – but no matter how hard he tried, he could not make out the expression on that far-above face. There were only hands on the wall and the harsh angle of daylight. There was a churning of moth wings inside his gut at that spill of dark hair, and a spark of sundown upon a crown.

Bilbo, knowing nothing else to do, lifted his hand and waved hello.

The figure stopped, stared down a moment – as if squinting back, too – then, and this is truth, bloody
ran out along the battlement, heavy black cape snapping behind him. He pushed some of the guards as they cranked open the series of dwarf-iron draw-gates along the wall, tore through the first arch, ducked under the second, and was so impatient he actually touched hand-to-floor as he all but dove under the final threshold. And then he whirled to face Bilbo at the top of the stairs.

And he was a little easier to see out here. Perhaps our burglar could not determine how furious the deep-set Durin eyes were, but he could make out other things: the lofty lines of a royal nose, the bold brow sitting highly. The pale dusk against his face was strangely undarkened, and for a moment, Bilbo thought the king must have removed his beard – what an unheard-of dwarfish travesty – but then he was close enough in that silvery crown and sable tunic to be seen properly, and it was, in fact, not just a bare chin. It was a blaring, toothy grin that could not have been any other dwarf.

“BOGGINS,” the little prince cried.

Then he was galloping down the stairs, cape billowing. He was taking the last six steps in a coltish leap, ignoring Bilbo’s anxious command of no-no-no-do-NOT-jump. He was bounding over to where the hobbit had just now managed to get one foot out of the stirrups and one leg over. Kíli of Dís of Thráin sprinted like a jackrabbit through the delicate, hip-high oat grass at the foot of the Mountain, and was upon our former burglar in no time at all.

Bilbo didn’t even make it off the goat. “Bloody foolishness! Jumping down stairs. If I’ve ever seen such a stupid dwarf—!” he was grousing, “—trying to break your own back!” And then he was airborne. Kíli snatched Master Baggins from the side of the saddle, whirled him around like he was somebody’s brat, then tossed him right-ways to be hefted up and head-bonked. The hobbit’s eyes spun wildly as they tried to make sense of golden fields and rocky mountain and the inky lining of the prince’s vesture. But they gave up, satisfied their search with the giggling grin and the tangle of Durin hair, and promptly lost composure. Bilbo grabbed the lad’s shoulders and with the rosy glee of long-parted cousins they laughed.

“Your bottles! I didn’t send them!” Prince Durin shouted. “Good Blue Mountains metheglin – said I’d send some along, right with the letters and everything, but I forgot. Until just now. Are you furious at me?” Kíli begged, still holding him up beneath the arms, and doesn’t it figure these would be his first words after half a decade apart.

“Disgusted. I can’t stand the sight of you. Put me down,” Bilbo fussed, clearing his throat through the crackling rise of happiness, trying not to make a scene. Kíli plopped him unceremoniously in the tallgrass and swept down for a proper embrace.

He squeezed tight and breathed sharply to have his arms around one of the Durins again. A grasshopper sprung out of the weeds and knocked into Kíli’s sleeve, but they paid it no mind. Master Baggins diligently choked back whatever emotion was crumbling up and gave the young prince a few stiff pats on the back to end the hug before he made a fool of himself.

"Up you go then," he bid, cutting the tears short with a well-placed sniff, mumbling something about allergies. "Let me get a look at you."

“I can’t believe you’re here,” Kíli said, standing, a good lad to oblige the curmudgeonly familial request (and not to point out the lie). “Did you get any shorter? I remember you being taller. Did I get taller?”

No, Kíli-Son-of-Dís had gotten no taller and Master Baggins no shorter – but with him all here before Bilbo, it became clear why the dwarf had been a touch difficult to recognize from so far away. He looked older - more mature, that is, and less of a lope-legged fawn. Less summer dogwoods, more winter pine. He wore velvety ebon cloth all studded with silver, black leather boots and
vambraces, a swirl of kohl around each eye. His hair, loose and heavy, now hung halfway down his
back, and it had darkened. It was almost as black as Thorin’s now, tamed with oil that smelled like
some sort of spiny, boreal flower. He’d both his honor braids put in: the plait of status at his right
temple, the war-bead at his left. And though he still hadn’t managed to sprout much of a beard
(which Bilbo understood, with a rash of self-consciousness, was an aesthetic-genetic disaster among
dwarves), what little there was had been neatly groomed into a razor-fine edge along the prince’s
jaw, leaving just a blink of hair to divide his chin. Though there was overall less, what remained did
not appear nearly so patchy, allowing one to suppose he had merely chosen to style it so.

“Do I look daft? Be honest,” he worried, spreading his arms for judgment and staring down at
himself. The cape hung limply off his arms, listless but for a few sticker-pods that had gripped on.
“Dames coming in tonight. Ought not to look full clottish – just a bit.”


“Pshew,” Kíli heaved. His arms dropped back to his sides with a not-exactly-princely flop. “That’s a
relief! You got here just in time. No one else is going to tell me prince, now don’t take this the wrong
way, but you look like a cat that fell in the bathwater.”

Strange to see Kíli under crown. It was not, after all, the Crown of Durin on his head. The one-
pointed circlet he wore was by comparison quite pure and plain, a clean silver dotted with green
gems, but it’s hard to taxonomize headwear at a distance.

Except, all of a sudden, our writer seemed to see the crown for what it was. It struck him as far too
monarchical to be the laurel of merely a second-prince, and for a spiraling, terrible choke of a second,
Bilbo felt like he was doing this all over again – like he was standing at the crumbling summit of a
bloody bird-named rock.

“But where,” he got out, dreadshot, all the pipes of his throat going tight and an unnatural thickness
at the cusp of Master Baggins’s so put-together voice. “Where’s Fíli?” He clutched at the weak pip-
pop of breath spreading like a palm leaf across his chest. All of the letters gone unanswered, a flurry
of ravenwing, descending on the space in the back of his skull. All that would come was: “And, and,
and.”

“In the Iron Hills,” Kíli answered, easily as anything, having not even noticed the lee collapsing
behind Bilbo’s face or seen the stormdark rising over the back of that mountain to put out the whole
wide world. “They’re at a funeral, sorry to say.”

“Oh. Who? Died,” Master Baggins asked mindlessly, blinking as his head stopped whirling and
those strange drums stopped threatening to rumble everything down.

“Cousin Dáin’s second child. Fever. His first was a coldborn, and this one was not even four.”
Prince Durin whispered it, engendering the word child with a sacred, grim gravity only a dwarf
understands. “Thorin went to sing over the body.”

Master Baggins did not even think to give his I’m-sorries. He was too relieved. But because he could
not say that either – could not admit feeling better for the death of somebody else’s child – the hobbit
stood frowning in the Mountain plain. He shivered, clutching the spotted fur of his collar fast around
his neck.

“Anyway,” Kíli figured, deep-dimpled and sunny-as-anything again. “You’re early! Dwalin must’ve
whipped those poor horses to ruin. We didn’t expect you for another several weeks. You know
Uncle hates surprises.” Seeing his old friend shudder, thinking him cold, he tossed a length of
weighty cape over Bilbo’s shoulders and scooped the hobbit into it with the drape of one arm. “Let’s
go inside. I’m getting ticks out here.”

“Ticks,” chuffed the scooped hobbit, elbows pressed tight to his ribs. “Too cold for that. It’s practically snowing.”

“Do you think it will!”

He held out his hand as if to catch some first flakes, then, glancing up to the purple wisp-clouds with a real pinch of hope – and even with the heavy stone signet there and the emerald on his pinkie and the crown and the cape and the eyeballs – this one boyish gesture was all it took for Bilbo to remember how much he really loved Kíli, and chase the rest of the darkness from his mind.

“Well, if it does,” the writer supposed, “I think I am entitled to a mug of the very best spiced wine you have.”

“You must be starved! Come on, I’ll show you the rooms I’ve had set up for you,” Kíli directed. He kept his arm ‘round him and walked side-by-side like that, making his stride considerately smaller than the normal bounding Durin one as he steered our road-weary hobbit up the large stone steps. Bilbo let himself be led. He was grateful for the prince’s kindness and for all the things about him that had and had not changed. “It’s the diplomatic suite and it’s very nice. You rest up and settle in. Unpack your things. As for me, I-myself must off to prepare for the rehoming ceremony, but I’ll hurry back. Then we can call in the ale and the ham and the cheese and the cakes and the cheese-cakes. Do halflings eat pistachios?”

With portcullises cranking shut behind them, Bilbo went with Prince Kíli into the claustrophobic darkness of the defensive corridors shot through Erebor’s thick walls. But before he could be afright with memory, bare rock pared away to the marvelous gut of the Lonely Mountain, in all its gilding and all of its echoing gold.

Here is the stagger of what Bilbo will remember if he lives one-thousand years:

The arteries of Azsûlul’abad, for that is its proper name, have no equal. They are like combs in honey, like the cut of a diamond. The geometry is perfectionism and drama and bleak, mighty earth. Its great darkness is chased into corners by iron sconces and chandeliers, kept at bay just as watchtowers blaze through a moonless night. Erebor is the coldness of a mountain, yes, but it is also the luxuriance: eyed statues, jeweled mosaics, rippling banners, lush velvet and predator furs at the feet of thundering hearths. Crystal and obsidian shiver along the walls; fierce black pillars push into the sides of polished gray rock like backbones. Its sounds are what a dwarfling hears in the womb: a high, frigid rush; the roar of flame or a gust of Yule wind in the door; the constant, low hum of dwarfsong; the groan of stone upon stone, snow upon snow. The echoing is tremendous, and the ceilings so far away you might keel over trying to find them. And all shut away behind that fierce golden door! You expect to see it opened and a world of wealth sluice out. You expect to find the Halls of the Dwarrow are livid with ruby and pearl.

They did not enter through The Lion Door or tread the grand aula regia. It was only a minor side-hall he and Kíli had now. But even so, the glitter and immenseness of such an ostentatious place will hit you, all trumpets, announcing for the rest of the world This is Erebor! It is the greatest of the great Dwarrow Citadels, and as such, it would not permit you mistake it, my dear – not one pebble on its back or candle in its darkness – for anyplace, any people else.

There weren’t many dwarrow about the auxiliary halls at this hour. They were a decorous lot, Ereborian dwarves - more so than the Ironfoot armies had been. Gilt robes, golden gowns, amethysts studded in plaits upon plaits. Guards in lamellar and chain collars with strong backs pressed between the pillars. A very old dwarf was puttering around on a cane with a deadly bulb of lapis for the
handle. A dwarrowdam stalked by in an overabundant flounce of blue fur, flanked by three or four obsequious males, who scattered when she turned her chin just enough to boom some business in Khuzdul that was probably "Begone, males! I have no want to hear your snivelings!"

“—way to go on the west quarter,” the prince was explaining, pointing here-and-there, ignoring the few bows his passing earned. “But the east and north have come along pretty nicely. Of course, the Forge Halls are still a wreck. The Forge itself is serviceable, but we had to hurry and pull all that gold up off the floor; you really can’t forge anything if you’re skidding around on a golden floor. It wasn’t too bad, though, not in comparison. Some of the corridors were just flat-out walled off with gold from all those decades ago. Most of those have been cleared, but we have to be a little more careful with the old ones, because there’s—” He winced. A little quieter, a little more to-himself: “—bones in it.”

If there are, Bilbo has reasoned, ghosts in the halls of Erebor, it is of no surprise. There is nothing poetic about its sort of iconolatry. Hair catching flame; cloth turned to cinder; warriors snatched up and gobbled alive. They trampled each other in their panic. Skeletons in the treasury; claw marks in the crumbling stone. The dragon’s fire boiled the dark dwarven gold off the walls and melted them inside its beauty, stuck in lost riches for an age.

Master Baggins can overwrite his way into knots trying to explain this, my dear. But you won’t really understand the Folk until you understand what happened here, what was done to this proud people and how it changed them. For now, just make sure you remember this image – bones trapped in gold – if you ever find dwarfish arrogance getting on your last nerve.

“By the way,” he asked, deceptively breezy, as though none of it concerned him anymore. “What’s become of the Arkenstone?”

Kíli shrugged, turning at an abrupt junction of three mighty blue-stone halls. “I don’t know,” the prince admitted, a bit laissez-faire, a bit annoyed. “Uncle won’t tell us.”

Perhaps he’d banished it, the burglar thought. Perhaps he had buried the Heart of the Mountain deep inside an ancient mine and swore upon its loss that he would never make another mistake so selfish and so sudden. But in the back of Master Baggins’s mind, this image: a black-scaled dragon sleeping on an ancient jewel.

“There’s a strange little homunculus in its place over the throne now. Bunch of different-colored gem shards fused together, rolled in diamond-powder and dipped in hot glass. A neat trick. Looks exotic, but it’s not the Arkenstone; you’ll see that right away,” Kíli figured. “I’ll bring you by the Throne Room when there’s time. Get in a giggle at it. You’ll not be fooled.”

They reached the end of the lane, took two lefts, and the marble went by degrees darker and bluer. Bilbo could tell from the midnight curtains, crushingly heavy, they were nearing the Royal Quarter. And then – entering a final hall - walking beneath a long ceiling of mirrors latticed with diamond - passing eight gray pillars dressed in the colors of a clear night-sky - ducking under a colossal arch of gold - they were there.

The Royal Quarter was nigh empty, and absolutely no one was about, so Bilbo took it in. The great stone rotunda roared up, marble like some dance of creamy bone and deep water, cylindrical and so smooth you could find no hard dwarf-chiseled edge. Coals blazed in intimidating pits of white stone and the grand tapestries felt between one’s fingers like history stitched into being. You could not even see its highest point. If you tilted back to stare up, up was only a soaring blackness, as though it might touch the snowcapped summit from its secret underside.

The quarter fanned into three residential halls, each with massive metal doors, thousands of poured
pounds pinned back by complex locking mechanisms. Master Baggins remembered Balin listing them so long ago: the Diplomatic Suite (where the diplomats stayed), the Durin Suite (the ruling family’s beds, boudoirs, armories, and solar), the Council Suite (you can guess). Across the ring, two parallel corridors might take you to the Moot Chamber or to the Royal Treasury (which rather summed up dwarrow priorities). There was ever the sound of unseen water moving through the mountain. There were little motes of light dancing about – flame reflecting off bronze, sweeping over stone – and the smell of fire celebrated in the air.

And, at the center, beneath the cavernous ceiling and surrounded by bitter-cold onyx tiles, an unfinished statue was being built. It was difficult to guess what might stand here in five more years, but for now, from its pieces, Bilbo knew. He knew what it was. He knew from the long, gooselike neck arching from a block of black granite, shivering with spines, its face in agony and its skin doused in a wash of gold. The runic inscription, Kíli snickered, already read *Thorin II Daunts the Dragon*. But it was a premature version of history. It had not yet let the king out from the stone.

Still, as it always had been since the time of the Deathless and beyond, the black Durin sigil glistened portentously where it had been cut over the royal doors.

“Dead as a doornail in here! Imagine they’re all about the Grand Hall right about now. Preparations for the ceremony tonight,” Kíli remarked, leading Bilbo around the dragon circle, where the pit embers were less of a roar and more a constant growl. Their footsteps on the fire-warm stone were shockingly loud in isolation. The second prince’s boot toes pointed confidently in the direction of the Diplomatic Suite. “Everyone’s in a squeaky fuss! Got to make an impression on a dam. Got to cook and clean and powder your nose. Good news is that there’s no foreign diplomats in Erebor at the moment, so I put you in the nicest rooms – lucky you. But you might have to switch if Dáin shows up. Not that I think he will. Circumstances being what they are. I wouldn’t feel like entertaining.”

“That’s no trouble. I didn’t drag my whole house-and-home cross the mountains.” He shouldered his bag. “Travel light, my boy. That’s what my father used to say to me and I’ll say it to you samewise.”

“Samewise,” Kíli teased him, it being an awfully hobbitish turn of phrase.

The Diplomatic Suite was a fine long hall of dapple-gray stone, punctuated with arched black doors to each private chamber. Torches were generously stacked down the line until they reached, at its farthest end, a large and sublime study. It’d been a moldering sadness the last time Bilbo visited. Though these corridors were too thin for the dragon to disturb, they’d been overtaken by other antagonists: disuse, spiders, grime. Dust gone thick, buttery cream curtains pruned brown, dead parchment. Forgotten guest books and the skeletons of abandoned lunches still parked on dark tables. Portraits half-sat-for and trefoiled tablecloths so old you could not tell the colors anymore. Nowhere to cozy up with a book. But he remembered the astounding chandeliers – great clusters of yellow candles that looked, to him, like the eyes of dragonflies. He’d wished fleetingly, all those years ago, to see them lit one day. Maybe, Bilbo thought distractedly, tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow he would even get some writing done.

“Sorry about the hike,” his host apologized, noting the way Master Baggins was trailing, mistaking it for fatigue. “Ereborean importance being dictated by how far away you sleep from the door, I guess. You should see the sprint from my bed to the lavatory! If you hear banditish running in the middle of the night, don’t worry, it’s me. Running and sloshing.”

It was like being faraway family, the hobbit supposed. It was like watching a faunt’s gosling down and baby fat shed off. And it made Bilbo feel a bit old, to tell true, to see Kíli grow up so quickly. To see the directionless disappear from his step and the sunbrown tint fade from his cheeks, he felt like he had missed something important, time he would never get back. Yet - if you looked closely -
you could still see the faintest suggestion of freckles there, under the torchlight: little fawnspots winking over the middle of the grave Durin bridge.

“Kíli, I must tell you: you’ve gone very handsome,” Bilbo told him. The prince blushed in the dreadful, hot coal way of people not accustomed to being told they are much to look at.

“Well, I have to wash my face and hands, at least. Or Fíli won’t be seen with me. Do y’know he got married? Yes!” before Bilbo could blurt a shocked no. “Just last winter. Should have seen my face. Didn’t even want to wait a few months to send out invitations. And talk about foofaraw. Oh, give me a minute – here we are.”

He stuck out a hand to stop Master Baggins, and gestured at the nearest black door.

All right, all right, Bilbo said. He said *I’ll let you off for now*. But when you’ve more time, he said, and when it’s convenient. He said: "I expect a full accounting of all this."

“I’ll tell you,” the little prince promised, “everything.”

The right key opened the lock.

“*Leaving,*” Thorin had said, disbelieving, as though Bilbo had not just said exactly that.

Our canny burglar at breakfast did his utmost not to appear too canny or too burglarish. He crumpled his napkin in one hand and plopped the whole fist next to his plate, casual-as-can-be, hearing the ineffective thump of fleshy hand upon carven rock.

It was a fine morning for this, actually, Master Baggins told himself. Daylight peered yellow and muted through the tall, glassless alabaster windows on the far wall of the king’s study; it got caught up in the heavy curtains, making them look more buttery than gold. It warmed the snowy marble walls in here and made it look a bit less Ereborean. It crept across blue stone floor. In a few hours, those dreamy, cottonish clouds over yon Misty Mountains would lose their gilding and graze the plains, casting weighty shadows as they went.

“Well, don’t say it like *that,*” Bilbo scolded. He sat in his cushioned chair across from the Dwarfking, decidedly not-looking over the imperious table but instead pondering the set of his own clenched fingers upon it.

The militant cut of his dwarven bilaut still struck him as gaudy, bronze clasps on crimson taffeta, stiff soldierly shoulders – though Bifur (who’d tailored it) said it made him look brave, and isn’t that just what he’s always wanted. Ermine itched at the sleeves and the cuffed ankles of his slacks. Sting hung at his belt, and his war-braid stuck fast where it had been tucked behind an ear, tickling in a way he was not usually conscious of anymore. Brave, he’d remind himself. *Brave* is the word.

“It’s not such an upheaval. Natural recourse. It’s not as though I’ve announced my departure from the mortal lands,” he offered with staunch, crispy pleasantness. Yet the misalignment disturbed him. The taste of the black tea lingering in his mouth seemed a little thinner and the bird eggs he had requested a little waterier than they usually were. “It isn’t even that far to go. Relatively. Other end of the road, is all.”

That given, Bilbo stood to reach the silver pitcher, moving a little too fast for comfort, and poured
himself a glass of juice that would end up undrunk. He did not need to look up to see. He could suppose the king’s blank face well enough.

And oh, Bilbo could suppose the fit he’d pitch.

Our royal burglar – for that was good as his title now – hardly got a still and silent moment to chat with Thorin Oakenshield these days. This was hardly by design, but a consequence of the great restoration – not that Bilbo was sore about that. Lots to be done, and all, what with the repair-work and negotiating and anxious arrangement-making for his official coronation as King Under the Mountain. Lots of meetings and visitations and proclamations. They barely spoke more than ten words to each other on those not-infrequent occasions Erebor held an open court and Master Baggins had to put on every lick of his armor and stand there gravelly beside the Lonely Throne, scowling like he’d stab you for getting too close. (Incidentally, he probably would have, my dear – he took his job seriously – and it wouldn’t be incorrect to suggest Bilbo was a little jumpy about Thorin Oakenshield, given everything that had tried to happen to this particular dwarf, Mahal forbid on the burglar’s watch. Fortunately, no one gave it a go.)

He probably wouldn’t have seen much of Thorin at all did the king not insist on taking breakfast with him every morning. (Second breakfast, technically, but after that year of constant walking – frequent running – Bilbo had learned how to sleep in.) And then, Thorin was usually in a tired sort of mood and didn’t have much to say.

“Anyway, it won’t be right away. I’m not in a particular rush. Caravans trickling out now. Shouldn’t be difficult to sign on with someone. Hey, was there a change in the kitchens? Tea seem a little funny to you?” the hobbit wondered, stirring his stagnant cup, studying with too much intention the brittle cloves and mulberry leaves bobbling up-and-down.

Thorin, who was not very good at mornings, would not have put on his full regalia yet. He was never late, no, but wasn’t exactly awake when Bilbo stropped in, either – sitting there at his table, looking blankly at papers or a plate of dwarven pastries or the dense lashes along his own eyes. He would hum a sedate hello at whatever snappy greeting or interesting thing Master Baggins said. While Bilbo tore apart a loaf of bread and fired up his list of curiosities, observations, and complaints (no use asking the king questions before ten in the a.m.), Thorin would wait, half-dozing, uncrowned, his heavy black robes an arrogant sweep on the floor, wolf’s-fur and candlesmoke, his heavy black hair combed down his back. He would listen and 

committedly, but didn’t speak much until halfway through breakfast; even then, it was mostly a reactive sort of conversation.

But he was very, very needy about routine – and you had better not skip out on him. Those rare occasions Bilbo simply stuck his head in the king’s study to shout in “Oi, go ahead without me, I’ve something to get to,” Thorin would sulk about like he’d ruined his entire day.

“If I push off by the end of the month, figure I’ll reach home a beat before the snow bowls in. That is, assuming I don’t drag my heels all the way through. But I usually don’t,” Bilbo swore. “I usually go just as fast as I can.”

As fast as he could, our writer glanced up.

The king was not, to the hobbit’s surprise, utterly shocked by the news – and for a moment Master Baggins was very irritated with some other dwarfish friends for spreading his business around. But it was difficult to feel irritated at Balin and Dori when Thorin Oakenshield was still before him looking that way. The king seemed like someone had pulled a painful and important stitch below his skin and now a wound was surely open. It was worried, that expression, more than hurt – awful, tender, weak-hearted worry, a rushing-forward worry of the sort one might feel when a missive does not come. It made him seem smaller in the dark drape of velvet and fur. His fists on the table sat slackly.
He blinked, then looked nervously, upsettingly away, a to-himself fret of frown, like he had heard this story before but just couldn’t believe it was true. *Powerless* is the word.

It was a distressing and a fitfully embarrassing way to see him look, so Bilbo glanced down again, feeling strangely like he might accidentally peer straight through all this dwarven stone.

“But why,” the king wanted to know.

Bilbo had perhaps a thousand explanations with which to answer that, but none of them could be articulated without unsnarling all the others – and, like separating links of dwarven mail, that was good as impossible. Even for a writer – even for a *good* writer, which Master Baggins wasn’t, frankly – certain things are just not cut-out to be described.

“Keep myself out of trouble, mostly,” Bilbo said, because he could not, for anything, say some other set of words.

He meant to say it’s troubling – to be a hobbit under the ground, safe and ensconced, wanting oddly for the discomfort of the road. It wasn’t as though he missed the damp clothes and the wet fur stench and the sores that would grow in your mouth from eating undercooked leafy greens. It was just that he missed the ease of it. That is, the strange simpleness of being around dwarves, and around Thorin Oakenshield, too – the storybook ridiculousness and his own constant bemusement and the worrisome state of having to wonder what the king was getting himself into now – all of that. Bilbo missed, he supposed, knowing his friend (the king) before he was his friend, THE KING – in a serious, formal-offices, all-capitals sense.

We might merely say *Bilbo missed his friend*. Yet that made no sense, either, because here Thorin was, and here they had been every morning since the wooden town stopped smoldering and the dragon’s head was dredged from the Long Lake.

Since he could not bring himself to admit that for fear of the harm it might do, our burglar shrugged, plopped nonchalantly back into his chair, and dropped an overgenerous knifefull of sweet cheese on a breadcrust.

“Things have settled here, haven’t they,” he ho-hummed instead. The silverware in his hand felt foreign, the tines on the fork inconceivably sharp. He picked it up and held it uncertainly and set it softly face-down. Among all this mighty gray and bitter white and the loud fanfare of gold, across from sumptuous Durin blacks and blues, he felt like a red rudeness. Brave, he’d been told. Above all else, he is brave. “They’re coming along pretty well. What with Dáin-and-army about, I figure you don’t need me standing around anymore.”

The king was still sitting defenselessly at the far end of the table. He used to grumble at Bilbo’s insistence on placing himself all the way at the other end, noting not incorrectly that there were only two people seated and how foolish to have to speak over all that empty space. *Manners*, Master Baggins insisted. It’s no good arguing with manners. And if he simply dragged Bilbo’s chair beside him, Bilbo would irritably jut his chin and drag it noisily all the way back ’round.

The truth is that Bilbo found he could not really stomach being too close to Thorin anymore. It made him feel, faintly but surely, something beneath him was about to fall apart.

Snatching the teacup and taking a tasteless drink, he made himself look up and hold it. The Dwarfking still had not said much of anything. There was a twist of confusion between low dwarfish brows, making the dismay seem physical, a bleeding that could no longer be denied. Master Baggins wanted no part of that expression. It was an utterly alien way for a king’s face to be – for Thorin II, the hubristic, palatial optimist, who never seemed to worry or doubt or disbelieve the possibility of
anything he put his mind to – and Bilbo felt a terrible need to remove it somehow.

The hobbit’s two-pats of laughter seemed nervous, disproportionately glad. “Don’t just sit there looking like I kicked your cat! I’ll come visit.”

Thorin was still stuck on the unsatisfying catch of why. “But your title?” he protested, though his attention was elsewhere and his voice was weak.

Bilbo Baggins, King’s-Guard, winced. It was realism, gentle and bleak as it could be. “Oh, come on.”

What should a burglar have done, then, if you’ve so many ideas? Should Bilbo Baggins have said to a person to whom loyalty is everything that after it all, he could not bring himself to stand behind The Lonely Throne?

“That was awfully nice of you to offer,” the burglar went on. “But we both know I could never do that job. It’s——” Ridiculous is the word he would decide on, though it seemed – from Thorin’s demolished, grasping expression – like it was decided, doomed, for him.

No one said anything for a moment. Bilbo tapped the tips of his fingers on the edge of the smooth rock surface and watched only clouds.

“But I dressed you,” the king spoke. Finally, dismally.

“Then it is a coat of station? I thought it might be. I mean, mithril – of course it is. Say no more; that’s all right. You can have it back; I completely understand.”

Thorin looked at him in horror. “No,” he gasped, a bit breathlessly, like Bilbo just suggested he lob the Crown of Durin off the wall.

“All right!” The burglar retreated quickly. “I was only checking.”

They sat there a moment. Brave Master Baggins, twiddling his thumbs, his plate of unappetizing eggs abandoned; the Mountain King, still looking so dramatically offended, one hand worrying up to land slack, curled fingers aimlessly upon his chest.

“It was a gift,” Thorin said, a baffled sort of insulted. His fist drifted over his heart as though someone he did not like had just brought him atrocious news.

“Oh. Then I’ll keep it. My father used to say ‘The way a fellow keeps his things is the way he keeps his people.’ Bit of Shire wisdom for you.”

The precious Baggins platitude did little to appease. It seemed nothing would take away that awful look, and having to see it there on the king’s face, Bilbo wished irrationally and selfishly he’d not said anything at all – merely vanished into the ether one day with a kindhearted note on his bedstand and maybe a present or two. He wished he had given the whole thing a little less opportunity to settle-in. He wished Thorin would thunder about him some about dishonor. But Thorin-named-Thunder didn’t storm about or declarate at all. The king sat in his chair and blinked himself back to blindsided silence, processing the revelation the way one does an ultimatum where neither option is the one you were counting on.

Bilbo gave up on his cooling meal. Standing, tossing his balled-up napkin beside the cream saucer, keeping his shoulders turned against the flush of pretty morning sun, he knocked once more on the chair back and obviously prepared to go.
“Won’t be for a while,” said the hobbit, rounding the long table, no-reason-to-fuss. “I mean two or three weeks at the very earliest. I’ve still got some arrangements to arrange. For now, though, I’d better be off. Lots to plan, and I did promise Ori I’d help him find some utensils today. Should probably get to that. Probably be down in the down in the library later. I’ll be someplace, for certain. Wherever I am.”

And he was almost gone – but not quite gone enough. Thorin grabbed his arm. Reflexively, without looking up, without moving. It halted Bilbo mid-step.

Surprise hit the burglar’s heart into the roof of his mouth. He’d not whipped Master Baggins around or yanked him back to yell at him – it was merely a stopping, a disallowing, unaggressive and unyielding, like walking into stone. And Master Baggins was stopped. He meant to let fly a few words about it, too – being dead-ended so, as if he was somebody’s runaway faunt. But by the time Bilbo sharp-eyed the impetuous fingers clutching his elbow, they had loosened, and then they slipped to the wrist, and then they were never there. The king let him go right away.

He should have snapped what did you do that for – should have squawked you can’t just be snatching people left and right as you please – but Bilbo didn’t. Thorin did not even lift his head. He sat still and unturning, with that unbearable look of such trouble left untended-to.

So Bilbo took his freed arm back and just said, benignly, “See you at breakfast, right?”

And went.

He did not see Thorin at breakfast. That next morning, or the one after, or any of them, and eventually he left Erebor with his pack full of diamonds and the silversteel glittering over his back.

Bilbo startled at dwarfish knocking upon his diplomat’s door.

“Hurrah, huzzah! Hear ye, hear ye! The almost-king has returned,” Kili proclaimed, head-and-shoulders popping into Master Baggins’s suite the moment he unlatched it, smelling of faintly of dwarf-wine and the smoky aftermath of celebration. He squeezed his fist into a buzzy horn and trumpeted a little fanfare for himself. His black tunic sparkled with little flakes of shaved silver like he’d been caught in a beauteous rain. “And I brought so much feast food. So much it’s a little obscene. As in I grabbed a dining cart and ran away with it. Help me prop the door, will you?”

Bilbo held it open and the prince wheeled it in. "It" meaning one fine bronze table with lopsided red cloth, and (more importantly) meaning the food: a bowl of buttered rabbit ribs, paper-thin venison cuts, a crumbly bread basket, goat cheeses next to tough yellow grapes, a plate of oddly poisonous-looking tarts (damned figs again), spicy-sweet pastries, and a lidded tureen of some kind of hot-smelling orange soup. Our hobbit hadn’t eaten since that unsatisfying bowl of roadside noodles, and this was more than enough of a feast for two.

“I think the pies are still warm,” Kili prompted, kicking the door shut again behind him. He pushed his cart right up to the stately stone-footed parlor canapé, so you’d not even have to stand to grab something off it. There was a distinct whiff of pipeweed on him, now that Bilbo had him in the room. And while the fine clothes were too dark to look rumpled or sweatted, you could tell from the bushed wheeze in his throat he’d been honor-this, honor-thatting in the way of kingly blather for a good while. There was a smudge of charcoal-green malachite powder on his eyelids that had started
to wear off. “It was dying by the royal table! Shouldn’t have lit up the braziers. Everyone was there – glamored-up for the dames, of course – and you know all those lords in their furs and their wools and their five layers of silk had to crowd up around me, kiss my arse. Got to show off how important they are for the females. I probably passed out at some point.”

Bilbo snatched the shirt he’d dropped when Kíli slammed the knocker as a Durin will. A guardsfellow had nicely brought his luggage by a few hours prior, and he’d wasted no time in exchanging the dwarfcoat for his patchy house robe. He’d polished and hung up his armor. Then, feeling washed and more comfortable, with clean feet and a frothy stein of the promised meth EGLIN Kíli’d doubtless had sent up, the writer unpacked. (Easy enough; the armoire in here could’ve fit five of him, plus a cousin or three, and someone already stocked it. It was full of fancy robes and bright tunics and mufflers and the like, most of which sort-of fit – probably adolescent clothing – they were still a touch pouchy through the shoulders and chest.)

“My feet are killing me!” the little prince whined, as little princes are wont to do. With nothing left to keep him from it, he flopped down un gallantly in the sofa, tossing his boot heels over the long ottoman, knuckles thumping heavily upon crimson cushion. His crown hit the tasseled pillow beside him. His neck tipped bonelessly and his Durin hair went right over the back of the couch until he was staring, exhausted, at the ceiling.

As for the suite itself, it was predictably opulent. Dwarfish accommodations are. His opened into a little round sitting room that fishtailed neatly to the bed and bath chambers, each flickering with scone lamplight. Everything was done up in noble red upholstery. The furnishings were garnet cloth tossed over a stippled, whitish variety of rock found close to the Mountain peak, bleached by sun-melted snow. The desk in here was a bit too tall and important-looking. He’s arranged his books on it, face-down for privacy, raven quills at the ready with a full flask of ink. Fresh new candles dribbled from gaudy brass candelabras. The cut rugs were soft and the floors brutal. There were no windows to be had.

Bilbo peered at the spread for a moment, then walked round back of the canapé, firepoked some glowing coals in the intimidating hearth, and reached out to dust a handful of silver snowflakes from Kíli’s shoulders. “What’s this doing here; you’re shedding metal all over.”

“Oh, right,” the prince remembered. He stood up to shake, doglike, the glittering scraps from him; they went just where Master Baggins had kind of wished they didn’t. “Servants dropped it from the ceiling when the Door was opened. Bet Bifur thought of that. Nice touch, pretty for the dames and all. But they should’ve done it before we cracked the barrels. Had to pick curlies out of my drink.” Here he dipped his face into the crook of an elbow and did a mediocre job of sleeving off cosmetic. Bilbo recalled the disaster of his post-dwarf smial and was relieved he did not have to worry about picking up after Prince Kíli ever again. “Sorry you couldn’t go. That Galinyah was right mad at Dwalin for sending you off. You should’ve snuck down there; burgled some biscuits, just for old times.”

“I considered it. But once you’ve burgled a gaggle of princes, biscuit tins seem a bit of a step down, don’t you think?” Bilbo, holding the whole cheese plate and with a mouthful of cheddar already bulging one cheek, deposited himself in one of two plush lounge chairs.

“Anyway, the dames liked it all right. Here, have some of this wine. I’ve had too much already.”

With a toss, it was his. Master Baggins popped the cork, sniffed it, then busied himself dressing crisps. His curls were still a little damp from the bath he’d taken. The suite’s tub was set flat into the washroom floor, square and dwarfar-style, a plunging brass basin surrounded by skinny coal ditches. Standing straight in the middle, our hobbit was swallowed up to the chin. It was a little
embarrassing to bathe in there, tender skin against the metalshine, so he washed quickly. Bilbo – for all his past exposure to dwarven technology – was still nervous about the rumble of unseen water through the rock, from the buried pipes, out of the faucets.

“It’s not elf-wine, is it.” When he found no cup to pour in, the writer simply went for a sip and knocked it back. “I’ve seen what that does to a person.”

Kíli looked distractedly around. “I bet Thranduil used to drink in this very room,” the prince mused. “Bet he used to get plastered in it.”

Bilbo waggled the bottle back for seconds, but his host (who was, now that you mention it, a little glazed) shook no, so it went gently on the floor. “Well, if the Elvenking shows up, I’m not sharing. He can pass out somewhere else.”

“He won’t,” Kíli promised, tilting his head back again, fascinated with the marbled patterns on the ceiling. The writer pressed a cheese-laden flatbread into his hand, and he munched it blindly, nobody fretting about crumbs on the couch.

“You never know. Not with elves. Maybe he’ll come for the after-party. Ask the fine dwarfish ladies for a dance.”

“That would be a short number. Uncle has forbidden all Elves of Mirkwood from setting foot on stone laid by Durin hands.”

Bilbo set the plate aside. Kíli blinked a slow, sleepy blink, one that looked strangely old for him – tiredness, it seemed, below the painted eyes.

“Well,” the hobbit sighed. “I am sorry to hear that, my lad.”

The dwarf’s head picked up and cocked aside in that inquisitive wolfpup way. “Why?”

“Perhaps it was long ago – and you’ve other interests now, I’m sure. But I had thought you a little fond of an elf.”

“Tauriel is not a Mirkwood Elf,” Kíli observed, nonchalant as pointing out a common sparrow in an unremarkable tree. He propped his elbows on the sofa back and did not even quirk a brow. “Thranduil banished her.”

“You don’t say,” Bilbo said, the neutral ‘oh’ of absolute uncertainty when you aren’t even sure what expression to try out on your face.

“I do say. And you’re not going to believe it—” The prince sat up straight in the slouch of cushion, and that tiredness scattered, just as the silver shavings had. He couldn’t hold it in anymore. He bragged: “—but I’ll tell you anyway. She rides with the Royal Guard.”

Bilbo’s look required the full story.

“Lift your eyebrows at me if you like, but it’s true!” Kíli swore, a little snobby with the privilege of doing so. “Presently, that is, and in a longer-term sense. Clears Dwalin up to go about fetching hobbits, at least.”

“Here! Here, then? You mean to say here, an elf-guard, in the Dwarf Nation?”

“Royal Guard,” the prince chirped again, gloatting by way of correction. He picked up a crisp and brattishly bit off just the half with the whipped white cheese.
Here, then is where returning to Erebor gets a smidge more interesting.

“You don’t believe me,” Kíli pouted, crossing his ankles upon the overdressed footstool. “Told you so.”

“I admit. I’ve trouble accepting the notion Thorin would allow that.”

“So would I, but you might say the elf has proven herself useful. Saved Uncle’s life, as a matter of fact.”

Master Baggins, former King’s-Guard, didn’t have time to bark out what do you mean or what happened. His eyes merely sharpened, and he glared at Kíli for his dramatic, cloying pause.

“Manling arrowshot at the gates of Dale,” the prince clarified. “Tauriel had been living there for some months – couldn’t go back home, after all – and we were out on a diplomatic tour. She grabbed it right out of the air! Went clean through her hand. Crunch. You should’ve seen it!” he gushed. “It was bloody fantastic. Fantastically bloody. Better than going through Uncle’s eye, which is what it otherwise would’ve. She’s probably camped outside Dáin’s palace somewhere right now, sniffing down deadwood and shooting at pigeons, my poor uncivilized silvan maid.”

“That’s common,” Bilbo demanded, his clutch of coldweather grapes forgotten.

“Shooting pigeons? No, not especially, but you can’t be sure what elves get up to when you’re not hovering over their shoulders.”

“Do you suppose you’re too important to go right over this knee?”

Kíli laughed his Kíli laugh, then - that gleeful, nefarious, no-harm giggle. “Only the one time with the arrows. It’s a, uh, rocky relationship – Uncle Thorin and the Dales. That’s not even a pun. The situation with the Men is... well,” he tried, wincing with one eye squinted, flattening his hand and tilting it side-to-side. Bilbo realized his own hands had clamped down on the platter and he loosened them, lowered it back to his lap. “Touch-go. Push-shove. Better to ask Fi about it if you want a political rundown.”

“Still,” he said, breathing out in a rush, hoping to fish his calmness back out of the nerves. “To house a silvan. Exile or not. It’s the last thing I’d have expected of Erebor – from any dwarf, for that matter.”

“I think having her here flatters him, to be honest. It’s a good story, isn’t it? A Mirkwood war-captain betrays her liege lord to serve the Dwarfking. And you know how hard Uncle goes in for good stories. Clearly she has recognized the inherent frivolity of her people, and acknowledges the superiority of dwarrow kniness and the Durin legitimacy to rule.” He sniffed, holding his jaw at that insufferable Thorin angle until the mockery sifted away. Prince Kíli snatched up a tart and he winked. “Uncle has her riding rounds at the head of the Guard every time Thranduil’s even remotely nearby.”

Bilbo gradually – gradually – leant himself back, shoulders rigid in the fur-draped seat of his dwarven lounge chair. He nabbed the rested wine bottle, lifted it with two questing fingers, and took a thin sip.

But that’s not the full story, is it, he said.

“Well,” the little Durin admitted. “Not the full story.”
Roundabout here he shall tell you all you really need to know about the smittenship of Prince Kíli of Erebor and Captain Tauriel, by way of a demonstration:

Our smallest Durin was, as Master Baggins has already noted, a sweet and pure-hearted soul, nevermind his troublemaking disposition. He’s not really in it to taunt or embarrass; he merely likes to laugh. And make others laugh – it’s his reward to get someone’s attention in such a way. An unquashable smile and spat out drink are, to the prince, a job well-done – and there aren’t many jobs for a second heir in the shadow of his prideful brother and a demanding, if affectionate, king.

This is all well-and-good, on its own. It’s a very sour person who doesn’t enjoy a bit of comic relief. Except Kíli’s jokes were terrible.

He spent far too much time cooking them up. “So did you hear the mop got sold? It was just collecting dust!” Prince Kíli might blurt. (“Oh, lad, that’s terrible,” Bofur would groan.) Or, for an idea of his set-ups: “Psst, Bilbo – ask me what I know about she-hobbits. Go on, ask.” (“Nope, shan’t,” Bilbo would quip, that’s-that.) Or: “Hey, Uncle, what do you call somebody with no body and no nose? NOBODY-NOSE!” (“Enough, Kíli,” the Dwarfking would sigh.) It wasn’t the prince’s intention to annoy everyone. He simply did not have his brother’s cattish cleverness, or his uncle’s wry sense of restraint. (Not that you should ever, ever go to Thorin Oakenshield for a joke.)

So it was not a surprise that – days after the Great Battle, as the staggered forces of elves and Men and dwarves struggled to clear the wreckage, and the remains of Dale smoldered softly – Kíli, in his purpose to be light, was unfunnier than he’d ever been before.

Meanwhile: Of purpose, the red captain had none. She drifted, picking her gooselike way along; hunting with the scattered families of Men; following straggling orcs, silencing them; wandering the broken rock at the foot of Erebor, hardly daring to peek inside. She slept in a hammock she’d made in a farmer’s hayloft. She kept the horses company and tossed handfuls of pears to the goats.

In this same time, Kíli hadn’t much in the way of royaling to do. Thorin was scarce; Fíli was rarely conscious and more rarely coherent. Balin and Dwalin were always in meetings or debates. And though he and Bilbo grew quite close over their sickroom chats during the bleak, snowless first-of-winter evenings, playing cards on the foot of the crown prince’s bed and making sure he took water, neither one of them was quite right in the heart.

(A note here, for your reference: You cannot just wither about to watch your beloved ones suffer all day, my dear. Our writer learned that from Belladonna, when the two of them would spend hours reading to Bungo as he died in his home, unsure of whether or not he could hear them. They would fix covers and fluff pillows and stare out windows in this funereal silence, hardly daring to speak to one another, until Mother inevitably snatched Bilbo’s sleeve and demanded to go pick some apples. We need a break, my bug, she’d say. Just a little break to be people again. They always got more fruit than they needed out on those walks, thinking for a brief time of pretty trees and bumblebees again. Bag End was bulging with apples. To this day, he remembers his father’s passing by the smell of Belladonna’s cobbler, cinnamon cooling on the kitchen sills.)

And so here we wind up with our scene. Bilbo, who could not bear to let the one standing Prince Durin out of his sight in those hours after Azog, had been following an aimless Kíli about for days, walking heavily with one hand upon Sting and a rock still lodged in his throat.
Tauriel, who had nowhere to go – looking strangely cast-off, fretful-faced and shifting like a soaked bird after a storm – had found them one smoggy afternoon by the rubble-strewn stairs to the Lion Door. She brightened and then worried; she looked desperate to be in a place. She saw with obvious relief that Thorin was not with them (for in that brief time, the Dwarfking spent most of his own conferring privately – in a grave, listening meditation that was not like him – with Gandalf). And so, awkwardly curt, all that wind-roughed hair afire behind her, she made a suggestion. An offer, specifically, to find some delicate weed known to elves that might numb Prince Fíli’s terrible pain.

No one was around to stop them. There were not enough Guardians to both protect the king and keep the Fortress of Erebor. Erebor, for a little while, was on its own.

It had rained the night before. A cool, heavy, persistent rain – a rain that felt grimier than refreshing – a dull, tedious wash. They went wandering just they-three around the foot of the mountain, picking at small puddles. Every so often, the taciturn captain (ex-captain, as it were) would stop to point a sprig out to them. Kíli would scramble up to look at it and Bilbo would hang a few steps behind to watch, not sure what he was watching for.

It was not an easy thing to match strides with Tauriel. She may have been flame on the killing fields, but she was also set up gawkily on those overly long legs, picking through the rocks with high, fast steps like a filly not quite in control of its limbs. (And she was, of course, much taller.) The prince went skidding over pebbles in an effort to keep pace. Bilbo did not bother. He, like the proper writer he still hadn’t managed to become, observed.

A spot of dialogue:

“Um. Something the matter?” – Prince Kíli

“You make perfect sense! And you’ve got much bigger ears than me; if you hear it, I believe you.” – Prince Kíli

“A spot of dialogue:

“Um. Something the matter?” – Prince Kíli

“You make perfect sense! And you’ve got much bigger ears than me; if you hear it, I believe you.” – Prince Kíli

“Ah! I am transparent. It is my fault, nothing of concern. It only that: for a field, do you not feel it is too silent?” – Captain Tauriel, frowning harder, then, at remembering her no-place place. “I hear my voice not making sense. Forget I mentioned it.”

“You make perfect sense! And you’ve got much bigger ears than me; if you hear it, I believe you.” – Prince Kíli

“It’s not what I hear in my ears, but in myself. Have you noticed, Master Dwarf, the eye of silence in a storm? The first quiet is never the end. It is only the breath before the next half of the flood.” – Captain Tauriel

“I guess I don’t pay enough attention to clouds.” – Prince Kíli

“Let me say this. We are far from the threat we have needed to fly from. Yet I do not feel it so. There is a weight. I am disquiet.” – Captain Tauriel

The prince thought about it for a half-second and opened his mouth.

“Hail, Disquiet. I—” alas “—am Kíli.”

She stopped just ahead of them on the rocks. Tauriel’s head dropped, a shiver took the she-elf’s shoulders, and from behind where Bilbo was, it seemed she was weeping.
Then, all of a sudden, she shrieked.

“Because I said ‘I am—!’ Did you just come up with that! That’s so funny!” – Tauriel, Captain of Mirkwood, who fights like free fire in a dry Winterfilth wind, and somehow finds this stupidness clever.

Tauriel laughed spastically, obnoxiously. She would clap a bashful hand over her crumbling mouth in attempt to bottle it up; then break into a high-pitched, horse-scream of a squeal; and then, like a stallion trying to regain its air, stumble into a sequence of snorting and gigglng that obeyed no discernable pattern. Kíli blinked at her like someone who had just opened an old suitcase and found the family fortune.

“You are very clever, winimo,” she had said, drying tears with her leatherepd pelisse sleeve.

Bilbo grimaced like someone who had opened a cabinet and found a dead cat.

Thus began the prolonged comedy-courtship. Erebor’s second prince spent all this loose, lost time chasing after an exiled elf to tell her his newest joke. He would calculate when they were apart. He would retreat inside his fortress and stare at the ceiling while Fíli slept the fearful sleep of the badly wounded. He would ponder into the mountain sky, still smoggy with war-soot; he would peer into his cups; he would think along the sentry fires. He’d rustle up a good one, and then he’d pounce, tearing off at a glimpse of fox-red hair, shouting, “Tauriel! Tauriel. All right. Listen to this. What do you call an orc with apoplexy—?”

And here: the yodeling peal of the elf’s laughter, odd and galling, swooping high over the lowing of stables on the trampled plain.

I love ponies! Can’t get enough of the ponies! he’d lie blithely, but it was always to talk to her.

In fact, soon Kíli needn’t even chase after Tauriel. She would linger a little too long at the foot of the Mountain on the chance he might lightfoot out of it, and when he inevitably did (likewise looking for her), she had started trying to tell jokes to him. They would chat between the straw bales and carry water to the rams and she would try to make him laugh. He’d gaze at her through the splay of his forelock with false pity, shaking his head and smiling tenderly, like one does to a hapless child trying to be grown-up.

“What about this: What did the tree say to the rock? Don’t fall!” – Captain Tauriel.

“Well, that one doesn’t even make sense.” – Prince Kíli

“It does! If you cut a tree, it collapses, and is a collapse from a mountain not called a rockfall?” – Captain Tauriel, persistent if nothing else.

“See?” – Prince Kíli, when a pony nickered, stout hand reaching up over the stall gate to stroke its nose. “Even he thinks it was rubbish.”

“Perhaps it should have better gone ‘What did the tree say to the leaf?’ Don’t fall!” – Captain Tauriel

“Oh, Tori. There’s nothing to be done. You’re just too lightsome and noble to be funny.” – Prince Kíli, gently, like it was a real tragedy, spare-her-dear-silvan-heart.

And “Tori” would swat him with the inside of her playful, lightsome fist.

And that marks the end of this concern, or maybe, if you prefer, the beginning. For they two decided
– while it was questionable judgment for a royal dwarf to befriend a homeless elf – there was indeed no harm in telling jokes to one.

OOO

“It’s not exactly orthodox to be snogging one, though, so I’ll ask you to go ahead and scratch anything like that from the book, all right?” the prince said, taking a selfish bite out of a tart, flinging the crust back on the table. “One of the things I wanted to talk to you about, actually.”

Perhaps our writer should’ve been more surprised to hear of this cross-species amour, but Master Baggins was a gentlehobbit, and gentlehobbits understand what happens when you let a young lady and a young fellow tell each other one too many jokes.

He swirled the colorful soup in his cup. “Are you in danger?”

“No! No,” Kíli assured, a little too jovially and with a little too much blasé certainty to be trusted. “I am the master of discretion and elves have these marvelous sneaky-quiet cat feet. Besides, it’s not as if I’m likely to throw a bastard in her or something. What,” the prince pouted at Bilbo’s choke, scowling his most mature, we’re-all-blokes-here scowl. He tossed back the hair over his eyes and sniffed. “It’s impossible. I asked the wizard. Speciological contrariety. So it’s not like they’ll off-with-my-head about it, but I’m a Durin, and you know dwarves – strictly conventional.”

Bungo had often said: "The fellow most sure of himself is often the one least certain." Bilbo, Son-of-Bungo, wondered if perhaps there was a nervous prince in the room trying to convince himself with that rash of overassertive ‘no’s. “Does Thorin—”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” Kíli fobbed, blowing a raspberry breath, rolling his painted eyes extravagantly and waving him off. “Yes, definitely.”

Oh, Bilbo breathed.

Good, Bilbo whooshed out.

Thank goodness, Bilbo sighed, and with that sweet relief of knowledge, let himself slip back against the chair cushion, taking another spicy sip of soup.

“Oh…” – Prince Kíli, a little drawn-out, a little puckish, with that hesitant one-eyed squint.
“Probably.”

Most likely, Kíli promised.

It’s possible? Kíli mused.

I mean, Kíli figured, theoretically.

There was a popping in the fireplace as coals broke apart. Belladonna’s portrait, which he’d since reframed and set neatly on the mantle, looked contentedly down at dwarf and hobbit, as though to say please, sweetheart, go on.

Bilbo said oh no, no, no, no, Kíli, no.

The prince looked a little attacked. Kíli chuffed, pulled his legs off the ottoman, tossed his hands into
the air, and let them hit back to his thighs with a dead weight smack. “Well, it’s not like I had a conversation with him about it! It’s not like we bounced up and asked him to bless our union. This is Thorin we’re talking about. You do remember Thorin?” he checked. “Thorin Oakenshield, King of the Dwarves? He’s about, oh, yea high, lots of hair, very traditional, storms around a bit. Not big on elves. Bloody hates them, with the thundering fire of ages.”

Bilbo set down his up with a defiant clank. Kíli paused, and thought about it, and flashed his pointy canines in a bright-side smile.

“But he’s taken a shine to Tauriel, I think,” the prince teased. “Lets her sleep on a wee pile of twigs of her very own. Hardly ever calls her a deer-humper.”

“Kíli, do not tell me,” the burglar groaned. There was something airy and anxious rising in his stomach, an awareness of the wet braid drying on his neck. His waggling finger shot up and he looked indignantly away in an unkind one moment gesture. “Do not tell me I am meant to keep this secret from your uncle.”

“But you’re great at keeping things! You’re the most things-keeping person I know!” Kíli cried. “So keep one more – why not?”

“Because I can’t—” He stopped-short, exasperated. His palms were clammy and his ankles suddenly unable to go foot-flat and hold still. “You can’t – keep – secrets from him! Kíli, it’s Thorin. He’ll do that – that – that – thing that he does, with his face. That sidelong thing. You know what I mean.”

“Resist the thing! Company solidarity! Come on, Boggins, you’re killing me,” Kíli whined, big-brown-eyed and baby-lipped, his most malicious combination. “Do it for love,” he egged. “Do it for peace in the household. Do it for Tauriel; she’s got the cutest little pinkie toes.”

“You just had to tell me. Couldn’t allude. Couldn’t make something up, let that-be-that.”

“I said I’d tell you everything! Plus, I wanted to be sure you hadn’t written anything funny about me. Don’t worry, though; I’m sure that whatever you’ve put down is fine.”

Master Baggins stared him down with a miserable anger that was beginning to just give up hope. Kíli demurely cleared his throat. “But you’ll scratch it from the—”

“I’ll scratch it from the book,” Bilbo swore, cursing to himself.

The dwarf exhaled on a honey-sweet smile. His dimples returned like a parade. Prince Durin felt safe in his station, but clearly worried for his darling’s wellbeing. In another situation – a situation pertaining to a different hobbit – Bilbo might have found it admirable, but given that this was Kíli’s situation and the hobbit none other than himself, ‘admirable’ wasn’t the right word. “You’re a dear,” he said in a farce of an auntie doling out coins for her nephews to buy some nice dinner bread. Then, on second thought: “Better yet – maybe you should just scratch Tauriel entirely. Cross her right out. Zip.” A pantomimed a swash of pen.

Our writer crossed his arms and stewed and did an all-around very good job of being cheesed-off.

“I can’t believe you put me in this position. I’ve not even been here eight hours, and I’m lying for you. To the Dwarfking.”

“Lying is such a nasty word. It’s more like holding your tongue. And it’s the responsible thing to do, if you think about it! We don’t want to distract him with something like this. He has much more important things to oversee than somebody’s love life. Especially mine.”
“Good grief. I’m the one who said it. I said it, didn’t I? I said before that a Durin was going to be the 
end of me.”

Kíli shrugged. “At least I didn’t ask you to talk to a dragon. Compared to what some Durins have 
had wanted from you, this order’s pretty light.”

“How dare he kick up a protest, actually. By this point, who does he think you think he is.

“I promise, Boggins. Dwarf’s-honor. You won’t have to do a thing. Just keep my secret,” the little 
prince swore, “and it’ll all work out like a dream.”

The truth of it is that Bilbo’s never been good at keeping secrets. It’s not for lack of wanting to, or of 
trying to, or of telling himself it was all for everyone’s best. But the hobbit had come to realize a 
harsh fact of himself: he was not, for all the dwarfish esteem he’d won, and for all the warrior honors 
lavished upon him, so worthy of trust, after all. For he’d been living a lie, hadn’t he. The reality, so 
long obscured but in end inescapable, is that Bilbo Baggins, Burglar Extraordinaire, the Fierce-and-
Brave-and-True, was neither a burglar nor was he especially truthful. He was no one at all, really.

And knowing so – knowing what was and was-not snared up inside of his fast-beating heart – he 
could not bear to be no-one-at-all around his friends anymore.

And that – more than the distance, more than the cold, more than the longing for any home – was 
why Bilbo the Not-So-Brave had to snuff out his secrets and leave.

Dear Bilbo, that old letter said.

I trust my message finds you well, and I do, my dear boy, hope you will remember me.

If not, don’t fret. You were quite small when we last met – and I myself was already quite the old 
man. Let’s see. I gave you a sparkler, and if I am not mistaken, you set right off into a cotton field to 
slay a dragon with it. It was your mother who extinguished you. She was a very special friend of 
mine, and special in her own right, too.

Ah, now I ramble, but an old man will. You’ll have to forgive me for the unexpected hello, though it’s my opinion that a bit of unexpectedness is important for anyone.

Surely by now you’ll be wondering, ‘Well, that’s all well and good, but why is this old man writing 
to me?’ I confess, I am a lover of the occasional mystery and do welcome an overture from an 
interesting stranger, but I think you might appreciate vagaries a touch less. Let me tell you directly. I 
am looking for someone to assist me in a small company venture, and I can think of no better
candidate than the only son of Belladonna Baggins.

Well, my dear fellow: are you interested or appalled? Either way, there’s no need to write. Think it over – I suspect, in one fashion or another, we will meet again soon.

Until then, happy dreams and swift sunrises.

Gandalf the Grey

P.S. My tenderest sympathies on the loss of your mother. There has rarely been a finer hobbit and I wager I shall never be so merry to make a friend.

P.P.S. Are you willing to leave home?

There were no sunlit windows to slip through; here, dawn comes with time.

Kíli and Bilbo nattered all night until the prince nodded off on his fine satin canapé. In end, though – despite months of road-exhaustion and his weary eyes – Master Baggins proved too tired to sleep. He covered the remains of the food and tucked some remaining clothes away. He re-lit suffering candles and waste-binned the empty wine bottle. He struggled to situate Kíli more comfortably on the couch – which was annoyingly, humorously difficult for someone of our writer’s size – given the young Durin slept all limply, with sprawled legs and dead arms tossed high over his head like a little boy. Bilbo reeled them back down. He grabbed him by the ankles and did his best to drag the attached body downwards, unkinking the crook in his neck. He shoved a pillow under the uncooperative head, yanked his stubborn dwarf boots off after much tugging and cursing, and, deciding that would have to do, tossed a fur blanket over the passed-out heir to the Lonely Throne.

Then he took his book to the desk.

Sighing, Bilbo sat, poured himself the last of a flask of cold tea, and – with quill in hand – started the hardest part of a writer’s labor. He began erasing words.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

All right, if you absolutely must hear it: the catastrophic and life-changing misunderstanding about to be brought before you may have been partially Bilbo’s fault.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How Master Baggins came to serve the Lonely Crown? Well, it was sort of an accident.

A minor miscommunication, as it were, to put it more specifically. Not an error, exactly. Not so much an accident, either, as much as it was *accidental* – as in it was a marginal wrinkle in planning – as in something that happens when you move too quickly, or if you speak too fast.

"Now hold on," you might here say. "How could such a thing be an accidental? Are you suggesting Master Baggins didn’t comprehend what he was getting himself into, even with all those funeral checkboxes and survivability disclaimers and footnotes re: incineration on that five-foot-long documentation? Did the burglar put his name on the contract or not?"

Well, I don’t blame you for saying so, my dear. But you must appreciate that there is a spiritual shift between swearing your life to a person and signing your name on a line.

Now, granted: there was, as you so helpfully mentioned, all that undramatic and perfectly professional business with company contracts and whatnot. But a mercenary partnership is not the same stripe of service as being formally pledged to a royal family, and Thorin Oakenshield Son-of-Durin is no things if not extremely dramatic and excessively formal. No, what our writer means by *serving the crown* is an oath – lasting for the duration of one’s lifetime and weighed at the measure of one’s honor – to keep the king upon his throne.

Baggins honor is serious stuff, you must surely know by now.

As such, Bilbo hadn’t been officially sworn-in until after the nasty bit with the warg. Once Thorin II was no longer actively spitting up kingsblood and the tooth-hole in his royal lung had pretty well healed, and they were all-of-them settled in Beorn’s tidy red cottage among jolly bumblebees and sloppy-eared hounds, Master Baggins was approached with the offer. That is to say the offer was presented to him. That is to say he was told, in no uncertain terms, that a *hired* burglar is a whole different creature from a *sworn* burglar, and anyone with half-a-brain in his head should much prefer being the latter. For dwarfish reasons.

Honestly, it didn’t make much sense to Master Baggins, who rather thought a job was a job – if you said you’d do it, then you ought to. But it mattered a great deal to his compatriots; that much was clear from the manner in which he’d been asked.

Specifically: with great, booming flourish, as if there had been a full jury sitting in Beorn’s jam pantry, tucked in between the pickled beets and the peach preserves.

“MASTER BAGGINS!” the Dwarfking said. “I MUST HAVE WORDS WITH YOU.”
Bilbo skittered around with a jar full of honey and eyes the size of milk saucers.

“—in the blazing twice-stuffed grass-picking Sam Hill—?!” he spluttered, leaping away from the dwarrow crowded behind him, hopping forward in the only direction he had space for: vertical. The honey hit the floor with an impolite smash.

“IN THANKS FOR YOUR SAVING OF MY LIFE,” Thorin proceeded, not noticing in his formal declarating that Master Baggins had literally sprung halfway up the shelves in surprise, and was now clinging from them like a squirrel that misshot its mark. Cereals scattered and a bag of oats flopped over. The small disaster of blown-glass and honey lay untended to on the rough cedarplanks. “I OFFER YOU THE HONOR OF SERVING DURIN’S CROWN AS A MEMBER OF MY COURT. THE DURIN FAMILY IS POWERFUL AND GENEROUS. YOU NEED ONLY TAKE THE OATH AND A WORTHY TITLE WILL BE YOURS.”

“I’m right here,” the burglar observed, a little sharp, climbing gingerly down.

“THEN WE MAY ADMINISTER IT FORTHWITH.”

Bilbo stuck one finger in his hobbitish ear and gave the head around it a shake, dislodging the discomfort of all that announcing. “Did you really have to do this now?”

For one, there was hardly any room. Bilbo rather thought he’d been the first one awake (barring wood-chopping Bombur and also barring Óin, who walked the dewy baby grass at four a.m. every morning, puffing gently on his pipe, picking morning glories and one-hour mushrooms). Our burglar rose from his wooly bedroll in Beorn’s suspiciously cozy barn, rubbed his eyes, poked his grumbling stomach, and ambled up to the house over the damp yard, so keen on a piece of toast he had not even bothered combing his hair. Gandalf smiled at him from the herb garden as passed, waving with a handful of dill. Bilbo made his best attempt at an unmoody wave back. If you listened closely beneath the high tweetings of forest birds and placid lowing of Beorn’s soft-eyed milk cows, you could hear the great beast grumbling about his woods.

He hadn’t counted on running into anyone. But Thorin (who was too important to sleep in a barn and had thusly commandeered their bear’s own bed) must have spotted and followed him in.

Frankly, Master Baggins thought it a little too early for Thorin Oakenshield just yet. First breakfast wasn’t even on the table, and - strictly between you and I - the Durins are a family one has to sort of work themselves up to being around.

To put it another way: while there was plenty of room for a bear-man in this Beorn-sized cellar, among the smoked salmon strips and the home-brewed lavender mead, there was somehow not quite enough to be down there with the dwarven king.

“What do you mean,” Thorin asked, brow furrowed. The train of his grand coat hung at the knees in distinct discordance with the dangling ropes of garlic, red onions, and dried thistle. A little fleck of disturbed rosemary settled on the oiled drape of black hair.

There was no clearance to dart down and gather honey spill with a pair of Durin boots standing over it, proclaiming. The hobbit tossed an irritated gesture about these tight walls around them, at the cucumber bundles and the potato bags. “It could’ve waited until after breakfast, is all. Why are you up so early? Take a step back, would you; there’s glass on the floor.”

Thorin II, Prince of the Silver Fountains, Terror of Dimrill Dale, One True King of Durin’s Folk, who was much too important to clean up dropped breakfast food, seemed a little baffled, as he’d no understanding of how immediately his most official speaking voice overwhelmed a little room. But
he did ask asked, allowing Bilbo to kneel down and attack the mess with a handful of spare washing
cloth. Master Baggins scrubbed with some unnecessary force.

“But of course, you are correct. If an oath is to be sworn, better there are witnesses. I will wake Balin
and Glóin,” Thorin, First Son of Thráin, Heir of the Lonely Mountain, etc. etc, said.

This swearing business seemed embarrassingly grave and histrionic; you know a Baggins is not cut-
out for excessive carrying-on. Still: a considerable career trajectory lift. Despite the obvious
outrageousness of it, Bilbo found such an offer hard to flat-out deny. Pragmatically, wouldn’t it be
easier to write this book about royal dwarves the closer you are to said royal dwarves?

(Tangentially, he was fond enough of the Durin family. That is: Bilbo had met three out of four
living Durins, and found all of them all solidly acceptable a good sixty-five percent of the time.)

But the Dwarfking’s retreating wolf’s-fur proved a throw too alarming to Master Baggins to tolerate,
for in the next instant, he was pawing out for it, lunging to stop the processions before they began.

“Wait, wait, wait. Hold on,” the burglar shrilled, grasping fingers remembering their rank and falling
short just before they’d given that coat scruff a yank. The dwarf stilled and looked quizzically back.
(And, I mean – forget suggesting to him that a person might be slightly hesitant to pledge his life
away in service to any crown, let alone a crown so magnanimous and doomed to be named the
Lonely one.) “Just wait a minute, will you?”

Son-of-Thráin-Son-of-Thrór blinked at him, not yet annoyance, not imagining what the problem
might be. His fair eye went unfocused and indignant in the way of great proclaimers – in the way
that it did when you’d said something that provoked Thorin Oakenshield, King of the Dwarves, and
there was no letting mere Thorin-himself get in the way. “What is the matter?”

“Um,” Bilbo stalled, mentally groping. Any-excuse-would-do. He shot up from his knees, curls
bouncing, forgetting the mess, and put his heel right in sugary stick. “Nothing. Nothing’s the
matter,” he insisted. Durin’s Son had abandoned the overhead hatch to face him, now not so buoyant
as he just was. “It’s just that – what’s the thing? – you know – there’s – considerations. Yes. That’s
the catch! I have to – unfortunately – consider some other business, not-at-all related to this one. I
really must ask Gandalf,” is the name on which the fumbling tongue landed. “Before I go off
adopting titles and pledging oaths and whatnot.”

They were not exactly two separate people, Thorin II Oakenshield King of the Dwarves and Thorin
Himself – indeed, they seemed to agree on the vast majority of topics – but they were two very
different editions of the same person, and our writer much preferred one to the other. You can
suppose for yourself which.

Thorin Himself looked concerned. “You are beholden to the Manling wizard?”

“I wouldn’t put it that way. Necessarily. It’s just that he did recruit me, and I really wouldn’t be here
if not for him.” The hobbit was yammering. All outright lies, naturally, but the more he spoke, the
more this all seemed quite a reasonable thing for some stalwart burglar to say. (And it certainly felt
reasonable to pass the buck to Gandalf so Bilbo didn’t have to he-himself think of an inoffensive but
totally legitimate way to no thanks a king.) “I mean to say: he did sort of cosign for me, didn’t he.
And before committing to any other business, I had better clear my ties with him.”

The Dwarfking thought it over. He mulled seriously for a moment, frowning, and then – easy as
anything – gave Bilbo’s shoulder a firm, knowing pat.

“Say no more,” Thorin reassured him, inclining his head in a way that was nearing graciousness -
and so saying, the Dwarfking left without incident.

Bilbo – being a pessimistic though not entirely skeptical hobbit – had concluded this to be a sign of their shared understanding. Matter closed, as it were. He'd assumed the peaceful smile and the brotherly clasp had meant to say: "Not to worry, Master Baggins; we have communicated; after all, this is a most serious decision, dangerous as all-get-out; I hear your hesitation, and I hold you in no less esteem for it. There are no hard feelings at all."

Wouldn’t you know it: he’d made the recurring mistake of taking Thorin II Oakenshield to be a reasonable person.

Look – maybe it is best to take a few steps backward, and more fully describe the scene.

They had washed up at Beorn’s some four weeks ago. The bear – and bear he was, though it struck Master Baggins as vaguely rude to refer to him this way – was a perfect host. He ousted himself to the pines, appearing only at odd dinnertimes and to push his wound-healing methodologies on Gandalf (who, it must be said, didn’t take entirely kindly to this). Other times, the mutts dragged in supper and the drones set the table. Bilbo’s gut felt a mite peculiar eating flapjacks mixed and fried by enmagicked spaniels – but then, it might’ve just been the recipe. Dogs, being dogs, put way too much sugar in things. What can you do.

(Writer’s Note: This bizarre job-delegation was indeed too bizarre to thoroughly comment upon. Ori had even spied one of Beorn’s bloodhounds loping out in the pasture to bottle-feed the lamb. For being hand-reared by an omnivore with three-inch-long teeth, the animals were extremely courteous.)

As for Thorin, he was a bit preoccupied healing the apertures in his chest. It took him two weeks to walk the length of the house hall without stumbling dramatically to one side. Three weeks to speak without ebbing blood through his teeth. And as for Bilbo’s part in all this? He kept well-enough away. You need space, don’t you, to recover from an injury like that. You don’t need noncritical fussing with. Besides, prior to this disaster, the Durins had exhibited no special fondness for him – indeed, for all his hobbitish manners, Master Baggins deduced he’d installed himself in this party as more a fields-thumping country yokel than anything else. He had displayed what was perhaps not the appropriate amount of deference to a king.

(I mean: you should have seen the Dwarfking’s face the first time Bilbo, when they were turned about in the overgrown thickets outside Bree, ahemmed into his fist to pipe up, "Nope; that’s completely wrong, actually; sir, we just came from that direction; in fact, Thorin, I think you’re holding the map side-a-ways. Here, give it over.")

(It’s not that Master Baggins was disrespectful as a rule. But you must remember that hobbits do not have kings, so all this genuflecting and praising and excessive agreement was simply not in his nature.)

(Besides, Thorin Oakenshield, king-or-not, had a tendency to propose the most problem-causing solutions and he had an even worse sense of direction, so what was Bilbo supposed to do when he tossed his hair and incorrectly declared This Way? Clam up and gush acquiescence with the rest of them? Fat lot of good that strategy had done the Dwarves of Erebor thus far.)

Anyway, with the prescription to wait and the removal of their food worries, it wasn’t an entirely bad time at Beorn’s. They ate greedily and caught up on sleep. They played jacks and petted the sheep. Perhaps the only thing that truly disturbed our burglar, after all of this trudging and all of this panic, was the new quiet at night. The king was abed with a hole in his lung. There was no music and there was no Dwarfsong.
All right, if you absolutely must hear it: the catastrophic and life-changing misunderstanding about to be brought before you may have been partially Bilbo’s fault.

He might have tried backing out. Might have, had he not the fresh image of the mangled Dwarfking staggering to his feet, wheezing red, stumbling desperately across the rock to throw his arms fearfully around him – crashing to his knees and grabbing like Bilbo was the last preserving bit of grabbable mast above a sunken ship – like a faunt seizes the arm that has just woken her up from the worst and realest nightmare she’s ever had – like you can only hug something that is saving your life.

And he might have outright said no, Bilbo might’ve, had he not so clearly remembered turning away from that rock and finding wet kingsblood all over his shirt.

So you understand why – a king having just been wolf-bitten – Master Baggins might dare presume Thorin Oakenshield listened to the actual content of his words, and humbly inferred something like: “Thank you, really, but no thank you, I can’t.”

As it turns out, what the king in the pantry had heard Bilbo say was: “Woe is me! Would that I could accept, O Great and Generous King, but alas. I am bound to a loony old witch-master, and sadly, I am too polite to ask for any favors.”

So now you can comprehend why what is about to happen happened just the agonizing way that it did.

Bilbo did not feel particularly comfortable with the look of purpose that had come so swiftly-and-surely upon his cellarmate. From where he stood at the foot of the ladder – watching, with some reservation, the king ascend – our hobbit did not care for the challenging forward-jut of Thorin’s jaw at all.

The burglar stood there in the smashed honeyglass for only a few moments longer before he heard Beorn’s front door bang in a suspiciously Durinish way, said oh no, no-no-no, not happening, and followed a little too late.

Gandalf the Grey deserved a lot of things, if you want Master Baggins’s frankest opinion. (And if you don’t, perhaps you should put down this book.) After all, said wizard had dragged our formerly respectable gentlehobbit into this screaming mess on a larceny premise that was complete fabrication. He could’ve used a good stern meta-cosmical talking-to. But the strange old bird did not, perhaps, have this one coming.

He was still kneeling in the garden, picking basil and lemongrass, occasionally dabbing his forehead with a sleeve and every so often stopping to regard the basket of gathered herbs beside him.

And then he was looking at three sets of dwarven boots.

“Wizard!” Thorin snapped. Dwalin and Glóin glared behind him. They stood there, these three dwarflords, bristling wool and fur and steel like they were spoiling for a fight, throwing their ominous and exacting shadows over the snap peas and daffodils.

"Thorin Oakenshield?" Gandalf answered, not unpleasant, squinting a bit in the sun.

“I have a proclamation. I say this only once, so you would do well, old and feeble-minded as you are, to draw back your hair and hear me.”

(It would be irresponsible of me to speak on the king’s behalf here. It would certainly not be judicious to come right out and suggest that Thorin Oakenshield, Son of Thráin, Son of Thrór, did not like Gandalf. But you might infer from the way he would look sidelong at the wizard, or from the
way he would raise dispute to his every advice, or from the way he would throw snake-eyes his way across camp and positively sneer, that Thorin Oakenshield was not especially chummy with him. Especially not after the handful of disappearing acts and the affair with the Rivendell Elves.)

As for Gandalf, he had no apparent bunk with Thorin Oakenshield, barring his occasional cursing frustration with the blasted stubbornness of dwarves. So it was with a curious expression that the wizard lifted a hank of bushy white hair from each ear and said *Oh?*

Thorin proclamated. “The burglar serves you no longer!”

*Oh?* Gandalf said.

“He pledges a binding oath to Durin’s Crown. You have neither magic power nor lawful word that might supplant a royal one, and thus, from this day and all days onward, your former bond means nothing!”

*Oh?* Gandalf said.

“Your mastership,” Thorin informed him, “is ended. Be told.” Such was the declarative dwarven statement of *I’m finished.*

A horse nickered. Bombur put down his armful of lumber to clap supportively out by the woodpile. With that for an exit, and with a final arrogant flash of his contemptuous expression and a whip of his mane, the King of the Mountain (plus two scowling followers) about-faced to stride importantly away.

"I’m told," Gandalf said, and all-around very unflapped, went back to troweling at radishes.

By this time, Bilbo was standing on the porch, mouth unhinged, staring at the approaching dwarves with a distant and inarticulate dismay. They stopped on the short grass before the bear’s front steps and without pause delivered their news.

“You are free of the wizard,” Thorin was pleased to announce. He was as gloating and proud-of-himself as a cat that had just dragged in a snake.

Bilbo said *I HEARD.*

The Dwarfking must have taken the burglar’s somewhat less-than-jubilant look for the bamboozlement of sudden liberation, because he merely nodded, a gesture that both evidenced his great-and-humble mercy and sent black hair spilling over his shoulders. “There is no need for thanks,” he brushed. “Such things are trifle to a king. T’was truly nothing.”

Bilbo – who’d not been about to thank him – folded both arms and stood there under the ivy-draped porch roof, nose twitching, blinking, done for.

He stood there as Thorin, deducing that the hobbit needed a moment to process his newfound autonomy, gave him one last kindly nod and went inside, disappearing through the door in self-satisfied pomp and a sweep of that bluish coat.

He was still standing there when Gandalf came creaking up the steps some time later, patting his basket of carrots and thyme.

“I hear you’ve pledged allegiance to the Durin Crown,” the wizard said, tapping up his hat brim, breezy as a milkmaid’s oh-hello.
Master Baggins, yet cross-armed, sucked in his cheek and bit on it. The hobbit’s anxious stare fixed far-off on nothing tangible in that thorny treeline. “It does increasingly seem that way.”

“Strange notions dwarves come up with,” Gandalf observed. He sighed and gazed pleasantly over the green yard in the late morning sun. Then, more portentously, with a flick of that low-fire warning catching in his large eye: “I hope you know what you’re doing, Bilbo.”

Bilbo, who was suddenly rather annoyed with Gandalf (whose fault was it the formerly admirable Baggins ended up flung here in the way-out-wherever telling lies?), did not much feel like accepting this feeble attempt at council. He sucked breath that puffed his shoulders. He went a little sharp and a little spiky, as Shire pride is wont to make a Shireling go.

“I know what I’m doing,” he snapped.

“Oh,” Gandalf tutted, weatherworn robe dragging behind him, savoring the playgame delight of repeating his warnings over-and-over-and-over-again. “So I hope.”

My dear, Master Baggins is not a prideful creature. But even if he hadn’t been exactly biting at the bit to swear his sword away before, he was certainly going through with it now.

Given the glittery grandeur of Mountain Dwarves and their love for performing, Bilbo had expected more ritual. They’d slice his palm with an ominous dagger, he thought, or make him drink something dubious, or best Dwalin in single combat (not happening), or burn a tattoo into him, or tie weights on his legs and chuck him in a lake – honestly, who knew with a bunch of dwarrow? But there was none of that. They simply gathered around in the misty moor that evening, with the fog rolling in from Mirkwood ahead of them. (Gandalf was not invited.) There was a considerable deal of capitalized speeching. They said some words, sang a bit, and that was all.

Since he was not permitted to speak the Khuzdul, Ori did it for him by proxy; all Bilbo had to do was effect an appropriately serious expression and bow his head with suitable fealty on cue. And if it didn’t seem quite real to him, with one knee in the cold weeds of Beorn’s backyard and his fist balled up over his heart, at least it did not also seem especially momentous. Besides the occasionally bothersome minor details of being the Dwarfking’s apparent New Favorite Person, nothing much even changed.

Bilbo, who was rather getting the hang of adventuring, decided that he did in fact know what he was doing. There wasn’t nearly as much complication to it as you might think. All in all, he thought he was doing fine.

My dear, he did not have any idea just what it was he had done.

Bilbo Baggins came-to without any notion he’d fallen asleep.

The writer had nodded off mid-edit on a spread of papers. There was an ink splotch on his hand and a crick in his neck. No daylight could invade the windowless suite, but it must have been early, for beyond the dark door shushed footsteps of servants and the clatter of breakfast dishes being passed here-and-there. Kili was still passed-out behind him on the sitting room couch.

“Wake up,” Bilbo nettled. He pulled off the throw he’d tossed over him last night and shook Prince Durin’s socked foot. After an inordinate amount of time, Kili sat up, wordless and bedraggled,
rubbing his paint-smeared eyes with the backs of both hands. “Come on, then. You can’t lie about all morning. Don’t you have acting-king business to do?”

The dwarf blinked, yawned weakly, and spent the next few minutes fingernailing kohl-stained sleep from the ducts of his eyes. “Not a very exciting job, acting-king,” he said, flicking a pebble somewhere else. “You’ve got to act like you might king, but you can’t actually king because you’re not the king.”

“You’ll not get very far complaining about your job to me, Prince of Erebor.”

“Can I complain about my head, then? I drank way too much wine.”

“That’d be something to think of while you’re doing the drinking. Here, have some water. Besides. You’ve new residents, and shouldn’t you check in on them?”

“You don’t just drop by uninvited on a dwarrowdam. Honestly, Bilbo.” He swallowed the glass down and set it aside. “You’re a complete gourd.”

The lad sat for a little while longer, pulling on the boots Bilbo dropped at his feet. Then, with a lazy dog sigh, Kíli threw himself off that extravagant sofa and into a lionlike yawn. His arms stretched recklessly over his head.

“I’ll tell you what,” the prince told him what, downing the rest of a cold teacup off the abandoned cart, making a halthefhearted effort to flatten his pillow-frizzed hair. Quick as a wink, the thin silver crown was upon him again. “I’ll go buzz around the halls and throw some majestic Durin disapproval about. You sit tight. Squeeze another hour in. Get Tori the rest of the way out of that book. Once I find them, I’ll send up some friends to show you around. Then I’ll come find you for lunch,” he concluded, promising vaguely, “and I’ll have a surprise.”

Bilbo didn’t get to ask what it was before Kíli was taking a big stride into the hallway, shutti ng the door behind him.

And he didn’t have time to do much but dress and eat a couple of last night’s pastries before someone was knocking at it again.

Bofur’s arms were around him before Bilbo even really saw the dwarf. Then Bifur’s, then Bombur’s. Balin and Glóin, they told him, were with the king’s travelling party; Ori and Dori and Nori were working; and Óin was up to his arms in consultations until three, else they all would’ve been in the morning lineup to squeeze Master Baggins, too.

His friends were itching with news. His friends, yes, though they were hardly like he’d left them – they were all dwarven lords now – merchant princes, who impressively looked the part but still whistled and giggled and snapped their fingers like jays.

Bofur, to begin with, had taken a position in the Royal Mechanics, where he refitted the creaking old Erebor siege constructs for easier use (less likelihood of gobbling your arms). He was finely dressed in rich reds his cousin made, and the dusty trapper’s hat that so defined him had been hung on an honorable coat rack. Those lopsided braids, too, had been calmed into twins tails that flopped down his back whenever he moved too fast. And yet - though the tinkerer had turned engineer - you could see his pockets were stuffed with pop snappers and jacks. Toys, Bofur added with particular pleasure, were now his pastime, and since feeding the family was no longer a concern, he gave them out for free. This made him quite popular, as you would imagine. And if anyone thought the good Mechanic a little odd for referring to his clanking war machines as Nagi, Dagi, Dusty, and Old Gilda, they kept it to themselves.
Bifur was now a much-sought-after tailor for Erebor’s nobility, and you might recognize his craftsmanship about the halls wherever you went. He’d greeted Bilbo just as excitedly as ever, all spastic hand gestures and exuberance so friendly you’d hardly mind not understanding a lick of what he said. (Khuzdul never sounded so jovial and welcoming as it did when this fluffy housecat of a dwarf spoke it - for it was not, my dear, a very jovial or welcoming language). Bofur translated what was not conveyed, as much as he could keep up with the rapid babbling-brook of his cousin’s conversation.

As for Bombur, he had, to no one’s surprise, opened his lifelong dream of a bake shop – which had, to no one’s surprise, been a huge success. Alas, he’d sacrificed the moustache after catching it afire in a clay oven, but had found a very handsome fur cap for the small bare patch on the top of his head (which was never very noticeable to begin with). And he had kitchen companionship in his life’s partner, Tannä – whom Bilbo had never met, but felt he knew from all the funny stories doting Bombur constantly told. The two spent most of their time pushing rows of tiny cakes back and forth, alternately shaping and frosting; this became quite a show when they began to get on each other’s nerves, and their customers came for the repartee as much as the dessert.

They’d brought him presents, too, of course. Bombur brought two pies, walnut and yam (because he could not decide which one came out better). Bofur brought him a little vial of something he called bottled flame (it was a tube of oily liquid that might be snapped against a charcoal tapper, making one clever wink of fire for candle-lighting or what-have-you). Bifur had tailored him some properly-fitting dwarven tunics. He had even been brought a pair of real dwarfish boots in his size, fur-topped and jangly. Bilbo tried them on to be polite.

“Well,” our writer lied just as politely, grimacing as he tripped over his own heel and had to be caught by Bombur. He sat rightaway down to pluck them off. “Maybe we’ll just give these a try later.”

So, barefooted, our former burglar set off with his old friends. They had quite a good time poking about. Bofur’s workshop was a wee bit too hazardous to be chattering in, but the proudly showed off a bolt-firing implement he’d fixed along the walls. (“I call this one Mad Baggins,” he beamed. Bilbo ooh-ahhed appropriately.) Bifur let him get a sneak-peek at an unopened banquet hall he had just sewn grandiose tapestry for. (Bilbo gratuitously praised the silvery stitchwork and noted how it shone in the dark.) They even dropped by Bombur’s bakery to meet sweet-petite-teensy Tannä, who was indeed barely larger than a hobbit herself, yet indeed nothing remotely close to teensy. (She yelled at Bilbo for drinking out of the wrong cup, nicely, then yelled at Bombur for not bringing him a fancy one, less nicely).

By this time, Kíli was looking for him. A tight-lipped courtier waited while Master Baggins bid goodbye to his friends, then led the way to the Durin Suite, where the young prince was already waiting in the family solar.

It was cozy, by dwarfish standards: cloudy, comforting stone; longer than it was wide; with pretty copper chandeliers and a smooth round blackwood table fixed in the center. You could smell the candles: lavender, charcoal, something sweet and dark. There was one large window, fully glassed, with a sill plenty broad enough to hold cushions for lounging. There was a bookcase overflowing with a bowl of ripe emeralds. Along the walls, little sunken shelves where you might find tusk vases, carven boxes, a small menagerie of wooden animal figurines. From the ceiling, tapestries of blacks-and-blues. On the floor, a great soft brown bear pelt. And on the far side, silent now: one large scoop of fireplace that reminded Bilbo of the mouth of some ancient sea cove, lit by the castaways it had saved.

For all the gemstones and that plush rug, it was bizarrely homey for a royal room – even looked
lived-in. The solar was reserved for the Durins to socialize amongst themselves, free from the public and the staff. But if you knew the same Durins Bilbo did, and if you were in a search to describe them, “homey” would not spring to mind.

The courtier announced Master Baggins with a brisk knock – got dismissed via a friendly “Yes, I know; it’s open! Come on in!” – and with no further input, departed. Bilbo came on in.

Kíli was tilting laddishly back in one of the dining chairs, arches of his tall boots wedged on the table edge, blue surcoat tails slung over his bent knees and arms folded behind his head, hair pulled up in a messy tail. He looked shockingly humble, given how he appeared the night before. The big round Durin ears stood in full unobstructed pride, and they made this Prince of Erebor seem very childlike there on either side of his dimpled cheeks. He’d dropped his crown right on the place setting, where it glistened, seeming odd and venemous and dead.

“Oh, good!” Kíli noticed, twisting ’round to regard Bilbo with one elbow slung over the back of the seat. The afternoon sun hit him sidelong and he smiled just as sunnily. “You’re here!”

He sprang up, and when he did, Bilbo noticed who else was seated at the table.

“May I present,” the dwarf said, joshingly decorous, as she stood. “Prince Dís of Thráin of Thrór, also known as Dís of the Drakespaw, also known as Lady Dís, Lord of the Blue Mountains, also known as my mum.”

Generally, and you might have noticed: when someone starts going on-and-on in poetic dressage about the glory of the Durins, extolling in flowery descriptors their magnificence and sagacity, aren’t-they-something, Bilbo’s inclination is to attach a lukewarm et cetera, et cetera, blah-blah-blah.

It’s not that he disagreed with every positive assessment of the ruling family. They were certainly a striking and orotund tribe, it’s true, even if they were also less-mentioned, less-flattering things. It’s just that the extent of the praising seemed a bit excessive to a humble hobbit, and the frequency was simply not healthy. Bilbo belonged to the firm and old-fashioned school of thought that maintained one should not be called majestic more than twice in a day.

Well, Bilbo’s philosophy on most things the Folk exalt as majestic: I’ll believe it when I see it, and he hadn’t seen Lady Dís until today.

She wasn’t blah-blah-blah, at all.

She was gorgeous.

Prince Dís at the far side of the table looked like a fairytale winter’s queen. She was most certainly tall, and she was inexorably lovely. That same proud, steady Durin gaze; the same patient, self-assured watchfulness. She had Thorin’s outrageous black hair, tragedy-silvered, too glossy and magnanimous to be called anything but a mane, its heft held in-check by one decorative ivory clasp at the back of her head. She had Thorin’s stature, too –neck high, shoulders back in her furred snow-blue gown, lids halved. But this is where the overlap ended, for the dam’s bearing was entirely her own. It was not so grand, not so dramatic, not so insistent on impressing by measure of its might. Prince Dís saw little need to flaunt her might. She was who she was, which ought to be good enough for anyone. Her hands and arms were unknotted; her gate, slightly tired, took its time. Her beauty was not as glamorous, not as deliberate. She sat her skin more comfortably. She would even slouch upon occasion, a warrior weariness settling upon her muscles; she had let herself after much struggle and two children get a little bit fat; and that clever face, lofty as it was, might even be approachable when it smiled.
She was to-herself and straightforward and smart. You could find in her more of Fili’s wry sureness than you’d find in any the other Durins. One of Kíli’s famous dimples stopped the neatly-tapered sideburn of her left cheek. And even if her stare was not, he found, star-cut opal as the dwarfish skalds would swear, it was still Durin blue.

Truly, Bilbo thought her the loveliest lady of any people he had ever seen. All his dwarfish manners flew from him. He took knee there in his proper dwarfish doublet, all white-and-gold and glittery, and he placed a proper hobbit kiss upon the prince’s signet ring.

Dís gasped. She twisted her hand away, and in the space it took Bilbo to register he was no longer holding it, propriety smacked our Shire yokel in his face.

(Cultural Note: To the Mountain Folk, who believe their mouths and voices and song and language more sacred than anything else, kissing of any sort is not considered a public affair. They actually get quite bent over it. Mind, hobbits don’t take kindly to rosy youth slobbering over each other on the tavern floor, but they’d hardly drop their jaws at a little harmless canoodling.)

(Note on the Cultural Note: Since you are already wondering how it is Master Baggins knows this fact, here is a smidgen of advice: take care mixing humans and dwarves. You should’ve seen the appalled faces on thirteen adult dwarf males when they concluded their Laketown negotiations, lifted a toast, and were summarily surrounded by the inebriated celebrations of several thousand of the most unashamed, consistently amorous species in Arda. Nori had actually covered up Ori’s eyes.)

You know enough now to realize why Bilbo thought he was in for it. She was still, you realize, a Durin lion. Hers was merely a more relaxed ferocity, a stately cat that had already proven her claws. But after that spot of wide-eyed blinking - just long enough for Master Baggins to rockslide into profuse apology - Dís showed her teeth and she laughed.

“I hadn’t taken hobbits for a lascivious people,” the lady-prince announced, glancing sidelong at her son. Dís-of-Thráin had a sated and blunt and warmly low voice, like cooked caramel; it was smokier than her brother’s, a bit rougher, not as declarative. The strange memory of her palms, smooth and alarming moon’s faces, lingered on his fingers. “But I have been told they are full of surprises.”

This was Thorin’s sister, and he really should not think of her in such a way, but Bilbo could never help noticing beauty. Perhaps that, my dear, has been his problem all along.

“Boggins! You’re embarrassing,” Kíli cried, groaning as though he had done it on purpose just to humiliate him.

“I am so sorry,” Bilbo was stammering, kneeling there on the floor. He shot up all at once. You might not have seen the dust on his gray trousers, but you’d certainly see the horror on his face. “It’s been years since I’ve even seen – let alone entertained – dwarfish royalty, and I’m not as practiced as I once was. Hobbit propriety, I’m afraid, is very different from dwarf propriety – it’s just, you’re the first dignitary I’ve met here, and my etiquette is rusty.”

The Lord of Ered Luin brushed one hand through the air dismissively, her palm egretlike. It held no rings but for the boxy Durin sigil, and Bilbo realized with deadly curiosity that creaseless texture must have been a burn scar. “That’s all right,” she told him. “I enjoy a little scandal.” Then, pausing: “Don’t do that in front of Thorin.”

“Or Fíli, for that matter.” Prince Kíli added was already eating, hand stuck in a pewter saucer of sugared fig seeds, crunching away in a manner not befitting an heir to a throne. “He’s gone territorial. A couple measly threats to the Durin Line, one little wife, and he’s turned into some kind of Lineage Protector.”
They seated themselves at the table, then – the elder prince first, the younger second, and Bilbo when standing there like a broomstick became too awkward. “Winter’s Queen,” as it turns out, may have been purple of him, but it wasn’t incorrect. Every two of them, she left the Blue Mountains to stay in the court of Erebor for a year. The official reason was to attend defense moots held by her brother, but from the way Kíli whimpered and sulked when his mother mentioned the possibility of cutting this stay short, Master Baggins suspected reality was more domestic.

“Anyway, she’s not the surprise,” the little prince tossed in. “This is.”

And he pulled up a silver platter cover, revealing a roasted bird, neck snaked beside itself, head attached.

“No, not that,” Kíli said, and pulled up the next one: bread rolls. “Where is the—? Ah, here!”

Finally he found the right tray, and sitting upon it was an overlarge green cake. The frosting was thick and buttery, the shape perfectly circular, and someone had stuck a handful of woodruff flowers on the top as though they weren’t quite sure what to do with them.

“I give you: hobbit-cake,” he declared. “Pistachio. To celebrate your arrival. Probably just as good as being at home, I bet. Here – give that knife, we’ll start with this first. Come on, Boggins! You’re not going to argue with me about getting to eat cake, are you? Oh, no, you can’t. I’m acting-king, and I want dessert. Whack! First one’s for you.”

It was ugly, to tell the truth – a dwarven approximation of what hobbit cooking should be. (Too much spice, as usual.) He said it was delicious.

“Wouldn’t Kash come,” Kíli wondered, leaning over to help himself after Bilbo had mumbled enough thank-yous.

His mother’s brows hopped with unsurprised and unhidden disapproval. No kohl or paint wore she – only her attractive expression, contemplative and exacting. She seemed somehow satisfied her prediction had come true. “You know our new maid Durinbride doesn’t entertain,” Dís observed thinly, dismantling her serving with a stab of fork. An aside to Bilbo: “If the poor thing got any shier she would cease to be flesh-and-blood entirely.”

The he-prince pouted. “Did you tell her I brought hobbit-cake?”

“I didn’t tell her a word, son of mine. That dormouse turns heel and runs whenever she sees me coming.”

Master Baggins was about to interject with something clever here, for he was having trouble keeping up, but Kíli beat him to the punch.

“More hobbit-cake for us,” the young prince reasoned, though was clearly a little disappointed about it. He explained for Bilbo’s benefit, swinging his hair tail out of the way before it dipped the plop of frosting. “Kashet. She’s Fi’s wife. Poor soul.”

Dís snorted, not that Fíli of Erebor needed much defending. The string of sharpened opals along her neck were shaped like arrowheads and listened in angled sunlight like the face of a lake. “Indeed: poor soul to have married my own bold-hearted, beautiful firstborn, Heir Apparent, and to insist on having the personality of a baked cut of cod.”

“You just don’t like her much. She’s a perfectly fine dwarrowdam,” the Kíli assured our writer, “not at all like cod.”
“It is not that I dislike her. It is that I love my people more than I like or dislike anyone.” She stabbed her cake with righteous presentation. “And pardon me, Bilbo, but as I am sure you already know, we are a bullheaded folk. No whispery-throated diplomats are we. And no Queen Under the Mountain she. Not unless she learns to pull the empty smile from her face, stand her ground, and chirrup about something other than how grand everything is. Grand rugs, grand walls, grand pots of dirt. She’d call a glass of water grand if a Durin gave it to her. I am not comfortable with the eventuality of my son the king with a grinning mouse as his closest consul.”

Kíli rolled his eyes over a mouthful of pistachio. “Oh, come on – of course she doesn’t talk much to you – you scare the daylights out of her. Besides, that’s a losing battle. Fi is hopeless. Just sits around like this.” He acted it for Bilbo: chin dripping into his fists, elbows spread gawkily across the table, eyes swimming, panting like a bitch in the full throes of puppy love. “Drooling at her. It’s pathetic.”

“Put your tongue back in your mouth, Son-of-Durin,” his mother chastised. Kíli retracted the offending tongue to pick lazily through his plate.

Bilbo, at the bizarreness of this disclosure, found his thinking mind again. The writer tucked his napkin into his collar, terribly hobbitish of him, and had arranged the flower buds in a nervous arc around their cake plate. If he looked into the polished Erebor silver, he could see his flick war-bead hanging around a distorted face. “Is this the same Fíli? I rather thought the prince had a pretty proud philosophy about matters of the heart. What was that awful thing he’d say? *I am no she-kitten’s paw!*” he remembered, blustering his best. “*I am the Heir of the Lonely Throne! I am My Own Dwarf!*

Lady Dís sipped her tea with high eyebrows, recognizing the foolish words of her beloved, stupid son. “It didn’t take him long at all.”

“Of course all the stylish young dwarrowdames about were squealing after a crown prince. *Prince Feee-leeeee!*” Prince Kíli shrieked, waving his napkin wildly about, fanning himself as though he might palpitate right there at the family table. “*Prince Fíli’s so dree-mee! I could be a Durinbride! I pity the poor servants; practically had to sponge up after them.*”

Dís cringed. She was too old to be scandalized by sex jokes, and Bilbo had spent too much time around Dwalin to choke at colorful descriptions of various genital functions anymore. “Dwarrowdames do not ‘squeal,’ son of my womb. Any there were not as many suitors as you say.”

“They’re going to have five children or something,” he muttered, eyes rolling, like it was an outrageous, improbable number.

His mother-prince took a touch of pity at that. She looked at her lastborn lovingly, patting his long forearm – her boyish, ungainly pup of a son, funny and funny-looking, whom she in her regal suaveness so transparently adored. If dwarfish attractiveness is measured by one’s physical closeness to Durin I, it was no secret Kíli – with his bare face and limby lope and sweet, buttoned nose – not blue-eyed or black-haired or aquiline or especially broad – was not considered ideal. Bilbo wondered, what with Dís and her brothers having been adulated as a litter of bloodline-saving beauties, if the sting of his undwarfly appearance stung worse. But if the Folk of Erebor were at all disappointed to have one blond-headed and one beardless child come from their ravishing she-prince, first female born to her long kingly line, they dared not say so. (Provided they were keen on keeping their tongues fixed in their mouths.)

“My son tells me you’ve finished your accounting of the reclamation of Erebor, Bilbo,” Prince Dís noted. Her traditional braids, one for war and one for status, slithered through the queenly snow bear fur around her neck.
“Indeed I have. Well. Not, you know, finished. There’s a flurry of editing to be done. And I still have to consult my sources.”

“I look forward to enjoying it.”

“Oh.” Our writer was suddenly anxious. He dabbed his mouth and tried not to gulp. “I look forward to you – ah – enjoying it, I hope.”

“At the very least. It should be—” A considerate pause. “—revelatory,” she settled, “to hear an outsider’s perspective.” The dam picked up her knife and retrieved another cut of green cake. “Thorin’s recounting of events hedges toward the dramatic.”

Does it, Bilbo said.

Prince Dís minded her steaming black tea with a slow, sage blink. “I do love my brother, but he is a bit of a prima donna.”

There was a gap in the conversation so that Kíli might annihilate the jug of goat’s milk. His hands chased but couldn’t right it in time, and the spill sluiced a section of table. Dís merely twisted her black fur slippers out of the way and kept nursing tea.

“Don’t you dare bother a servant for that.”

“I’m not; I’m cleaning it; get out of my feathers, mum.”

Bilbo, standing to toss his napkin over the mess (because shouldn’t you be extra-helpful in front of a pair of princes), put the arch of a foot on something mean. Hopping backwards, a hushed curse on his lips, he bent to find the aggressor and came up with a wooden figurine.

“What’s this?” he asked, wincing back into his seat. Who’s responsible was a better question, because it was clearly, hand-carved and a bit clumsy, a crane.

“I see Thráin has claimed another victim,” Dís hummed to herself. She accepted the bird, which had obviously toppled from its shelf to migrate here. It was – like the warrior bears and maned cats and saddled rams waiting in their battalion – exaggerated, albeit loveable. The prince turned it about with tenderness bubbling in that smug half-smile. “My father made them. He was quite the lover of animals, though you’d not know it, fierce and furious as he also was. Ugly things.”

Bilbo massaged his smarted sole while Kíli wiped up the milk. “A bit, maybe. But you can see the care put into them. My father painted the same way. Portraits – Mother at the table, Mother reading, Mother pruning the tree in the yard – nothing imaginative. None of them were very good. My favorite work he ever did.”

“Ai. We love our fathers most when they aren’t perfect, as we should, because they never are. My brother used to play parade,” she recalled, setting Thráin’s creature between the tough-skinned bread and the roasted pheasant her son had started prying at. “Used to leave them strewn about the floor. They tormented the rest of us. You’d hear grandfather yelp in the middle of the night and know he’d just found the boar with his foot.”

“Your brother, majesty, or you?” he teased – carefully – as carefully as one teases a friendly dragon, he imagines. “I can’t picture Thorin Oakenshield doing something so frivolous as lining up animals.”

She puffed. “Thorin was scolding the king for lollygagging by the time he was ten. I meant Frerin.”

Being a writer – and thereby being a deft and persistent interviewer – Master Baggins already knew
there had been a third Durin in this generation, famous and spoiled as the rest. He had even learned from Glóin where it was their third prince died. But he had never, being polite, asked a Durin.

“May I ask,” Bilbo dared, gently, “how it happened?”

Lady Dís looked waterier for a moment; her throat tightened while the rock-blue eyes went ghostly. Not pain, precisely, but a retraction. A fear, internal and easy enough to dodge – to side-step – to not-deal-with – the same way one avoids a woodpile snake. You could see from the way her teeth touched it was a question she might conceivably leave unanswered. Then, glancing up, stiffly prepared to deny him, the Lord of Ered Luin found Master Baggins had not been prodding about her dead brother but pointing tactfully at her resting hand.

She reacted as he hoped she would: Dís smiled. The threatening memory veered left and was already locked away. “You should have learned better by now than to ask a dwarf about her battle scars. Do you want to sit here for an age?”

“For a good story, with a lovely prince? You know, I shouldn’t so much mind.”

Dís was flattered despite herself. She did not answer right away, but tossed her napkin to Kíli, and took another slice. “Your hobbit is charming, my son. I begin to understand why they say Bilbo of the Golden Tongue.”

The hobbit’s thumb rooted in his cheek and his finger touched his brow and he skewed up his face like a brat. “Do they say that. Really?”

“Upon occasion, when there is reason to remember you.”

Bilbo laughed preposterously. “I’m sorry – I’m being rude,” he fobbed, flattening lapels he did not have. The gold ladder of braids that held his jacket breast together tripped the fingers up. “It’s just that I’ve never been a very good talker at all. Small talk, that is. Party talk. Don’t see the point. Not at all related, I’m depressing at parties.”

By that time, Kíli had finished cleaning and rejoined them with a heavy flop into his chair. “I thought he was going to be a terrible bore, yes. Less of a burglar, more like a schoolmaster. Like—” A big disciplinarian hobbitish huff, and those arms folded, and princely eyebrows scowled low. “Let go of my teacups, that’s my grandda’s grandda’s second cousin’s sugar cup, I’ll have you know! Prince Who of Where-Now? I don’t care if you’re the Prince of Rohan with a hundred horses trotting up the hill; get your stomping feet off my couch! He was mean to me, mum.”

“You could use a little meanness,” his mum supposed. “You might have come out better.”

Kíli scrabbled at that. Dís, who’d not forgotten they’d side-stepped Bilbo’s original question, smiled at him.

“Dragonfire,” she said, holding out her palms for perusal with no trace of shame, the delivery of a fact. They were like burnished pearl. “It’s not for nothing I was named Drakespaw.”

“A warrior, too? Forgive me; I’ve never seen a dwarrowdam warrior,” he confessed, though she hadn’t seemed to mind. “I’d never seen a dwarrowdam at all, to my knowledge, until this journey.”

The she-prince’s brows lifted again and her smile changed its character, like he had said something ignorant and a little bit cute. “We are females, Master Halfling; so we are all warriors.”

“I fear hobbit females are different from dwarf females.”
“It is probably your males that are different.” (That wasn’t suggested all too kindly.) “But we are not wholly unlike your people. Like yours, we prefer to protect our domiciles than wander aimlessly. Like yours, we do not often deign to leave our nation. Unlike yours, a dwarrowdam is not kept from danger. She is not coddled like some fragile second-race, but in her wisdom and long-sight, and in acknowledgement of her importance, she does not make a habit of wantonly seeking her death. Our place among our people, Bilbo, is not to die for them, but to preside over what only we are able to create. It is no surprise you had not seen us.”

“But you—” A hobbit doesn’t let anything drop. “—are a fighter, anyway.”

She shrugged, and that prideful gesture was without doubt Thorin’s (or perhaps it was Thráin’s): the shoulder lift of dismissing feats like they were naught, like you might do it again at any time, not much trouble at all. “I am a prince. For a dwarf prince, there is no responsibility more important than the protection of our dames. So when there came a dragon, I faced it. It was I who shut the golden door. Some of me,” she said, beholding her hands playfully, “held it a little longer than the rest.”

He imagined it, then – not because he wanted to – but because he was a writer and could not do otherwise: the wash of the flame, the dwarf prince welded to the door, the pain of tearing her off.

“Oh, she’s a fearsome warrior. Uncle tells the story much better. If she’d had a little more time,” Kíli bragged, spearing a tiny potato, talking with his mouth full, “mum would’ve shot Smaug right out of the air. She’s being modest.”

Lady Dís hummed to herself again, trying to appear unaffected, pleased by her son’s boast. “One of us has to be.”

“I knew that Durin wisdom everyone keeps talking about had to have gone somewhere,” the writer ah-hahed. “It clearly wasn’t anywhere around me. Where were you when I had to talk a dozen-plus-one dwarves out of storming up to the mountain and shouting Oi, slug, come out and fight!”

The prince chuckled. “I might have gone, if I knew he was serious. No one expected my brother to ever reach the door.”

And Bilbo hadn’t much time to think on that – to feel his brow dent, to dislike the statement, to parse through what it was she meant – before Dís, powerful and unpretentious, went on.

“But I thank you, Bilbo, for your question. It’s nice to be asked things once in a while.” Her wintry eyes flickered to Kíli beside her. “I like your hobbit more than I thought I would.”

“Did you expect not to?” said hobbit joked.

Dís did not answer – not but for a flash of sidelong eye – the lion who knows how to wait in the grass.

It occurred to Bilbo just then he had absolutely no inkling as to what sorts of things Thorin might have said about the journey, about the company, and about him. It occurred to Bilbo that he might’ve been speaking to someone who’d been fully prepared to disapprove of his presence in the Lonely Mountain, not to mention disapprove of Master Baggins personally. And it also, jarringly, occurred to Bilbo that perhaps Thorin did not have cause to think so highly of him anymore.

He had always sort of assumed the king would get over it one of these days. Oh, our burglar had fired back some angry finality of his own in those unanswered messages over the years – at the time, in the pique of bristly injustice, it felt like he meant it. But all those huffy digs and dramatic fine! farewell!s came with a certain understanding that such flair is merely how they were meant to fight.
Dwarves hold infamous grudges, but they are also theatrical and over-attached; it wasn’t unreasonable to surmise that the excitement of planning an old friend’s visit would shake out whatever thorn Thorin had sat on. Bilbo never expected there was something he might do or say that could not be repaired.

Surely, he figured, Dwalin wouldn’t have made the extra stop otherwise. Thorin would not have arranged or allowed that. He would probably have just mailed a ceremonial axe glittering with the Khuzdul inscription no.

So he wouldn’t be here, would he. If the king really did not want him to come back.

Except it occurred to Bilbo that, for all he knew, Prince Kíli – not Thorin – had been the one to read the writer’s letters and say yes.

There was a docile knock-knock-knocking at the solar door.

“Aha!” Kíli, suddenly awake and as tickled as a munchkin, slapped his palm into the table, jackrabbiting up. “There’s my guest of honor.”

His hair bounced gleefully as the prince trotted outside, slipping from sight to speak to whoever it was; the latch didn’t quite take behind him. Effulgent, effusive Kashet had shown after all, Bilbo supposed. He glanced inquisitively at Dís, looking for a cue, but the unflustered Blue Mountains prince only sat in her spot, stripping some fowl onto an empty plate.

The door eased back open.

Kíli stepped in with a dark little girl squirming in his arms.

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Here is one Bilbo Baggins didn’t get around to sending:

*Dear Thorin,*

Well, are you dead or not? It’s been mostly a year now and I haven’t heard so much as one sorry peep from you; am a bit concerned there is some sort of peril. Have you lost your last pen? Has there been a terrible parchment shortage in Erebor? Is your castle currently besieged? (The gap is entirely understandable, if you are locked away in an elfish tower somewhere.)

I’ve only just sent a letter, so there’s no real reason for me to be writing another. Except I realize I forgot, in the last one, to mention that it’s dawned on me I am a very selfish person, and I feel really terrible about it.

Apart from that, nothing to report.

Anyway, as we say in the Shire: I hope whatever has you busy has you smiling.

When you do break out of that tower, steal some paper, and find a functional pen, please write. Let me know what good and bad has happened. I may be selfish, but I worry. A thief can only take so much quiet, you know.
Maybe you’ve also felt this kind of happiness before.

“Surprise,” Kíli cheered. The child’s pale eyes stared uninvitingly from the midst of ram-black hair. “This is Bélarûh.”

Nobody had to tell him. He was sure he already knew.

“My favorite cousin, isn’t she sweet. Fit-thrower extraordinaire, and resident Durinbaby,” the prince added, bouncing his unfriendly armful, making their forerunner tsk at the nonsense term. “Want to hello at a hobbit, chubchub? Can you say Boggins?”

She was no bigger than four. The girl in Durin blue would push her small denying hand into Kíli’s face if it got too close, holding him at bay. That was her style of royalty. That was the force of importance you would come to recognize, if you knew the Durins as Bilbo did. And the brow; and the exigency; and the nose, with the bridge that would wrinkle once when it sneered; and the cool stare; and the mane, combed laboriously and let free well past her shoulders. Such hair on a baby seemed unreal. Her feet under the dark fur robes were bundled in small, compact boots, wool and hide, and she would stamp them the moment you set her down. More than anything else, there was the scowl.

And Bilbo was so very happy, you see. It is hard to explain how much so. A demolishing happiness – a dangerous one. He was so happy that in this moment he could not be sure there had ever been such a thing as unhappiness. He was so happy there were no words to answer for it, and no way for this strange, stinging triumph to be written about. He was so suddenly and so choked full with happiness that it felt this joy had cancelled his whole heart.

“Don’t fuss over her,” Dís complained. “She’ll never do anything for herself if you all insist on toting her about everywhere.”

“I can’t believe I kept my mouth shut. I was bursting at the seams to tell you. I’m proud of myself – aren’t you proud of me, Beelah?” Miniature fists ineffectively hammered against Kíli’s chest. “She doesn’t have much commonspeak yet,” he got out, laughing as the little one proceeded to do her best to beat him senseless. Bélarûh didn't like being shown off. His teeth clacked when a tiny, punitive hand hit under his chin. “But she does want down. She’s very shy.”

The babe’s cheeks were the only thing that looked properly childlike about her: plump and round and dimpled. She shoved her palm heel into the prince’s, pushing his face away on a mouthful of Khuzdul. “Kíli,” she grunted, not aware of how silly her small voice sounded when it was trying its best to boom. “Dunudul, khidu. Khidukhidukhidu. Be told!”

The Lord of Ered Luin chuffed. “Be told! says the child. She didn’t get that from me. Now, now, now. Hopeless thing.”

Prince Kíli finally gave up and sat her down. And like a ghost, Thorin’s child was slapping across the stone and darting under the table and behind the tapestries and gone.

“Stone help the girl. I never coddled you like that.”
“Of course not! Uncle says you let us run wild.”

“I let you make up your own little minds. You didn’t need to be carried and cajoled every moment of
every day. You learned to do things for yourselves. I don’t know how hobbits raise their families,
Bilbo,” Dís noted, shaking her sugared fork, “But they’ve ruined her for the rest of us, these
Durinsons. I wash my hands. All there’s left for me to do is hope Mahal prevents the day the child of
my brother sits beneath a crown; she would be twice the tyrant in the Lonely Throne.”

Bilbo said I can’t believe.

Bilbo said I’m so happy for you.

Bilbo said I can’t believe you didn’t tell me.

“I almost did!” Kíli said, thumping back down. He tried to coax her out of hiding with Thráin’s
wooden crane, but she was having none of that, and before long, the prince forfeited. “Just yelled it
from the wall. Held her over it and brandished her. Look what I got!”

Lady Dís, cutting a piece of cake for her niece, did not chuckle. She divvied a generous chunk and
set the plate under the table, leaving it as one would for a cub. “A daughter is not something a dwarf
writes in a letter, Bilbo. I hope you are not offended.”

No, Bilbo said.

No, oh no, not at all. How could I be? Bilbo said.

I’m just so surprised, you know, Bilbo said. I’m so glad.

“There was a big celebration! First Durin born since our triumphant return to Erebor.” Kíli laughed a
high, snickering laugh, the kind you use to convince friends of some cockamamie story they won’t
believe. “It was wild. We painted her itty-bitty baby-self up in gold and Uncle presented her to the
Mountain. Fi, being the principal heir, got to read her lineage from the banner. I don’t think you
understand; this is a big banner. There was a three-day’s-long song. Try to get that out of your head!
Bofur set this huge charcoal dragon on fire. I got drunk.”

She’s—

“Fat as a turkey,” Dís snorted.

I was going to say beautiful, Bilbo said.

Bilbo said some other things, too, and he was sure they said some back. Eventually, Bélarûh edged
out of her tapestry fortress to retrieve the cake Dís set out; if you want another one, went her royal
aunt’s terms of engagement, you’ll sit here like a dwarf, not a cat in the curtains; and she accepted,
but grumpily so. Kíli grabbed her little boot as she scaled the chair just to make it more difficult. She
castigated him. There was a good deal more chatter. The child ate and grumbled noncommittally and
pretended to be very disinterested in Master Baggins, no-concern-to-her. Yet he could feel her eyes,
phantasmic, staring. He could feel that he must not look back.

The princes conversated, and Bilbo told some very funny jokes. But for some airy and transient
reason, my dear, none of it stuck; he couldn’t keep the rest of the memory; the swell of happiness
abolished that, too. He had only the sidelong sight of a small hand on the table and the way she had
said be told.

And then lunch was over. Dís took the unpleasant child, Kíli went sighing back to court, and Bilbo –
smile unending – waited for the second glut of friends in his lonely room, swallowing and swallowing, suffering more happiness than he could ever hold.

OOO

Dori was a Royal Treasurer. He brought his old friend three beautifully bound blank books and showed him the incredible locks on the vault door, and Bilbo was very happy for him.

Ori was a Library Captain, something you might not be familiar with if you weren’t familiar with dwarves. He brought his old friend histories he’d translated himself and showed off the deadly sword and decorous shield with which he guarded Erebor’s Tomes of Debts and Dues, and Bilbo was very happy for him.

Nori was the Master of Keys. He brought his old friend a hand-sketched map of the city and showed him a few rocky passages that probably should have stayed secret, and Bilbo was very happy for him.

Óin was Master Surgeon. He didn’t bring his old friend anything, because he had forgotten his present in the clinic, but Bilbo was very happy for him anyway.

They stayed out late. They possibly had a little too much to drink. They walked with Bilbo all the way back to his suite, which was very nice of them, considering everyone had work in the morning, and by then nobody was walking especially straight.

They said *where’s your hankie*? They gave him an affectionate hard time. Then, with a hoot and a snort and a see-you-about, they wished him goodnight, and went home.

OOO

Bilbo shut the door.

And he was really, wholly, exuberantly happy for his dear friends, that they should have made for themselves such complete joy. He really was, because he had no reason not to be – he had no right, you might say – no right at all to be a bad sport – no explanation as to why he might feel the tiniest bit tender about anything, or like a fundamental part of his beliefs about this world had been uprooted. Or forgotten, just so nonchalantly. Or like he had been set drifting – cut free, as a brave little skiff is. Or to feel like splinters, yes – ship splinters – bobbing leftover in the rainy-gray bay – with only a torn shriek of sail to remember his once-self by. To be that lost, or to feel so hopeless – or so hopelessly stupid – I mean so very completely, to-the-bones stupid – like splinters – or so white-water unbreathably sad.

Because he was very happy and not at all unhappy, Bilbo smiled, feeling the cold against his teeth in the lonesome light of his fire-thawed room. He added three fresh coals to the pit. He washed off his heels. Then, knowing nothing else to do, too happy to sleep right away, the writer settled down at his fine dwarven desk to work.

He spread out his papers on the polished marble. He looked over his notes. He fixed a few sentences
and removed a few questionable similes. He poured himself a small glass of mulled wine and he drank it with a crunchy winter pear on the side. Then, feeling gradually sleepier, he collected his writings into a satisfactory pile, blew out the gaudy candelabras, lulled the bright-eyed hearth, and crawled into his outrageous dwarf bed.

And it was strange – having just been so awake with happiness – that bold Master Baggins would be so suddenly and so staggeringly tired, so emptied at the touch of the bear fur on the mattress on the bulky, stately stone. He was too tired to even make it up properly. He did not bother changing his clothes. He dropped his fine dwarf tunic over a chair back, tugged a fine dwarf comb through his disobedient curls, and in hobbit undershirt and hobbit skin, he put himself under the covers. He set his dwarf carrying-candle beside him and looked across the echoing rock of his dwarf room.

You know, mum, he mused, what they say about Tooks in this case is true; we truly do have these horrible imaginations. Then he blew her a kiss and blew out his last gentle light, and pulled the dwarf blankets over his head.

You really are very selfish, Bilbo told himself in the mountain dark – and, in perfect happiness, went to sleep without crying at all.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Once, or so the fable goes, there was a bold little blue jay who fell from his tree.

Chapter Notes

AN IMPORTANT NOTE ON DRAGON SICKNESS IN THIS FIC: Imma lay it on you straight. I don’t much care for that plot device. I think a supernatural explanation lets the Durins off the hook for their bad behavior too easily, and I think it ultimately diminishes the complexity and heroism of a flawed character overcoming a glut of bad family legacy.

For my fic purposes, I prefer to take “Dragon Sickness” as polite dwarf-code for “Durin Problems.” This essentially means I have decelerated his movie breakdown from instant, dragony corruption and written it instead as a spiraling acceleration of stresses. So if you don’t see Thorin behaving as possessed as you might expect him to in certain scenes, know that this Dragon Sickness is less of “I’m suddenly being affected by Smaug in a supernatural sense,” and more of a gradually worsening mental affectation, à la: “I’m so stressed out I haven’t slept in a week, and that charming folie de grandeur has become a Category Five paranoid delusional episode.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Bilbo woke, his fist was full of gold.

This is not an unusual phenomenon when you fall asleep in a dwarf vault, which is exactly what our hobbit had done. One moment, he was on hands-and-knees, calves sinking into coin piles, rummaging for anything that felt like it might pass for an Arkenstone. The next moment, he was reeling with the illness of a body knowing it must put aside everything else and sleep.

*No rest,* the king had warned them, *until you find it.*

Bilbo really could not care for Thorin’s madness or his threats just then. The stone itself was going soft and dim.

He dared to make a little bed in that overspill of a vault. Our burglar chose a corner where the world’s riches heaped in hidey-hills around him. And though the smarting edges of foreign currency bruised his ribs through dwarven mithril and Laketown textile and Shire skin—and though Bilbo hardly felt safe anywhere in this place of molten ghosts—he laid himself down. He pushed mean eyes of ruby out of his way. He grabbed blearily for the thin, frayed remains of a fallen flag, did not even bother shaking it, and rolled himself up in blacks-and-blues to quiet the Mountain cold.

He could not remember shutting his eyes. He only remembered opening them, unfolding his dirty fingernails, and watching coins—Durin gold—fall across the silken sheets.
He didn’t remember any sheets, either.

And he really did not remember the old king’s portrait staring, dark-eyed, on the wall.

There were other portraits, too. Unmistakably Durin faces hung along the veined black marble, oils gathering dust on velvet canvas. Family pieces. Baby pictures. There was a boy with a wild coif of nut-brown hair and a fearsome expression, dripping chainmail and posing dramatically with a far too large war-axe—Thráin, he supposed, in youth. There was a sharp-faced, red-haired, jewel-draped dam wearing a scowl that could have only belonged on a queen, her hand folded into Thrór’s gold gauntlet—what passed for dwarfish wedding portraiture. There she was again, older now, gone white and imperious like the snow tigers of the faraway south. The queen sat with a baby in her lap, a child between her feet, and a young Thorin at her side (his identity made pitifully obvious, even in adolescence, by the way he’d tossed his hair back to gloat and look displeased). They were held in frames of daunting red jasper and poured silver and menacing gold.

It was all a little chilling, to be honest. Candles burnt back the night (if indeed it really was night); tall candelabras flowered like saplings. The chandeliers were unlit. The fireplace, its stone so gloomy as to look wet, glowed mildly with old coals.

But the cotton shirt was still dry on his skin, and the mithril mail was still cool on the cotton, and the heartlike weight of Arkenstone that once shivered in his rough jacket had been hidden away so well in this lonely mountain, he was sure no searching dwarf would ever find it.

So—warm and quiet where he had once been exhausted from cold—in a toasty bed in a chilly room—our burglar had a hard time not ducking under piled furs and drifting back off.

Until he realized—with a heart-hitting start and that indubitably Durin stare over the fireplace—he was sleeping where Thrór once slept.

Bilbo threw back the buttery sheets and crimson quilts and the furs, kicking them down wildly, and jumped out all at once—not just because the silver-maned subject of that portrait (and this mattress) had been the Last King of Erebor, but because he was Thorin’s dead grandfather, and the combination of those thoughts was enough to send him out of the chamber entirely. The coins he had clutched scattered on the ground.

Then he was backing up, backing into a shut door, fumbling the handle until he was backing through it, and Bilbo closed Thrór’s staring face away.

“What are you doing here?” a Durin voiced asked him, and the hobbit nearly lost his marbles—right out of his ears and all over the floor.

“I’m lost,” our burglar spluttered, once he’d whirled about and seen the asker of the question was not a hundred-years-dead Dwarfking but merely flesh-and-blood Thorin, uncrowned, in an aura of firelight with his bare feet firmly on the floor. Master Baggins’s words were insistent, but his heart was rabbiting away beneath the breast of dwarfish mail. “Completely.”

The king sounded mildly annoyed. He sat the saber he’d been holding upon the table he’d been sitting at, and it only just then occurred to Bilbo that Thorin had answered the door with a blade in his hand.

“You are not. This is the Royal Suite,” Thorin told him. He gestured about with the patience one uses to introduce a familiar concept to a slow learner again-and-again-and-again. The dark voice was blunted by the sedate slur of its own tiredness. This deep in the mountain, you could not even hear the petty shriek of near-winter wind. There was only the hiss and pop of the salon fireplace, boxy
and menacing. Thankfully, it was brighter in here. “You are in my rooms. You may use the others
for your own, for now.”

That said, he resumed his business behind the onyx table, which—now that Master Baggins had
calmed down enough to actually see—was heaped with a fantastical dripping of jewels.

“Nope,” the hobbit reported. “I really can’t do that.”

Thorin flung him a sharp look, as though Bilbo should know better. It was a butter knife of a
warning, though; his eyes, circled and yellow with untaken sleep, were not really in it. “You cannot
sleep in a mountain, in winter, on a pile of metal. It is lucky that I thought to find you. You will
freeze to death like that.”

The king sat forward on his elbows, and the candlestick before him, in this uneven light, eviled
everything up. It danced along the embroidery of his tunic and made golden gilding look like
snakeflesh. It caught the august angles of rings on his fingers he had not taken off. In fact, it did such
a convincing job that our burglar had to sternly remind himself the person before him was merely
Thorin, and that—no matter how poor his decisions or how strangely he had behaved, no matter
what he wore or how he spoke—the fundamental truth of that had not changed. You might be afraid
of a king; you might be especially afraid of a bad king; but if you were Master Baggins, you could
not be afraid of Thorin Oakenshield. You could not tell where the shield he’d carried so long had
gone, or where the black velvet separated itself from the hood of black hair down his back.

“Well, I cannot—can not—sleep there.”

“You can,” the Dwarfking assured him, “for I put you there.”

“It’s not a matter of permission.” He’d reflexively touched his belt and realized Sting was still clipped
there, still safe-and-sound, just as she always had been. “I’m not sleeping in Old King Thrór’s bed!”

“You are not. That one was my grandmother’s.”

Bilbo’s shudder was more apropos than he would have preferred. He had not really taken to the
silver and stone, he found, now that he was in it instead of before it. He wasn’t really a decor person.
He did not like Erebor so much.

Hunched up with folded arms, snagged in cool spell the healthy fire could not justify, our discontent
hobbit took a better look around. The king’s quarters were bold and squarish and melodramatic in the
usual dwarven way. There was a stuffed brownbear’s head mounted behind that fearsome,
ostentatious desk, snarling something awful, and a red fur rug before the fireplace that was so large
Bilbo didn’t want to ask what sort of animal had been wearing it around. The candelabras were metal
and the vases stone. The time-dulled gold banderoles with their sewn emeralds and cleft tails hung
floor-to-ceiling. Orc trophies had been arrayed on the far wall: a file of spears, a morningstar nailed
fast, a massive axe. The sword Thorin had removed left its shape behind in the dust.

It was a drawing room of sorts, he supposed. Its architecture was continuous with the bedroom he’d
woken in, dark marble and Durin blue. But the portrait in this room was not a portrait at all. It was a
lineage banner. There, in sparse and faded stitches, the entirety of Erebor’s kings—right down to
Thrór I.

Below him, fresh paint in a striking hand, not with a brush but a finger:

THORIN II

Just looked a little bit mad, is all.
It was only a partial joke: “Well, then, are there ghosts? I feel like the walls in this place are eyeballing me,” Bilbo complained, rubbing his arms, roughening that chill he could not chase out. “Get your pointy ears out of my kingdom, they say. Hobbit, go home!”

Thorin at his desk looked amused. “You are superstitious.”

“Am not. I don’t like all this tinsel, to be honest. Makes me uncomfortable. Just let me steal a few of those bear furs, is all.”

“It is not for tinsel. I put you there because you are the only one I can trust now, and I would have you keep close at hand to protect and advise me.”

So it was that Bilbo found he did not like Erebor—and he liked less the way Erebor had subsumed Thorin, opening its mouth and gulping him back up like nothing momentous had changed. He did not like the way Thorin looked in its glamorous old dark and he did not like the way it seemed to darken the king’s face from within. Most of all: he did not like the way Thorin looked, in the full force of what this place demanded of him, at everyone else.

Bilbo looked around. There were two other bronzed doors in here. One sat beyond the roaring fireplace and a statue of somebody’s hunting dog, probably the way to where the old king (and the new) slept. But the way out to the Durin Hall had been blockaded. Someone had actually upturned a rock bookshelf in front of it—so if Thorin desired to exit, he’d have to traipse right through the place where Bilbo was meant to sleep. (More to the point: so would anyone who tried to come in.)

Bilbo supposed, if he was professing to guard the king, he had better get used to being placed between Thorin and whatever he fancied for a threat.

“I need no advice now,” said the king who allowed him to leave. “So you may go back to your rest.”

Bilbo pulled his shabby Laketown jacket more snugly around himself, tightening its fat leather belt. He gravitated toward the blue-lapped coalfire to stare that stone dog in its dense eyeless face. “Oh, just like that? Just go on back to sleep, Bilbo? You shook a blade at me. I’m beyond awake. What’re you doing walking around with a sword at this hour?”

“You surprised me,” Thorin informed him. At least he was not skulking about in armor, waiting for the imaginary siege to overtake his bedroom, anticipating assassins who did not exist. The king’s shucked boots and arm guards were flung carelessly beside a cushioned bench—because sure as the open sky above the stone, nobody was coming in here to straighten up after him. His head was crownless but for the braids he wore and his feet bare but for the silver rings on his littlest toes. Thrór’s gold plate—for he could not think of it as being Thorin’s—had been hung up somewhere else, where a hobbit didn’t have to worry about it, or how amaranthine, how deathless, it made the king look. Or how chimerical, how fabulous, how historical. Or how uninviting. Or how cruel. Like fiction. Is the word.

“I am taking account of recovered artifacts,” Thorin went on, sweeping his hand over the snarl of treasure sprawled out before him. One heavy amulet had slipped the hoard to dangle nooselike over the table’s edge. “We are missing some, but several of these I remember.”

“Artifacts? That looks like a pile of jewelry.”

“It is. Of the Durin Family.”

Bilbo took a closer look, then, bouncing up on the balls of his feet in the bunnyish way of halflings. There was, set-aside from the tangled mess, a collection of polished gems and baubles. A golden
dagger with a hilt of boar tusk; a smattering of topaz; a half-broken broche leaving only the shape of a crescent moon.

“Many will need to be repaired,” the Dwarfking admitted. There was an opal the size of a sheep’s heart in his palm. “The Ered Luin gemsmiths are still the finest in the world.”

“Think I’ll put on some tea,” Bilbo figured, jostling himself more awake, yawning into the back of his hand. “Want some tea?”

“If you are not going to sleep, you may help me here.” As if his arched look wasn’t enough of a pardon, hint-hint.

The burglar pulled himself up one of those black chairs. He had to stack a few cushions on it to sit properly in the dawrven desk, but that was something he’d adjusted to by now. Less accustomed-to and less bearable was the heaviness of the dwarven candles. Some bizarre, lavish, golden melt of smells Bilbo’s hobbit-nose couldn’t get a grip on—dark vanilla and sweet lavandin and smoky balsam and orange embers—that, if he breathed too closely, made his head start whirling around.

Cuffing his jacket and shaking back the shirtsleeves, Master Baggins pushed that wicked candlestick further away so he could respire like a normal person. He picked up a random handful of links and began to untangle. They would not without clever coaxing let go. “Kind of a hairy mess, isn’t it.”

“You put it mildly. I do not know why it is dragons crave for treasures when they have no care for beauty.”

The fat gold saucer at one corner of table had originally been meant for embers, but was now swimming with loose diamonds Thorin had pitched there with little thought. Bilbo tossed a couple small ones on top. Then, unable not to, he stuck his whole hand into the spill, taking up a fistful of clear-cold wealth and giving it a brandish.

“I bet you have a whole kingdom of diamonds right here. Who needs diplomacy?” he dared, widening his fingers to let some fall through. They plink-plink-plinked satisfyingly. “I bet you could march down there tomorrow and buy up the land from Laketown to Dale.”

Thorin did not seem impressed. He lifted one shoulder and let it drop with the usual shrugging sneer. “I cannot understand Men’s attachment to diamonds. They have no color. They are not so rare,” the Dwarfking said, tossing a handful of them—one nonchalant, raining clack across the desk. “They are not so precious to a dwarf.”

“They take on the colors of other things. That’s part of their beauty. Hardest little rock in the world, but it changes with wherever it is.”

“Pish. The Folk are not fond of change.”

“Trying to give you a little perspective, is all.” Our writer did not think it important or necessary to tell Thorin he’d never seen raw diamonds in his whole life—not until he arrived in Erebor three measly days ago. He twisted one against the candlelight. It broke up and scattered flame. “They are pretty, though. In the light like they are.”

The Dwarfking, who was not convinced, shrugged again. “You may have them, if you wish.”

Bilbo, who had just seen someone give away a pot of diamonds like a handful of coppers, tried to play it casual. “You know, I think I’ll hold off,” the hobbit supposed. “I don’t have anywhere to put them. What’s this one?”
“A victory gem. Worn in the hair—decoration, nothing more. I was hoping I might find some of my sister’s to welcome her home.”

The hobbit’s curls, grown too long, were a shaggy untended-to mess around his face. He had to keep raking and shaking. But no matter how long he allowed it to get, that warbraid would not stay put behind undwarfish ears. “Tell me what they look like. So I can keep an eye out tomorrow.”

The king shook his head, and the frown frankened, a royal come, now. “I would not have the King’s-Guard crawling about on hands and knees for baubles when you ought the Family defend. If you wish to be of use, there are better tasks you might do.”

“That’s not what you said yesterday.” He felt the moonstones of an anklet, smooth and unharmable in his hands. “Yesterday it was, ‘Neither rest nor peace until the stone is found.’ You told us in no uncertain terms.”

Thorin paused, scowling, as though he might deny it—as though he did not quite remember. He looked away and sounded a little embarrassed. “I thought you would have understood I did not mean you.”

“That’s not going to make me popular. No rest, no peace! To work until you find it or you fail! Oh, well, not Bilbo, obviously; you do whatever you want.”

“What matter? To question you is not their place.”

“Fíli and Kíli are down there as well. And just my guess: picking through coin and bone is also probably not their place.”

Thorin had the sense of self to look scolded. A flare of provocation brought that blue eye some fresh lucidity where the sleepiness had halved it, made it clouded and dull. His fingers in all the golden chain were not behaving, Bilbo had noticed, with their usual precision.

“You worry for them,” the Dwarfking decided, finally. Saying this aloud seemed to unbristle his hackles, but it lifted the burglar’s; benevolent presumption put a condescending sort of kindness in Thorin II’s voice. Bilbo did not care for kindnesses now. He had meant to make him a little angry. Nothing like a little anger to wake you up from a disturbing dream. “It is well and good of you to do so. But you are too soft upon them in your caring. Remember this,” he warned, and Bilbo looked up heatedly, a fast and daring challenge, wishing with reckless confidence this Son of Durin would feel the spur in his glare. But Thorin did not. He had gone back to the rubies in his hands. “They are my heirs, but so too are they the blood of kings before me—and should they forget their place in line, the same kingsblood will drive them for the Lonely Throne.”

“That’s mad,” Bilbo shot, and jabbed his pointer into the table. “You can’t—can not—think Fíli and Kíli would breathe a word against you. You’re cracked if you really believe that, and I know you don’t. Suspect all you want of the others. It’s a waste of time, but go on. Be that way. I’m not going to stand for your finger-pointing at your own blood. They’re your boys. Your family.”

But Thorin was unflagging—too secure in his decision that Bilbo was Good, and all else Unknown. “The name Durin is a mark of greatness, but no promise of loyalty, and if you knew its history, you would understand what it means to be a Durin in this place.” He did not explain what it meant. “In time, I will give them what they show me they deserve. They must show it first.”

The sureness is what scared him, to think back on it. A fierce, black, unbreaking sureness, more frightening than anything else.
“What do you want them to do? Do you want them to fight a second dragon? Let’s see if I can’t go 
rustle one up, shall I.”

“You are not Folk. You are not acquisitive. You do not understand what it is to be a Durin or to be 
Mountain-Made,” Thorin conceded regretfully, which was, of course, merely the nicest butt-out 
Bilbo had ever been told.

“I do not criticize,” he added, having doubtless seen that whip-crack of argument uncoiling before it 
could fire off the halfling’s Hills-Made tongue. “It is no fault you are not so. You are forthright and 
true, and I hold you dearly for it. But you would measure the hearts and minds of the world on the 
scale of your own virtue. The world is not like you. The world is treacherous and covetous. You are 
too naïve to the ways of royalty, Bilbo.”

Oh am I, Bilbo grumbled, his conscience as heavy as his pockets—as heavy as a stone.

“There is a mural in Rivendell of a boy-king on battlefield. (It’s a Man, but it doesn’t matter.) He is 
standing in a hollow of darkness with a sword in one hand and in the other, a crown looking wet 
with what can only signify father’s blood. Arty elvish symbolism, carved into the ribs of some 
courtyard stairs. There are cracks running the edges, crumbling through the stone.

But that’s a cliché, and so it has lost its meaning—the image of the boy-king left to war with a world 
crumbling. It’s only art to you. Bilbo cannot rewind time to make it something more; he can only find 
a metaphor. So he invites you to picture, if you can, another reality: Kíli, dark-haired and impetuous, 
motherless and brotherless, sitting stoic on a lowly throne.

Perhaps nothing has helped Master Baggins to understand the Dwarfking better, he thinks, than this.

Thorin, he said. You could do with some sleep.

“I do not resent them for it. They are Durins; it is in their nature. Their honor, though, I cannot 
assume” He rapped the fingers on his collar. “Time will tell.”

If it had been anyone else—well, who knew. Who knew what Thráin might have looked like in this 
place, or Frerin or Dís. For all the mirrors in Erebor, and for all the times this king must have looked 
into them to judge if his reflection was worthy, who knew if he could see the circles suffer beneath 
his own eyes? Who knew if he saw that the dour beauty a whole Folk expected from him had gone 
dire with his fear of crumbling? Who knew if Thorin, who had belonged to The Dwarves even 
before he had been old enough to belong to himself, saw the same world as everyone else?
And how do you protect a person like that. Because surely anyone who sings so prettily and reads a map so poorly and swears silver on his little toes could use some protecting.

Bilbo was downright narked by now, so much he had again forgotten why one might be cautious to speak this way to a king. He wanted to slap that dwarfish hand from its posturing place on Thorin’s chest. “You’re wrong,” he flat-out snapped. “But believe what you want.”

The Dwarfking nodded as though it proved something—as though he was sure our burglar would say precisely what he had. “You care for them as a true friend should.”

It is not that Bilbo hated Erebor. It was just not as he had imagined it might be—not the trumpeting triumph and the singing coronation and diamonds in the king’s hair. The triumph was mistrustful; the diamonds were cast off in a pot. There was no celebration, and there had been no final song.

“I’ll take a favor, please,” Master Baggins remembered, plucking at the coarseness of his coat. “Do you have a robe or something I can borrow? Not to steal your things, but this is less than ideal.”

Thorin concurred a little too quickly for Bilbo not to feel insulted. “We are in agreement that the Mannish coat is hideous and ineffective, and you should not wear it. Have the tailor fit you a lord’s coat.”

“We are not in agreement. I like this coat,” Bilbo lied—a half-—for the vest of Laketown was indeed uncomfortable, unflattering, and drab, but all the same he found he felt truer in its flagging color than in any gilded velvet to be found in here. “Besides—” (If this part was said a little nastily, you could hardly blame him.) “—Bifur’s presently a tad preoccupied with the with Arkenstone issue.”

“He will do both. If you would not ask him, I will write the command.” The king was already picking up a quill.

“Look, never-mind the coat; I’m sleeping in armor. Is what I meant. I’ve got chain prints in my hide.”

Thorin looked skeptical of this claim. Truthfully, the mail was too finely woven to leave anything like prints; it was light as calico, thinner than cassimere, yielding and reforming like the cooked skin of an egg. “I did not give you mithril to have it sit in a pile on the floor.”

“Well,” Bilbo sassed, unperturbed by the annoyed way the Dwarfking had laid down his pen. “I had planned on hanging it nicely.”

“Mithril is not to string up and admire. It cannot keep you well if you are not wearing it.”

“Just all the time, around?” he asked, dismally. Master Baggins was an Adventurer proper by now, but he was also, if you recall, a hobbit, and the prospect of sleeping in metal is something a lifelong hobbit cannot wrap his head around. “At dinner? To bed?”

“Those who protect the Durin family from what seeks to do us harm are likewise from it by the Durins protected. Death is not convenient. Assassins do not knock on the door.”

“But there’s no one here,” the King’s Guard protested.

Thorin’s insistence was even-tempered, though it did not budge. He picked up the quill and wrote an order down. Bold letters swept parchment, practiced penmanship, but worryingly large. “Wear the mithril, Bilbo.”
Just about ended that conversation, didn’t it.

They worked in silence for a time. Master Baggins dethreaded abstractly, recovering a selection of earrings, three silver fibulae, a golden belt buckle, and a large, polished chunk of lapis that looked like it broke off a pommel. With a little focus and a little distance, you could almost shove the politics out-of-mind. He might even be able to pretend the Mountain was still some fogginess on the horizon, a suggestion of giantness ahead of them, nothing but things that might happen, one day. He might forget there was silversteel fishscaled against his back, and before him diamonds, caught fast like stars in a sky.

“Not diamonds. River pearls,” Thorin corrected, a bit amused anyone could mistake them. They glistened on latticed silver like no pearl Bilbo’d ever seen a clamshell husked around. Each teardrop looked like fresh milk frozen clear, like hot water poured into twinkling snow. “The White Gems of Lasgalen. Meant to be an elf-queen’s necklace—tribute paid instead to Thror, and given by him to Eira, my mother, upon her marriage to his son—as I would give them to a bride of Fili’s. Thranduil would sell his own son to recover them.”

“You know what: I very much doubt that.”

“Then you do not know elves. Give them here,” the king bid, and took them, spreading the delicate web over his hands. “The elf should know I have them.”

“Sure. Salt the wounds. Taunt the Elfking. Good ideas.”

“A bargaining tool,” the Dwarfking told him. Then he stood, crossing the rug to lay the gems safely on a shelf. They glimmered like a laid-out rock snake in their pocket of wall. “They have forgotten their days living in the shadow of the dwarflords. He will remember whose grandson sits upon the Lonely Throne.”

“Or maybe you could send him a note.”

Thorin did not pay any attention to the joke. He carefully smoothed the necklace straight, but a thought caught him midway.

“What’s wrong now?” Bilbo asked the king’s back, twisting round to prop one elbow on the rear of his chair.

“You will need a token of office, too,” Thorin worried, leaving it there, frowning at nothing. “The lords of the King’s Court add an honor bead to the family plait, but you cannot wear the plait—” He tapped to indicate his own. “—for you have neither dwarfish mother nor dwarfish father’s clan to claim.”

“I’ve got enough things on my head. Nothing goes on here that comes off again. Look at this. Look,” Master Baggins said. He made to swipe his hand through his newly grown spit of hair, but it snagged, one painful inch out.

The hobbit tried to pull his fingers through his tangles. Thorin looked offended. “That is terrible.”

“You’re telling me. You don’t have to wear this mess around.”

Whether you believe it or not: the Dwarfking rolled his eyes.

“Come here,” Thorin tsked, “and I will fix it for you.”

That said, he was unwrapping the silver-toothed carrying comb from his pocket, removing his rings,
and settling cross-legged on the fur.

Bilbo, determining his head had nothing to lose, sat down, too. He figured he had better; this is not something a dwarf offers fair-weather friendlies. And indeed, it might have been a very nice friendship-building experience, had it not felt like Thorin was trying to tear off his entire scalp.

“Stop squirming,” the king scolded.

“Stop squirming? Stop yanking!”

Thorin removed the comb from a snaggled pass just to wag it sternly over Master Baggins’s shoulder. “You did not keep it very well,” he reproached. The war-bead came off all right, but its braid had gone to brambles; it didn’t take to the smoke-smelling dwarfish hair oil or to the plucking-and-raking. “It is your own fault. There are many small tangles just here. Once they are undone, the caring will be easier.”

“Rot it. Shave my head and start over.”

Thorin II Oakenshield was a merciless detangler. Our pitiable writer had barely recovered before his even more pitiable hair was being divided into sections of coarse off-gold; he was not reckless at the work so much as callously methodical. But Bilbo, tender-headed, couldn’t manage stillness. He kept flinching and ouching and ducking away.

“Kíli does not keep his well, either,” Thorin intoned—and indeed, all along this journey, the king would apparaet behind the prince’s dinner chair with a sharp comb and a fistful of Durin hair. And how that prince would yelp and squall. “He says I am a menace.”

“Why don’t you all just wear war-badges. War-pins,” Bilbo groused, teeth pulling at his curls and the dwarfish fingers turning his head this-way-and-that. He squeezed the bead nested the center of his palm.

“Did no one teach you to care for it?”

“Not as such. We keep it short.”

“When I was in your lands, I saw many long-haired hobbits.”

“Lass-hobbits, maybe. Not proper for a—who you ask if you need me to turn a bit? Don’t just grab me by the skull. What was I saying? Right—it’s not proper for a respectable gent to be bouncing around with his hair below his chin.”

“Why?”

“Got me. Helps to keep us separate, I suppose.”

He could feel Thorin squinting at the back of his head. The Dwarfking gave a dismissive snort. “Your people make no sense.”

“Oh, and what are dwarves doing that’s so special! Like you all are the cutting edge of practicality. I’ll tell you what: you don’t see hobbits stabbing metal through their ears. For the hell of it. Very practical, that. You don’t see hobbits—”

It actually did not take as long as Bilbo dreaded it might. When the worst of the business was done, and his shoulders settled down from where they’d parked beneath both ears, Thorin shuffled around on kneecaps to survey his work. Judging from the critical tilt of the royal head, our burglar assumed
it was awful.

“Am I the prettiest girl at the fair?”

“It is all right this way,” the king blandly supposed, Bilbo’s joke either sailing right over his head or passing by ignored. “But it is still too short for a war-braid.”

“Maybe this is why we cut it off. Hobbits being an orderly people. It’s where we store our unruliness.”

“Study how I did it,” he suggested, ignoring still another joke. The king reached over Bilbo’s head to retrieve a steel bowl from the lowest shelf behind them, and handed it over flat-side-up; the coins inside were dumped and lost in the shaggy fur rug. “So yours does not look so incompetent in the future.”

There was just enough reflection to see. The hobbitish curls, soft and heavy with leftover oil, had been brushed down into some semblance of obedience. Thorin, being better enough at braiding to surpass Bilbo’s handiwork even after days without sleep, had undone the frayed knots and replaced them with slick, even lines. He’d parted it strangely to one side to afford more hair for the plait, and though it had our hobbit’s ears feeling a little exposed, at least if a stick got stuck in it you could unstick it again.

“Shall I do yours up now?” incompetent Master Baggins sassed, tossing the bowl aside, a little dig at his own expense. “Wouldn’t want to upstage you, here. Seems I’ve left my ribbons and barrettes at home, what a pity, but—”

Bilbo was only joking, you see. But dwarves do not, he has found, much understand gendered humor—and Thorin never did pay much attention to his jokes. The king didn’t laugh. And this is the funniest part about it—he merely propped back on his elbows, stretched out right across the royal cabinet rug, housecat boredom, ankles crossed toward the steady fire. And he threw all that hair into Bilbo’s lap.

Bilbo combed less delicately than he had unknotted the jewelry. And, because he didn’t have any more council to give, spoke while he went. He rambled on and ran the comb root to end, expecting to hit a snag, or a snarl, or something to put up resistance, but never did. It was only the sure and palliative motion of heavy hair through his fingers, and whatever stories a hobbit has to tell.

It took some time, but yes, Bilbo conceded: long hair is noticeably less dreadful when you care for it. Indeed, where our hobbit had been flinching and gritting his teeth, Thorin went to a noodle almost all at once. His elbows stopped propping; his profile lost its grandeur and slumped. His neck began weakening, and his breathing slowed, and eventually, he tipped back—and, all at once, like the felling of a pine, the king’s head hit the buttress of the burglar’s folded legs.

“No, you’re not,” Master Baggins griped. “I don’t believe it.”

But, of course, he was.

Bilbo found this a little indecorous. Besides, he couldn’t exactly finish the job this way, with a handful of royal mane all wrapped up in one hand and the comb awkwardly pinched in the other. But a bit of calculus: even if it was indecorous, and even if it meant leaving a job half-done, at least Thorin was sleeping.

“Right in the damned middle of my story,” Bilbo observed thinly. He curled back the mean index finger poised to poke him awake and flipped the comb on the floor.
There was no conceivable way he’d heft the Dwarfking up and put him in bed, but at least he might bring over a pillow and a blanket. Bilbo had to slip both palms beneath Thorin’s head to carefully uncross his legs, which spoiled what he had just brushed. It’s unsettling, holding a king’s head in your hands just like that—the weight leaden, the eyes closed, the hair smelling sweetly of fire and the dusky amber of candles, intermingled with whatever he’d washed it in. Without the family plait and the war-braid, his ears rather stuck out, Bilbo noticed. Stuck out, literally—large and goofy-looking, to be brutal about it—and the jewelry on the left one was cold, and he had to chase away a terrible compulsion to kiss it, not because that’s really what he wanted to do, but because Thorin was Thorin, and it seemed like a significant mistake he didn’t have someone around to kiss his ears. Not on account of being king or anything, but due to the standing fact he was so blatantly there to adore, were everyone not so busy admiring him.

There must have been a lot of mistakes in the drafting of this story. Misprints, that is. Because Bilbo had done everything the storybooks say a hero is supposed to do. He’d fought off monsters and scaled a wall; he’d defended his clan’s honor and outfoxed a rival king; he had faced a dragon that breathed fire from the sky. Yet for all that, somebody had still cast Thorin Oakenshield as a ruler of an entire people while sticking Master Baggins with the unglamorous role of mediocre sidekick—and the real injustice of it was this someone had at the same time decided to make Thorin Oakenshield in such a way that Master Baggins would be just terrifically fond of him. Fonder than Master Baggins had been of anyone else, ever; just sick with devotion-to, actually; and, as stupid and lovely as he was, very much full of affection-for. This, beside the other things, was clearly an error.

And even if we accept all those other poor authorial choices, we cannot accept the other one: that the plain fact is, if the Dwarfking had only been a lass, this prospect—the prospect of bowing over the dozing prince he had adventured so far and done so much craziness to get here, of turning his chin to the side and finding a cool metal earring with his lips—would’ve at least been footnotable.

It was too bad, truly. Because Bilbo, though he did not want to do any of this, should have liked to want to. It would have made for a good book. It’ve made for an ending clearer and sharper than the one he was going to have. And it was all-around very inconvenient—that the one person in this world Bilbo found he would leave home for, he could not so completely love.

But he could let him sleep for another moment longer.

Bilbo set Thorin’s cheek back upon his unfolded leg. He laid the brushed hair carefully over a shoulder, twisting its body once to tuck behind his large ear, careful not to catch threads. Then, rummaging as much as he dared, he retrieved his notebook from a tattered jacket pocket. It flattened easily upon the kingless thigh.

Too much squirming. As he moved for a pen, Thorin, mostly asleep, frowned mightily and grabbed the offending leg to keep it still.

Oh really! Bilbo snorted. Did I disturb you?—but it was no use, because he was lead again in two seconds, and from there, actually proceeded to snore.

On one hand: what a brat. On the other: how strange. What a strange story my life has become, Bilbo thought, with a king asleep on his leg and his half-written book of history on the other. He could not help but wonder, then, which side was the more real. Had the cause come first and lent itself to the tale, or had Thorin of Thráin grown out of it—conjured into form from every wild thing Belladonna had ever wanted of the world and from the secret, ridiculous, fairy-story dreams Bilbo had worked so staunchly to kill, appearing now before him all the more fantastical and tremendous in indignation over his attempt to choke them.

Even if it was unjust, he decided. Even if the whole venture had been doomed to error from the start.
Even if, he was glad to have been there. He was glad to have something to write about, at last. Bilbo Baggins—for the first time in his previously unremarkable life—was glad to be who he was, sour and standoffish and bold and mad and whatever else some other author had made him. Because if tales like this one can exist, my dear—if there really are lost kings and fiery drakes and chuckling wizards and hero burglars—then why not, he has asked himself, people like him, and why not people like you.

Perhaps it is a faulty story, pen to paper and gold on the floor. But it is story, all the same.

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It is twelve days later when the great horn sounds.

Bilbo’d been breakfasting at Bombur’s Bakeshop. He’d taken to spending sunny morns here, rising restlessly at dawn, bundling in furs to keep off the chill, and walking over with an armful of papers. He’d arrive before opening and halfheartedly edit through chatter. He’d work.

He’d eat, too, but they refused to charge him. “Batch tester,” Bombur insisted, pushing fresh sweet rolls and cheese pastries on him. “You’re doing us a service.”

So there would be Master Baggins, on a mercilessly bright day with a mess of interview notes spread out across the bar, a bowl of porridge with nuts, and some sleep in his eye. A sleep that was blasted away when that unforgettable bellow shook through the rock and pealed over the sunwhite plain.

Our writer almost upended his glass. It felt like something prolonged and ancient all around him, trembling his ribs and rattling the heart inside—and, no matter whose theme it played, Master Baggins could think of nothing else but war.

Tannä caught his cup before it spilled. She propped one rough elbow on a spot of countertop across from Bilbo and waited out the royal riff, unaffected by its thunder, retying her apron straps. Her speed was jarring for such a button-baby face and doughty little frame. And her livid green stare was made even more beautiful by contrast with the dark face around it; a dozen pretty glass beads danced jauntily on a head blooming with tiny rose plaits. She’d a thick sprinkling of fawn-freckles across her enviable cheeks like a dream.

Her voice was much more awake than Bilbo. It said: “That’ll be the king’s party, then.”

The Horn of Erebor, built to flutter the bones of a mountain. It announced to the Folk that the black raven banner of the Durin Kings had been sighted; the Royal Retinue was on the prairie road, just visible in the distance, a day’s march away. There was no missing it, and there was no mistaking the arrogant roust of Thorin of Thráin’s motif.

And there was no unwriting the last time Bilbo had heard it, either. His ribs quickly resettled. But his heart needlessly remembered what that motif had sounded like played not for a king’s arrival, but for his last brave going-away.

“Oh! I had better put a hog on,” Bombur gasped, pulling a plate of hot biscuits from an oven with that surprising, light-footed grace of his. He’d a blush from the heat more tomato in shade than tulip. “If there’s to be a return feast.”

Tannä shushed her husband’s fretting with a taut, certain soprano. “There’ll not be feasting tonight. With the Ironfoot child having just passed. I doubt anyone will be in the mood for pork steak.”
He looked worriedly at her, transferring the tray of puffed pastries with pinched fingers, blowing to cool his hand between each one. Flour sparkled midair. The topknot he wore bobbed its own yes. “Of course, that’s right; I had completely forgotten. The poor thing. Maybe just a few chickens, then. For the family.”

“And when will you feed the Durins these chickens, eh? No one’s coming in until well after nightfall. And he’s not made it up past eleven o’clock in twenty years,” she told Bilbo, flippant like a pebble splash in a wishing well. “A few chickens. Puff! You’ll be drooling up your pillow before they crack the gates.”

“Oh, no! I only drool up yours.”

They were really very lovely together, Bombur and Tannä—he gentle and swanlike; she powder-keg and seeming thrice his size at half his height. Watching them was like watching a comfortable waltz. She led with terse pecks of affection; he followed with playful innocence; and it was joyful to see two people so happy to be bantering. They could not have any children of their own, Bofur had confided on a too-bad sigh one day; Tannä, as it turns out, was barren (though dwarrowdames really do not like being described this way). As such, she’d never expected him to accept her proposal. But Bombur did all the same—and if, after all these years, he’d a single regret about this decision, it was only that she liked to put a frustrating number of walnuts in her scones.

“You cork the leak where that back-talk came from, husband. I’ll burn those chickens to a crisp and say you made them.” Bombur gave a theatrical gasp and flung a wet rag at her over his shoulder without looking. It contacted the counter with an ineffective, soggy thump.

“See, here! You almost took Bilbo right out! The war is over, you brute,” Tannä cried, snatching the cloth, which had truthfully not come too near him.

“I’m sorry, Bilbo! I was aiming for a little fly, but small as she is, I can’t see her.”

“Don’t worry yourself over me,” he began to say. “I’ll survive,” he fobbed. “I’ve lived through worse,” joked the burglar. But before he could be any funnier, Tannä balled up that damp rag and hit Bombur right between the shoulder blades with it. He shrieked.

“Mariticide!”

“Bring that big word over here and see what it gets you. Now stir something!”

Bombur grabbed up a bowl and made a big show of it, stirring wildly enough you could hear the scrape-scrape-scrape over the merry applause of their first patrons.

Then it was all good mornings; hello, Máira, Ragnar; what-can-I-serve-yous; and how about a little tea?

Seeing Bombur and Tannä work together woke in Bilbo a mellow sprig of gladness, not exactly like but not unlike watching Belladonna and Bungo in their garden had. For all that it made him happy, it also made him a little sad.

No use working in here once the breakfast rush began. Master Baggins refastened his dwarfcoat, gathered his things, waved goodbye, and retreated to do some writing. Or at least, he had meant to do some writing. But instead of fixing fragments and unmixing his metaphors, Bilbo sat in the library worrying, wondering how long it might take until you’d see royal colors on the East Road.
The sun set warmly as the king passed Dale.

And the city howled.

It was a terrible, ghoulish roar, like winter wind caught in a glass door. There is nothing glad in such a sound. There is bone and hunger and nails in a box; there are ashen pines and a dragon’s scales fished out of a lake. (The Dwarves took those, too.) And though the wooden town of yesterday had stopped burning, its leftover people had not forgotten. The orphans of Old Laketown lined against Dale’s gates. They draped their arms and hollered from tall clay houses; they hoisted their own flags and threw their brooms and their sticks and their pitchforks, too faraway to make a difference, but wanting the Durins to hear.

This madness made clear why the Royal Guard marched as it did, gathered defensively around their monarch even with Erebor glowing in sight. The thin string of human archers along Dale’s walls seemed insufficient to keep the city itself at bay, and plainly uninterested in doing so. A rail of cabbages, vaguely insulting, sailed weakly to split on the grass.

Bilbo had heard that howl all the way in the Diplomatic Library, and rushed out to see what was going on.

Our hobbit had developed what amounted to a particular hatred for ramparts, but that didn’t stop him. Master Baggins reached the open wall with its old scars and its siege blocks, boosted to the tips of his toes, and felt the dusk on the battered rock. From this distance, could see them: the angry city, and the colors of the Durin kings cracking in clear, crisp air.

Bilbo hurried inside with that red sun and Dale’s roar chasing his back the whole way.

He expected to find a regiment mobilizing in the throne room. Prince Dís and her Honor Guard would be preparing to meet them, surely; or a battalion of engineers would be oiling up their war machines; or a slew of ambassadors must be clamoring to determine the appropriate response. But it was only Kíli, sitting by himself under this grandiose echoing space, bored and sedate, waiting under simple crown in the arms of the Lonely Throne.

“Bilbo,” the little prince announced, pleasantly surprised. Our writer’s name echoed inside clean, spacious stone. “Good to see you! Did you hear the horn?”

He’d marched right in. The Ereborean Guard had been informed Master Baggins ought to be let pretty much everywhere he liked, which proved a non-issue, since his identity was inobscurable (he was the only hobbit in the Mountain; in fact, he was likely the only hobbit to have ever been inside this Mountain in the history of the world). With no audiences and no itinerary, he didn’t even have to wait his turn. Bilbo moved quickly across the dark floor, between the long pits softly popping their coals, beneath the hanging flags and inhospitable obsidian, through the lordly nothingness of space. He approached the throne.

“What’re you going to do?” was obviously the pressing question. Kíli of Erebor shrugged.

The prince was not occupying that mighty seat like you might expect a Durin to. For all his fancy velvets and oiled hair and the Durinish look he’d begun to cultivate, Kíli slouched. His hands had been dropped in his lap instead of poised on the arm rests, his leg occasionally jiggled, and his eyelids drooped less like an unimpressed king and more like somebody close to taking a nap. The
great golden braziers glowed with embers at his sides. The False Arkenstone stared sightless behind
him. He ho-hummed.

“Sit here,” answered the prince. At Bilbo’s furious look: “Traditionally, as Warden-King, I cannot
leave the Lonely Throne from the sounding of the horn until the True King Under the Mountain
releases me. Which means I’ve been sitting here a while. Bum hurts.” He rubbed his lower back.

Master Baggins was not deterred. You could still hear, if you were listening at all, that sound from
the field: dreadful and mammalian and weatherlike. He pulled the spotted collar of his dwarfcoat
closed and hooked the chain. “Then send someone. A contingent. Or something,” the former burglar
snapped. “That’s your present and future king down there, and a whole mess of nobles. You’ve got
to dispatch the Guard; you’d be fool not to.”

“You go right on ahead, Boggins. Ride down there and quash the rabbly peasants. I’m rooting for
you.”

“Because peasants have never been a problem for kings! Where’s Dwalin?”

“I sent him on a job. He was barking at me all morning.” Kíli popped one finger to his lips and
quirked a distantly threatening smile. “Kind of like you are now. Want a job?”

Master Baggins with folded arms outright glared.

“So they hate our king!” he admitted, throwing his hands emphatically up, big so-what. “They love
theirs, and Bard’s not marching on Uncle at the foot of Erebor. He’s not that stupid. And he’s just
about the last person in some two thousand miles with any interest in having a little war. They won’t
disobey him. They’re just,” Kíli supposed, trying not to be funny and failing, fishing for the word.
“Expressing their feelings. Loudly. They do this every time we go anywhere.”

Bilbo tried. But he could not shake from his mind’s eye the image of Captain Tauriel with a king-
aimed arrow torn through her outflung hand.

“Personally?” Kíli pulled his legs up into the great carven chair and crossed them, the most ill-fitting
way you’d ever see to sit a throne. “I’m glad to be cut loose. It’s my first time, acting-king and all.
Let’s just say I wouldn’t have minded if mum’d been less insistent on leaving it to me.” The prince
paused, scratched some dirt off his boot sole, and added: “Thorin’s going to be so angry you got here
already. You’ve gone and seen everything.”

And Bilbo had been kept so busy, and had been traveling such distances, and had been writing so
much, he hadn’t given himself time to worry about meeting Thorin. That is, he hadn’t until
roundabout this moment. It was, admittedly, a little worrying.

“Should I be here? If there’s to be some kind of ceremony, or welcoming, or—What should I do?”
he wondered, that little worry swelling cotton in his throat.

“I know You should climb in this pot then jump out to scare him! TOP OF THE MORNING TO
YOU, SIR. LOVELY DAY FOR A SMOKE, INNIT? Hah-hah-hah! We’d have to peel him from
the chandelier!”

He laughed spittily at the thought. Bilbo squinted and tried not to betray his fear.

It took the young dwarf some time, with the fresh thought of his royal uncle startling onto the ceiling,
to stop. He’d play-acted bursting up from an urn with the lid hefted over his head. Now, though, the
expression on Bilbo’s face must’ve sobered him up.
“Wait,” the prince noticed. “Wait. You’re afraid, aren’t you? You needn’t be,” he promised, fast empathy that does not like looking backwards, because it is easier to talk in gentle circles than to relive shared history sometimes. “You know I would have mentioned that to you. If I thought there was any chance—”

Master Baggins, who feared nothing more than he feared the phonetics of the word traitor, frowned him off. “No, no. It’s not that. It’s only—” He tapped the heroic leather over his breastbone. “We kind of had a row.”

Kíli’s concern bent to confusion. He leaned forward, propping his elbows on his folded legs, a royal who looked about eleven years old. “A row? Do you mean to say you’re on poor terms?”

“I haven’t heard a word from your uncle in years. Honestly, Kíli, I had no idea Dwalin was coming. Complete surprise.”

“No one tells me anything!” the prince protested with a great bellyaching huff.

Bilbo said I can relate.

Bilbo said I suppose there’s just nothing for it.

Bilbo said I will go off to bed, then, and let you all talk.

“Talk! Please. You can stay here.” Kíli’s decree came with rolling eyes and the clap of both palms on his calves. “If Uncle Thorin’s really peeved at you, better to catch him off-guard, take it from me. You don’t want him to sit on it all night thinking up things to say. Surprise him; he’ll be sleepy and dirty and will probably just say all right, all right and forget about it.”

“All right, all right? Because Thorin isn’t one to hold a grudge.”

The prince puffed up in his throne—and indeed it made him look a little more like a king, just for a half-moment, indignant with the full right of his birth. “I’ve known him a lot longer than you have. Pissed him off a lot more often, too.”

Bilbo said fine. He said if that’s what you say. He said point taken, my dear—and my dear, it was—though it hurt him uniquely to have such a thing said to him—as though to by-the-way Master Baggins about his hobbitness—as to remind him of his fifty-year middle-age to a seventy-years youngster—as though to give the suggestion of all he had missed, and would miss.

“Besides, they’re still hours off, so there won’t be a hurrah. There’ll just be me,” Kíli said, who hadn’t meant any of it that way, who was still chipper and light as a fellow dutifully stuck in a chair can be. “Me, sitting. Somebody’s got to keep me awake.”

I suppose that’s me, Bilbo said. But if there is anything he has been reluctant to do, it is to stand solemnly behind the Lonely Throne.

He said all right, Kíli, all right.

A Note on Hobbits, Part Three:

Of all the rumors and hearsay regarding Shirelings, there’s one particular false-knowledge that
irritates Master Baggins the most, and that is the Manling belief that they are cold-blooded creatures.

He had heard it said, here-and-there, that halflings (being half-of-a-Man—which is also rubbish) likewise experience half of what a Man would. Their sorrow, the Men say, is less sorrowful; their joy is less joyful; their drunkenness is less drunk. This is, of course, complete garbage. It isn’t that hobbits feel less; it is merely that their way of feeling is different from the ways of other peoples.

For one—and this is perhaps the most challenging concept for Men to grasp—hobbits are not in the habit of excessive touching.

It’s not that they aren’t an affectionate people, but their affection takes other forms. Hobbits give thoughtful presents; they rigorously shake hands; they come over in the middle of the night with a bowl of bird-and-pea soup because Auntie Iris heard from Cousin Logo heard from Old Tabbs you were in bed with the sniffles, and the whole family knows you’re always running out of chicken stock. Their tenderness is not the sort to overflow and seize you at random and wrap you up. Their love is a polite and respectful kind.

Pea soup and thoughtful presents, if you want Bilbo’s opinion, are a lot more helpful than a hug and a kiss and a pet on the head. But try telling Big Folk that. Why, this very moment, you-yourself are probably distressing your brow and thinking oh-how-sad. (If not, you may be a small percentage hobbitish, and this can only bode well for you.)

But the plain fact is that Shirelings are not at all a soppy people. Bilbo had never known a hobbit to weep in public, or to speak overloudly, or to grab people willy-nilly and embrace them. Certainly, before all this, no one had right-out hugged him since he was a child.

In fact, when he had returned home those years ago, marvelous and uneaten, the most fuss anyone had made was young Prim, who’d patted Bilbo’s hand and said, “Dear cousin, I am so very glad you aren’t dead.”

Understanding this—and understanding all you have been told about dwarrow, who sob and shout and knock heads as easy as they speak—perhaps you will too understand why a hobbit among dwarves might feel overwhelmed. He might feel a little shaky. He might feel as though he can never be sure how to act.

Bilbo, for example, felt absolutely sure there would be some degree of dwarfish fanfare for the king’s arrival. But there wasn’t. Night fell, and suddenly, they were here.

There was a murmur outside. The Throneguard bowed in the Great Hallway. The doors were drawn open.

Tauriel, then.

Our elf-captain was, incidentally, the tallest person in Erebor, but what you noticed first was always the hair. Bright as the last carrots of autumn, long as a hobbit is tall. It bounced jauntily behind her in a coarse fishtail, a dwarfish braid to fall ‘gainst a dwarfish coat stitched from wolverines she had brought down herself. Hunter’s takes: foxtails topped deer suede gloves; onyx sat in a broad dwarfish belt; no warbraid for her temple, but golden eagles for her quiver. Yet for the shriek of awkward growth that Tauriel was, an aspen in the granite quarry—she was sameness, too. Her boots were still soft and her face was still cat’s-eyed, and that stride! Lunging and loveable unconventional grace. She had learned to speak a little lower and a little louder, and she had learned to be a bit more robust, but the turtledove flight of her sharp elbows and the mooselike high-step of her sinewy knees? No lonely mountain would unlearn the lady that.
If she had any special regard for our little prince, she did not show it. In fact, you might guess Kíli made up the whole thing to seem dashing. But there—if you looked very, very closely—came just the fastest light, like new candlewick, in that clever green eye.

She put her fist-over-heart, as dwarves do. She curtsied before the throne like a genuine elf. And with nothing immediately to say, and with only an edge oflovestruck melting going on around Kíli’s face, and with the snap-crack of movement that so defined her, Tauriel swept aside.

Not ten seconds behind her: Durins, count two.

It was Fíli in the throne room, above the mirrorish marble and under the dark Mountain stone, both eyes looking forward and both feet on the floor, tangible and alive and like sun on a wheatfield. Bilbo would recognize the color on that head at the bottom of a trollcave beneath a moonless, starless night. As he would the sound of those boastful footsteps, always accompanied by the faint rain of moving weapons and beads. But instead of metals, it was now reds—rubies, that is. Scaled across the black collar of his handsome armored bronzecoat; buttoning the woolly ruff; threading the complex arrangement of braids down his back; stuck to his bare brow, arching into the hairline, mimicking a coronet. Not a little brother’s forced foray into adulthood, but Fíli as the Fíli he had always understood himself to be: rich and sure and admirable; calm and confident; no Durin dourness, but Durin generosity and Durin pride; a summer’s prince in a winter’s palace.

And in his arms: a white horned lamb, stuffed and life-sized, lined with real ramswool and fitted with a pretty golden bridle. The prince carried it like a live creature. His left hand would give the toy’s belly an absentminded pet when he wasn’t thinking. His right ended abruptly at the elbow where Azog had taken the rest.

And close at his side, the Raven King.

Bilbo wondered how it might have gone—if he had first met Thorin as Thorin was this very night, as he had been before the Terror of Smaug, and as he was born to be. The king was head-to-toe a thunderous sweep of silver and blue and black. No Lonely Crown just now, but a burst of sapphires on a carven diadem; his traveling armor was not the brilliant gold of dwarven battlefields but ebon maille winking coldly beneath a surcoat of velvet blue, stars through a rainy night. He had tossed his heavy cape ‘round his shoulders so it would not drag the prairie grass, and the fur there had been cut from a young black bear. None of it as black, though, as the black of the king’s hair. It was hair unbefitting anyone not leading a nation—a wall straight to the thighs, clasped sparsely with white jewels and kept mostly by its own considerable weight. Thick kohl had aggrandized his look and the lowland wind had reddened his nose. But if you could look past all that glamour, and look instead at the Dwarfking’s face, you might still see—clear and alarming and imperfect—that pale break of skin where the Defiling blade had marred a socket to miss the not-so-deathless eye.

If it had been like this all along, he supposed he never would have. Met Thorin, that is. Or any of them. In fact, seeing them return, it became very unbearably apparent to Master Baggins exactly how ridiculous it was he did know such people, and how much more believable a tale it would have made if no one had shown up at his doorstep, at all.

And on the off-chance they had: he probably would not have sassedit them quite so much.

So it was the king’s party came home, the three of them together, dignified and road-weary and illustrious—and, given their cultural differences and all the tonal uncertainty of this meeting, Master Baggins could not decide on what to do.

So he did the sensible, hobbitish thing.
Bilbo hid behind the drapes.

There was a smile in Kíli’s voice when he spoke. “Welcome Thorin, Son of Thráin, Son of Thrór, True King Under the Mountain,” said the prince, brandishing the formality just to enjoy it. He sat upon the Lonely Throne where they’d left him many weeks ago. (In truth, it was not much of a test, what with Dís at hand, but you could tell receiving his family in this capacity pleased Kíli. He kept his chin high, and the fingers splayed upon those daunting armrests did not flinch.) “I have held fast the rule of our ancient fathers in your wandering, and return to you your blood-right and your home.”

Thorin looked tired. He was already pulling the thick leather gloves from his hands, and, markedly less concerned with being courtly than his nephew, sighed. “Well and good, son of my sister. I release you from the Lonely Throne.”

So he rose from it, trotting down the dais to greet everyone. Bilbo could see the prince’s eyes begin to search, confusedly, for wherever his guest had gone. To his credit, though, he said nothing. More impressive was how he managed to ignore Tauriel, who played her faithful part as a respectful watcher on the wall.

Fíli waited his turn, too. Their king-uncle, though, was not so unaffected—halfway up the royal steps, he cupped one beringed hand behind Kíli’s neck to pull their brows together. The Durin sigil pressed into a dimpled cheek and there was no smile at all on Thorin’s face.

He must have held it a little longer than was usual, for when the young prince descended to knock heads with his sib, Kíli’s eyes were worried. “Is something the matter?”

Fíli could not find the words. With the lamb tucked under one arm, his fingers clutched his brother’s shoulder, indeed a little too tight to be everyday. “He—He looked like you,” blurted the dwarf who would be king. “Just like you, when you were a baby.”

Youngests don’t understand such things, of course. He took the toy in arm to admire, gentling its forelock just like one would a real kid. “For Beelah, then?”

“A present,” Fíli managed, sheepishly sad. “From the Ironfoots.”

They shared a pained look.

But then Kíli—as was Kíli’s way—turned about, cradling the ram, showing off his royalspeech as best a second-child could. “Shall I call to you your cabinet?” he asked helpfully of Thorin’s back. “What about the treasurers? I can request a scribe.”

Durin’s Son did not sit in his place. He ignored his nephew’s play-decorum, standing wearily over the nothing in his chair. There was a subduedness about the great king, worn from travel and from the heaviness of entombing another dwarven child. If you looked at Thorin, really looked at him, when he was unaware of being watched, it is easy to see the chord of old tragedy beneath the fierce grandiloquence, the loss beneath the deliberate beauty, like the clear-cold water at the bottom of a deep spring. Are not all the rulers in sympathetic stories that way? To watch him there, fingertips ghosting the arm of his rock throne, Master Baggins nearly forgot how he could ever think to avoid such a person. He forgot, in the moment, how angry he was.

“Less there has been a disaster,” the dark voice said finally, “I would rather not.”

“No, nothing too pressing. Though I do have complaints from the Trade Consortium about a hike to the price of lumber out of Laketown.”

“Oh of course you do. What say the Six?”
“They do not congregate presently, but I can summon them.”

“Do not,” Thorin swore. He turned away from our Master Baggins, then, facing his heirs on the throne room floor, and for a burglar it was only that hair and the heels of his boots. “Let them sleep.”

“Oh, Consul Onushka will be awake. I’m sure she’d—”

“Do not disturb them,” he insisted. “They must be left to their work; she most of all. There were no other complaints?”

“Not a one, my lord-uncle,” Kíli was smug to report.

“Then I am tired and hungry and would wait until the morning.”

“My liege—” It was the red captain this time, wiry and open-eared, the only one who did not seem drained from walking a dwarf road. Her coattails clipped with knives inside and the heartwood bow stiffened her back. “—if I am not needed, I shall see to the breaking of the train.”

Thorin dismissed her with a nod, though it was not unkind. “You may go, Tauriel.”

She bowed, toetip touching behind her on the floor, limbs cranelike and elven and clearly restrained—first to Thorin, and then to each prince. And then she went, and they were all listening to sharp elfish footfalls retreat on the shining floor.

(Well, almost nothing more. Bilbo did notice, just before she about-faced, Kíli sucking his front teeth in a way that made something twinkle in Tauriel’s eyes.)

“You may go, as well,” the Dwarfking allowed them. It seemed no one would be taking up the Lonely Throne tonight, for even he meant to retire. His steps down the shallow stairs were sticky-kneed and unfussy. It seemed there would be no prima donna reckoning, after all. “Send your mother to my rooms if she is not abed; else I will see all of you before the court is held tomorrow.”

If you had been in Bilbo’s position just then—sandwiched shamefaced between some decorative gold drapery and a nice, solid dwarven wall—maybe you would comprehend his relief. A rueful relief—a relief with moth wings in its heart and a bitten tongue. But still relief. Because from there, dotted with mountain dust and gagged with a murder of memories, it seemed he was standing in the audience of a play. No one could see him. He could drink them up and learn their lives and need give no explanation. The anonymity of writers was his.

Actually, Kíli said.

There was one more thing.

He dropped his noble flounce. He fussed the ram back into his brother’s arms. And here he came—spelunking, doggish and unembarrassed, under the sumptuous drag of curtains.

Believe it or not: Bilbo’s hand was halfway in his pocket for his lucky ring.

But before he’d found it, dwarfish fingers had his arm, and then they were tugging—and then they were wrestling—and then they were wrapping around Master Baggins’s whole chest and pulling him stitch-by-stitch from behind the veil.

“Look what I found,” the little prince boasted, and hauled Bilbo out all at once.
Here’s a little Shire wisdom for you:

Once, or so the fable goes, there was a bold little blue jay who fell from his tree. Now, this jay was quite a clumsy young fellow, and he hadn’t quite gotten the hang of flying just yet, so such a tumble was quite devastating. Broke his wing, in fact—so not only was he grounded (and very embarrassed), but he could not get back home.

Our wounded jay searched for a long while, as songbirds fancy time, for a way back into his old tree. He approached a sparrow, who would not help. (Sparrows being envious of jays.) He inquired from an owl, too, who asked more questions than he answered. He even petitioned a hawk, but the hawk (being a hawk) was most unhelpful and actually tried to eat him.

Eventually, the jay walked his way out of the wood and onto a pretty farm. There, he came across a host of hens, who took pity on the despairing songbird and offered to help him. “Oh, no,” the little jay said (for forest birds are an arrogant folk set into their foresty ways). “What help could you possibly be? he wondered. “Hens cannot even fly, so surely you cannot get me back home.”

(Dwarves are, yes, chickens in this metaphor—but we shan’t tell them, so it’s all right.)

My dear, our heartbroken little jay was beginning to give up. He thought he might never see his lovely tree again. With such a dark worry over his shoulder, he agreed to at least be put up for a night.

So it was that the songbird nestled in the coop with the chickens. And he discovered, to his great surprise, that straw is much softer than sticks.

Feeling restored by a good night’s rest, our jay was all ready to leave off in the morning. “But wait,” the hens said. “Are you leaving on an empty stomach? Surely you will want a little breakfast before you go.” Truthfully, he was extremely hungry—and, though he could see no way a flightless hen might help a jay pick treenuts, agreed to at least try a meal.

So it was the hens taught the jay how to hunt food from the ground. He discovered, too, that corn suited his palate much better than those aforementioned treenuts had, and it was a good lot easier to chew.

With his belly full and his head well-rested, the jay—now feeling quite a bit better for it all—thanked his new comrades, and made to depart. “Hold on,” the hens said. “Now that you’re fed and looking less sickly, aren’t you at all worried about being eaten, yourself? It’s an awfully big world out there to be a bird walking around on his lonesome, and we hope you’ll forgive us for noticing, but you seem rather small.”

“Oh, no,” the jay assured them. “Songbirds such as myself know all about danger. We aren’t like you chickens on the ground. When we are faced with a hound or fox, why, we merely fly away. So thank you,” he said, “but no thank you. You’ve been lovely, but I really don’t see how you could teach me anything about the art of flying.”

“Well,” they told him. “We really don’t feel right about it. Let us walk you back to the trees, at least.”

So they went. And so it was that, in the tallgrass beyond the farmer’s barn, the jay happened upon the farmer’s cat.
And so it was that he came to learn the art of pecking—and the cat fled so fast, for a moment, it flew.

“Well,” he supposed, watching the hens spit fur from their beaks. “Maybe I will just stay a little bit longer.”

So the jay stayed. They could not teach him about flying, and he could not, my dear, become a hen. He could not lay eggs for the farmer or wear the red helm or take their great hennish strides. But he could do as they did and live as they lived while he waited for his hurts to heal.

And—by the time he was well enough to fly back to the tree—he found he didn’t miss it so much, after all.

This is why, hobbit mothers say, if you ever do find a little jay has fallen from his nest, you oughtn’t pick him up and show him the way; you must let him find his own. That’s the thing about getting lost, after all. You can never know until you’re good and lost what you might be finding, and you can never know until you’ve found it what your way should be.

OOO

Bilbo Baggins, on the Great Quest for Erebor, had been thinking of blue jays and hens.

He had been thinking of them as he wrote his epic. He had been thinking of them when the burning tree fell. And he had been thinking of them with sharp teeth in his face and the wolfsblood steaming on his sword.

He thought about them, too, on that naked outcropping of Carrock, with the wounded king’s arms thrown around him and the air pressed from his lungs and the eagle feathers clinging on his coat. This was a story he’d read before, Bilbo realized, blankness in his mind and bloodstains on his front and Thorin’s mussed hair stuck wildly to his face, his own smile like stepping on a branch. Fairytale is such a fragile thing. Not like epic, and not like history. He was afraid that if he moved too quickly or if he did not act the right way, the fable would vanish, torn out like a page and let fly.

By now, though, he hadn’t thought of that story in a very long time. He didn’t have a clever moral prepared or a quip up his sleeve. He surely didn’t hug anybody.

In fact, he kneeled.

Thorin—who had merely wanted to retire to his suite and take his mail off—who had been wearing his skepticism transparently on his corvid and prepossessing face—who looked, just then, exhausted—had expected some sort of joke. But the joke was all on Master Baggins, who—dragged out of hiding like a bag of sweet onions, staggering to recover his posture, looking momentarily like he might fight Erebor’s little prince—lost every funny thing he might’ve said.

Kili gloated. Fili’s eyebrows blew into his hairline. Thorin stood blankly on the final step at the base of the dais and looked like somebody had left him holding the baby.

Then Bilbo, of course, made his unfortunate mistake. He dropped one cap to the marble floor before the Lonely Throne. His head bowed and his eyes averted and he could not even hide behind his cut-short hair. The effect was immediate.

“Your Majesty,” he said.
Immediate, and awful. The Dwarfking’s surprise turned, very clearly, to the hoisted brows and contemptuous sneer of someone who had just taken great insult.

This is all it took for both princes to see Master Baggins had flubbed it disastrously. They scrambled to cover.

“So! Bilbo. You’re here!” Fíli sounded jovial and unfazed, as though he had not just offended the monarch but had got home from a lengthy trip to the store. “In Erebor. Again, at long last. That’s fun.”

Kíli had a fist in Bilbo’s coat ruff and was yanking him up off his knees. The bridle in the stuffed ram’s mouth jingled and swayed, and in that inane moment of panic, he could not tear his eyes from it. There was pandemonium in miniature. Would he ever think of anything but Ravenhill?

“Yes! I put him in the Diplomatic Suite, and showed him around, and we had a grand old time. Didn’t we, Bilbo? Didn’t we.”

Master Baggins, who’d by then also deduced he had royally blown this rendezvous, fumbled to backtrack. His light-footed mind whirred and buzzed, and he thought he might play it off like a little fun, like a hah-hah-got-you, should-have-seen-your-face. But when he tried to muster the necessary tooth, his grin got caught in a grimace. And the face around it plunged.

Thorin’s hubristic eyes were halved and his kingly head turned askance, the glacial impatience with which he regarded those not worthy of his anger. The blue stones on the diadem looked icelike and dictatorial against black pelt. He had folded his arms in the way of a stubborn tween and he was so cold and so handsome like that you’d just want to tear out your lung for what it did to your breathing.

He said: “I trust you have found your stay adequate, Master Baggins?”

Yes? Bilbo tried.

“Yes,” he answered, ahemming it into his fist so the weak-ankled sound firmed up. “It’s been more than adequate. I’m really very—”

Grateful, he would have finished. I’m very grateful. But the Dwarfking did not let him.

“Then I am sure you will find your way back to it,” he said, snapped around, and left.

Thorin II departed. The cape cracked and whirled most dramatically in his wake. He did not even look back.

Fíli and Kíli were left standing with the writer in the empty room with the empty chair.

Oh, Bilbo said.

And that, my dear, was how it went.

OOO

“Wow!” — Kíli, a moment later, watching the hall with his hands on his hips and his brows reaching for the cavernous throne room roof. “That went really badly. What possessed you?”
Master Baggins, who did not appreciate the critique or the way his stomach felt leaden, suddenly, all full of clay bricks and mortar, stammered to his own defense: “That’s what you do—to kings—you bow. And—”

“If you’d have done that to me,” the little prince went on, “I would’ve stomped on your foot.”

Our hobbit could feel himself redden, bobbing between embarrassment and temper. Because he really was, writerliness and the similes aside, very furious with Thorin, and how. So it could have been plain old anger doing this careening thing to his heart and his face and his insides. Or perhaps the heat under his collarbone and the roiling beneath his diaphragm was simple confusion—you know Shirelings are never fond of confusion—for they don’t like the muzziness of snared-up thoughts and they don’t like strange earth.

“Yes, very dramatic. There goes Uncle. He’ll get over it,” Prince Fíli reassured them with the long-sighted sureness only Prince Fíli had. The rubies sat in that cornsilk hair like a flowermaid’s daisies on Litheday, and the lamb looked happy in his care. Bilbo had always been closer to the younger brother Durin than elder, but he was thankful for his perpetual calmness, even when he oughtn’t be so calm. “Give him a night’s sleep and a consortium deadlock or two. He’ll forget he’s supposed to be sulking. What’s this about lumber hikes, now?”

“Have Dori tell you,” the littler prince shrugged off. “I wasn’t paying perfect attention to the figures. There’s some nasty tree mildew or something; killed off next year’s saplings.”

“Oh? Bard ought to be on that.”

“What’s he supposed to do? Wrap them up in bandages?”

“Do what he does best: fetch himself an elf.”

“Speaking of fetching elves.” Kíli eyes were a hundred steps ahead of his feet. “I should really go feed the ponies.”

“Ponies,” Fíli oh-reallyed.

Bilbo hadn’t wanted to interrupt brothers catching up on business. He hadn’t quite swallowed the stone knotting up his throat. But, less-than-pleased about the prospect of being abandoned for a midnight shag, he furrowed his brow and piped up. “Ponies can’t wait thirty minutes?”

Kíli dealt the writer’s backblade a commiserating pat-pat. But all the same, he turned on his shiny booteels, gave his sibling an affectionate gut punch, and had already put half the floor between them before either could get out a complaint.

“They’re probably really hungry,” Kíli suggested, and in those great Durin strides, was gone.

They stood there in frowning silence for a few moments, Fíli of Erebor and Master Baggins, listening as the lad’s sharp left-rights turned to flat-footed running down the deserted Great Hall.

“He’s told you, then,” the crown prince oh-supposed.

“Yes. Yes, he has.”

Fíli’s sigh was a grumbling and given-up one. You could hear something much ruder bitten short between his back teeth. “If he says that contrariety nonsense one more time, I’ll chuck him in the coin melt.”
Bilbo agreed. Before he could slip in another snide remark, though, the prince’s remaining hand was on his shoulder, friendly and placid as ever with a kingdom around him and governing to do. He had been waiting his entire life, our hobbit supposed, for such a future to arrive—for his princehood to mean something concrete, not history and promises but a mantle of bona fide responsibility—and it looked well on him. There was a peace there had not been before. Not smugness and swagger, but the certitude of good leaders, those who do not feel the compunction to prove and reprove themselves.

“How have you been, by the way?” Fíli wondered, beholding him fondly, a dwarfish compliment fast to his lips. His idle fingers tugged the ram halter straight. “You look wealthy.”

Master Baggins in his dwarfcoat snorted. His eyes dashed judgmentally up-and-down. “You look like you fell in some glue and got pushed down a mineshaft.”

The prince laughed, and the lamb tee-heed its jingly-jangly head under Fíli’s free arm. “That’s Erebor.”

They spoke briefly of the place, then. Who had Bilbo seen? What did he know? How had he gotten on with mum? Wasn’t that statue bloody hideous? Did or did not Dwalin give him a hard time? As they chattered, awkwardly alone in this abandoned throne room, our writer could see Fíli was tired. He gave no indication of wanting to leave, though; the prince merely kept asking cordial questions, snickering and chortling as they wagged their tongues about everything new, avoiding anything old. Which was a kindness, Bilbo thought. He didn’t want to keep Fíli awake all night, but he was in no hurry to be faced again with the unfinished papers laid out across his dismal desk.

“By the way,” our hobbit chuffed. He aimed a disappointed eye. “Heard you dropped out of the ranks.”

It took a moment for Fíli to glean what he meant. “Ah. Yes,” the golden prince admitted. He managed some flimsy sadness, but made no attempt at modesty whatsoever. (And how could you have any modesty, when your royal uncle has been persistently reminding you of your fantastic ability and great importance and hereditary magnificence since you were a fuzzy-chinned little blond bean?) “A casualty to my own good looks.”

“Perhaps I am misremembering,” Bilbo supposed, going snotty, “but I seem to recall an honor concord between you and I. Something, oh, against the evils of marriage and what a waste it all is. Thought we were on the same page there. Thought we were going to be brother-bachelors forever. Does this ring any bells? We were going to form a guild,” the writer plainly bitched.

“It was a tragedy beyond proportion, believe me. I held out as long as I could. Innocent victim to the sad dwarfish condition.”

“Being wrong about everything?”

This got the prince laughing again, more unexpectedly this time—a sharp, glad bark that made the old burglar’s stiffened heart go a little lighter for having caused it. “Well, now that you mention it,” Fíli confessed. “If you’ll forgive me, Bilbo, I’d really like to go check on my wife. At the very least inform her we didn’t get lost between Dale and the front door. Let’s all find each other and sit down for a dinner soon, though. I’m positive Kash wants to meet you. How long will you stay?”

“A decent while. Through winter. This book’s not writing itself.” It was a brave wave-off, considering Bilbo’s nerves had looped several times already at the prospect of having no one else to talk to and nothing else to occupy his cannibal imagination. But he shooed the patient prince away.
“Plenty of time for dinner, in any case. Don’t let me keep you.”

It was all he needed. Fíli immediately pivoted, but caught himself through the sheer force of thoughtfulness, like a rider holds back a yearling on short reins. The little lamb looked back, too. “You’ll be all right,” he asked the burglar, “will you? Find your way around?”

“Find my way around!” Bilbo cried. “Who do you think I am? Go on.”

A jolly nod and a swell goodnight, and Fíli went, leaving Master Baggins to find his way on his own.

Which he did. Being a Baggins, and thereby being blessed with an innate sense of direction, our writer didn’t need much time. He dusted the dust from his trousers. He unfastened and refastened his furry coat. And, quickly—not enjoying the largeness of space, knowing the halls or Erebor would be torchlit and silent—he shook off the sight of the kingless throne, and he left.

It was later that Bilbo found the way back to his unbound book in his ash-cold room.

It was later still when he walked back out of it—and smack into an elf.

To tell true, our writer had found his rooms quite promptly. It was fifteen minutes, give-or-take, from the Lonely Throne to the Diplomatic Suite. And yet, when he reached the sealed black door, Bilbo found he could not manage its knob. His throat stung bothersomely. His limbs were alight with firefly energy, and in this hushed place with its soaring stone, the thought of lying prone was unbearable. He was not keen on crawling into bed just to stare at the ceiling with anxious legs and pebbled insides.

So he turned around and he wandered, as Tooks and little birds do.

Few bodies moved about during these brittle cool hours between the witching and sunup. The occasional soused noble went stumbling home, but it was mostly Erebor’s sober night’s patrol, busy relighting torches and listening for ill-doing dwarflords. They nodded hellos or paid Master Baggins no mind as he went. Bilbo was down the graystone hall where he stayed, under the intimidating golden archway, into the fountained Royal Quarter with its pallid mosaic and ‘round Thorin II Daunts the Dragon.

Fíli had it right. It was bloody hideous.

All the same, Bilbo stopped to look at it a while, this half-done statue bursting from its slab. A dragon scream in a splash of horror-gold. He wondered what cultural need it served—whether the dwarrow thought its fate just, or if they found this punishment ironic, or if it merely satiated some spur of cruelty they had developed in their long years of being told you are not wanted here. Maybe they just needed the story. All people need stories. The unwanted peoples most of all.

Perhaps he would just end his there, Bilbo thought: the wyrm in its pain and the mountain retaken. Myth-making goes against everything a historian believes, but he considered it just then, watching Smaug’s shadow wail lowly in the dark. If we are writing for the future, maybe it would be better to lose the tough truths and nuances—to drop epics, and write fiction—fiction, like the gilt reliefs waging war on Erebor’s library walls. Perhaps there is no need for showing our future the weaker, mortal things.

As you can imagine, with all this philosophy on his mind, Master Baggins was in a right lousy mood. He was feeling quite jilted and passé and sorry for himself about everything. So he was not exactly sunshiney about storming under the grand hall of mirrors, sighing past the latticed gold, and drifting...
into the unconsoling corridors—only to be all but run over by a lady twice his size.

Tauriel skidded to an ungainly halt. She did not literally trip over the hobbit, but she came awfully close, and he ended up bristling cat fur and scowling righteously at her knee.

“The hobbit,” she wheezed apologetically. He’d put an abrupt stop to Tauriel’s sprint, and the captain, palm pressing her clavicle in an informal elvish *sorry*, stared with surprise. But not enough of it. Her red hair had snarled out of its fishtail. “Many pardons. I was not watching as I should have been.”

It was not just the braid. Her furs, too, looked mussed—like they had been spread out on some hay—and one or two shafts were still clinging. She scraped up a weak smile to see another foreigner here. His eyebrows hopped.

Bilbo, take pity, didn’t have a whole lot of sanguine words for young lovers right now. But he did have: “What in the blazing depths of Rhovanion do you think you’re doing sprinting through a public hall? You could have obliterated me!”

The elf went sheepish. She coughed a bit, pea-greens flashing apprehensively this-way-then-that. “I was… walking under the night, for to look upon the eastern stars,” Tauriel explained, elfishly poetic, gazing at the starless ceiling even as she said so. Bilbo thought she was a bit winded for an elf who’s been looking at stars.

“Oh, sure,” he said.

“And how come you here, Master Hobbit?”

Bilbo groused it: “I was out for some air. Elves galloping in from *star-gazing*. Can’t a fellow get a little bit of air?”

The gracile face wasn’t interrogating, of course. She had merely wondered, and was still wondering now, armed with silvan cheekbones and spiderleg brows and the polite nervousness of deer. “Yes,” pressed Tauriel, “of course, but how come you *here*?”

In Erebor. He’d spent enough time answering that.

*Book*, Bilbo snapped.

He said: *I’m writing it.*

He said: *That’s all.*

There was, of course, a little more to it than *book-that’s-all*, and when they met again in better circumstances, he might apologize. For now, however, Bilbo wanted for a blanket, and his war-braid tickled murderously at his halfling ear.

Toodles, he said.

*This whole night will be a footnote*, Master Baggins supposed. With a pang in his heel and an ache in his gut, he turned back for that warm blanket. But by the time it cocooned him, my dear, daylight was breaking. And no matter how hard he tried, Bilbo could not get any sleep.
Super special thanks to Peanut (aka tigerbalm01 on FF) for making me an awesome collage to go with this piece! Gone are the days of me tacking awkward stock photos onto my tumblr releases! It’s so coooooool!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

"Don't you know this is Bilbo Baggins? There's no safer place in Erebor."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Here is something I bet you didn’t know about hobbits:

Of all the peoples in this world, the Shirelings, it is said, rise the earliest. They are, it is said, an inherently industrious folk. It is said their bodies are like mallow flowers tied to the cycle of the sun. And it is said, in fact, a hobbit physically cannot sleep past eight in the a.m.

That’s a common saying, but here’s the part you didn’t know:

Instinct has nothing to do with industry. Hobbits have always lived in the mornings so as not to be eaten by things that prowl in the night.

Now, there was not a great deal the prowling night had left to throw at one Bilbo Baggins. He’d already done wolves and wargs and more than his share of spiders. Also centipedes, goblins, orcs, and bears. Trolls, too. Mustn’t forget the trolls.

The catch is, for all that morning-living, the hobbits (and Master Baggins, too) have developed what we’ll call a false sense of security about sunshine. Those hours of buttonweed and bumblebees are theirs, they say. They find it difficult to accept the possibility that sometimes horrors happen in daytime sun.

Appreciate that—although Bilbo didn’t quite sleep past eight—this particular morning, he dozed right up to it.

Master Baggins had spent the prior evening, one day after his disastrous performance in the throne room, at a quiet dinner with Balin and Glóin. They drank red wine and he took some curious interview notes. Now, two days out, our hobbit hadn’t made it out of bed until about an hour ago, at which time Bilbo dragged raggedly over to his desk to edit abovementioned notes.

Which is exactly where the writer was—pheasant quill scribbling lazily and head mussed with sleep—when there came polite knuckled knocking at his chamber door.

And when he opened it, there Galinyah was: sparkling in a sweep of silver and smiling like a cat who’d just gulped the canary whole.

“Hello,” she said.

But it wasn’t just the silversmith. Accompanying her were four mail-clad members of the Erebor Guard, effecting their expressionless best in the graystone corridor beyond Bilbo’s door as though they belonged there. He was a bit startled by this excessive showing at eight o’clock in the morning. Underdressed in patchy houserobe with a teacup in hand, our hero blinked.
“Am I under arrest,” he supposed.

Galinyah blinked back. The buttons down her fine dwarf-tunic were polished amethyst, the tunic itself was a pretentious plum velvet, and her head was full of purple ribbons woven into a rosy brown plait. “Are you? Nobody told me.”

“Well, good,” Bilbo said, “because I wasn’t going to cooperate.”

Then:

“Things all right?” he asked, furrowed. “Look, I’m glad to see you; been meaning to come visit; don’t get me wrong. But—” A brisk, pardon-me nod to the guards—who were still waiting, about as stoic as the rock walls around them, on who-knows-what.

The dwarrowdam was nonplussed. She turned her chin to admire them, which inspired the one farthest left to puff up a bit. “Nice touch, isn’t it? Prince Kíli had them sent to me. ‘For as much as I require.’ I don’t, but I’ll keep them long enough to be courteous.”

Bilbo frowned. “I didn’t get any guards.”

“Hah, no. You wouldn’t. He probably aims to prove his ability to protect us in our new home. Not that we need any extra security. This is mostly show.”

“It’s nice to feel wanted?”

“I think so,” she figured, and looked back with her contented and well-fed smile. “It’s not the Blue Mountains, that’s for certain.”

It was not like any place, really. Azsâlul’abad was a home that could have only been made by the dwarves.

It brought a profound sadness upon him, then—the thought of a world with no dwarves to build into it. Already there was a great, looming emptiness inside Erebor; a sense of people missing; an overabundance of unfilled space. These halls had been dug for a bustling capital filled with many more of Durin’s Folk than were now left in the land. What would another five generations do to them? What would Middle-Earth remember of the Mountain Dwarrow when there were only their dark, glittering mountains left behind?

“You’re looking greenish,” Galinyah noticed, worrying at him as much as she ever did worry at you, tilting her head and peering. “Have you come down with something?”

Bilbo shook the negative. But the lids beneath his lashes were bruised, and the hand over his stomach did not settle as it should have. “No, no. Bad shut-eye, is all. Something about this mountain doesn’t let me sleep.”

The light, perhaps. You couldn’t tell dawn from dusk this deep. There was always the sound of air in the tunnels. Footsteps echoed the Diplomatic Hall as clean laundry was delivered to another guest.

“You’re beautiful, anyway,” he said, not flirting by it, or maybe just a little bit. (A spry recovery for somebody who felt like he ought to flop down on his bed and sleep through luncheon.) “Off somewhere fanciful in that thing?”

She picked up the train of her silvery robe and gave it a half-twirl of agreement. The fabric shone under light like the scales of a muscular coldwater fish. “Do you like it? It was a gift. Some lordling or another—I forgot which. Excepting my trousers, most of this was.” Galinyah meant it from the
gilded columbine pin behind her ear right down to the soles of her blue fox boots. “‘Interested friends,’ or so they call themselves. Maybe it’s in poor taste. But if you give me a present, it’s my fancy to think-of or not-think-of you as I wear it, as I please.” She checked the furry cuff of her shoe. “Not as nice as the things Azírê makes, of course.”

“Pshaw. I don’t know a lick about dwarven courting. But I would hazard a guess that you, my dear dame, are deliberately making gossip.”

The wayward twitch of her mouth suggested someone fully aware and entirely unrepentant. “Do you think so?”

Our former burglar crossed his arms, tossed his curls back on a tsk, and leant up against the door frame. “You’ve got to be a dozen times too rascally for a smith. Aren’t you supposed to be dour, boring, and reliable? Kind of like a mallet.”

“I am. I just forgot that, too.” Galinyah lost none of that grin as she winked her green eye and let the copper one sass. She was a little irresistible, and my dear—if she had been a hobbit or if he hadn’t been so ill—Bilbo here admits he-himself would’ve probably made a pass at the silversmith, too. “I am, though, off somewhere, and that’s just what I came to see you about. I’ve been invited to breakfast by the Durin family.” One finger tapped her auburn goatee. “It’s a small affair. I think.”

“So it’s business with the crown, is it. You’re getting an early start.”

“Yes and no. They probably mean to welcome us personally. Leaving a second prince to receive your females is bad form. Though that little Durin is precious as a billygoat, so I didn’t mind too much.” And she smiled differently now—the same happy allotment of tooth with which Galinyah first greeted him, back when Bilbo was just some nameless and undersized stranger hanging on the door of her carriage. “Would you like to go?”

Note that Bilbo didn’t choke, though there were definitely a few airless hrm-hrms.

“Well you mean today? Right now?” he fumbled, blinking the overhard blink of a writer who has just had something social sprung on him. “Formally, as your escort?”

“As my guest,” she corrected, not too harsh on him for the hobbitish cultural vestige. Galinyah understood that Bilbo generally meant well, but he had some semantic catching-up to do, and his dwarfish manners were clumsy. When you’ve just stepped out of a place like the Shire, where bluebonneted babies and wealthy uncles and short-haired bailiffs rule the day, the mechanics of matriarchy take a little getting-used-to.

(Also, as has been said: you can take the hobbit out of the hills, but you can’t take the hills out of the hobbit. Beneath the dwarfcoat and the dwarf braid and the dwarf title, he was still at his roots what you might call provincial. Bit of a hayseed, I hate to say.)

Bilbo picked at his unglamorous house-robe while she waited in the hall with that all-too-pleasant expression. “But I’m not even dressed.”

“Oh, aye,” Galinyah agreed. “You should get dressed, then.”

“But you’re already here, and won’t I make you late?”

“I thought of that. I’m early. Don’t tell me it takes you an hour to dress, either. I just spent eight months camping with you. I know how long it takes.”

“But maybe the Durins want to speak with you in confidence. Maybe they don’t want a writer
around, jotting notes, eyeballing everyone. Not that I do that—eyeball—but it makes some people
uncomfortable, you know.”

“Then they should’ve said so. I’m sure it’s only a breakfast. Hobbits are, I’ve heard, breakfast
enthusiasts.”

“But—and sorry for saying—but should you really be seen walking me around by the arm? Not that
I mind. Far as I’m concerned, my arm’s at your disposal. But to somebody else, it could look plenty
odd.”

“Any more buts and you’d be a bathhouse, Bilbo.” She reached for the door handle, and with a
scout-along flick of her tufted chin, ushered the bed-rumpled Master Baggins back inside to prepare.

He found he couldn’t say no. Galinyah had a way of charming you into whatever she thought the
best use of the day before you even had a suspicion you were being charmed in the first place.
Honestly, our hobbit didn’t bother inviting her in. He said oh, all right, and he went.

The guards moved to follow them. Galinyah stopped them with a cluck of her tongue.

“Don’t you know this is Bilbo Baggins?” she asked when they protested, just a small tease, both her
strong hands pressing the flat of his back. “There’s no safer place in Erebor.”

And she kicked the door latched with her heel.

Bilbo dressed quickly. When attempting anything that requires significant courage, he has found you
are generally better-off going fast than going slow. (Besides, it wasn’t much use. No matter what
time and effort you might invest into your appearance, you will never out-glamour the party dwarf.
He was not much of a preener. Doubly-besides, nobody would be looking at him.)

So—while he pulled a fat-toothed comb through his short hair and rapidly buttoned the too-many
buttons of a clean dwarfish tunic, smoothing his snowy coat’s collar until it looked respectable—
Galinyah sat in the parlor, sparkling, and finished his leftover tea.

“Where did they put you? By the way,” Bilbo asked through the privacy of his bedroom door,
hopping into some soft trousers he guessed were formal wear. There was no time to fix his bed-head
braid; he just jimmed the bead higher and, with ambivalence that would make a dwarf squawk,
yanked a few stragglers off.

“Put me?” she puzzled, sounding amused. “I’m in the Craftmakers Quarter, if that’s what you’re
asking. Right at the Jewelers and Spinners Cross. A shop—or it will be, though there’s nothing in it
just yet. I’m impressed. They had all my things moved from the Guest Hall in less than a two-day.”

“Well, they got the name right. Jewelers and Spinners. Sounds like the two of you launched a
tavern.”

Hesitation. It came to him as a silence from the other side of a door.

“She’s... still awaiting rehoming. I’m sure she’ll be rehomed. It’s only,” she said, “less sure than the
assumption I’d be.”

Technically, neither Luin dam had been officiated into the Folk of Erebor; only the titled lord of a
dwarfish citadel decides who may live there. But it was unimaginable that King Thorin wouldn’t
receive Galinyah of Valdah, whose smith-master mothers had followed the Durins untold miles and
helped carve new halls in those far-off blue hills. Aízrë of No One, however—who whose mothers had
lost their names and nearly their heads—was not a certain thing.
“But I imagine we’ll have a definite decision by noon. Who knows?” she wondered, forcibly upbeat. He could hear the restless tapping of her toes through spongy crimson carpet and into stone. “Maybe afterwards, you and I will help her move in. Put my guards to work.”

Bilbo muttered some acquiescence, markedly less confident in his irresponsible promise to fix the embroiderer’s familial problems than he’d been a week ago. Today, merely speaking with Thorin struck him as a daunting-enough proposition. He hoped there’d be a decent crowd at breakfast. He poured out a little carafe water to wet a hanky and dab his face.

Galinyah didn’t divulge anything more right away. Lukewarm tea ringed the lip of her cup. It was an anxious sort of pause.

Then: “I thought you might say a few words on her behalf. If your friend the king needs a little help coming to a good decision.” An uneasy *ahem*. “Though I would have invited you, anyway.”

And there it was.

Rolling on a pair of woolly socks, propping on his sloppily made mattress to contemplate the prisons meant to encase his feet, our Master Baggins happened upon a very Baggins thought. That thought being: he really should not have returned to Erebor in the first place if he planned on spending the whole time holed-up in a corner somewheres because of a difficult few words and a harsh look on a royal face.

“You will,” she asked. “Won’t you?”

Bilbo tugged loose the anklestraps and, toes first, he slipped in.

*Of course*, he said.

And he stepped hard into his furry dwarf boots, and they went.

OOO

That morning, it rained. There was hardly any sunshine at all.

Bilbo and Galinyah made their way unhurriedly. As they moved from the Diplomatic Suite to the Durin Hall, pausing to consider that unfinished dragon statue, the sound of weather emerged beyond the rock. At first, it was a faraway hush, like dry leaves tumbling down a cobbled street, so muted and everywhere that our writer could not identify rain. As they drew closer to the king’s study, it became unmistakable. And when they entered the white room past its drawn double-door, you might see it, coming down in a sad and unremitting pour.

The rain stretched out beyond the far open wall. They had an unseasonably warm day under slow, gray, thunderless skies, and there was a thickness in the air. It stepped inside with the elegance of a drunken flutist at a noonday ball: a tease of sun through soupy clouds; a cloying breeze that dragged the gold drapes across alabaster floor; a coolness upon the carven columns. Fat waterdrops curtained the miles of stiff yellow wintergrass far below, and an eerie absence of wind settled over them, like mist on the smallhairs of your neck.

A good number of important people milled in here to chat and watch the lazy storm, but none of them were Thorin. Dwalin was about, on-duty if his scowl was any indication. Bilbo recognized a
sprinkling of the new King’s Army positioned inconspicuously along the walls (or what passed for
ingconspicuousness among dwarves); they were happy enough to welcome Galinyah’s attendants.
Servants modestly doled tea and collected gossip. Captain Tauriel stood sleepy-eyed before the
glassless window with elven sabers at her hips and tundra fur ‘round her shoulders. And Thorin’s
child was here, too—small boots and heavy robe making Bélahrhûh look like a cub lordling in dark
Durin blue. She held up her stuffed lamb for Cousin Dwalin’s consideration and was apparently
telling him some serious things about it.

Princes Fíli and Kíli, meanwhile, engaged Azírë. Our royal brothers looked a bit like mismatched
bookends there, one right next to the other, wearing each a full surcoat of family blues-and-blacks in
different heights with different heads. The elder in gold coronet was still hitched with rubies; the
younger in silver circlet left his hair free and wore most prominently the blasé bearing of someone
who’d made their first impression weeks ago.

It struck Bilbo as a tad unfair for them to gang up on a lady like that. Azírë looked apprehensive.
Here she was in the king’s study in her finest satin, a pale gray gown that matched her eyes and
stood stark against loose yellow hair. She’d painted her face with swoopy brown ink and mica, and
talked so fast you couldn’t gauge how nervous the tailor was.

When she spotted her friends, though, that second of relief was all it took to give said friends away.

They only looked a little surprised to see Bilbo there, dressed in his Ereborean best and trying
valiantly to maintain in dwarfboots. Kíli shot a cheerful wave. But it was Fíli who excused himself to
greet them, crossing the chamber in blustery Durin strides, coat flapping at the shins; he offered up a
palm and inclined his head by way of introduction.

“Welcome, sister,” bid the crown prince, ignoring Bilbo, to whom he would’ve said something more
like “Oh, it’s you! Thought I heard scurrying.” “I’m sorry we’re only meeting just now. I am Fíli,
Son-of-Dís-Daughter-of-Thráin. I’d welcome you to Erebor, too, but it seems you beat me home.”

Galinyah graciously accepted. She placed her two hands face-down on his one, and the brief bend of
the dam’s knees could hardly be described as a bow much as it was a dwarfish curtsey—genuine but
not fulsome respect. He obviously already knew who she was. (As for our hobbit, nobody paid him
any immediate mind. Master Baggins tried not to bristle about this. Out there, in Yon Wilderness, he
pretty much said whatever he wanted however he wanted to whomever. Here, in the glistering
kingdom of the very dwarves over which he’d once claimed ownership, an ex-burglar had better get
accustomed to waiting his turn.)

“I am most pleased to be here, my prince. But I must tell you: we’ve met before.”

“Have we? I don’t recall.”

Bilbo—who I must admit was getting a little bored of being ignored in for court parlance—felt his
eyes wander, as writer-eyes do. It was an itchy, uncomfortable nostalgia, being back in this room
where he and the king had broken so many fasts. Nothing about it had changed. The curtains were
excessive, the candelabras were tall and silver, and there was a dizziness about being so high up—
just cut, as though by axebit, into the mountainside over all that flat land. He looked down to see his
shadow on the floor and was greeted by the still-bizarre sight of fur that wasn’t his own. Timberwolf,
probably.

Small miracle that Master Baggins had managed to stumble all the way here without tripping onto his
face. He glanced away from the boots to determine when he’d finally get to sit down. Servants were
ferrying the first of the food to the great marbled longtable, but hardly anyone had touched it, and no
one sat. There was no sign of Thorin.
The smith and the prince were still talking:

“Which you shouldn’t. You were a hobnail heavier than that—” She pointed to Bēlarūh (who was still chattering away to Dwalin in the corner, possibly regarding her pet ram’s dietary needs). “—and I was a little younger than you are now. You paid my mother a visit in our workshop.”

“Oh?" "

Galinyah’s smile conveyed nothing. It was bland for one of hers, not-at-all smarmy or wicked, which made Bilbo leery. “You were hiding in a smelting pot, and a good thing somebody checked. Is it coming back now, Your Highness? What you said? I lifted the lid and in fact, you promised if I didn’t tell His Majesty where you were, you’d grow up and give me four children.”

A servant passing by with a steaming tureen sneezed suspiciously. One of the King’s Army had overheard and seemed to be biting his tongue.

As for Bilbo, my dear, he lost it.

While our writer snorted into the wide-open, leaping to cover his own mouth, Fíli-Son-of-Dís morphed eight shades of crimson—or, two for every child he’d promised. Color was spread mercilessly. “Did I,” he croaked, fingerpads self-consciously shaping the edge of his own cheekbone, as though demurring might keep everyone’s eyes off. (It didn’t.) Kíli had twisted his chin to glance, curiously, across the chamber. Lady Dís was nowhere to be found. Erebor’s glib and venerable crown prince looked as though he might even appeal for Bilbo’s lowly help—were Bilbo not preoccupied catching his breath and drying his eyes with his sleeve. The loud, unbitten-back hobbit laughing did not soothe the royal blush.

Galinyah’s pleasant smile was unaffected. She extended her arms and looked confusedly this way, that. “Where are all my daughters, then? I’ve come many miles from Ered Luin to see if you intend to keep your word. Am I to understand that Durin’s sons do not always mean what they say?”

Fíli fumbled for anything, at this point. His throat worked uselessly, his braided beard twitched, and if his neck got any redder, all those rubies might as well retire.

The silversmith didn’t say a word. She stood there, wingspan hanging, waiting for an answer.

Then she grinned.

The realization he’d been the butt of a little friendly Blue Hills humor was like a pail of water tossed over somebody’s head. Heart stuttering, blood cooling, Fíli showed his teeth and laughed an agonized laugh.

“You jack-throwing hills-dwarf,” he blurted. His big breath out chuffed into giggles and this Heir Apparent bowed over, palm heel propping on a cap. “You scared the life out of me—! Four children. How was I going to explain any of it to my wife?”

Galinyah was proud as a peacock to have made her prince laugh. She gave a second curtsey to apologize, holding handfuls of her silver robe’s tails like mothwings. “Twenty-some pardons, Your Highness, at least. But you really did say it.”

As for Bilbo, still tsking his tongue and shaking his head, he figured it wasn’t hurting anyone’s reputation to pipe up now. “Sounds like Fíli. Tales taller than his other parts are.”

The prince, still pink-cheeked with embarrassment, gave up completely—and he stretched out his arm to wrap around hers, wheeling the silversmith into a weak-kneed hug. “Absolute villain.
Welcome! Welcome home.”

Having gotten a welcome-home hug from the future king, it was all-in-a-day’s-work for Galinyah. She politely excused herself to let them speak privately, and to join Azírë, who may or may not have needed some saving from Kíli’s ghastly puns.

And so Bilbo suddenly appeared to Fíli. The crown prince hit his old mate with a stink-eyed squint. There was still a twinge of color in those cheeks. “And here you are, bowling on in with a couple of dames to laugh me out of my own house. Running with a rough lot, as usual.”

Our writer waffled. “Don’t look at me. I didn’t know she was going to do that. You’re the one promising people children.”

It was a mite difficult speaking to Fíli here, to be honest. Our hobbit rather wanted to go pester Dwalin a bit, but he was too afraid of Thorin’s daughter. The King’s-Guard held fort in a distant corner sullen with murals and bookshelves, watching her talk without cracking a smile. They made for a humorous sight: his ringed ears, his mail jacket, his giant mitt extending when Bélarûh held up her stuffed lamb to deal its head the demanded pet. As for the princeling, she barely came past his knee.

But it never especially mattered to the Fates that Be what Master Baggins wanted to do (or thought he wanted to do), did it? Because before he’d the chance to say much of anything to anyone, somebody new showed up.

The dam poked through the open double-doors like sneaking a nefarious peek ’round a treestump. She was a head of romantically whorled caramel over a sweet, snub-nosed face; she wore dripping white gold earrings and kept her beard short and even. She was pleasantly chubby in the way hobbits tend to find appealing. She wore a dash of rouge over cheeks the welcoming color of cold beachsand and warm breadcrust; the generous skirt of her ivory dress twirled dramatically whenever she’d pivot; and, if you were close enough to get past the overpowering whiff of clove perfume, she smelled a little bit like strawberry soap.

When it became clear nothing had started yet, she let out a breath all in a whoosh. Her steps were waltzlike and precise in narrow suede boots, and demanding no special attention, she made her way directly to Fíli, whose proud face softened definitely as one’s face does when he is in love.

Around her neck: the Gems of Lasgalen, a Durin gift for the dam next to be queen.

“Sorry I’m late,” Kashet started, puffing a little exasperation as she drew near enough to take her husband’s hand for a squeeze. It started Master Baggins, that voice. Bright and swift and lively, like a swallow looping through the air; words rushed out as fast as her tongue could form them. It was a high, fluttered-heart voice he had never expected to hear inside Erebor. Her eyes were like that, too: large and alert, the pupils ever-moving, watching for anything and everything, a goldish brown that might make halflings think of marigolds. “Have I had one! A morning. Two steps out my door, biscuit in my one hand and hairbrush in the other, I run—smack!—into—oh.”

It was like tapping on a light. Her story stopped short. That sunflower of a face recalibrated: her eyes widened; her mouth unrolled a practiced grin full of teeth; and with a measured whirl of that courtly gown, she courteously turned her sights to Bilbo.

“Accept my humblest apologies!” the lady lamented. That sugar-sweet, nasally voice went up a few octaves, even at its lowest consonants like no dwarfish voice Bilbo’d ever heard before. (Dwarves do not, in his experience, speak in exclamation points.) “In my unseemly haste, I have neglected a fair face I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting! Yet I know who you are! You are the estimable
Lord Bilbo Baggins of the Fair Western Hills! I, Kashet Durinbride, Daughter-of-Brehrûk-Son-of-Brarîs and Ambassador Second Secretary of the Nordinbad Dwarves, welcome you to the grand halls of my husband, with joviality and with—”

Fíli’s palm stopped on the underflesh of her arm. “Don’t mind with it; it’s just Bilbo. He’s one of us.”

Master Baggins was going to ask what precisely that meant. But then her beaming and cherubic bearing ball of a smile dropped like a glass bowl and broke into what you’d have to describe as a whuff.

“Well, thank the Grand Halls of my Husband for that,” whuffed Kashet of Nordinbad, Future Lonely Queen.

Bilbo, who wasn’t going to forget his dwarfish hello a second time, offered both palms. Kashet’s were chilly, and once introductions were through, she bounced back to the preceding conversation. Her eyes rolled dramatically towards her husband and her dense brows gave a knowing hip-hop.

“Thorin caught me this morning. Had to walk me around and know all about my ‘health.’ He just wouldn’t leave. My jaw is going to drop off.” The menacing flourish of her false Court Smile looked aggressive this time, hardly hinged; Kashet snorted it away again before dropping a hand on Fíli’s shortened arm. “Please, love, please tell your uncle to keep his business out of my womb or the next time he ‘inquires after my health,’ I’m going to say, ‘Oh, very good, Majesty, and yours? How is that heir production coming along? Are the king’s lads swimming all right?’”

The crown prince devolved into a crumbling laugh. “Darling, I’m so sorry. Do some deep breathing. Remember your meditations.”

Kashet sent one last shot of air from her nose. Her long earrings jangled softly at each shoulder whenever the future queen turned. “I apologize for my mouth,” she told Bilbo, “but I have to live with these people and if I don’t flick off the cap now and again, I’ll burst into cutlets in the middle of breakfast.”

“Well. This is my wife.” Fíli was all smug pride. “Do you like her?”

“I think she is maybe the best person I have met in Erebor.”

The pleased prince feigned coincidence. “I said that, too.”

“I’m blathering,” Kashet digressed, brushing the compliments aside like snowfall. “This time, I truly am sorry. Are you enjoying your visit, Bilbo? You must tell me—in some better setting—all about yourself.”

“Oh, I’m not very interesting, I fear. Better you tell me about you.”

“None of that! There’s no foothold for humility here! If you’ve half the stories I’ve been led to think you do, you’re my tutor for the winter. No, you don’t have an option! It’s for the health of the kingdom. For diplomatic reasons. I’m tragically lacking in blackmail leverage and you never know when that will come in handy.”

“Where is Uncle, by the way?” Fíli wondered, squinting toward the propped open doors. Galinyah and Azîrë were watching Kíli obviously pantomime the Daunting of Smaug, Tauriel was dozing where she stood like a ragged pony, and Bélarûh had given up on Dwalin’s company to sit with her lamb on the stone-cold floor. “It’s late.”

“Your mother grabbed him; that’s how I made my escape. He would be off talking with her, I
“Well! It’s a good thing we have nothing to do today,” he mused, only good-natured as long as the pastries stayed warm. Kashet doubled the sentiment with an annoyed hoist of her brows. “And Bilbo. Look at him, he’s having fun. Perfect way to spend your holiday. Watching custard dry.”

“It’s not so bad. I came to work, you know, not to stand around and—”

With the gift of dismal timing he usually had, Thorin II picked that moment to arrive.

For a moment, Master Baggins thought it must be his wife on the king’s arm—but true to Kashet’s theory, it was only Lady Dís. And she was not on his arm at all. They walked in together, imposing figures in sweeping black, large Durin paces and shoulders inside carnivore fur.

The Lord of Ered Luin looked as unrufflable as she had when Bilbo first met her. There was a silver fox pelt pinned ‘round her neck—head and tail still on—ferocious enough so she in a dress and a broad maiden’s braid didn’t have to be. At the sight of Prince Dís walking there, wearing a predator like jewelry, Azírë’s breath caught. Galinyah, half-listening to Kíli-babble, sternly snatched her friend’s hand before it could spring to her mouth.

As for Thorin, by this point, we need only say he was himself.

Whatever private conversation Thráin’s children had been having, they cut it short, and the two of them separated immediately, not even bothering with a final remark. There was no announcement, either. Thorin went to speak with Dwalin, giving the rest of the room three feet of hair and the back of his head. No Raven Crown atop it—just the bluestones and silver of the royal diadem—and its absence was a brick off our writer’s shoulders, which incidentally doesn’t make sense.

Or he would’ve spoken with Dwalin, that is. As it was, he was quickly waylaid by Bélarûh, whom the king scooped up without thinking, and it is difficult to put words to what the sight of Thorin-Thráin’s-Son standing so far away with an armful of his unfriendly child did to Master Baggins. Fortunately, there was no need to put words on it, as nobody wanted any from him. They conversed there in the bookish corner without seeing Bilbo, at all.

Dís saw him, though.

She did not look pleased.

The prince didn’t say hello, either. Her thick brows ascended threateningly—and, having nothing to say to him, the Lord of the Blue Mountains in foxtail and inky gown went promptly to greet her former subjects. (She also went to smooth down a floater on Kíli’s hair. Azírë’s panicked look became only marginally less-panicked when she saw Lady Dís’s spit-wet fingers in the lad’s locks.)

Bilbo wished he could have explained to her he’d nothing to do with this—that it had been all Galinyah’s idea, which was, by the way, the truth. But before he’d even thought through what he might say to appease Dís, Thorin and Dwalin had finished, and the king with the child-prince made to join her.

Our hobbit hoped Kashet and Fíli might buy him a little more time, but it wasn’t so. Thorin very obviously spotted Master Baggins there. His halved lids opened wide; there was a harsh, questioning glance at his sister; and, pulling her aside, they had what was obviously a less-than-tickled chat about it. Strange to see two dwarves look so unhappy with Bélarûh’s mitts still stuck fast to the ebon velvet of her father’s tunic, shy face buried into the lion’s ruff of his cape. There were too many people in here for her, and a writer could relate. Her ram sat alone on the floor.
“He is her guest,” Dís belabored, aggrandizing it—a mocking bit of conversation Master Baggins wished he hadn’t picked up. That word cut unkindly through the splatter of rain outside, and Bilbo flinched in-between the crown couple. All of a sudden, he didn’t have time to appease the irked Lord of Ered Luin—our writer was too busy figuring out how a burglar who’d worn out his welcome could possibly go about vouching for a familyless dwarf.

Still, nobody wanted for Master Baggins’s opinion on the matter. Thorin sneered quietly—as he did when something had displeased him—and if a king has ever come close to saying “ugh,” it is King Thorin II of Erebor.

He untangled Bélarûh’s fingers from his crow-black hair, set her down, and made to speak welcoming words to the new dwarrowdames.

As for our dames, they were waiting their turns with a mix of apprehension and steel. Azírë had just been whispering to Galinyah—Bilbo caught the end of a bewildered, nervous “Why did you get guards? I didn’t get guards…”—when they shushed. No one wanted a spectacle, or worse: for their settling to be denied. (It may have been a private breakfast, after all, but only “private” in the air-quotes sense. Dwarves, from servant to guard to fluffed-up lordling, gossip worse than a room full of elfish fisherfolk.)

The silversmith, who had no reason to worry, went first.

If she was at all uneasy, it did not show. The dames bowed slightly at the waist—as much as dames will for a male—and Galinyah introduced them both. (She had been much less formulaic with Prince Fíli, but of course, it was neither proper nor prudent to sexually ridicule the King Under the Mountain, even if you were just being a loveable rogue.) “We greet you, Thorin of Thráin, Khulzêl Son of Durin, under the roof of your home,” she said, dulcet and courtierlike, “where we have come to practice our crafts, and to join our hands with the hands of your Folk.”

Thorin did not look especially interested. He had gone through the motions of welcoming dwarrowdames pretty frequently since the Mountain had been retaken, and, face reset to the wise and unflappable neutrality of royalty again, accepted. “You are welcome in my home, Khazush, for it is now yours.”

To the smith, whose hands fit decently well over his own: “Galinyah, Daughter of Valdah, your name and your skill will be honored. My mother knew yours well.”

She nodded gracefully, still shimmering away in the grayish morning, and stepped out of the limelight with a courtly swoop. “Many thanks, King Thorin.”

To the embroiderer, now—who cringed when addressed, and to whom the king did not offer his palms: “Your name, too, is not forgotten, Daughter of Menava, Daughter of Brulírë. I am to understand you come here on your own?”

Azírë, no longer recalling her first bow, bowed again. It was too deep to pass as a proper Ereborean bow, which should never be obsequious enough to show an audience the part of your hair, and should never—as hers did—smack of someone asking for mercy. She didn’t have Galinyah at one hip to bolster her backbone or to keep her from being grovelish under the direct address of the king. “I do, Your Majesty, for the good of the Folk,” she professed, “whose halls are quieter than those of my home.”

Bilbo, who was unprepared but brutishly committed to speak up roundabout now, had expected some sort of kingly challenge. He at least expected a snort. He did not expect Thorin to place his hands behind Azírë’s shoulders and tow her into a distant, formal hug. “Then let all who know your
name know I here embrace you as my sister and let all else but that be lost.”

A performance for the attendants, clearly. Yet to call the embroiderer surprised by his rationed affection would’ve been understatement. She went board-stiff. Then, realizing what was happening, all the air seemed to leak out of her, her cat’s ridge unpoofed, and Azírê’s tightly balled fists reformed into hands. Kashet flashed Fíli the not-displeased frown of being impressed. Her Heir Apparent husband hhmmed.

And that was that, and everyone sat down to eat.

Seating was predictable. Thorin took the head, Fíli and Dís beside him, Kashet and Kíli respectively beside them. Bélarûh was snatched and plopped between her smiley cousin and authoritative aunt. Erebor’s newest residents had been obviously intended to sit across from one another, as well, except they didn’t. Instead, Galinyah grabbed Bilbo’s hand and all but dragged him over to Kashet; Azírê latched onto his opposite arm; and thus the table was two places lopsided, with the writer looking up at nobody, and the prattle of rain still smothering the morning sun.

Master Baggins looked at his plate instead. Through no conscious action of his own, it filled up with some kind of thin bread and cut ham and sweet potato. Kashet and Kíli chattered politely with Galinyah at his one side; Azírê (of Menava of Brulirê) was still looking a little gobsmacked at his other, blindly spooning sugared berries onto her plate. Dís and Fíli listened politely. Thorin, apparently, decided his work was done, and as such, he intended on speaking to no one. The king picked sullenly at his food at the faraway end of the table—and if his mouth was full of hashbrowns, Bilbo decided, at least he couldn’t ugh with it.

“Has your tea gone cold?” Kashet touched a few fingers to the smith’s sleeve. “Shall I call another pot out?”

Galinyah—honored by the king, blushed-at by the crown prince, fusses over by the future queen, and in all honestly more marvelously Galinyahish than Bilbo had ever seen her—had just failed to coax Dwalin to the table, but didn’t let that quash her. She turned her sights to Tauriel—who, incidentally, was still doing her best not to sleep standing up. And the silversmith said: “Oh, no, Your Grace, not at all. It is only that I’ve never seen an elf before, and I grow nervous with elf-eyes watching me.”

It woke Tauriel up a bit, at least. You might assume she was not unaccustomed to such unsolicited comments; our captain straightened, tightened her jaw, and tried to look deserving in the somber dwarfish way.

Fíli was quick to interject on behalf of his brother’s secret belovéd. “She’s one of ours, sister. The captain merely looks shifty. She means no harm.” (Kíli, meanwhile, looked entirely unfazed, like someone had just made a mildly unfavorable remark about a potted plant.)

“No, my prince. I refer not to the elf but to the eyes. Like being watched at your dinner by a hungry dog.” She picked up and waved with a leaf of flatbread. “Eat something, elf, lest that hair gets wet and snaps you at the waist.”

This turn surprised no one more than Tauriel herself. She fobbed the invitation off with a small, demure laugh, sheepishly touching her mighty red fishtail. You might also assume, for all she was used to their insults, the captain was likewise privy to the humor of dwarves: friendly, bodily put-downs, where a dwarf will find roundabout ways to insult your feature they find most deserving of admiration and praise.

Fíli was, of course, was not-at-all trapping the unlucky sot his sib slept with when he hiked one
blond eyebrow up and said, “Ah, but now you’ve been invited, haven’t you.”

“I wish not to disrupt.”

“Tauriel.” It was Thorin. Without looking up, without looking jovial at all, he rotated his royal hand to call her over and the deep, sonorous voice spoke. “Sit. Eat.”

There was no refusing that. Nodding, caught-fast as much as she was flattered, the elf abandoned her post and took a quiet seat at the farthest end of their long table, where no one was near enough to easily engage. All hunched shoulders and lanky calves, she looked as misplaced as Bilbo did among this dwarfish gathering. The king gestured wordlessly for her to be brought food and drink.

Lady Dís propped an elbow on the marble and hummed amusedly into the heel of her hand. “An elfmaid at my brother’s table. Let none say ours isn’t an age of wonders.”

Her brother at his table merely shrugged and sneered at that, not likely to be baited by a sister today. The gemstones on his fingers were heavy and forbidding in this light, and they looked out-of-place, too—for hands that have been too long sitting upon the arms of a throne are soon not fit for doing anything else.

“My liege-lord King Thorin is generous,” Tauriel agreed quietly, a mousey flutter of voice, not daring to lift those elf-eyes. Bilbo thought she was laying it on a bit thick.

So did Kíli, apparently; the young prince was all smiles as he bounced up from his chair to start in on the unsliced bird. “Gracious to a fault, we Durins are. Here,” he announced, yanking its tray forward, tresses overspilling a shoulder as he drove in the knife. “I’ll even cut your elf’s meat for her.”

The halfling choked fitfully into his glass.

“Generosity that knows no boundaries,” Tauriel granted, a comment that everyone else—besides Bilbo, who had gone from sputtering to hacking now—took as the poor, underschooled silvan flubbing her idioms.

“Fancy sinking your teeth into a leg? No? How about a breast?”

“I savor any cut, my lord. But I must tell Your Highness it is the thighmeat I hunger for the most.”

Master Baggins, eyes watering and napkin stuffed over his mouth, motioned quickly for the water pitcher. Azírë laid her palm worriedly on Bilbo’s back to ask if he was all right.

But we need not be exposed to any more of that, so let us instead shift focus to the king’s child.

Bélarûh, who didn’t like her tart, saw the distraction as an opportunity and snatched it. She’d campaigned for someone to retrieve her lamb for a while now—(Dwalin, who was indeed five feet of warlike taffy around children, had tried)—but Dís was having none of that. Finally, after an utterly despairing line of sighs, the child-prince managed to successfully slip under the table, knocked Kíli’s leather boot out of her way, and resurfaced hanging from the train of her father’s cloak.

Thorin detached her from his clothing and put the girl instead on his knee. Discovering there was nothing more interesting happening at this end of the table, looking incredibly sour, she started to whine.

“I told you you’re going to ruin her like that.” Dís sharp-eyed as Fili handed over Kashet’s bronze brooch and Kíli made every outrageous face he could think of to stop the babe from throwing a fit.
Bélarûh squirmed, wanting to receive their pampering no more than her aunt wanted it given. She purposefully dropped the brooch on the floor, lunged to get it, and struggled to melt off the king’s lap. Sitting her up just long enough to pull the mussed hair out of her face and put her robes aright, Thorin simply set her free.

The Lord of Ered Luin harrumphed over the backdrop of scrambling feet through the lull of rain. “Raise a mannerless despot, then. Why should you care?”

“She’s just a little bored, Mum. Wouldn’t you be?” Díš chuffed Fíli away.

“She is a Prince of Durin and five winters next year. It isn’t asking too much to expect she sit through a breakfast without rolling on the floor. A prince should at least speak enough to greet our guests.”

“She’s shy,” cooed Kíli. “She speaks just fine.”

“To whom she pleases and when. Your great-grandmother would have taken your whole heads off if you even thought of behaving like that. If we fussed in front of her friends, Ylva scorched the scruff right off our chins.”

Thorin in his sulking frowned. Whether he did not appreciate being chided in front of the dames or was merely in a stormy mood could not be determined. His love for his grandmother, though, was a certain thing. “I did not tell you how to raise your children.”

Galinyah, helping herself to another ladleful of soup, looked like she appreciated the free show. Azírë had calmed considerably, but if you paid close enough attention, you could see—just where the graceful wristbones peeked out beneath graysmoke cuffs—her hands shake as they reached for a serving dish.

“No, brother; you tried to steal my children. After you accused me of letting them get mangy. Did you or did you not spend the first ten years of Fíli’s life scolding me that I was raising a prince, not a puppy? Did you not climb through my window to braid Kíli’s hair when you thought I had done a poor job with it?”

“It is different.”

“Makammathûn! It is not different.”

Bélarûh—who you will learn has inherited her father’s atrocious timing—chose that moment to loose a stolen plate like a warrior hurls a discus. It made a terrible sound against the strings of Thorin’s great silver harp in the airy far corner. Everyone jumped. The king grimaced. The king’s sister looked vaguely pleased her predictions had proven true.

Dwalin was already en route to remove the rascal princess, but Thorin brushed him off. “Do not,” the king warned her instead, voice taut, brows high, his best disciplinary tone. His child, who already had a second plate in-hand, lowered it just slightly.

Bélarûh’s hesitation was not convincing. So it was the King Under the Mountain stood up from breakfast to retrieve his child. Díš shook her head the whole way.

“Buntanut,” he told her, too gently for a decent admonishment by hobbit standards, standing behind and lifting her arm to peel fingers from saucer. She stared perplexedly up at him. His free hand steadied the stricken harp, which, if it had fallen, would have crushed her easily. “Do not.”

“Though you might play for your new sisters. Or the old one, if she still merits a song or two,” Lady
Dís proposed. Thorin, with Bélarûh’s little fist engulfed in his one and confiscated plate in the other, made an irritated face.

“In the middle of my breakfast?”

“A short one,” she pouted. And asked so by his sister—and so surrounded by Durins, when it had once not very long ago been only two left—the king could not deny anything.

In truth, he rather liked showing off. It was with this halfhearted resignation that Thorin passed off the plate, sat down at his harp, settled his nerves, and released his daughter to play something.

And—storybooklike—believe-it-or-not—the rain lifted a few seconds just then, as the girl ran gleefully back to her ram and the king laid his hands ‘cross the strings. A cloud huffed out of the way, letting in a smidge of sun. The low breeze stopped its soused two-step, and the heavy curtains, damp and decadent, showed a decent snap of sky.

The day arrived.

The harpstring broke.

And the arrow hit white wool.

Chapter End Notes

KHUZDUL TRANSLATIONS (Compiled from various sources, primarily the neo-Khuzdul Dwarrow Scholar dictionary.)
1. Khazush = sister [In the compatriot sense, not the familial one.]
2. Khulzêl = male of all males [For our split-government purposes, we’re going pretend this is an actual title for “leader of the males” and not some extra creepy Khuzdul come-on.]
3. Makammathûn = he who (excessively) continues to sing [And a rude nickname for a big bro.]
4. Buntanut = tiny cat. [Given the geography and likely local fauna, I take “cat” in this context to mean wild cat/lion. Therefore the implication is “small lion” (maybe housecat?) rather than “kitten.”]
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

And such is the story of how Master Burglar Baggins came quite suddenly out of retirement.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was Nori, in fact, who taught Master Baggins how to fight.

Oh, sure, some people will tell you hobbits are useless in a scrap. Something about reach or dynamics or momentum and so on. But these people are terrible combatants who couldn’t tell a dirk from a hanger.

The plain and unpoetical fact is: plumb near anybody can make a decent showing in a swordfight, so long as you are willing to sit them down and properly instruct them. If you can swat at bees or poke a fireplace, you are serviceable. If you can do either of these things while taking a big step sideways, you have prospects of doing significant damage. Real combat, my dear, doesn’t have to be fanciful; indeed, a great deal more difficult than the actual fighting is finding an instructor who knows how to teach.

Bilbo, of course, didn’t have to search. Nori merely settled down at camp with him one day, chewing pumpernickel and slopping his tea, to ask: “Hey, Cottontail. You want that I should learn you how to fight?”

It was timely after famous episode with the rock trolls. Bilbo, half-miserable with a cold, had been perched grumpily on a limestone shelf to nurse some grouse broth from beneath a rough saddle blanket. Nori had—in Nori’s way—picked deftly up those stones, sitting himself not quite beside our hobbit, but a little higher and a little behind. (There’s never been a handier henchman, but to put it straightforward: the dwarf was a touch creepy. He reminded Bilbo of a mangy badger lingering under the buttercups, observing you at your farmwork, plotting how to eat your henhouse chicks.)

The writer sipped at his cup without looking, because that’s just what Nori wanted. “Aren’t you a thief?”

“Says the fluffy-footed burglar. We sneaky types have got to stick together. Honestly I think you not-fighting, being a legitimate member of our prestigious order of picklocks and pickpockets, is kind of a shame.”

“It’s my philosophy that the whole point of sneaking is not to get caught,” Master Baggins said with a rigorous snuffle and his cocked left brow.

Nori smiled at him, toothy and nefarious, ginger-haired and coal-eyed even when he was trying his damndest to be friendly. He dipped his stale bread in his mug and ate it like that. Our hobbit couldn’t quite figure out how somebody wore so many whistles on his head without clink-clanking around. “Now, that is a very optimistic life view, rabbit, and we all love you for it.”
“I’m not opposed to the idea, I just—” He waved helplessly with his soup cup. “Isn’t Dwalin the master-at-arms around here?”

Dwalin was master-at-armasing even as he said so. The befurred dwarrish tree trunk was currently instructing little Ori in the high art of evasion—which in layperson’s terms meant he was walloping the scribe’s ankles with a birch branch and yelling at him whenever his bum inevitably made contact with the ground.

“Oh, sure,” Nori ho-hummed, dusting a sprinkling of breadcrumbs off his trouser knees. He’d developed a funny way of talking after running with packs of human hoodlums for so long. The botched accent and linguistic excess of style did not obscure his inherited Ereboorean pride, however—he was rubbish at playing shy. “But what’s a lump like him got to teach you? You and I share what we will call a finesse build. Finesse, right?—because it’s not all smash-n’-bashing like Dwalin does. Nor is it all Glóin’s hack-whacking. Not Thorin’s flashy-washy twirly-whirly bullshit, either. Fact is,” the thief told him, demurely picking off a few lingering specks of pumpernickel, “I’m the best fighter the Durins got.”

Bilbo snorted and went for another unappetizing gulp. “Right until Dwalin hears you say so and clobbers you.”

The dwarf wrinkled his bony nose and gave an exasperated smack of his lips. “Why do you figure a lowly shadster like myself got to come along on this noble-type venture? D’you think His Inimitable Majesty particularly enjoys having me around? Were these not such historic times, bunny, I’d’ve got a close shave from one litigious constable or another by now. Stone-cold fact,” he swore, thumping a knuckly fist on his heart in the appropriate dwarrow way. “I’m the best, and the venerable House of Durin knows it.”

“You know what?—sure. You’re the best of the best! Doesn’t change the facts for me. It may surprise you to hear this, but hobbits don’t do much bandying; we’ve got a block or two stacked against us in that regard.”

Nori tutted his best mother hen. “That’s no excuse. Lookit,” the dwarf prodded, dealing Bilbo’s blanketed form a poke roundabout his ribs. “What was your day-job, burglar?”

Our burglar had to take a moment to remember. His rain-damp curls fluffed sulkily. “I did investments.”

“Perfect!” The thief slapped a chapped palm on his wooly trouser knee. Master Baggins was a little taken aback by the enthusiasm. He turned about to pay real attention now. The dull dagger on his hipbone seemed like it might never feel familiar, but the halfling’s ears perked up. “So you’re a career guesser. Well, bunny: you’re going to be a great fighter, so long as you act smart, listen to me, and you do it finesse.”

Fighting, Nori said, is just a high-stakes game of educated guessing.

He said: You guess what the other sod’s going to do.

And, he said, you stay one guess ahead.

As it turns out: Master Baggins was a pretty sharp guesser.
Bilbo’s never liked writing battle scenes. Reality doesn’t carry over very well, you see. The nature of narrative is sequence, but in battle, everything happens at once.

So, all at once:

The arrowshaft split the air.

The Dwarfking leapt in great offense to his feet.

The breeze tickled the curtains open.

And the carving knife hit the man hidden there in his throat.

You’d think, from the way adventure yarns put it, a child struck with an arrow would fly across the room, but it just isn’t so. Bélarûh merely crumpled over, lamb clutched tight to her plump little belly, back doubled like a lady with a mean moon cramp. She sat right away down that way, too, such an empty look on her fierce young face, you’d think Cousin Kíli had only sprung from a closet to scare her. Stubborn nails on stubborn hands clawed into white wool. The arrow jutted out.

Thereafter, the Royal Study was chaos. Dwarves jumped up or froze in their chairs. Someone shrieked in Khuzdul. Captain Tauriel—one fine leather boot stomped on the grand stone table, hand still hovering where she’d yanked the blade out of the bird and hurled it—leapt over and made for the stricken assassin. He bled spittily across pale marble, dying swiftly in a puddle of late morning sun.

Thorin fled to his child. The black cape billowed fearfully until it collapsed around the king, who kneeled beside her with no grace, prying the stuffed ram with difficulty from Bélarûh’s locked arms. With it came the arrow, spearing the poor toy straight through its ribs.

Seeing this, Bélah began to cry, more from confusion than anything else, for the shock would not let her feel the pain. Her father’s hand pressed her shoulders back on the floor and his face frightened her with its terribly mortal look. There was a thimbleful of child’s blood on his fingers. He opened her robe and found the wound on his daughter’s side.

The bloodless expression on Thorin’s face crumbled immediately into something that looked like it might sob. Seeing she had not been killed, the king held up the shot toy to show everyone this sad gift from Dáin’s dead son had saved her life. An inarticulate cry of thanks Bilbo thought came from Kashet actually belonged to Prince Dís. Her littlest child sat beside her dumfounded in dark-headed Durin shock. Fíli, who’d sprung up before anyone else, was already saying something important-looking. Dwalin—who had been close on his cousin’s heels, lording over them like a stone statue—un-petrified. His paws swept from his horrified mouth to rest breathlessly atop his head.

Tauriel was not part of this disorder. The captain had one goal: answers from the man with the bow. Said man had clearly not counted on contending with an elf. (And who would, in a Dwarven Citadel? Sort of like looking into a doghouse and getting jumped on by a hacked-off cat.) He might’ve shimmed back down his climbing rope had it not been for the lady’s devastating aim; as it was, he found an elven thumb gouged in the tenderness beneath his chin.

“The name of your master, and I will staunch your bleeding,” she offered on handheels and knecaps, leaning her large ear close. But Tauriel’s knife had cut too surely at its mark. Apple
bobbing, eyewhites livid and tongue working helplessly, instead he died there on the study floor.

She cursed herself. As the captain stood, with human blood wet on her hands to match the dwarfsblood on the king’s, a soldier shouted from the door.

Here are three members of Erebor’s new King’s Army: their faces frightened, their gauntlets banging so hard upon it that the mighty knockers rattled on brass screws. “They’re jammed,” one yelled. “We’d two on outside watch. No one’s there!”

Galinyah grabbed Bilbo’s hand under the table. Bélarûh wailed, and Thorin—kneeling with his black hair spilled on the floor and his hand over his child’s wound—looked about as helpless to fate as our hero had ever seen him.

“Dwalin!” Dís bellowed, burnt palms slamming the table as she scraped loudly from her chair. “Get them open! Knock them down if you have to.”

So Dwalin ran, iron boots hammering, to challenge the locks. He threw his burly shoulder into it. Then, growling filth, the King’s-Guard of Erebor hefted one punishing battleaxe and brought it crashing—once, twice, thrice—into the cleft. It mulched. Woodchips went like flies from a rotten tomato a fauntling had kicked.

Well, you know how Dwalin is. He’d gnash straight through rock if he had to. This was only a door. Give him, say, ten or fifteen chops, and the dwarf would’ve had those hinges blown open. He got in four.

OOO

And now we must pause for another note about hobbits—about Master Baggins, in particular.

The Baggins Family, pretty much since the Oldbucks held the Thainship and the East Road was newly-dug, has been a clan of smart investors. (Some smarter than others. We will get into that, and Drogo’s regrettable shells habit, another time.) In this modest way, their fortunes have depended upon prediction and chance for quite a long time.

It was a very exciting business for Bungo, this metaphorical matter of playing the right cards at just the right moments. Honeyfruit out of Southfarthing, red beans in from Bree; beeswax to Ered Luin, parchment straight through Bywater. He researched with great enthusiasm his annual trade bids, and took pleasure in positive gains far beyond money. (Though Bungo had a pronounced—but not overzealous—taste for that, too. He would’ve fainted square on the welcome mat with one glimpse of the gold casket Bilbo brought home. Then, after a cup of sweet tea and a liberal splash of brandy, would’ve proceeded to interrogate his son as to whether-or-not his crate of dwarfcoin was honest. And honestly, our writer wasn’t sure. Maybe best that he had not needed to explain the title “burglar” to his father, or the unhobbitish state of his hair.)

To put it more simply: while Bilbo’d missed the touted Baggins propriety gene, he had, fortuitously, inherited Bungo’s propensity for data collection. From his father’s patient tutelage and from good breeding came a natural ability to zero-in. Sometimes he supposed a clue was coming miles in advance. Other times, they appeared only as hindsight—a jarring, high-clarity glimpse back to a detail that didn’t matter then, but now returned to him, stark like pennyflash in the bottom of a wading pool.
His mind—in the way of libraries—seemed to store away everything it saw, even without letting Bilbo himself in on this process, just in case our esteemable Master Baggins might need to access the catalogue one day for a particular file. True, this occasionally caused some frustration. Yesterday’s hints could hit like a grandmam’s I-told-you-so. More often, though, Bilbo found his affinity for detail tricked the world into making a little more sense.

Why are you hearing about this now, you might wonder?

Well, we must explain the knife up his sleeve somehow, mustn’t we.

OOO

The pertinent detail: a guard’s hand gingerly upon his sword.

Obviously, that’s not to be thought unusual, given the rather tense circumstances of a prince being shot. There wasn’t an armed dwarf in the room who hadn’t reacted by now. One of Galinyah’s people, strong-and-silent under knitted mail and standing directly behind our hobbit, had been tending to his pommel with particular devotion.

What was unusual: he’d settled there one blink before the arrow hit.

Bilbo recalled this right about now—and, as everyone else went afright about the door—he quietly nudged his pear knife up into the cuff of his coat.

Which was pretty clever of him, incidentally—for the moment it became clear the entrance had been sealed and its lock was going nowhere, the false guards dropped their play-act, and they drew.

No one expects to be attacked in the middle of breakfast. You could not really blame the Durin Family for being armed with little more than biscuits and cream. Two masqueraders were parked by the vast columned window; two more had quietly slipped in with the cart-carrying servants and now flanked the opposing wall; two were still (naturally) right behind Galinyah and Bilbo where they sat with plates full of sweetbread.

This was all highly problematic. A bigger oops, though, was the quite frankly embarrassing positioning of Erebor’s loyalists. Dwalin and his trio of King’s Army soldiers were chopping at the door. Captain Tauriel—blood-freckled at the foot of a curtain, eyes flickering rapidly like she could not decide where to be—was closed-in-on immediately. Whatever happened to the Duringuard outside, they were not at-hand now, and likely couldn’t have gotten in if they tried.

And, lest you forget: there is the king with his daughter, exposed in the middle of an echoing room.

A fist tangled violently into Azírë’s yellow hair.

She shrieked in protest as the guard dragged her away from the table, flailing messily backwards, face ashen as the morose gray silk of her gown. Prince Fíli looked three half-seconds from enacting a stirring defense of his family with a candlestick. Prince Dís sat fearsome and stoic like a statue of Durin I. Prince Kíli just sat.

Thorin, you know. He was too outraged by the thing to be properly scared. The Dwarfking swept up with Bélarûh in arm, hackles on-end, too angry to think straight, so furious you could see his eyewhites circle round the blues.
“This is the living blood of Durin the Deathless,” swore Thorin-Thráin’s-Son, thrusting out his red fingers. “You cannot kill me in this mountain!”

Clearly they were not convinced by that flawless argumentation, because he had barely finished when the advance began.

Tauriel dramatically unsheathed her sabers. Dwalin, his troops in tight and frightened formation behind him, looked like he might eat a dwarf’s whole heart after biting the head off his neck.

Oh, they’d been decently organized, as attempted coups go. They had obviously mapped the arena and the best-possible-timing therein. Someone had even been prudent enough to prevent the servants from scurrying for help.

But they had not, my dear, factored everything. For the guard with his arms full of squealing embroiderer hadn’t considered that this position might give some stabby halfling a nice shot at the highly stabbable gap right under his armpit.

And so, quick as a Rhosgobel blink, Master Baggins came out of retirement.

He jammed the pear knife all the way in.

Azirë escaped quickly. She twisted away, falling to hands-and-knees and scrambling beneath the cover of table. Which is exactly where Galinyah and the Family went, too—or so Bilbo supposed—because it was a little difficult to check-in now that he was in close range of two-hundred odd pounds of freshly-stabbed dwarf.

Again, all at once—in a couple of instants—and slow as a summer morning dream:

Our burglar half-stood, half-tripped, cursing his damnable boots, into engagement. He felt his heart like a beehive in his chest. He lost awareness of the rest of the room. He sensed rather than heard chainlink panic as the fighter he’d shanked staggered backwards. He saw—time swaying at the unnatural pace of shock—a holstered shortblade bounce temptingly on his thigh.

Well, Bilbo drew himself up, and he went for it.

The dwarf’s brass gauntlet swung messily for the burglar’s head. Master Baggins saw it coming like a rock giant’s. And he saw, in his mind’s-eye, a string of events not yet in-motion, but clear to him as dancing:

(1) himself hopping back from the swing;
(2) himself getting horse-kicked in the gut;
(3) himself, hurled backwards, and
(4) himself, watching that same sword he’d wanted turn for the princes under the table.

Bilbo dove forward instead. The next time someone suggests to you that hobbits are useless in a scrap, tell them to pick up a book, will you.

He let the blow hit him. Our burglar was ready for the fitful crack, but had not been prepared for the impact. His face whipped aside; at one moment, he’d been eyeballing his prize, and then he was looking at bookshelves. There was a loud, sickly snapping noise beneath a burst of bottom jaw clacking top. The taste of blood, instantly. The bones rattled in his face.

Bilbo stumbled, disoriented. His fingers touched down on the marble, and he was choking out sharp little caltrops that turned out to be broken-off pieces of his back teeth.
But there was the sword—right where it ought to be, in the hand at the end of his arm.

He stuck that one in, too. It cut into the unarmored crevice between the guard’s hipbone and thigh, making him scream like a naked banshee. (Nobody likes to be knifed near the groin.)

Unfortunately, Bilbo paid a high price for his daring. The second rebel found his longsword, and slashed our burglar straight ‘cross the chest.

Poor Master Baggins was fleeced off like a bug that just bit somebody. That mighty undercut had sliced and tossed him easily away. There was nothing in his hands; there was no air in his lungs. There was only the cold stone connecting with Bilbo’s back and the hornets in his ribs and the new-penny taste down his chin.

And there was shadow.

And there was a dwarfboot coming down to pulp his head.

And there was also an axe.

Which was lopped, as it were, halfway through the false guard’s neck.

Clueless sod did not even cry out. He gurgled, went fish-eyed, and spat blood in a thick mist all over the face he’d just meant to stomp. He died stuck standing up with his spine notched onto the bit.

My dear. If ever so happens you want to kill off the Durins, as a few enterprising souls have ventured to do before, write this down. Let no one forget about the Lady Dís.

In the confusion and the mess, the Lord of Ered Luin had stood up. She had slipped under the table. She’d resurfaced and on the other side. She’d pulled a decorative battleaxe off the wall, and—just as easy as that—they were all in a lot of trouble.

There was a vomitous splurch when Dís kicked the body off her axe. He fell into an unspeakable gush, and before our friend who’d sliced Bilbo could pull the pear knife out of his ribs, she’d hefted her two-handed behemoth into a roaring whirl that knocked his skull clean in.

You may have heard it said (very tritely) that a warrior’s eyes go to fire. Master Baggins is loath to make such a prosaic claim. So instead, he will put it like this: if the Lady Dís had looked upon you just then, with that dark mane and animal fur bristling alive around her, you-yourself would have probably burst into flames.

It was all rapidly downhill after that. Of course, there is some disadvantage when you’re observing a fray from the floor, clocked in the head and gashed all along your front. But he shall report what he can. Fíli recovered our burglar's dropped sword and moved to assist his mother. Dwalin bellowed like an easterling cat. Captain Tauriel’s tapered blade loosed an enemy’s guts so quickly, it appeared they simply decided of their own volition to plop on the floor.

Bilbo breathed, and lay still.

What can I tell you? When it was over, it was.
There were some deaths. Aren’t there always when trouble rides in on a morning like this.

The King’s Army trio had become one. A servant had been killed for getting in the way. Dwalin’s pauldron caught someone’s mace, shoulder bleeding so dramatically under the skin you could see a dark splotch spreading up his neck, but ruffled he was unhurt. Thauriel, having dispatched her opposition with cool brutality that would make an orc nervous before charging to the king’s side, was actually unhurt. Galinyah clung onto Azírē’s wrists where they remained under the table, thankful her young friend had lost no more than some hair to a gauntlet. Keshet couldn’t seem to let go of her napkin. Kili had broken three fingers stopping a blade with a cheese platter—and would’ve broken much more, had Fili not lickety-split galloped to his aid. Dis’s pelt and the prince’s fair face were splattered a sodden, terrifying red.

Thorin stood ghostlike in the same place he’d been at the outset—Bélah in one arm and a dagger in the other, clean silver, pathetically drawn from his boot.

As for Master Baggins, he was definitely still on the floor.

“Oh, Bilbo!” Azírē sobbed, bolting from beneath the table and rushing, skirts aflutter like real castle’s maiden, to mourn her fallen hero.

Except we must put a bit of a damper on that.

Bilbo sat up.

“That smarted,” the burglar gritted out, and curled up to his elbows, and loosed short puffs of air through his bitten teeth. “That was *not* smart. Not smart. At all.”

One side of his face had become a late-Wedmath blackberry. His right nostril was sighing out bright hobbitish blood faster than it could be wiped, his incisors were pink with the broken molar’s misfortune, and when Master Baggins spoke, it looked like he’d done so through a mouthful of cherry juice. But he was alive, my dear, and there was nothing else to it. The sword had sliced a goreless path along his leather dwarfcoat. To the eyes, there was nothing but frayed shirt beneath.

Azírē hurriedly kneeled to aid him. The guard, the dames, the servants, and the strapping Lady Prince all watched our halfling stir in awe. Bilbo—decently battered, still spitting out toothmatter—wasn’t killed, and no one quite understood why.

But you know, don’t you.

“You are not wounded?” the Dwarfking asked, wan-faced, staunching Bélarûh’s belly with a handful of cape. For all the wars he had waged outside of his home, he had never tried one in it; Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure Thorin understood what had happened just yet. And he certainly didn’t quite make sense of the burglar there, nose-bleeding all over himself, or he wouldn’t have asked such a fool question. Also, he would’ve probably remembered to be mad.

“I’m all right. I’m fine, I’m fine,” our hobbit slurred, grunting as some winch by his ear clicked. There was a tidy split in his lip. The embroiderer’s palm on his back eased the way as he struggled to fully sit. “Knocked the wind out of me, is all. Got a pop in the jaw. Help me up, would you?”

“Oh, Bilbo,” Azírē hushed again, still so sadly, crooking her finger to pull a bloody curl off his brow.

There was still work to be done on the doors. While the Durins collected themselves, Dwalin (wounded, mind you), the Army soldier (whose name, if you are wondering, turned out to be
Habrin), Captain Tauriel, and the two he-princes forced it via an improvised battering ram. The marbled table was too heavy; they used a bookshelf instead. It took several heave-hos before the hinges surrendered. Dís still had a forge-fire in her howl of a stare; Thorin, swallowing and swallowing, could not seem to get his famous colors back.

It finally gave. And there was no one outside, at all. The Duringuard was nowhere to be found, and the Durin Hall itself was empty. The servants, at Dwalin’s bark, fled for help.

By this time, Galinyah had lifted Bilbo to his feet. Azírë, who seemed to think she shouldn’t’ve done this, brought him a goblet to spit in and a twist of dishcloth for his nosebleed. They fussed gingerly at his face like friends do, and made him teethe on a napkin to stem the flow of his bitten tongue.

Dwalin returned to the Family with princes in tow. Kashet and Thorin had sat Bélah on the table to fix a bit of bandage to her wound. She’d stopped crying entirely—the poor, imperious little thing looked so drained and so defeated, passed about between her cousin and father, you merely wanted to tuck her in bed.

Speaking of pity, Kíli’d gone blank-faced in the same way his uncle had. He could not seem to move his feet, holding his swelling hand tenderly against his stomach, a pup grief-stricken by a thorn in its paw. Fíli, on the other hand, was mobile. He passed by on his way to the Durins and gave Bilbo’s shoulder a tight, grateful squeeze from behind. The dance of his braided moustache was inappropriately joyful, and before our burglar could turn about to pat him, Erebor’s heir was at his mother’s side.

“Who were they,” he demanded, hand fisted, the sword Bilbo’d filched dripping a trail to the stone chair where he’d set it down. Fíli went spur-eyed and stiff-jawed. Dís’s punitive, perilous temper had put its mark in him, but his was chattier than hers, and perhaps that was from his father. He waited for someone to answer. When no one did, that spurred look turned upon Galinyah, whose palm on Master Baggins’s arm clenched. His voice lunged like a war-dog at the foot of a throne. “What do you have to say?”

She scrabbled at Bilbo’s sleeve hard enough to sting. If you looked closely, you could see blurred teartracks striping each cheek beneath her mismatched eyes. “How am I to know?” the silversmith demanded, unable to muster indignant when she sounded so scared. Her pitch swung high and, as he’d never heard it do before, cracked. “I don’t know these males! They’re your people, not mine. They’ve been with me days. No more than that. On Prince Kíli’s orders.”

Prince Kíli blinked. He came back to himself, soul filling up the body like a nasty nail-pinch pretties up the cheeks. “Um. I gave no such order.”

Galinyah blanched. Azírë worried. Fíli cursed. He slapped his palm heel on Thorin’s table and hunkered forward, a military way to brood, then pushed himself up and cursed again. It was not exactly an apology. “Then they knew you had only just homed here and used the situation against us. But that does nothing for my first question. Who are they?” His blond head, bless it, still jangled when it turned too fast. “Tauriel?”

She’d stood under the chandelier in silence, Erebor’s red captain. With two long swipes, the blood from her blades evaporated into a napkin, and the sabers slipped home. “They are not of my watch. I had thought they must be with the new army.”

Dwalin grunted no. His shoulder seemed to pain him in earnest now; that blood-bruise tip-toed to the clavicle, and the King’s-Guard’s throat flushed with the effort of making words. “They’re not mine. I’d thought they were yours.”
Fíli flung his hand airborne with a derisive snort. Tauriel bowed her head to the chastisement. Dwalin looked choked. “Is no one talking to one another in this mountain? We could have been killed. And for what reason? ‘Oh! Awfully sorry! I thought they were yours!’”

It was Kashet who noticed. While her husband vented, she crouched over one of the dead dwarves, toffee ringlets dangling and two deliberate fingers pinching her nose. “I recognize this one,” the queen-to-be announced, extending a pointer to turn his jaw toward her. “This braid. I think he’s a Norther-Broadbeam. Potters in Nordinbad.” She squinted. “But I don’t know his face. Why wouldn’t I know his face?”

Prince Dís wiped blood from her chin and chest with a handcloth Kíli brought her. But she’d done a mediocre job of it, and the smeared pink stain lingered, making it impossible to forget the disaster of just-before. “Why would a Nordinbad Broadbeam be here?” The prince propped the head of her old axe into the ground, lacing both hands over the knob and leaning forward to finish catching her breath.

“That I can’t tell you. I’ll write the ministry to detain and question his family.”

It did not satisfy Dís. She regarded Galinyah, who’d only just regained enough composure to dab dry her face—and who now went stiff in the way of someone likely to lose it all over again. “You’ll not go anywhere. I will have more questions for you.”

Thorin found himself. He clasped the last clasp on Bélarûh’s robe, too dark to show where it had soaked the first of her blood. Erebor’s babe-prince could not seem to summon another wail. She seemed oddly, fatally sad—not cold—but her father covered her anyway, pulling his furred cape loose at the neck to drape small shoulders. Remembering to cry again, eerily silent about it, she lay down beneath the makeshift blanket, trying to lip-quiver herself to an exhausted sleep.

“It will wait,” said the king.

“For what, nadad? We must—”

“It will wait!” he thundered, his ringed hand on his daughter’s side.

His royal sister looked displeased, but she waited. There was a moment of scolded silence while Thorin gathered his child into the cape and carried her.

“You will go to Consul Ilanís,” he told Kashet, placing the bundle of dwarfling into her arms. The dam took Bélah pityingly, who curled without protest into the eave of her cousin’s gentle shoulder. She snuffled; that was it. “Tell her of this and remain with her guard. She will not turn you away. Dwalin will escort you.”

The King’s-Guard disliked the suggestion. You know by now our quintessential warrior automatically blames himself if anything should go wrong. “Don’t think that’s wise. Everyone better come on with me. I’ll leave the brood of you off with the Six, and—”

“A crown under threat does not gather. We will split,” Thorin told him, “so as to make ourselves harder to target.”

He protested, not keen on leaving any of his royal-cousins alone, mitts still trembling if you caught them unfisted, but the king merely gave him a look. It was enough. Dwalin grunted, scrubbed his beard with a wristbone, and called Habrin to heel. They gave Prince Fíli half-enough time to embrace his wife before hurrying her away.

Then, to the heirs, as though he had not just expended a vast amount of trust in handing his only
“Take them elsewhere,” Thorin ordered, indicating Galinyah and Azírë with a flick of his chin—and, Bilbo supposed, meaning him, too.

It is, if you recall your dwarrow civics lessons, a dwarf-prince’s chief responsibility to ensure the female population is adequately defended in his (or her) home. The frightened dames murmured a moment between themselves. Fíli gave his younger brother a firm wake-up pat. They delayed only long enough to wrap Kíli’s snapped fingers before making to go.

It is at this time help arrived. A Royal Quarter patrol had been found by a hysterical servant and came clanking riotously up the Durin Hall. (Beholding the upchuck of study, they were, to say the least, a little dismayed.) There was some fuss while Thorin instructed them. Dís, though, still stood silently over the crutch of her inferior axe. Breath caught, she let it bang on the floor like so much junk and approached her brother. The prince’s mouth was a thin, tempered line, and though the fires had waned to hot coals behind that stare of hers, her skin from breast-to-throat was still the delicate carmine of diluted blood.

“I’ll find the bowman,” she said.

(Yes—after all this time, the Durins were still calling King Bard “the bowman.”)

Thorin frowned. “You will not. You are a Prince of Erebor and you will stay inside these walls.”

“Safe from the assassins?” she dared. The king, who had not even dirtied his knife, had the modicum of humility to glance away.

They looked alike and unlike one another, standing there in ragged debate, his black hair free and weighty, her heavy braid mussed with sweat. Like twins—not identical, but fraternal, hemmed close with no triplet to stand between them anymore.

“I will take a complement and return with the King of Dale. He will identify his corpse,” Dís spat, pointing at the killed human, who’d gone to wax as the last of his liquid pumped onto Lonely Mountain rock. “And he will answer for the arrowshot at my brother’s child.”

That being that, she about-faced, shouting for one patrolguard to fetch her coat and axe, snapping for another to follow along. Dís drained a carafe of untouched juice. Then, breathing deeply and slamming the emptied vessel down, she strode through the crunched remains of door. It was much faster than Bilbo had ever seen the tired she-prince move before.

And then it was Thorin Oakenshield, the last remaining Durin in the sundered hall. He stood in his defiled study, capeless, face more pallid than flushed, with the coronet leashing blue jewels across his mane and a sunshower snickering outside.

“Tauriel,” he said, watching Dís leave. You could hear her footfalls landing until you couldn’t anymore. “Go with my sister.”

The captain had been waiting stock-still in her chosen spot. There was a soft spatter of rain blown against the drifting curtains. Tauriel’s lips pursed. “Liege. I would not leave you now.”

“It is my mountain; I will be fine.”

If you knew Thorin Oakenshield, and you knew his general demeanor toward elves, you would not have believed your ears to hear one speak to him this way: “Was it not also your mountain two moments ago?”
But our king did not even flinch. Indeed, if there was anyone on Arda half so stubborn as Thorin of Thráin, it was Tauriel—Once of Mirkwood—and now, thanks to said great stubbornness, of Mirkwood no more. He afforded her his usual adamant look. “It was not a suggestion.”

Unconvinced but uninterested in persuasion, the captain swept her dancer’s bow. “Then it is as you say, Majesty,” she admitted, and hurried, leggy and lightfoot, after Dís.

And then what else was there for a king to do in a torn-up room but leave it?

Thorin took one last, worrisome look out the glassless window—and turned, graceful on his heel, to go.

He found Bilbo by the door.

The Dwarfking stared. He seemed blindsided. He did not look very pleased. “And what are you doing?”

Our burglar, who had indeed not gone elsewhere with Fíli, Kíli, Azírë and Galinyah, stared back. He’d stoppered enough of the troublesome gum-bleeding to speak normally, but a napkin still plugged his nostril, the walloped side of his face was plumping and darkening rapidly, and his mood was utterly shot. One hand gestured impatiently with a stolen sword. “I’m going with you,” Bilbo said, explaining the blatantly obvious.

The Dwarfking’s expression went lofty. Those handsome eyebrows lanced higher. He actually crossed his arms. “You will return to your quarters until you are summoned.”

Bilbo said: “The hell I will.”

The changing look on Thorin II’s face landed, finally, somewhere between disbelief and exasperation—exasperation that, after years apart and a long goodbye and a bloody breakfast mess, the hobbit would still not button up and listen to a thing he said to do.

He did not bother arguing. He did not even speak. He hugged his folded arms tighter, scowling—he looked down quite resentfully on Bilbo—and then, like a defeated tween, snorted these feelings away all at once.

_Ahh!_ the Mountain King growled, and—with a flip of his arm and a flip of his preposterous hair—gathered his guard, and stalked out.

And Master Baggins did, too.

OOO

Do not envy kings, my dear.

There are a lot of nasty and annoying requirements attached to kingship, Bilbo has found. For one, there’s the constant need for presentation and soliloquy. For two, there is no privacy. (Dwarrow privacy is a bit different than hobbit privacy, but the thought of never being able to spend a week’s end holed up in your room with a stack of books is frankly profane.) And, if we skip straight ahead down the line of nuisances—from inconvenient fashion choices to reproductive responsibility—there is, finally, a little word called _diplomacy_. 
You may here be thinking of the negotiations between foreign leaders. That form of diplomacy is necessary, too, of course. But for the Dwarf Nation—whose lords answer to kings and whose kings debate with consuls; whose males obey monarchs and whose females respect royalty less than republic—the internal politics are really the messiest waters you’ll have to tread.

Case-in-point: Thorin immediately went to the Six. He left his desecrated study, stalked quickly for the Council Suite, and once there, lunge-legged for one room in particular. He did not slow down for Bilbo or for his three trailing guards. He did not request a presence politely, either. He whirled to a stop on the charcoal marble (as much as one can whirl sans cape), raised up his fist, and he banged it against a dark red door.

He called and he called. When no one answered, the king seized a passing scribe, demanding to know where Consul Onushka had gone. The poor scribe explained with startled voice and obsequious apology that the entire Chief Council had left in a hurry just moments ago, and were most likely assembled in the Moot Hall, conferring in secrecy behind thick dwarf-bronze.

Master Baggins had to sprint to keep up. The low-lit, windowless Moot Hall corridor felt to him ominous in the way of fireglow on knolls of gold. And perhaps that is no surprise, for somewhere beyond these mighty stone walls lay the Royal Treasury, where Thór once lingered in the madness of wanting infinitely more.

Bilbo rather wished he knew whatever became of the Arkenstone. But he could not stew on this errant thought for long, what with his feet in clumsy boots, his jaw throbbing, because soon they were standing at the dim metal foot of the Council door.

Diplomacy: The Dwarfking knocked.

The Council turned him away.

Thorin seemed irritated as he stood there in ominous plinth-light, waiting. He stared at the massive ram’s head knocker. He exhaled audibly. Irritated, yes—then, after the second knock, embarrassed—then angry—and then, before he could hammer a third time, offended by the silver-scaled warrior who stepped out.

Said warrior looked startled only for a moment to see Thorin II standing there, bristling, with all the inky grandeur and indignation passed-down since Durin I, and the livid-sharp fear of having seen his daughter’s blood.

Then he smiled, graciously, and bowed.

“Shamukh, thanu men,” the guard began, sliding fully through those cracked doors and shutting the bronze behind him, switching tongues immediately when he spotted the halfling puffing up the hall.

It was the first Dwarven Scion Master Baggins had ever seen. The elite guard of the Consul of Six, comprised entirely of the councilors’ own sons, who answered to none but the mothers they were sworn to serve—these are the only males in the dwarven kingdom outside the king’s command. He didn’t have to bow to Thorin, but he did. The Scion looked in stature not unlike an Erebor Guardian, and yet Bilbo thought him somehow a little too well-oiled. There was a lightness to that easy bow that made our hobbit suspect he’d given it with full awareness of his immunity. What’s more: his tone was courtly, his voice was more fanciful than fighter, and his demeanor struck him as the charming, knightly kind. The guard’s dress was marvelous, iridescent lamellar—Erebor silver, right to the ankles—and there wasn’t a single knot in his gold-braided red beard. He looked, oh, about Kili’s age.
Thorin did not budge. “I must speak to the Six,” he said, severe as ever, leaving no room for argument.

You’d think that would be enough of an order for anyone to retreat from a Durin, but the Scion wasn’t moved. “Many pardons, my king,” he beseeched, “but the Six are in congregation and do not wish to be—”

“An attempt was made on the Family. I will speak to them now.”

“The Council is aware, and is deliberating. Given the unknowns, they prefer to do so in the protection of their own government.” He did not even flinch beneath the full force of the Dwarfking’s lordly stare. “Once again, many pardons for the delay, my king. They will summon you when your presence is necessary.”

Thorin drew up with a look could have turned a whole churn of butter back to milk. “My presence is necessary.”

Though he did not have to, the Scion bowed again. He already seemed to know the verdict. He offered anyway. “With respect, my king. I go to ask another time.”

He went.

And he came back, slipping out just as quietly and courteously as the last time.

“They say it is not,” reported the Scion, easy as answering the question what’ll you have for second breakfast? Thorin stood in his place and steamed. “But they offer you my spear, for your safety.”

“And who are you?” the king barked.

“Pardons, my king. I am Rogah, Son of Ofrís, Daughter of Rodán. Consul Ilanís is my great-grandmother.”

“I have my own escort,” Thorin snapped. The (frankly overwhelmed) patrol guards tried their best to look up to the challenge. Bilbo stood there and bled from the nose.

Rogah, polite-as-ever—who looked like he could carve up the triplet of minor warriors without sweating a drop in his perfumed beard—bowed. “As you wish, Majesty. They will send for you.”

And he slipped back in, shutting the grand door with a low, feel-it-in-your-bones creak.

This, my dear, should tell you all you need to know about diplomacy between the Dwarfking and the Council of Six.

Thorin waited there a few moments more, just to see if they were going to change their minds. The hall stayed silent. You couldn’t hear a peep from inside—merely the patrol’s occasional uneasy shuffle of chainmail and the odd snuffle from Master Baggins, trying not to drip anymore on his coat.

“She knows I am out here,” the king insisted, stubbornly, if only to himself.

But the only dam to appear was not-at-all Consul Onushka. When those doors eased open a final time—barely enough for a dwarf to step through—it was Kashet, holding the dozing girl-prince in her arms.

Thorin was upon them quickly. “She’s fine. We both are,” the queen-to-be assured him, whispering so as not to disturb her rest, not that it seemed anything would. Bélarûh’s eyes barely fluttered. Her
wound was better-bandaged, and Ilanís, Kashet told him, had mixed the child a spoonful of laudanum tea for the pain. *Hence,* she said, giving her a gentle bounce. Someone had kindly taken off those little boots, and the prince’s bare calves were limp as overcooked green beans.

The Dwarfking softened at the sight of his daughter, though not for very long. “Will they not keep you?” he asked, prepared to be ineffectually wrathful all over again.

Kashet shook negative. Her chandelier earrings were pinned beneath Bélarûh and she winced, unable to free them. As for she-herself, the dam seemed mostly recovered. You couldn’t’ve told she had been in a fray were it not for the dust on the cream of her gown and the way her butterscotch whorls had slumped. That, and her voice—so honey-sweet high—seemed under strain more honest, somehow.

“No, they will,” she reassured him. “I came out to see you.” A pause. Kashet glanced, brows worried, to Master Baggins, still loitering where he was in the rear. “Are you all right, Bilbo? Your face.”

This seemed to startle Thorin, who looked back at our burglar with an aftershock of pale daze coming swiftly upon him, as if he only just seen him again. Bilbo ahemmed like to do Bungo proud. “This? Yes. Nothing at all. I’ve had worse.”

“Are you sure?” she pressed. “When you fell! I’d thought you were killed.”

“Well, I’m not. Better luck the next time.”

“You were very brave,” Kashet told him, sincerely, and then she was back to business again. As, Master Baggins supposed, a good queen must be. “And Fíli?”

“With Kíli. He will return when the dames are secured. The Council should know its people are threatened. I had meant to tell them what happened myself. Onushka will not come out,” Thorin complained, obviously.

“I’ll make sure she knows.” Kashet laid a fraternal hand on the inside of the king’s elbow, balancing his daughter easily in the cradle of her opposite arm. “Don’t expect an audience soon. She’s having hard words with Hallevi.”

“Hallevi was not there. Defense is not her Table. She should know—”

“She should, she shouldn’t. There’ll be time for talk of Tables later. What I can say is that we’re fine,” she promised, patting a palm on Bélarûh’s stomach as the prince slept her dreary opiate sleep. “Here, Thorin; look at your daughter. She’s well, so all other things can wait.”

He looked, as she bid him to—and his face weakened in the way it did when you had told Thorin a truth that, for being so true, hurt him beneath his great un hurtableness somehow. Bilbo has learned that, no matter what lowliness or peril may come, you cannot damage Thorin II Oakenshield, King of the Dwarves. But you can, if you ever manage to get your fingers in under that magnanimous edge just the right way, hurt Thorin Himself quite easily. If you were looking. It was like letting in water. It was not so hard to see when something had made him feel small.

The Dwarfking went silent, and then he was moving forward quickly, and his arms were around them both, a fit of an embrace like a child who’d sat up from a frightful dream.

Kashet returned the hug as best she could with one arm full of dwarfling. But she didn’t have to for long, because here came the clamor of the King’s-Guard, hurrying up the hall with a contingent of Guardians in tow.
“Thorin,” he rasped, and if you had thought the king was emotional, you clearly have not spent enough time watching Dwalin cycle through stress. To anyone else, he’d probably seem winded. To Bilbo—who’d spent many days with this particular dwarf—it was obvious that the flock of soldiers were the only thing keeping our mighty warchief from throwing himself around his family, too. His eyes were damp red and it was not just from the shoulder pain. “I took them straight here, just like you said. I’m back from Balin and the marshals. They’re drawing up a defensive check in the Royal Quarter.”

“Good,” Thorin greeted him—and only then, seeing the king in one piece, did Dwalin stop long enough to catch his breath. Let this serve as proof positive: No matter how regal or important, your little cousin is still your little cousin first. “Tauriel will help them when she returns.”

“Should we come with you?” Kashet wondered, looking apprehensively between them, unsure which dwarf she was asking.

The king shook his head. “No. I want you to stay with Ilanís. There is no safer place than with the Council, at her side.”

Finding no one in immediate danger of being pin-cushioned, the King’s-Guard was recovering now, bent halfway over with hands-on-kneecaps, breathing like a horse. The five Ereborean warriors waited expressionlessly behind him with sheepdog eyes. “You ought to come along with me. Go speak to Balin and the others in the War Room.”

Thorin declined. “No, I must ready to receive King Bard,” he said. Dwalin’s stiff nod supposed-so. “Dis will not tarry, and the Men will be quick to deny their role here. I would have you and your folk take up position outside this door. We cannot allow the Six to think I have lax interest in their defense. When the moot is through, if they have no use for you, go to join your brother at his work.”

“Right. Take this lot, then. And leave yours with me.” Now that each and every urgency had been waylaid, so too was the Dwalin’s unresisting mood. The King’s-Guard wore his thick brows and gritted teeth ready to argue if Thorin said no.

But Thorin didn’t say no. The Guardians, gleaming meanly in blue iron, could have clearly obliterated the king’s picked-up patrol easy as chucking a rock. He said, “Very well.”

It was a grounding thing. Gone were those wild-eyed days of reckless chance and ‘gainst-the-wind running and Thorin of Thráin walking too willingly into fire. The dragon had been deposed; the Mountain had been reached; the great impossibility of a royal lifetime had been lassoed and stitched down, and with it, so too had his foolish optimism found dry-land. The Era of Taking-Back was over. That trumpeting, nonsensical belief that had so reminded Bilbo of Belladonna, and for which he first had really come to love Thorin, could not fly-free as it once did. Because now there was something to lose, wasn’t there. Now, he thought, watching the king bid goodbye to his daughter with a squeeze of her foot in his hand, are the Days of Keeping-in-Place.

Suddenly a book did not seem so very important. Master Baggins was not sure why he had expected a king of a whole people might find time to remember old friends, at all.

He followed along to the throne room. He did not make any fuss. He pulled the cloth from his nose when the bleeding had ebbed, and he stood there in the dusty dimness behind the Lonely Throne, a place where he had so many times been.

A servant dressed Thorin II quickly. Another lit the braziers. The Guardians took their positions upon the sullen rock walls while the king was brought his regal effects. Finally—with brushed fur over his shoulders, with sword on his belt, with gold armor on his forearms and Raven Crown
dauntless upon his dark head—the Dwarfking of Erebor, empty-faced and empty-bellied, sat.

Bilbo waited. Bilbo stood around.

And for all of that waiting and all of that standing, it was Thorin who spoke first.

“Your hair,” he said.

Master Baggins scowled. The uncut braid bobbed mutinously below short-clipped curls, tickling along his ear. He did not bother swatting it away. “Yes, what about it?”

Thorin had not even looked. In fact, the king in his throne—all grievous and terrible, all contemptuous and lashy, all black beneath mithril—was decidedly not-looking. He frowned, glum as a toad. The thought of that braid dancing by itself had put a disdainful curl in his upper lip.

“It looks foolish,” he said.

In another time, our hobbit might have fought him on it. But given the morning, and given the years, and given all the ways he had learned how to fight and not-fight, Bilbo Baggins let that one slide.

Chapter End Notes

Bilbo: *rocks a side rattail*
Thorin: What was between us is now dead. I am no more for this land of love and laughter. If this be mine eyes’ truth then I plea Mahal to strike them out.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Just maybe, my dear – when you pull apart the semantics and push aside the culture and toss the damned cranberries – hobbits aren’t as daft as Bilbo Baggins has made them out to be. Maybe it all comes down to etiquette, after all.

First, a note on etiquette: Guarding the Lonely Throne.

My dear, if circumstances should come into your life that cause you to profess an oath to a king—and Master Baggins by no means suggests you ever do this—it is helpful to know a few tidbits about courtside manners. Dwarves do not fuss about spoken pleasantries as much as other peoples, but they are very conscious of body language, and if a dwarf wishes to offend you, rest assured she will first do so with the slump of her shoulders or the lines of her hands.

In the Ridiculous Old Days, when Bilbo was King’s-Guard and Smaug’s postmortem shoe hadn’t yet fallen, his sense of physical decorum was (to put it mildly) a laugh. He would go bored and disheartened. He’d stop paying attention and fiddle with the fibulae on his cape. It was not uncommon to see him prop chin-in-fist and sit right down on the throne dais, unwilling to humor Thorin’s paranoia, knowing no one would come, moping until the sick king decided he was done holding court for Erebor’s ghosts.

Today, though, he did none of that. Bilbo stood straight as an aspen as they waited on Bard, brooking with a lot of patience and a little ire the gloomy indignation of the dwarven king.

“And what do you intend to do,” Thorin wondered at him (not too kindly), sitting sullen in his Lonely Throne.

No matter how many times Master Baggins had seen the ancient crown, he never felt comfortable with the look of it there on his old friend’s brow, and would perhaps never grow to like it. The weight and sharpness of the mithril was too heavy, and that is to say nothing of the evilness of the obsidian, or of the poured Durinul gold that once tempted a dragon down from the north. It isn’t that it sat poorly. It’s that the Raven Crown took too easily, too completely, to Thorin, who had waited his entire life to wear this artifact and whose Folk had so long insisted that to look upon Thráin’s dark children is to look upon Durin I. It looked like too much history. It looked less and less sure of Thorin Oakenshield there beneath the seven points and vicious metals and eyeblack, and more like of an echo of fourteen dead kings.

You understand, then, if Bilbo preferred not to conversate. His jaw was swelling, his nose hurt, and the taste of swallowed blood was accompanied by a sweet bellyache, the kind you get when you’ve overdone it on the berries and need to eat some bread.

“I’m going to stand. Right here,” he said, and he did.

The king harrumphed.

“You, by the way, were the one who tried to give me this job, so don’t carp about it.” Master Baggins shot a stern look at the side of Thorin’s face—as much of it as he could see, stationed where
he was—and watched the royal teeth tighten in an unfriendly way. “You used to think not so terribly
long ago I was fit for it; you used to think I had some business claiming to guard the throne.”

“I did,” the king agreed snidely. “You said it was—” Snider still: “—ridiculous.”

Bilbo frowned.

“It is.” Our writer squeezed the sword stuffed willy-nilly into his belt, wearing his dwarfish best and
still sticking-out like a watermelon in a strawberry patch. Something funny caught in his throat.
Anger about the obviousness and something else, too, sadder and less material than the rest. He
snuffed another mouthful of itching blood. “Clearly.”

Thorin could not sufficiently slouch like the brat he was beneath a metal crown. He had to keep his
chin straight, as he usually did when making pronouncements or delivering a speech—a touting of
posture that looked less laughable with the age-old thing sat there upon his head rather than hanging
in his aspirations. To compensate, he tossed his legs out, unmannerly in a peevish way, brattish as
situationally possible. Even without the flaunt of Thrór’s cuirass, the golden bracers had weighted his
arms to make each gesture require more deliberation and poise, and the golden shinplates wouldn’t
let him lock his knees.

Didn’t stop him from this nasty by-the-way: “Then are you not ashamed, if it offends your
conscience so greatly, to be seen too near the Lonely Throne? Since it is ridiculous.”

His mood, suffering from the pain, went steel and tart. “Oh, you’ll not speak to me that way,” Master
Baggins warned him. His throat felt ignored standing behind the tender remains of tooth, jagged
beneath the tongue, and Bilbo empathized with it, my dear. His heart had yet to settle correctly and
his temper went into it like spur. “I don’t care if you’re king of a hundred mountains.”

The scolded king sulked.

“You listen here,” Bilbo went on, too sore to bother with propriety deliberations just now. “If you’ve
got some plan to tell me I’ve been anything less than loyal—to accuse me of betraying your
brotherhood or besmirching your honors or refusing your decree or some other melodramatic
dwarfish nonsense—you can wipe that clear from your itinerary, because I won’t have it,” he said. “I
did nothing to suggest that to you—ever—except the one mistake in the hall—and I’m sorry for it,
but what was I to do. You’re a king,” said the burglar, just in case there was any need to remind the
world of this—of the fact of Thorin II Oakenshield sitting there in Raven Crown—as though it was
no issue to come prancing up, swat his back, and say to him whatever you pleased. “I bowed. What
should I have rather done?”

“Anything,” he swore.

“Oh? Yeah? Should I have yelled at you in front of your heirs? Should I have whacked you one
upside the head? ‘Oi, long-time-no-see, you old gourd—how’s the family?’”

Thorin wasn’t done brooding over perceived injustice. He glared, and stuck up his commanding
nose, and felt quite offended on his own behalf. “Anything,” vowed the king, “would have been
better than that.”

Bilbo was no longer prickling with a foretaste of anger. He was downright hopping. His socked
nostril hurt when it twitched, reflexively, and he scrubbed a new trickle of blood away. He steamed.

“I’m sorry—hold on—where do you get off? Because I’d like to know,” comes the whistle from the
teapot, “what high horse let you climb up there and start spouting woe-is-me, I am wronged? You. I
haven’t heard from you in years. And in fact, I’m not sorry,” he said, discovering this rather suddenly for himself, quills sharp and collar hot, brows shot right up into his foolish haircut. “Because I didn’t do anything wrong. I didn’t throw a friendship aside—not like a spoiled child with a broken toy—since it didn’t line up exactly as I planned for. On account of a court seat. A seat and a stupid title.”

Thorin twisted ‘round in his own stone seat with a look of outrageous disbelief, to determine whether or not Bilbo was serious. “Throw aside?”

Our hobbit thrust out his beaten-up jaw with martial and exemplary sangfroid. “You ignored my letters.”

“I did not ignore them.”

“Well, that’s worse, isn’t it, because it means you saw them and read them and elected not to respond.”

“What are you talking about,” Thorin blurted like a boy, startled and scandalized in one confused bundle. His ringed hand gripped the throne arm as he twisted angrily, and if you’d lent them a few minutes, those harsh cheeks might have actually simmered up some red. “Did you not receive a bounty?”

“Oh, I’ve been well paid off, thank you.” The burglar’s green look and pitiless tone could have roasted a whole hog.

“Paid off?” he rumbled, furious. Bilbo thought it more of a bawk.

“The thing is,” our hobbit went on, squinting. “Hobbits don’t purchase our friends for a lark. When we make them, we mean to keep them. Wild concept. We don’t toss them to the wayside with some coin for the road. We don’t answer their friendship with trinkets and silence.”

The wide-eyed Dwarfking looked like he had swallowed a fistful of apoplectic bees. “Trinkets?”

“There an echo in here? Should I write this down,” Bilbo cut, as good as five feet tall.

Thorin sat quietly, staring, for five or six blinks.

“You are wrong,” he decided, surely, insisting it so, a tongue-tied snort caught ‘gainst the back of the teeth. The king turned coolly back to his hollow room and, less sure if he was insulted or embarrassed or merely shaken. He looked liked something unpleasant had gotten stuck deep in his throat but he’d rather keep it there than be seen coughing. “You are wrong, and proud, and foolish.”

“Oh, that’s—that’s rich, it is. Bloody hilarious. Fancy hearing something really foolish? You think somebody’s wrong just because you say he is. You, calling somebody pr—”

“They are not trinkets. They are tokens from the Dwarven Kingdom, and they are not payment because I made them.”

Bilbo let go of his fists.

His mandible was still stinging. His ear-tips burned. Mortification—that, too—and yet our writer found he could not cut loose the thread of his anger. Sometimes anger is all that’s keeping your thumping parts in one piece.

“Well,” Master Baggins begged pardon, “how was I to know?”
Thorin’s standoffish face didn’t look, and his shrug resentful at best. The king might’ve lost his choler, but just then, to hear dispassion in that dark and cheerless voice seemed worse than to hear it snap. “I have no cleverness for words or speeches. And what matter?” A cold vambrace clacked colder stone with a dismissive fling of his wrist. “It seems you did not care at all.”

How about a note, Bilbo suggested.

“Dwarves do not speak in nettles and notes. Parchment is lost and ink fades. It is you who have said nothing.”

Next time, Bilbo proposed. How about a hi-hello.

“You of all folk ought not deny what a trifle it is to break old words.”

How about: Here’s a present, happy holiday.

It was roundabout here in a rapidly worsening conversation that a Guardian, Green Lady kiss him, flat-footed before the throne.

“My liege,” the young warrior preambled—Habrin again, unlucky sod—kneeling there on Mountain marble, voice louder than he’d expected in the geometric largeness named Erebor. (This was one of Ered Luin’s surface-born, if you remember, and barely more acclimated than our own Master Baggins.) He seemed like he’d been for a run. “Price Dís arrives with the King of the Dales. They approach the Door.”

Thorin was melodic and anchored in the Lonely Throne. His halved, heavy lids and the bold line of his nose said nothing of the bout they’d just had. “Send him in,” ordered the Dwarfking.

Habrin dipped pushed himself up, sweating beneath chainmail, worn from this morning. And he glanced this way, that. The King’s Army soldier seemed to be reaching for an inoffensive way to determine if he was meant to remove Bilbo, too.

“The hobbit is here?” he settled, finally, missing the polite mark by a good quarter-mile.

Our mouth-bleeding, sword-toting, cat-wearing hobbit behind the mighty carven rostrum exhaled. “A hobbit,” he corrected, mite pinched. “There are other hobbits, you know. I’m not the only one.”

“Oh,” said Habrin.

“In fact, there are a lot more hobbits in the world than there are dwarves. Just because you haven’t met any doesn’t mean they aren’t out there.”

“I didn’t mean...” The Guardian demurred. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s all right,” Bilbo conceded. “Keep it in mind, though, will you?”

“King Bard, Your Majesty?”

Thorin, in his throne, was unmoved. “I am waiting.”

You’ve noticed: Erebor won’t let you wait very long.
King Bard of the Dales—Regent of New Laketown, Man of the People, Dragon-Slayer and Devoted Father of Three—was what most authors would call an olden soul.

He was also a bit of a tosser.

It was hard to look at Bard standing there before the Lonely Throne in scraggly goatee and rainslicker—all fiery rightness shot through knifelike, woody eyes—and not think hero. He wore no crown or jewels or oiled furs. For the King of Dale, it was not glamour and beauty, but a woolen scarf and wind-red cheekbones; a click-clack of leather bootheels; a cutlass at one side. He strode about with a forceful, hurried absence of airs that you’d not see on any other royal. He tended to wince and rush. He was, for his obvious lack of courtly graces, full of realer grace: clever without wickedness, bold without arrogance, rude without crassness. His face was roguish without mischief. His knuckles were bony and hunger-tough. One glance at this crownless king, and if you didn’t already have a hunch you were dealing with protagonist material, you’d figure it out when he eschewed the honors and ring-kisses and genuflections, forgot his regality, and merely waltzed up to shake your hand.

Which rather made Thorin II Oakenshield the villain on this map, when you angle things just-so.

So it was that King Bard, true to his heroic form, downright stomped into the daunting dwarrow throne room, insulted and sopping with weather. He left wet footsteps across Erebor’s floors. His unpretentious head of hair quivered with rain and his deerhide coat trickled as it emerged from the evening fog.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” quarreled the crownless king, off-puttingly informal, not even bothering with the rituals or courtesy—since between the dwarves and the Dales, all of that good-will stuff was false. “You know I would have nothing to do with this.”

Thorin Oakenshield did not rise from his throne. His judgment was ironclad and his hands on its arms were threatening in the way of griffons—of talons on lionlike birds. “But you will answer for it nonetheless.”

“And how shall I answer, O King of the Dwarves?” Bard threw his own arms wide, dripping everywhere. The wild look on his face was made of exasperation, not fear, and this bravery in the face of might was perhaps the most astonishing thing about him. Who besides a hero could live in the shadow of so much golden greatness and not become someone craftier, someone more honey-tongued, and someone much richer himself? “I would not order this of my people, and the people were not mine. You know me well enough to know I tell the truth when I say I didn’t know anything about this. I did not know the plan, and I do not know the reason.”

He didn’t even stop advancing. Bard, in the trebuchet force of his truthiness, so honest he couldn’t bother being timid, had a boot on the first step of the royal dais. He might’ve ascended it, too, had Bilbo not protested with a disapproving, bullish ahem.

“That’s close enough,” said the burglar, hand-on-his-blade-on-his-hip. “If you please.”

Bard, who had been so vehement, so brambly and offended a moment ago, seemed to see Master Baggins there all at once. His overstepping shoe sole slid off the stair. His face fell from that oh-so-admirable anger to a dense, blindsided blink.

“The hobbit?” he noticed, genuinely surprised.

Bard was a touch perplexed to hear this, let alone to see him, bloody nose and all. His arms folded, and his chinpoint tilted, and it dipped that charming squire’s cut to one side. “I didn’t know you were still here,” the Dale admitted, not unpleasantly.

The bounce of the hobbit’s brows was not altogether impressed. “Seems you say that about a lot of things.”

“And I apologize,” he confessed, still blinking, “but I can’t recall your name just now.”

It’s Bilbo, Bilbo said, thinly.

“Oh, right,” remembered the king. “Bilbo. Like the smallsword.”

Like the small sword, Bilbo said, sighing as-you-like.

(On Baggins honor, cross-his-heart: a nobler man you’ll never find. But a tosser, all the same.)

Noble as the man was, there was still the matter of the tiger in the room. Thorin, who was not thrilled by being left behind in this conversation, got back everyone’s attention by making a fist and dropping it. The metal armguard clanked.

“You claim,” began the Dwarfking (which was, incidentally, never a good way for Thorin to start you off), “you know nothing of the Man who fired upon us, yet you too claim the Dales guiltless. It cannot be both. Either you know the threat well enough to know it is not yours, or you do not know anything at all. Which is it?”

To call Bard impatient with the Ereboorean flavor of politics would’ve been understatement. He had no appetite for negotiations, exponentially less taste for posturing, and did not appreciate how the Dwarfking seemed to deliberately misunderstand him for the sake of an ominous pause.

“Your sister and I went through all of this thrice,” the Dale cut in, scowling at the floor, hands on his hips, looking more like a disgruntled dock-worker than a sovereign. He knew by now that Thorin was made of bluster, and if addressed head-on, could often be successfully parlayed with, no matter what he said. Sometimes you might even win. “While she bullied my guard. I’ll tell you exactly as I told her: not every man in this world is mine. Since the ones who attacked you were mostly *dwarves*, so I understand. Maybe whoever hired a mercenary. Maybe they had an old friend. And even the men who do live under my banner—what, d’you think I follow them all around? Day-to-day? All some-thousand of them, house-by-house? We’re not that kind of people,” he professed, roughhewn but proud of it. “And I’m not that kind of king. What I can tell you: I, Thorin Oakenshield,” Bard went on, slicing the air with his coated arm, “have a lot of other things to do. I have two towns to ready for winter; you think I’m caught up in yours? I don’t hatch plots. I don’t keep assassins. And if I have a fight to fight with a father, I don’t,” he swore, gravely, “shoot for his child.”

It is not that Thorin doubted Bard. (Not his honor, anyway.) It’s that he believed—after those lowly, exiled years in Dunland, watching his Folk haggle over smallcoins and be cheated at dice—Men to be sneaky. And he believed the King of the Dales—for all his fire and honesty—to be ineffective at controlling them, ill-suited to lead them, and in all things government beyond naïve.

“Then you will not waver, if you are indeed so noble, to lend your neighbor aid in this search,” the Dwarfking presumed, and if he’d have been Bard, Bilbo wouldn’t’ve cared for his sudden curl of smugness at all.
The King of Dale considered arguing, but rethought it. His bothersome drip-dropping had slowed. Bard’s akimbo arms dropped to both sides in a tired-out, why-not flop. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll tell you if I will. If I can.”

“I am glad to hear you say so.” There was nothing in Thorin’s snide tone to suggest this was the case. He placed one false effacing palm upon his velveted breast and proceeded: “We dwarves are not, of course, so honest as you men. Therefore it might behoove me, I think,” the Dwarfking claimed, “beset upon by assassins from fields unknown, to have a friend close at hand.”

“Fine. I said I’d aid you. Uselessly, since I have nothing to do with this. And neither does Laketown. And neither does Dale.”

The Raven King was pleased, for Bard had said exactly what he’d wanted him to say. His dark brows lifted. He was as satisfied—and dangerous—as a cat who knew the mouse in the wall had exactly one escape.

“Good,” said Thorin II. He clapped for his Guardians, then, and their silhouettes closed into the mighty archway. Prince Dís was with them—in imperious in her brutal irons and war-coat, backlit by the deepening gloom. She gave no indication of stepping out of the way.

“Until we find our enemy,” said Durin’s Son, “you stay inside these walls.”

In no other time were they so obviously different, these Kings of the East. Thorin of Thráin—who had been groomed for a crown from his birth, who had been fed ancient music, who had been taught how to speak and gaze and think like a ruler of peoples, and who wore old doom like precious stones—stood-up-to by a man who had come into his title because there was no one else desperate enough to be so brave.


“You are detaining me?” he demanded, voice surging, choking on the outrage of disbelief. And indeed, what king would believe another might take him captive so fecklessly, as though it were no act of war but merely a teacher’s slap across the knuckles, an order to write one-hundred lines. The bowman beheld the dwarven warriors there like a threatening, unfunny joke. “I am your prisoner, then?”

Thorin waved his ringed hand dismissively. “Prisoner, no. You are a guest.” His would-be guest swiveled this-way-then-that. Bard’s humble storybook rightness was absolutely seething now. “And you are free to leave. But having so freely offered aid—as Men do, and as you have—should you quit my court before the terms of our alliance are relaxed, the Dales receive no winter coal from Erebor.”

You may here wonder at our writer’s reaction, too. (And having by-now spent so much time with him, maybe you can guess.) Yet I shan’t give you it this time, my dear, but to say things in Erebor and in Thorin’s Court had changed. It was no longer Bilbo’s place to opine. It was only his place to record.

If the possibility of imprisonment had made Bard choke incredulity, this made him splutter rage. The rain-tangles in his hair whipped ‘round, he made to address Thorin so quickly, and those thin eyes were racing. To this day—despite the hoggish battles of elves and dwarves he had and had-not fought in—nothing stole Bard’s wind like cruelty. He could not comprehend how easy selfishness comes to lords and kings.

“No coal,” he cried. The mountain air suddenly shivered his teeth. “For the whole—? You can’t do...
that. We’ve a lumber shortage. Did no one tell you? We’re to lose half our ten-year saplings to a tree-sickness; there’s a moss in last year’s logs. We’ll not survive the third hard snow. You can’t condemn us to freeze in the fields because I didn’t answer your question?"

But Thorin was king, my dear—and he could.

“I am king,” said he, sitting stoic in sapphires and black fur and gold. “It is Erebor coal, and it is mine to give or hold as I wish.”

“Your wish is for our women and children to die of cold, then.”

“That will depend upon you.”

Hardly fair to frame it so. Bard stood there simmering for some time. The autumn sun rushed from his tall cheekbones, his shades of brown looked flatter, and all that strapping heroism petered out.

Then, stiff as a board, and no warmer: “Dale needs need time. Give me twelve hours to go back and make ready.”

The Dwarfking chuffed; I-think-not. “So you may abscond into the night? I am no cub-king. If you would double-cross me, Dale, you will need work harder.”

“Then let my advisors in,” he snapped, long limbs hugging tightly to a body that didn’t have much warmth to spare. “Damned dwarfish paranoia. I can’t just leave off and hope everyone manages; I don’t have a council. Arrangements have to be made. I have business to attend to—business that hasn’t anything to do with you. If it will end this idiocy to have me dragged out here, then I will; I have no choice; but I won’t let my cities be without headship.”

Thorin II was not unreasonable. Thorin II, the dwarrow histories would tell you, was just a troubled king with a two-ton heart and a closed fist.

“They may come and go. You,” he said, and so it was, “will stay.”

There was nothing more the Dwarfking cared to proclaim. With an insolent twirl of his metal-laden wrist and with face turned sidelong away, he had Guardians escort Bard out. The King of the Dales, when he left, did not wish anyone goodnight.

Dís entered at Bard’s exit. The prince moved with large, stern paces in a fierce half-plate alive with mink and grayiron; her blue hood, thick with weather, had preserved the burly braid beneath. She looked every bit the royal fighter. Yet she did not look so delightfully wry as when they first met all those breakfasts before.

Bilbo could not put his finger on where he recognized such a look. It was not until later, after he’d stripped his leathers and crawled abed, the answer dawned upon him. Kíli had worn her armor into the Battle of Five.

“The bowman won’t take to that. You mark me. He’ll try to worm out,” Dís warned Thorin, who stood from his throne to speak with her.

“And risk his people’s hearths on my forgiveness? He will not.”

She walked right up the dais. The prince, coat tails flapping wet, climbed each step with veteran knees that pained her in the damp. Bilbo dared not try to stop her. He stood quietly and tongued his broken tooth.
“He won’t? Are we now betting on Men not to be foolish? You know what Thráin would tell you.”

“I do not bet on his wisdom. I am betting on his disdain.”

Dís stopped just then. Not abruptly—but surely, unavoidably—the prince on the stairs switched her punishing eye from Thorin II to Master Baggins, who stood aimlessly there to be scrutinized, dried blood under snowcat and honeycurls.

He could not muster a curtsey. He could not even perk up. She looked, she saw, and she turned her sober attention back to Thorin.

“We should speak of it,” Dís told her brother, “privately.”

Bilbo, whose place it wasn’t question the Durins—whose place it wasn’t to hem-and-haw about the fairness of the royal decree—whose place it wasn’t to determine whether or not Thorin was bluffing or betting, and whose place it wasn’t to stand behind the Lonely Throne—did as he was asked.

He picked up his dwarfboots. He went.

OOO

After all that: our writer, what-do-you-know, was all right.

Because the terrible day was coming to its close—because the peachflesh sun had swollen old raspberry-red, and the final sword had been dropped—we can safely say Bilbo Baggins was still in one piece. He-himself was fine. But the tooth, my dear, had to go.

It didn’t straightaway occur to our burglar that he had better go pay Óin a business visit. Instead, he went home to shuck and wash himself up, to hang his mithril, to breathe in-out, and to survey the damage to his calm. That lasted until he tried for a cool glass of water and ended up spitting pink in the bath basin, trying to stifle a yelp that was more of a scream.

Óin recognized the problem on sight. “Broke your roots, did you!” he observed, inappropriately cheerful about it, popping a tablet of strange-tasting paste in Bilbo’s mouth and a full stein of rooty dwarf-liquor in his hand. The medicine took just enough edge off the pain. So there our hobbit sat—bare feet swinging over a tableside in a steamy, kitchenish surgery ward, chugging warm beer until he felt mildly numb. He watched Dwalin’s shoulder get splinted. Then, once the King’s-Guard finished grumping and Master Baggins finished his second pint, it was time for the roots to go.

Bilbo really was a brave little fellow. He tilted his head back and opened wide. And he was immediately glad to be drunk, because Óin came at him with pincers that looked more to do with ponies than teeth.

Here it gets somewhat fuzzy, my dear, what with Master Baggins being inebriated. It is even possible he passed out once or twice. Eventually, though, the image cleared abruptly; Óin was fanning him with one hand and finishing up with the other; and Bilbo discovered what it was like to have a molar yanked by a dwarf.

Having wrangled out the culprit, Master Baggins’s skillful doctor fixed an adjacent tooth crack with cleverly poured gold. He packed the leftover hole with clove, moss, and poppy, which made it throb in an entirely different but still entirely horrible way; he gave the unsteadied hobbit an alcohol-soaked
cloth to teethe on; and he let him take another full bottle of booze for the road.

So it was Bilbo staggered out of Óin’s clinic with a new appreciation for helmets and a mouthful of gauze.

And here it was, as dusk fell ‘round the mountain and the torches burned brighter inside, he came across Lady Dís.

She stood up from the wall she’d been leant on. She had unspooled her black hair and exchanged her iron breast for silver buckles on turquoise robes. She’d clearly been waiting on him, and as he blinked away his lingering muzziness, Master Baggins looked upon that dark lady-lion and remembered to dip his head.

“Rins Dith—?” he mangled, then fished out the cotton with a crook of his finger to soberly ahem. “To what to I owe the—is something the matter?”

How strange to see a dame in velvet and wool, smelling of soap rather than blood, and feel warier than when she’d been wearing hammered steel. A war axe hung calmly at her side. There was something perilous about this small, closed smile. “I just came to make sure you were well.”

Bilbo felt awkward with a bottle in one hand and bloody wad of cloth in the other. He thumbed the thing into his palm and shook off a few lingering clouds. “That’s kind of you. I’m fine. That is, I’m fine enough—nothing Óin couldn’t fix with some pliers. I’m not hurt, thank you.”

“Magical. You caught a blade right ‘cross the chest,” she noted, chillingly, still sporting that unblinking smile. “I was sure you’d been thoroughly killed.”

Bilbo, now suspecting in earnest there was something afoot here, said hmm.

Under the circumstances—those being Óin ripping a six-year out of his head—it had been difficult to think overmuch about politics. He hadn’t agonized a whole ton over the question of how well Thorin ruled his Folk under duress, or really thought anything about Thorin, at all. He hadn’t thought of his box of trinkets. He hadn’t even tormented himself over the uncommonly cool way Dís looked upon him in the throne room. He had just gone away, and gone about his business.

“Of course,” fobbed the Lord of Ered Luin—and her tone was that of a Durin with a confident hunch and with a malicious idea in her head. There was no one pottering about this minor corridor, not one servant or measly guard. “I’m glad you’re fine.”

He was most certainly tormented now.

“In no trifling part thanks to you, by-the-way,” Master Baggins threw-in, his best attempt at shoring up some favor, which was easy because it was true. “You were phenomenal. Right on time, too. Guess it’s true what they say about your battle-chops; less-true what they say about mine. Lucky for me, hobbits are a pretty resilient—”

The blunt, imperious, bite-for-the-throat manner in which she shut his babbling down was unmistakably Thorin’s—or, perhaps, his manner was hers. “Do you know,” Dís cut, “when I led our people back to Erebor, the first place I went was the treasury. I care less for gold than some of my ancestors, but what the Dwarves make by our own hands is what makes our culture. The halls in the horrible state that they were—we couldn’t have the Folk arrive to a place without culture, too. So I searched, myself, through the rubble and the dragon’s mess, and helped gather our most precious artifacts to make sure my people knew the home they remembered was not lost. Yet, no matter where I looked,” she told him. Precipitous, calm: “there was one thing I could not find.”
In conversation—and in families—there are certain moments of clarity when a person will suddenly look back, snap all the loose pieces together, and say *oh, shit*.

“Look—” Bilbo blurted, liquor in one hand and tooth mess in the other, eyebrows darting for his hairline, jaw aching, bead playing hopscotch at his ear. “I know what you’re thinking—what it looks like—and it does look like that—oh, does it—but Lady Dís—for summer’s sake, I promise you—I didn’t *steal* anyth—”

“Bilbo Baggins, I’ve enjoyed your company. Indeed, you are very clever, more than is probably wise. But if you come here—” the prince menaced, “—to profit off my brother, you’ll find you have an enemy in me like no other enemy you’ve had before.”

Then again, there are also those moments when all you can do is furrow your eyebrows and squawk *what*?

The burglar furrowed.

“What?” he squawked.

“I am a Durin born, but I warn you now,” Lady Díṣ told him. The pale ramswool at her throat lent her extra pomp and the royal axe was still unignorable; that was to say nothing of her impressive physique. And to say nothing of the rather loud knowledge our half-sized halfling scrapper had seen her chop a dwarf down to his spine some eleven-ish hours ago. “Because I am an unusually good sport. Do not make the mistake of thinking you know this house and hold its favor because you know a handful of its sons.”

You might expect a diplomatic hobbit would roundabout here burst into profuse and obsequious apology. But Bilbo, my dear, was still a touch drunk—and, feeling both like he ought to flee and like he wanted to fight, our burglar held his ground. His fingers around the gauze became a fist. He set the drink down.

“I was invited. For a project. By the king.”

“Which does you no favors. Swear what you will, Bilbo Baggins; it means nothing to me. You are an Oathbreaker, and I have no shyness about calling a thief a thief.”

Again: Bilbo furrowed. Bilbo squawked.

“I’m a what?” he said, come-again.

Díṣ did not care a mite for his confusion. She bothered explaining only because his ignorance dampened the brunt of her challenge. “Don’t play unawares. You swore a witnessed oath to the very same king whose permissions you invoke, as well as to the Kingdom of Erebor. And you broke it. You cannot pretend that away because it was inconvenient to you.”

Master Baggins, Oathbreaker, stammered.

His gears and levers were screeching to process the charge; his heart was hammering with a flush of perplexed, helpless guilt; and his mind, floaty with fermented tubers, sank fast. “You weren’t there. I wasn’t breaking, I was only—I was being realistic. The whole thing was unfeasible, everybody knew that, and I could never—”

“Spare me your reasons. A broken oath is broken no matter how you did it.”

Bilbo’s tongue was lazy with pain and drug. His lungs had gone oddly leaden. There was, too, this
swift, swirling plunge in his gut—this heart-bound harrowing—that came with the first wave of awareness: his friends, my dear, had not gone cold and forgotten him. His cold friends thought he was false.

“Nobody told me.” Our hobbit could in that instant remember nothing more immediately than Balin and Dori outside Erebor’s library, coming to visit with kindnesses, gasping as Bilbo announced he would leave. “He didn’t tell me a thing about it. I didn’t know I was dishonoring myself. I thought it was all right. The king even said—he said quite clearly—”

And then was the memory of Thorin catching his arm in the marbled sunlight and letting it, too swiftly, go.

“The king does not speak for me.” Prince Dís, in the midst of her condemnation, frowned. A to-herself frown; a worrier’s frown. “He’s too reckless, my brother, with his belief. He is a fool, I know this, but I love him, and I will not let anyone play a cat’s game on a fool I love.”

“I don’t know how you’ve made that leap—” A snort got out and into the air before he could stopper it up. The pie-eyed rushing inside had gone to vultures and it was hard to make sense over these outlandish crow-caws coming from the muscle bunkering his heart. “—but I’ve got work here. All I’m doing—all I’m trying to do—is finish this book, and go home.”

“So you say, and then you wedge yourself in the business of the court. Every time I turn around I see you, Bilbo Baggins,” she pronounced, cross-armed and belligerent, as exacting as her name. “And I don’t care for it.”

To say Bilbo was offended would’ve been putting it lightly. Bilbo was furious. But he caught himself, sucked air, and let the pang of breath on his raw tooth bring him back to the reality of arguing with princes and kings. “May I speak freely?” It was only part plea.

Dís looked down her nose the same way Thorin would turn his up—as though she was beholding a bothersome dragonfly, or a rat in her cellar corn. “I have no use for a male who won’t.”

“Then I’m sorry,” said Bilbo, “but how dare you?”

This actually surprised the prince; her eyebrows shot right up. “What is it with this family?” he went on, trying on for size a bedeviled grimace and squint; she wasn’t the only one who could play the audacious peasant game. “What’s next? You want me to prove myself to you, somehow? If you’re measuring loyalty by feats and favors for the dwarven kingdom and the dwarven crown, I ask you: show me the dwarf who’s proven more than I. I ask you: show me the dwarf who’s proven more than I. I ask you. Actually, I demand it. Because if my loyalty was half-less than any dwarf’s, then you wouldn’t have the halls to dig through,” Master Baggins, sprinting down the moral incline too fast to be curtailed, dared. The burglar felt his face calcify with the force of its glare. “And you’d neither have a king.”

He’d gotten himself too riled and righteous. Bilbo actually flicked his eyes up-and-down over the Lady Prince, high-browed and indignant as a dwarf in a galley or a hobbit on his front stair.

“Everything I’ve done for the Durins,” he said, “I sure as the high hills did not come here to be maligned by his little sister.”

Dís’s dove-blue gaze went bright with offense, but through the itch of her anger, she looked bizarrely pleased by his gall. “If you knew the Durins long enough to speak to me like this, you wouldn’t risk it. If you knew the Family. If you knew who we are.”

He didn’t miss one beat. “If you knew what Thorin brought us through to bring you home, you
wouldn’t call him a fool.”

The prince stopped. She looked absolutely wrathful for a moment, blistering coldness, a stormwind flung ’round a mountainside.

And then, all of a sudden, she laughed.

Big, bold, real laughter. Spitty, throw-your-head-back, arm-over-stomach laughter. The power took these empty halls by force and made Bilbo skitter in his hobbitish skin. It was not very elegant, but it was honest, and livened the stony walls around them, threatening to snatch the flame from the torchheads and the courage from our writer’s unptierced chest.

Master Baggins, having expected to be slapped across the cheek or (having argued with a dwarrow) alternatively butted in the head and knuckled in the eye, was only shoved into confusion. The king’s little sister took some time to come back from her stutter of humor. With actual wetness making that stalwart, hawkish profile more friendly, Dís exhaled. So surprised and so shocked was she that some foreigner had spoken to her in such a way, this Lady of Erebor could not be fierce. She sighed through the guttering laughter. She dried each eye with a corner of her wool-soft kirtle sleeve.

“Bilbo Baggins, rest my wrath!” the prince swore, tickled by this odd mix of anger and delight. “And I had thought you so conniving and clever. You are a fool, too!”

Before he could disagree or shy away (or bolt like a jackrabbit loosed off the griddle), Dís’s fingertips found his arm. “Come,” she bid, talking his elbow in her hand, leading him along not like a burglar but like he was the belle of the ball. “Walk with me.”

They did. Perplexed and lightly-oiled as he was, it took Bilbo a slice of time to regain something like a direction-sense. He picked up his amber bottle, for it didn’t seem polite to leave it, and with that was along for the ride.

“I’m sorry,” Dís granted, “that I fought with you. I hope you will forgive me the challenge. My niece’s life has been threatened. I can afford to trust no one right now.”

The smell of night sky came subtly, welcome, into his nostrils. They moved shallower in the mountain, turning a corner or two, passing patrols to whose bows the prince offered her barely-perceptible nod of acknowledgement. Bilbo was perhaps overly aware of his fingers peeking through the crook of her arm. It felt a mite strange for him to be led around by a lady, but role reversal was far from the strangest thing to happen to Master Baggins today. Firelights plucked at her silvered strands and gilded the blue-blacks as this deep-rock darkness gradually lessened its hold.

“I can’t believe I scolded you,” he muttered. Adrenaline had put an animal quill in the writer’s belly and left a nagging headache behind his left eyebrow. “Please don’t mention this. Half the place is already angry at me, and the king’s one slight from slamming your golden door in my face.”

“Oh-ho,” chuffed Prince Dís. “I’ve no wish to involve Thorin in this conversation. He would be furious if he knew I even spoke to you. But I do what I must to protect this family.” They passed beneath a fat archway laden with runes. “My son did say I was paranoid.”

“He’s a good lad,” Bilbo told her, because it was safe and easy to do so. “They both are.”

A second chuff. “Kíli is too like Thorin for me to put much stock in his feelings. My first, however, told me I was wasting my time questioning you—that you didn’t have a disloyal hair on your head or anywhere else.”

To this, Master Baggins said nothing for fear of putting his foot in it. Yet he really was touched by
the knowing-so. Fíli—for all his tall-tales—had always been slower to trust than the reckless second-
son. (You may here remember the chummy interrogation visited upon him in Thranduil’s wine cellar
regarding the spoils our burglar thought to gain.)

Soon the wide-open scent of wet fields, the hint of fresh water, and the spice of distant darkwoods
were no longer suggestions but everywhere. Dís directed Bilbo up a twisting archer’s stairwell
(minding her tricky knee), then out onto the low parapet girdling a forward tower, a stretch of wall
behind Durin IV that Master Baggins had never visited before. The new night was shivery and
humid from this morning’s rain. It was too cloudy to see any stars.

“I thought you might appreciate the air.” Dís settled both elbows on the rampart, lordly sleeves
ignoring the damp stone, hair spilt down her back, looking out over fieldgrass and lakewater and
Dale. A pause. “You smell like an alehouse basement, Bilbo.”

“Well,” Bilbo sighed. “I feel like one.”

He joined her there, because it seemed odd not to. With his back propped against the rough merlon
and the bloody taste of uncovered flesh reminding him there really should be medicine stanching that
leftover hole, our writer popped his liquor bottle and offered it. Prince Dís didn’t hesitate. She took
the glass in her scalded palm, took one full drink, and held it at the ends of three fingers draped over
the wall.

“Care for a family secret, writer?” The prince didn’t wait for his answer. No hostility in that smoky
voice now—merely a full-figured weariness, a bemusement like a dusted-out parlor carpet. She set
the bottle in the embrasure between them and looked upon New Esgaroth’s faraway longboat lights.
If you listened, you could hear the nesting wild hawks. Bilbo crossed both arms to ward off the cold
and waited for her to speak. “Kashet. Our queen-to-be. Do you know who she reminds me of? My
husband,” Dís told him, simple-as-apples, doesn’t-that-beat-all.

Master Baggins watched the farthest edges of his breath out churn to delicate steam. “You know, I’m
a keen interviewer. A pesky one, at least. But I don’t know anything about him. Fíli and Kíli didn’t
say much, and I figured it rude to ask.”

“They wouldn’t; they hardly knew him, themselves,” she brushed, steepling her fingers over the
coping, nudging the signet ring straight. “Which plagues me most of all.”

“Sure they’ve inheritance to honor him by.” It’s a small balm—he knows from the hand-me-down
dishware arrayed upon Bag End’s highest dining room shelf—but dwarves, you know. They can
read more truth from their crafts and tokens than other peoples do.

“He was a commoner,” she informed him, not embarrassed or protective but merely pleased with
herself and the story behind her. “And not a clerk, or a hunter, or a smith. A pig-farmer.”

“A farmer!”

“Ai. Of pigs, no less. He could not even take our bridal name.” The soft smile paired with a beguiled
huff. “They’re a better match than we were. Fíli and his mouse. Thorin was outraged when I told
him. I was wasting my bloodline. I was weakening the lineage. And perhaps I did.” Dís’s sigh came
drawn, sleepy. But much like the prince’s anger, before it finished, that sadness flared and crinkled
unexpectedly into a bark of laugh. A laugh, my dear, is a grief more longing than any sigh can be.
“Oh, well!” she said. “Stone help me but I did love him so.”

And the swallow that found Bilbo was full of pain that did not belong. Hearing her, something fizzed
up, like old infection or too-sweet beer, scaling his heart vein and into the absent root. “I’m sure he
was a great dwarf.”

“No. I am a great dwarf. Thorin is a great dwarf. Dáin Ironfoot is a great dwarf. My son will be a
great dwarf. My love? He was very average,” she said, and loved him longer still. “But he did make
me laugh.”

It occurred to our writer that it was really quite a precious thing—to stand with the prince in this spot,
after this morning, feeling the mild eastern winter and the pain in his jaw and the malaise moving in
his throat. It was precious to have here Thorin’s sister, too. Given all that preciousness, Master
Baggins found he could no longer stand with his folded arms and his face to the dark mountainside.
He turned to watch the plain beside her, and though his palm on the rock grew cold quickly, it was a
relief when pressed to the spots that still hurt.

He did not have the leave to say I’m sorry. She sensed the word behind his lips and stood up.

“Don’t pity me, Bilbo. I am a prince of a whole people. That’s not so hard a life. I tell you this so
you might understand me a little better. With such a hole in my heart, can you blame me?” Dís
wondered of him—not daring, this time, but asking—as the drake’s war-bead balanced along her
neck. “If I am fierce to keep my family?”

Such was all she said to him that night. The prince did not need to watch him judge her. She fell
silent and studied the statue, then—Durin IV, carven from undying mountain stone—and he did, too.
But if she got any whispered wisdom from her ancestor, this old oathbreaker didn’t hear it. He found
his eyes on Ravenhill again.

No, Bilbo told her.

No, I suppose I can’t blame you for that.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

The first fool to whom a writer tells lies is himself.

A good lot of this world believes there is nothing the dwarves value more than the sound of pick upon gold.

They have clearly not seen dwarves around their children.

“How is she,” Kíli choked as he pushed into the king’s rooms, where the king was upright and the king’s daughter was sick-to-death in his bed.

The first thing that struck Bilbo—having followed Erebor’s young prince in his midnight flight through the Royal Quarter and into Thorin’s private chamber—was not the lineage banner, or the bear’s head, or the weapon wall, or the gem-stacked bookshelves that had once been overturned, or any of these familiar and unfamiliar things. It was the stagger of heat. Stepping from the cold arched quiet of the Durin Hall into the king’s cabinet—then beyond the cabinet and into the bedroom, where nothing hung from the blackstone walls and where Thór once slept—was like leaning too close to a furnace. The gated hearth had been hastily overloaded and blazed with coal. It danced menacingly along the rock and threw long, demonish shadows, washing the lynx furs and the woven carpets and the foot of the stone-cut bed in fretful fireglow.

Thorin stood swiftly from where he had been sitting on its edge. In robe and hair and sleeplessness, but for that drained half-moon look upon his face, the king was the blackest of the shadows from the fire.

“I brought Tauriel,” managed Kíli, messy-maned and heart-in-his-throat. Tauriel curtsied. The elf was five steps behind him on bare, bony feet that showed beneath her woolen sleeping gown. And there, five steps behind her, was Bilbo in shirtsleeves at the chamber door. “She knows poisons. Let her have a look at Bélah. Please, Uncle, please.”

You expect, when a little girl has fallen suddenly ill, to be woken in the night by nursemaids hammering on your door. Except we can’t say this in the case of Master Baggins, for when the news of Thorin’s child came to him, he wasn’t abed at all. He wasn’t even in his nightclothes. Rather, our writer was cross-legged, fur-tossed, and sore-backed on the royal rotunda floor; he was sitting propped against that still-ugly start of a dragon; his suspenders were digging and shirt was rumpled; his notebook was aknee, and he had a noseful of smoke leaking into still, dry air.

It was beautifully silent out there on the bluestone at night. It’d been embarrassingly too long since he’d done anything you could sincerely call writing. It was a cynical mood that settled upon him, and even though the dwarven tobacco was weak and and his boot toes pinched, it was all peaceful enough. Frankly, my dear, our hobbit had the sort of thinking to do that can only be done with your mind thin, your eyes narrowed, your head tilted back, and the taste of burnt leaves in the rear of your throat.

Óin had warned him off the pipe for a week. His jaw was still troubled even by the soft cheeses and honeyed breakfast drinks Bombur and Tannä made special. But by now you know Bilbo, and you
also know that if Bilbo did everything told to him, none of this would be anything but a marvelously worrisome dream.

And this explains precisely where Master Baggins had been when the prince and the captain came bounding by—buttoning as they went—afright as though someone had just shaken them out of a tree.

Tauriel was no threat. No matter how much he distrusted what he did not know, once you’d won Thorin’s esteem—and he had decided you were, all bets to the contrary, Good—he would go to great lengths to justify whatever you did, until you topped the irreversible boiling point at which he could not do so anymore. The Dwarfking rightaway said of course.

“My knowledge is of black poisons.” Thin red locks spiraled down her front, losing those awkward elbows, and she’d dust on the bottoms of her toes. “But I will do my best.”

And so she did. The elf’s knee dented the king’s mattress as she leant halfway over to study Bélarûh, who lay quite in the middle as a Durin will. The child hated to be peered-at and yet she hardly stirred. Tauriel took one of her small to study the color of the fingernails; Kíli watched this with his own hands splayed anxiously over his face. The Dwarfking did not watch at all. Thorin, looking at nothing, still looked more abjectly miserable than Bilbo had ever seen him. It was a look rivaled only, perhaps, by the one upon his face some six years ago when Óin had admitted in the gentlest tones there would be no saving Fíli’s arm from what Azog had done.

Bilbo, who had never set foot beyond the king’s cabinet, was not particularly keen on doing so now. He lingered in the bedchamber doorway with his still-black-and-blue eye, and realized he had no earthly idea what he’d raced here to do.

“Where is your surgeon?” the captain asked, her typical reasonable self.

Thorin’s voice was so heavy with suffering it barely made it up his throat and through the Dwarfking’s mouth. It was frightening, somehow, to see him look so private. With no coronet and no crown and no eyeblack and no plate, no gemstones or gold or scale, the King Under the Mountain seemed not so much drawn from memory anymore, but really there, in this room, made of sinew and skin and all the other hurtable things people are made of. His cowl’s train dragged the floor, spectrelike, and when he sat dismally in a bedside chair someone’d pulled in, the weakness of his gesture was resignation itself. “Dís goes to fetch him.”

It was far too hot, and yet Prince Bélah was cold. You could see, if you looked closely, the too-quick feathering of her breath, the pain light caused her slitted eyes. And if she had seemed too tired—too sad—for a babe when the arrowhead scratched her, she was barely cogent now. Tauriel husked down the opulent blue quilt and the yolky sheets to peek between each pebbly toe for pox, but even frigid elfish hands ‘round her feet did little. Her legs goosepimped outside her sleeping robe; an elfish index lifted the bandage from its place, but she only grumbled. Though Thorin tapped and tapped his cupped hand upon Bélarûh’s plump cheek, there was scarcely any reaction at all. The child cringed too slowly and withdrew in the covers as though her father’s touch had stung.

“How long has she been this way?” Tauriel wondered, a thumb on the vein of the young prince’s neck to count her heartbeats. The muss of Durin hair twisted unbound in sleep.

“How long has she been this way?” Tauriel wondered, a thumb on the vein of the young prince’s neck to count her heartbeats. The muss of Durin hair twisted unbound in sleep.

“Spare hours. Being so harmed, she will not to her rooms for the night. I had laid her abed in mine and went to my work.” Indeed, there were open missives upon the black desk outside and the drawing room fire was guttering untended; the candles had been left to melt alone. “When I did try to wake her, she would hardly stir, not until I had upset her many times, and even when I did take her in my arms to shake ‘twas feeble.”
Tauriel tilted Bélarrow’s mouth open to examine the state of her tongue, and then departed the bed in an off-putting thump.

“I see no telling stain of poison, liege. The mixtures of Men and Dwarves are mystery to me, but I think I could spy that, at least. More likely,” she said, flipping the covers back up, “it is a blood-sickness from the iron. There are no means to waylay it but let it run its course. If you wish, I will collect components to dress the wound as best as I am able. Else I will wait upon the surgeon with you here, but there is naught more I can do.”

Thorin did not waste words. “Do it.”

Tauriel, Good Elf, gave her last stiff curtsey of the night and left quickly.

Kili remembered how to speak. His lounge tunic was rotten with wrinkles and his hair in his eyes was childish; he, even more than the others, could never stand helplessly still. “I should go and help her.”

The Dwarfking, too despairing to look, bid his sister-son leave with a dismal swash of a hand. He was plush and morose like the start of a violent story. He did not stand from his chair.

The prince didn’t bow; he just dashed.

Bilbo, who could neither think of a reason to go nor a conceivable reason to stay, said nothing. For his part, he merely remained, unable to step in or step back. When you cannot move on and you cannot just go away, you’ll find yourself very stuck. It seemed the longest time passed. The Raven King—unarmored and ungilded and uncrowned—sat there knee-bent, with one leather bootivee hooked disarmingly on the crutch of the chair, with his hand painfully to his bridge, with closed lashes, with winter fur blueblack and dismal round both shoulders, with face worn bright in the pale storm of fire. And finally:

She will be fine, he swore.

Bilbo said: of course.

A Durin cannot be by sickness killed, he swore.

Bilbo said: of course not.

In sixteen generations of kingsblood, he swore, not one has been taken in such a way.

Bilbo of-coursed everything Thorin said—not because he believed it—but because, even while wondering obviously if the king was about to grieve his child, this writer had learned the value of compassionate yessing. He had learned there is a type of untruthfulness that can be a kindness, too.

Óin didn’t dally. The old physician had always been more competent a battlefield-patch than a household tonic-brewer, and as you might suppose, a prerequisite of combat healing is being a mean sprinter. So Bilbo didn’t have to hover and watch the Dwarfking of Erebor look like the ill-starred monarch of some windy rook or melancholy hall. Saving the day with clacking purse and in mismatched robes, the doctor arrived before our stuck-fast writer could manage to get both feet on the bedroom floor.

Thorin did not rise to greet him. Óin didn’t waste time helloing at Bilbo, either, but shouldered apologetically right past, dropped his satchel in a clatter and then dropped himself to rummage. (Prince Dís, so he explained with mitts full of ointment jars, already told him everything before leaving to join Fíli at the Council. She had done her part, too, in making sure Erebor’s Master
Surgeon understood how upset the Line of Durin was that Little Bélah had fallen ill under his care at all, and gave him abundant good reasons to ameliorate this problem by whatever unholy means he could yank out of that lintball he called a head.)

The king had no reassuring oh-did-shes. Thorin merely held his brow in his hand, tilted so that beneath its shadow you could not see if he'd opened his eyes or not. He sat there in his spot like a dwarf with a head-splitting ache.

And he said nothing until a whisk of a tweezer got the babe-prince’s scab, loosing her burst of peppery cries; even then, it was only to spit: “A plague upon the Dales.”

Bilbo’d been uselessly poking at the hearth, underarms sweating from the few moments it took to fish fresh coals out of the urn and toss them inside. He’d caught the sudden need to make words. He did not think overmuch about which ones. “Careful with the deaths-and-damnations. You don’t know that it wasn’t a dwarf.”

“Ai,” Thorin snarled, sharp in his worry as a cavalry spur, “and a plague upon us, too.”

Master Baggins, defeated by the fireplace, could not figure out where to go. It was odd being there in his hobbitish clothes, unprotected from the wealth of the Mountain. He stood far-off from the foot of the kingly bed and looked at the smudge on his hands, punishment for not bothering with coal tongs. He felt a bit like a bird who had waited too long to fly south. He wondered if anyone had picked up his left-behind fur or if it was still lying there, abandoned at the foot of Thorin II Daunts the Dragon, retaining only the ghost of a shape inside.

“I should have known better than to leave the wound to its healing. She has never been hale.” The Dwarfking, it seemed, could not have cared less where Bilbo stood. He dragged a palm down his face, pinched the apex of his nose too hard, and went back to scowling that confused sort of scowl that never projected, but hit the bottoms of his eyes and bounced-back. “This is the curse of the dwarves.”

“This was an arrow,” said the writer, “that’s it. That’s all.”

Óin finished whatever unpleasantness had offended Bélah enough to make her cry. A silvery smell rose from the paste he set to making: a pinch of jade powder, a swirl of spiderweb from behind the ostentatious armoire; what might have been honey. If you looked at the cast-away bandage, there it was: the small, dark print of a prince’s blood.

Master Baggins detoured from his road back to the bedroom door. Rather, he stepped sideways off the carpet and dusted his hands on his trousers. He didn’t have anywhere to sit. It is in moments like these that our writer wished he’d been more of Bungo. Bilbo’s father would have jimmied a hand in his pocket, gazed into the fire, and said something impossibly catchy and wise. But Bilbo didn’t have any chewable wisdom. He was not very good at comfort.

“You know what I just remembered,” came out instead.

Thorin did not rightaway look over, and that was just fine. Our burglar rocked in his dwarfshoes from toes-to-heels as he called some narratorial authority back to himself.

“My Aunt Belba. Belba Baggins-Bolger. I’ve a portrait of her up in my dining hall—I don’t know if you remember – but she’s the one with the green—anyhow. Aunt Belba had this—what would you even call it. This talisman, let’s say. Which was not at all like a Baggins, but I digress. It was a little woven satchel; used to wear it around her neck on a rope. You’d hardly catch her out of the house without it. Mysterious for a married lass, Aunt Belba.
“Enter my cousins and I. We, naturally,” he admitted, “wanted to know what was in it. Being boys. And being horrible, as boys are, we snatched the thing when she wasn’t looking. Broke the clasp on a whetstone and dumped it. Beasts, like I said. You know what was in?”

“Nothing,” Óin guessed, one hand on his earphone while the other searched his bag—and if this had been a fable, he’d’ve been right.

But he wasn’t. It was: “A nail.”

The healer chuffed as he shook some sediment off his grinder and tossed it onto a square of folded cloth. Bélárûh slept her breathy not-sleep. The Dwarfking had looked up at Bilbo as though he was waiting for some shiny instrument of brilliance to fall out of the burglar and make things clear.

“Odd, right? Just one. Kind of a dangerous bit of junk to be wearing on your person. You’ve never seen such a disappointed gang of boys. I coughed up to Aunt Belba just for the explanation. Nail from a postbox where she was born, maybe. Nail from the barn where she got her first kiss. Picture nail. But she didn’t have one. *Doesn’t mean anything*, she said. Not a damned thing. Just makes me think of something else.”

Thorin blinked, looking baffled with one foot flat on the floor and one still hooked on the stretcher of his chair—but looking is looking, and sometimes it’s enough. “What has this to do with sickness?”

Bilbo shoved both hands in his trouser pockets and hefted his shoulders hup-to. “Not a damned thing. Just makes you think of something else.”

There was no reason to believe such a cheap-punch story might make the king laugh. But he might at least have rolled his eyes and *hmmed* disapprovingly about it. As it was, though, Thorin didn’t do either of those things. He looked away from Master Baggins suddenly, and, to our writer’s dismay, didn’t say *ugh*. He looked worse. Suddenly there was a woebegone edge and a teariness biting at his eyes. Suddenly the king looked like he might weep—because useless as a nail is, here was someone who had not argued with his limping attempt to force rightness on the uncontrollable, unstorybook world.

“I am glad you are here,” he said, and his throat was rocky and his voice was weak.

And for the first time since he arrived in Erebor, Bilbo might have been, too—save for the determinative knock at the door.

No, that wasn’t right. There was no knock—as in there was no inquiring rapping of knuckles. There was only the knock of the door to the king’s rooms being pushed all at once open, and there was, like a thorny sweep of a rosebush, the figure moving through it.

Óin audibly gasped when she came in. A sweep, he’s said, but the way this dwarrowdam moved was really more like the leaning of bare branches in the wind. She did not stop in the cabinet; she did not waste any effort on a smile. She walked with a pitiless eyes-ahead focus that could cleave through or crash upon you if it chose, and the Folk fell out of her way wherever she went, like broom tines through dried-up leaves.

The councilor—for Master Baggins knew she had to be one, long before anyone identified her—did not even make it into the bedroom before Óin genuflected. His bow was obsequious, immediate. She dismissed him without so much as a word; he was retreating out the door; no one looked twice.

Ignoring everyone else—not even stopping to hello at the king—she went right to Bélárûh in his bed to see what had been done to Erebor’s prince.
If the first thing you noticed was the movement, the next was red. She had it in bloody overabundance: red kohl, dusky swathes ‘round piceous eyes overfull with pupil; red tint on fading brown hair, combed long and free, with paintwater gray left swirling magically at the end of each coil. Her public robes, too, were a brackish spill of red on oil-black, squarish through the shoulders, straight lines and soft hide spoiled with chiseled gold. The sleeves were so grandiose you would not see her hands unless she desired you to; onyx raindrops shivered from her epaulettes; and her feet beneath the train gave away their steel shod only by the sound.

She was tiny, is the thing. Her face was small and waxen, bare but for the crimson storm drawing you inescapably to those eyes, and the carelines above her short brunet beard-braid revealed someone who pursed too much. She was not what you or I might call beautiful, my dear. But if you look as mighty and heart-stopping and torrential as all that, you likely have no care to be.

Thorin rose from the chair to greet her. His tired voice shifted into a cautious respect Bilbo had never seen him pay anyone. The councilor’s palm over his daughter’s lung was undebatable. It existed there as though it had a right to, and she paid rapt attention to the quality of breath below.

“Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood,” said he, “this hour and all hours you are welcome in my home.”

Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood paid King Thorin little mind. Her palm left Bélarûh there, but whatever the councilor ascertained was her business. She removed from the folds of her garments two corked glass vials. Pale oil poured swiftly into one of Óin’s left-behind bowls, was stirred with a thumb, and placed in the carven shelf behind the bed. It is difficult to tell with dwarves, but she seemed older—not softened by years, but sharpened by them—as a knife is improved by passes of rock.

“Dís has sent you here, no doubt. If this is the evildoing of Men, I cannot say. I say only that the Dale is in my power and must be pressed to answer for it,” the king decreed as the councilor drew her damp thumb, smelling of mint and something acrid, over the prince’s collarbone. She broke a bundle of sweet reeds, lit both halves with a nearby candle, and set them in the bowl. They cooked faint, fragrant smoke. “I will not be able to keep him for long. Already he threatens penalty from his allies. The Council should not delay.”

She didn’t stop working to talk. Her voice was flat and precise and needle-thin, like drawing loops with one finger on rainwet windowglass. “If I’ve a question for you, Thorin of Thráin, I will ask it.”

Thorin went silent. He stood behind the empty chair with his hands on its back donning only their signet ring.

Bilbo felt like a stray ember. His curls fluffed under the heat, and he’d backed away instinctively when she arrived, though the councilor’s path took her nowhere near him. Our hobbit wanted to detach himself from the hearth, but found he could not. It was beyond his control, just as a fox knows it ought to be long gone when the sheepdog walks by.

Once she had finished with Bélah, gently tilting her up for a few breaths of grassy smoke that make the child cough, there was brief silence. Bilbo half-expected a miracle recovery—real once-upon-a-time stuff. But it didn’t happen. Bélarûh didn’t leap from the bed and demand cake. Her dry-mouthed breathing merely seemed to slow a bit, as though there had been a cramp in her chest the body had until now forgotten to let go.

As it turns out, Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood did have one question. She placed her oil dish back on its shelf, put the empty vials away, and turned—with those frighteningly open, glacial eyes—to face the rest of the room.
“What is this,” she demanded, hands vanishing, no hello.

This—that is to say, Master Baggins.

Thorin looked to Bilbo, blinked wordlessly, and like a child with no explanation about missing cookies looked back.

“It is a hobbit,” he answered, gesturing weakly, helpless to try anything else.

Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood was not especially hostile. She was not trying to be menacing or mean. But if you can imagine how a block of obsidian might be, if granted life and a plate of bloody-raw power, then you are roundabout close to understanding her god-given nature.

“What is it doing here,” she wanted to know.

No offense, my dear. But if you’d been in Master Baggins’s shoes, right then-and-there on the black stone and blue carpet, you would have been petrified.

“A good question,” Thorin said, looking decidedly at the ground.

Those unbearable ten seconds of silence that followed were just the number it took Bilbo, fists tight and heart frozen, to deduce that the Dwarfking Durin didn’t know what to say.

“Visiting?” our hobbit offered, in his smallest and most inoffensive voice.

This did nothing to change the rock cairn expression on the councilor’s face. Master Baggins cleared his throat and shook the courage out of his eaves. “And I am writing a book,” he added, definitely, a more satisfactory answer.

But Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood was unsatisfied. His explanation wasn’t enough to ease her cold-blooded look. It was, however—to his distinct dismay—enough to turn that look fully upon him. It cleaved the warm air of the bed chamber, leaving Thorin standing self-consciously where he was like the long-haired, shame-faced wolfdog who had eaten the sofa. It flattened across the writer like a boulder sliding into place. And immediately our fireside hero regretted his heroism. Bilbo could not make out the surefire reflection of himself in those seawater black eyes. There was only the blaze of hearth softening everything and its dull hint of gold caught inside her the pupil, the nexus of the stormy red.

“A book,” she repeated, just to be sure she had heard that correctly.

Bilbo withered. The king was no help at all.

It didn’t take her long to lose interest in watching a halfling dry-swallow. In one swoop, the eyes moved back to Thorin, who had been waiting for them. She spoke: “We must confer with you in the morning. I will not speak for the others. The aggression must be discussed, and the Dwarves must respond.”

He inclined his head like a graceful subject would. “I will attend.”

“You will,” she knew.

She drew the downy quilt back up to Prince Bélarûh’s throat. She patted its sides in nicely. She looked at Bilbo once more, unguessable. And giving no farewell and neither hide-nor-hair of goodnight, Consul Onushka of the Table of Blood left the king’s rooms in large, focused steps with the glide of her robe and clack of her forward-pointed toes.
And then they were looking at a shut stone door.

Our writer felt the fear leave him gradually like an arched tabby dropping its prickles. He stood in
place with both fists balling and releasing beside him, letting his blood cool down.

Quietly, and with great feeling:

Holy shit, Bilbo said. She is terrifying.

Weary again all at once, the king moved back to his daughter’s bedside with grim, knowing eyes cast
downward, and watched her in-out breathe. “She is Bélarih’s grandmother.”

A pause.

“She is terrifying,” he agreed.

Óin, having seen Onushka exit, made a tentative return. He did not dare disturb her work, but took
Thorin’s chair from him, eking it close to the bed as could be. And Bilbo, not-at-all out of spite for
the lovely old doc, felt his face fall as a moment to speak was snatched from him. It seemed like the
universe would quite frankly never again chuck another opportunity like that one his way.

Thorin must’ve seen this in Bilbo’s grasping expression, because the king did not gripe for his seat
back. He sighed, looked over Bélah’s unchanging face for another minute or so—touched her cheek
to find it still too cool for his liking—and moved, unenthusiastically, to the door.

Master Baggins didn’t need to be spoon-fed. He followed Thorin out into the vacant drawing room,
where the unintended fire had fallen to a lackluster crackling, the sigil-stamped parchment had been
thoroughly forgotten, and the candelabras bled musky, ambivalent smoke. Sounding sleepy, as
though talking to Bilbo was something tiresome one must resign himself to, the king relit the gone-
out candles. Then he sat, equally resigned, behind his desk.

It was a good thing, our writer would later note, he had been so distracted that night. He hadn’t been
the full force of himself standing there on that bison fur, facing down the shield on the wall and the
spears on their racks. (It was also a good thing he had smoked a bit.) Because surely: to be alone and
in relative privacy with the Dwarfking after hearing nothing from him for so long would have, under
normal circumstances, caused Bilbo no insignificant measure of trouble.

He would probably not have yelled, exactly. But he might have, given the right catalyst, picked up
one of those precious dwarven books only to slam it back down on the table.

Instead, our hobbit frowned thoughtfully. He closed the bedroom door behind him, propped one
elbow in his palm, gave his chin a ponderous tap, and said, with all the breezy neutrality he could
muster, “You know, for a minute there. From the way we all jumped around. I rather thought I was
looking at your wife.”

Thorin II Oakenshield’s absent hand found his clavicle, pressing it through the collared black tunic,
brows up. The mink at his shoulders bristled. Not offended—more so startled—like the suggestion
was mad. “No,” he insisted. “She is the Consul of the Table of Blood. It is she who records the
bloodlines, who tracks the crossing of our families, and so she whose heavy fate it is to right the
course of the dwarves. Every child born in the home of the Durins since my father’s father sat the
Lonely Throne has been borne from the womb by her hand. This is nearly everyone you know. She
is on her own the most powerful voice in the Mountain; to wed her would be too much clout for any
king.”

“Ah, well. Doesn’t seem like you’re her favorite, anyway.”
“You do not know Onushka. Or you do not know the Six. She is more receptive to me than the others. It was Ylva who put her at the Table when she was only young.”

The king’s grandmother. It occurred to Bilbo he knew a great deal more about Thorin’s family than Thorin knew of his. Which, don’t mistake him, makes perfect sense, and why would anyone expect otherwise. Given that Thorin’s family is made of kings and queens and princes, and Bilbo’s is made of clerks and Aunt Belbas and Tooks.

“Looks like queen material, at least. She, what, walks around in the night like that?”

“She has come from the Council, no doubt. But yes. I have no evidence Onushka sleeps.”

“Didn’t think I’d find her in her pajamas, exactly. It’s just—”

Bilbo wished he had somewhere to sit. But you can bet he wasn’t going to plunk down cross-legged on the carpet, and wolves take him if he went anywhere near Thorin at the desk.

Someone should go and get her, though, he said. Don’t you think.

The Dwarfking did not think. “If you wish to call the Consul back to a place she has only just been, be my guest.”

I meant your wife, he said.

For the second time that night, Thorin went quiet. One half of his enviable mane slipped forward to shadow his face in a way that seemed intentional, and he was very suddenly interested in those loose papers on the table. Just when Bilbo was about to retreat with a peacemaking never-mind, the king recapitulated, and said: “It would be a feat.”

“Not here, then.” The chunk of lava rock in Master Baggins’s throat went down surprisingly easy.

“I should say not.”

Bilbo was just twisting the knife, now—and yes, it was needless and small of him—and no, despite his grievances with old friends who’d fallen silent, he had no reason to be snotty about Thorin’s personal life—but his mouth was open, anyway—and though our writer already knew he’d want them back immediately, the unfortunate words (like unfortunate words do) came bumbling out. “Did she refuse you? Can’t imagine why.”

“She is gone,” said the king.

If you knew Bilbo, you’d know his frown and his hush and his crossed arms together are the most genuine way he says whoops.

Gone, he said.

Gone as in left? he said.

Gone as in—

“I do not know,” Thorin admitted, and I do not know was all.

The painful seed of nastiness that’d first hit like joy, then metastasized—the spite that had been building a wretched little hovel in the gulch between Bilbo’s throat and his heart, a petty fort from which to throw rocks and generally be a public nuisance—bellied-up. It turned back to an organ and started hammering, instead. A little bit of panic will do that to you. It’s hard to be rotten or kind when
you are all at once busy running away.

He dropped and folded and dropped and folded and dropped and folded his arms. “You don’t know if the queen is around?”

The Dwarfking scoffed. “She was not a queen, and even had she been, I would not have laid upon her the mantle of my grandmother. For too long the Durins have been made to bet and bargain what is rightfully ours. This crown is mine by birth alone; so long as I live, it belongs to none other; I will share it with no one; and I made this clear.”

What could you say to Thorin Oakenshield, King of the Dwarves about his Lonely Crown, anyway? Bilbo squinted at him for that unwarranted hostility and waited Thorin Oakenshield, King of the Dwarves out.

“Erebor will have a queen when Fíli succeeds and crowns his bride,” Thorin Himself went on, recalling that it was just hilltop bumpkin Baggins here before him, and there were no councilors or shouting humans or craven elves to impress with the Enduring Might of the Mountain Dwarrow. “I think this is well. Kashet is tactful and wise. She will be worthy in the seat.”

“No, go back,” Bilbo demanded. There was at one point, theoretically, a time he might have been cautious about demanding like so, but if it ever existed, it was a thousand-and-one nights out-of-sight-and-out-of-mind. “We’re talking about your wife. And she’s maybe somewhere? But you’re not sure? Is what you’re saying. Could be either one. Who knows.” He chuffed, none too chummy, trying to puzzle out exactly what kind of a cracked-up place this was. “I’m sorry, come-again. I mean, clearly I did not understand correctly. Did you or did you not marry this person?”

He blinked long, as though it gave him some sort of sagacity to do so, as though Thráin’s-Son-Thrór’s-Son was not sounding like a jilted lad whose lady-love had stolen the family ring and gone poof. “It was the will of the Six and for the sake of the line. I did as I was expected and she as she was told she must.”

“I didn’t think you could tell a dwarrowdam anything.”

On this first bit, the king was, you might say, a little bit snide. “You cannot. But her mother could.”

“I thought dwarves didn’t do that.” And it was off-the-rocker dotty, arguing with him about this. As though he could pitch enough of a fit at the comptroller’s office to sorry, no the way someone’s marriage panned out. “Barter-matching. I thought you were all very serious about bloodlines business and all that. Very snobby about it, like the lot of you are. Son of Whoever, Daughter of What’s-His-Face, so-on-and-so-on. Nobody tells a dwarf who-what-where.”

Thorin seemed scornful to need remind him of this. He flung a sharp look the burglar’s way, and he flung back the hair that had tried to demure, as though to fling off the notion someone could wonder such a fool thing. Here was a once-lost king who could believe a dragon off the face of the earth, but could not believe so much naiveté. “I am not the butcher’s boy, Bilbo.”

And Bilbo winced, because he did indeed feel very foolish. For—well—really for everything, then.

The king, who was, after all, a king, forgave him for all of these foolishnesses and merely sighed once more. “It does not matter now,” he imagined, laying the rude way Bilbo was aside. “Yadreska angered the Six. You cannot survive in the Dwarf Nation, much less in Erebor, if the Six do not want it so. Perhaps she thought her status spared her their wrath. She was wrong.”

“But from a ten second interaction I am going to venture that angering Onushka isn’t wise.”
“Oh, she was not wise,” Thorin assured him. “But she bore the second Durin dam of the line and to claim this family was her right. It was not her right to demand a new seat be made within the council. Nor was it hers, when they denied her, to challenge her mother for the Table of Blood. It was as husband I warned her as much,” said he, shrugging emphatically, flashing the no-matter sneer one flashes when he pretends someone who still irks him no longer does. “But why should she have listened to me?”

He couldn’t cogently explain why, my dear. But Bilbo glanced down at the coal prints on his trousers and discovered that, out-of-time, he was getting awfully angry again—the same anger he’d tripped over in the throne room—and the same one he would indubitably be going to bed with tonight.

“But why should she have listened to me,” he repeated, as though he had some sort of moral ground to prop himself up on, as though he knew from firsthand experience what to do when someone you are sworn to makes a terrible mistake. “So your wife got roasted for politics and it isn’t your fault at all. That’s lovely. That works out so nicely for you.”

“You begin to test my temper,” the Dwarfking growled. He stood up from the chair with palm heels on the onyx, puffed in fur and pretty and obviously offended, but Master Baggins—feeling justified on somebody’s behalf, at least—stared him down.

He did not expect a revelation served in a teacup, my dear. He expected a stirring recoup of the King of the Dwarves. But in this small moment, Thorin surprised him. Standing awkwardly behind the candles of his desk, restless and irate, the king seemed to consider what had been said to him. His face unshadowed. His shoulders gradually lowered, giving him the appearance of some forest cat who’d been spooked for nothing and must relax quickly to save face.

When he did emerge from behind the table, it was not to argue with burglars, but to pass one by entirely. With little ceremony, he took up the poker and jabbed his waning fireplace, breaking the dead coals open, letting flame trapped beneath try to rise. It gave a desultory crackling inside the overlarge hearth. He tossed the rod back in its brass vase and did not snipe at Bilbo at all.

“I am not blameless,” Thorin confessed. A decent surrender, this, considering whom we are speaking to. “It is possible Yadreska felt slighted I would not crown her, so sought a holding through other means. Yet if she thought so, she said nothing of it to me. She made no noise of titles until the child was obviously in her womb.”

As for our burglar: Master Baggins didn’t forfeit a single step. And maybe he should have, my dear, just this once. “You know. I always fancied hobbits for fools because we’d leave in a knife not to bleed on the rug. But this is really something else.”

Thorin did not try to convince him. He merely sat back into one of the handful of places made for a king. “I cannot make you understand. Our people are not yours. A dwarf’s duty is not to dictate to his spouse what she or he will not do. My duty is to my daughter, that I might protect her from her mother’s folly and her grandmother’s ire.”

“She wouldn’t kill her own grandchild.”

As a leader of nations, this seemed like a reasonable supposition to make. As a father, he did not seem so sure. Thorin would not admit this fear, but if you knew him at all, you could see it thriving, a flurry of ruffled wing behind his eyes. “One lives or dies in this mountain by their choice. I would chance no Durin’s life upon a contract lost so easily as blood, and I would no sooner mercy my heirs
upon the whims of Onushka’s heart. For all that she was Ylva’s friend, she was too Yadreska’s mother. Yadreska made the mistake of presuming her love and she has paid for it with all she had.”

“That’s peas. Not Bélarûh. She’s a child; she’s, what, a few fingers old. There are—I don’t know—fish—older than she is. What the Sam Hill could she have done?”

“If a Consul has a daughter, she has an obvious heir, and her seat upon death will not be left open. Onushka herself was apprenticed to a daughterless table. It is a vicious thing to fight over and it leaves the Dwarves weak to discord. In courts past, an heir has made the difference to an inheritor whose claim might otherwise be void.”

“Void because she married you.”

“That is how it is done. That is how it has been done. This is how the court ensures the males’ power does not exceed that of the dames.” A pause. “There is, perhaps,” the king confessed, “special concern. With me.”

Surely we need not detail why this is so, or why a throne’s son might feel ashamed to remember it. That is a plotline from a previous chapter in another book. Here, we need only recall—no matter the trueness with which he loved him—how fast and sternly to Thorin’s lips came the recantation: I am not my grandfather.

“Yadreska believed Onushka secured her marriage to me so that she could no longer inherit the Table, for fear her daughter’s ambition might hasten her end, and to stabilize their line’s holding among the Family. As good a theory as any.” Here he stopped. But not for long. “She would perhaps not have been such a threat if we had born a son.”

The dizziness that bedeviled Bilbo then was bizarrely polite. It knocked at the door, giving him plenty of time to delay answering. It made the intellectual knowing that Thorin had begot a child, somewhere in the five bats of lash between where Bilbo had left him and where Bilbo returned, feel very immediate all of a sudden. It made the skin under his neck hot and shook up all the pictures in his head.

The old banner remained on the wall beyond. It still said Náin, Dáin, Thrór, and.

“And what—?” For all that he tried, the rest of his words wouldn’t tie up together; they lost their footing, and Bilbo swallowed them back down. “Thorin,” he whispered, not meaning to whisper, but a sliver of voice was all that would come. “What happened to Yadreska.”

“Balin thinks that the Council tore the child from her womb and killed her before she could manage the standing. I,” he insisted, adamant, for how could you rule a people who you believe are capable of something like this. “Do not know.”

Master Baggins, my dear, is a pessimist. He is not like Thorin Oakenshield; he does not rely on his confidence; he does not hope-for-the-best. So you must understand that the cringe gripping his face—the one that looked like actual pain, and the sharp intake of breath to barricade it—was not shock at the badness of this world. It was because it was exactly as bad as he’d thought it would be. It was exactly the sort of being-right that always made Bilbo sick.

“Shit,” he rasped. His hand found the fireplace much closer than he’d thought, and his fingernails dug into a groove.

Thorin seemed not so grieved as nervous, my dear. As the air left Master Baggins and his head went heavy on his neck, leaving him to shake choppy hair from his eyes and wipe away sweat, the king
stood coolly behind the table.

“At least, that is what they say,” he supposed. Thorin did not make it all the way around his desk, but stood long-legged and settled himself on an edge in such a way that he would not have to see our writer there. He folded up his arms. “Such things happen in a court. It is conceivable that Onushka smuggled her out of the city. It is equally as conceivable that Onushka was the one who ordered her death. It is hard to say what the Six will do.”

And so, he said. “I say she is gone.”

The marble was too cold for comfort under his hand so Bilbo let it go.

“That’s—awful. That’s the most awful thing I can? If I had known,” he promised, leaving the fireplace behind. “I wouldn’t have—not like that. I would never, ever—I’m so sorry.”

Thorin’s grimace was not sorrow. His one shoulder hopped, aggrieved, and his chin turned to look at Thrór’s war trophies. It was a brattish way to resent one’s life. It was very unjust that he should seem so fair wearing all this black and being so bitter. “I do not care.”

Master Baggins worried his brows with the most sympathy he had felt in a very long while. “Don’t say that.”

But “It is truth,” Thorin pledged. He ignored Bilbo’s strained, insistent “Stop”—ignored that it was now less sympathetic—and faced our writer down with a stern stare to prove how true it was. “I cared nothing for her, nor if she should live or die, for I was coupled to a womb.”

“Shut up,” Bilbo said.

Thorin did. But in that moment, our writer was not fussed about whatever it was Thorin did. Bilbo was so furious he had to look down. He felt his pulse in the depths of his ears and his nostrils flared, he was so angry. “That is the worst thing you have ever—ever—said.”

The king made a displeased face. But beneath that arrogance and discontentment, there was a flinch, like he regretted saying so.

Master Baggins did nothing to ease the silence. He fumed on behalf of someone he did not know and for crimes he did not especially give a damn about writing down.

“You cannot pass judgment upon me, for—”

“For you are the king?” Bilbo snapped, looking back with such bright-eyed vengeance that same king had to rise in retreat from his perch against the table. Had the hobbit been closer, you might think he’dve knocked him smack in the mouth. “I’ve heard; thank you.”

“For you do not know what it is,” Thorin went on, gentled with the guilt of what he had said. “To be every day forced upon one you do not know, you do not love, you do not even like. It is like a rotting. It is not quick and violent but let be it will consume you.”

Bilbo, who was after all that not good-and-ready to make peace, said nothing. He did not care for the way a glimpse of lostness on Thorin’s fine face made his own temper quail with contrition, so our hobbit hurried. He slid ten fingers through his browning roots and ruffled them. Master Baggins made himself put all these rocky pieces into a surly, to-himself scowl.

“You have a child. I mean, actually—” He blurted it. It had been pinned up in there so long, twitching like bees in a pot, it couldn’t come out any other way. But now it was and the outrage
flopped on the brick-red fur and his hands, tossed midair, fell in a flabbergasted smack back to his thighs. “A child—lif...
Master Baggins was neither finished nor feeling altogether forgiving. “That was very bad of you. Very bad, and really, truly rude. The rudest thing I can think of off the top of my head.”

“Truthfully I was not certain you would think on it at all.”

Bilbo squinted. He snuffed out. He made the one face that he makes.

“What are you peering at?” the king, who was not a friend of this face, asked suspiciously.

Bilbo answered: Well I am trying to see, King Thorin.

King Thorin regarded the burglar with caution. “See what?”

Who in the hell you think you’re talking to, Bilbo said.

It made the dubious dwarf puff like someone maligned again. When he beheld Master Baggins askance, our writer already knew the next grievance going to be nonsense. “When you left, you did not seem so pained.”

But he didn’t know how much nonsense. Bilbo’s choke rumpled into a stutter. My dear, he honestly could not believe.

“I jumped in front of a warg,” he spluttered. The hobbit left his dugout on the carpet and advanced in more astonishment than outrage. His hands animated, snagged between beseeching and flat-out ranting; they didn’t understand what movement could make it any clearer. “Thorin, I stole from the Elvenking. I took a keyring right out of his underwear. I lied—elaborately—to a dragon.”

“Then it was cruel, if you thought so,” the king informed him, indignation in spades, depositing himself in the chair again like a prince pops on the divan to preen, “to say so little. For you did not have this force of friendship then. You left quite easily, as I recall.”

“Excuse me—you can’t tell me what the force of my friendship was. I wrote you so many times.”

Thorin drew himself up as Thorin did when he wanted to look martyrish, and turned his face askance. His clean hands on the table could have easily been propped like so on his throne. “About tomatoes and snow.”

“That was—I was trying for something to talk about.”

“You wrote and wrote but said nothing. Is this not rude?” he expected. “Better not to speak than to speak and say nothing. A dwarrow would not do this. We understand one will talk emptiness if he has nothing real in his heart.”

Master Baggins’s eyebrows shot up and his mouth flew right open. “Did you just insult my writing!” (It took him a blink to shake off that bone and remember the snakepit where he’d already parked one of his feet.) “What I was—what I had—is consideration. I was being polite!”

“Polite,” the king said nastily, one wince of sharp eye tooth, an unkind grin. “You are cruel.”

Bilbo’s teeth went vicious and tight. “I was trying to be a friend to you.”

“You do not remember what you did?” Thorin begged to differ, a scornful and churlish disgust. “That you were very cold? Shaking my arm about strangely—” He pantomimed. “—‘Good luck’ and nothing more. You did not even say good-bye, Thorin. Good luck. You might as well have said no words at all.”
His teeth went a little bit tighter. “I didn’t want to make a spectacle.”

“You succeeded. To see how quickly you went, I thought I the fool. I thought perhaps I had been wrong about everything, then. Possible, then, that it is but a hobbit way to be so bold.”

The teeth in his mouth went even tighter, his bottom eyelids crinkled, and the writer seemed brighter, then—a little sharper, as a candle goes when you tap it—with a touch of murder to lighten him up.

“Hobbits wear short pants and grow azaleas,” Bilbo said.

He thumped his hands on the table. He thought he might make a command. But it was, after that small breach, altogether too close to Thorin—close enough that he could make out the ivory threads at his temples, and the blacks of his beard that would next need shortening, and the impression of bladescar lain fatally over one deep-set eye. And, just as quickly, Master Baggins pulled them off again.

“You broke an oath,” said the king.

Bilbo said I didn’t know.

“You didn’t know?” Like the belly of a flagship that is sinking: Thorin’s incredulity, taking on water, was hurt enough to betray the arrowhole in his pride. “You swore it.”

Here is the battle in which he lost the whole war. For the first time, Bilbo thus admits to himself—and to you—that he does know. And did know. A gentlehobbit knows, at least, when he has been cowardly. He knows when he has had a hard time convincing himself things that do matter don’t. And he knows, of course, when he chooses convenience over honor and easiness over difficulty and numbers over fiction and safety over truth.

He couldn’t manage a retort. Because just then, Óin came through with instructions for Thorin, and Thorin turned quite briskly away, and nobody saw Master Baggins anymore, and that was the end of that.

Bilbo let go all at once to find he’d rewounded his teeth. He tasted the blood before he felt any pain.

For once, since the start of it all, our writer had no right to be so angry with Thorin. Or perhaps he is lying to you. Perhaps there are a lot of things about which he’d no right to be angry with Thorin, but was. Instead, perhaps he should have been angry at the Durins before him—for being so besotted with doom that they’d raise their son to be this way, and then die, leaving their throne and their precious doom to him before he’d had a chance to be anyone else. But why stop at dwarves? Perhaps he should’ve been angry at hobbits, too—for properness, and politeness—and angry that the combination of these things had dully written-out Belladonna’s life before it was hers to begin with. Perhaps it was Bungo he was angry with—for falling in love with a person who above all things valued defiance and hope, and expecting she’d put that aside and love him instead. Or with Belladonna, for doing it. Or everyone—for making this the way that it was.

Or perhaps the only person he had left to scorn was himself. For recording everything he saw but saying nothing he meant—and for being, no matter how many monsters he fought or walls he climbed or princes he saved—at the core of it all—in the deepest stratum of himself—a coward.

What does a coward do when he’s bleeding?

Of course: he opens the door, and leaves.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Once you've got drums in your head, Master Baggins would warn you, there's no shaking them out. It'll be drums forever, then.

Master Baggins, as you know, isn’t in the business of fiction.

Fables and fairytales are all well and good for telling your children, but a grown person, he thinks, should want fact. Fictitious moralizing, my dear, is a terrible reason to do something so uncomfortable as writing a book. If you are really going to willingly commit yourself to run the gauntlet, better you do it for the sake of telling the truth.

That said, every writer knows that the best Once-Upon-a-Times work in threes:

OOO

Once upon a time, when Belladonna Took was young and our writer was a faunt of no more than six, they went to battle, mother and son. It was goblins in the pantry this time. As the Captains B. Baggineses scouted the situation, crawling on their bellies through a winter kitchen full of holly branches and canned cabbages, Bilbo's noggin inadvertently graced the underside of the dining table. Dishes tumbled with a clamor that had Bungo hopping out of his armchair, pipe ash on his robe, yelling to know what on earth caused that racket. “Drums,” Belladonna reported, blinking up from hands-and-knees with a brass pot on her head. “Never you mind, dear. It’s just the drums of war.”

It was the drums of war, too, when our fauntling writer and his cousins were playing stickball roundabout Brandy Hall and smashed one though a window. Glass vases cascaded; angry Brandybucks came shouting out. “The drums!” cried Bilbo as they sprinted away—which it always was whenever he and Belladonna wrecked something. Nobody had any breath leftover to ask what that meant. He enjoyed the guffaw kept all to himself.

And, many years later—when he was back behind the Burrows barn with Ginger Sandover, his trousers around his ankles and his hands in red springcurls—and they made a noise that startled the cow that kicked the wall that held the saddles, and everything came a’clattering down—Ginger looked at him in panic to hush, “What was that?!” Bilbo, of course, said: “Why, it’s the war drums, darling, that's all.”

When Bilbo awoke that morning in Erebor, there they were: the drums of war.

They shook the mountain for a day. You could go nowhere without feeling that low rumble of agitation. It was in the baubles on the chandeliers; it was in bathwater and bedframes; it was in your ribs and toes. Like trance, wherever you went, you could feel the pull of its source.

What source? The King’s Army, my dear—in full colors, stomping the frosty field before Dale, and
rolling a siege claw with them.

Dale, as you might suppose, was a bit concerned.

They had marched within a catapult’s distance of the city wall—sixty-some Guardians in Erebor mail, two siege engineers, plus a tireless band of percussionists. The sight of them there, teeming and ready for an order, was threatening in the bluntest possible way. Dales crowded their alleys and cornerside taverns to murmur nervously. Archers in old leather gambesons held grimly on cob walls. The street-sweepers began nailing extra boards over the main gate. Young Prince Bain, ruling in his father’s absence, had sent out a troupe of terrified spearmen to protectively surround the gatehouse, sixteen woefully unlucky fellows who could do nothing but watch their neighbor’s camp and pray the Dwarfking didn’t say *charge*.

With all these concerned people afloat—you might suppose Master Baggins was, too.

Erebor’s throne room, when Bilbo walked in, was the scene of a small shouting match. The tall cressets outside smoldered steadily, alerting everyone that Thorin II sat his Lonely seat just beyond these heavy stone doors. Indeed, there he was: midnight-blue and lion-shouldered and gleaning dully in his most Regal of Regalities, from the seven points of his crown to the thick eyeblack to all that hair combed and laden down his front. The king was holding a regular open court for Erebor’s males; the great golden braziers smoked beside him on their dark plinths, livening the cold air with an alarming snap of cinder, and the throne had been tossed with a silver bear’s pelt.

Dwalin was there, too—standing behind Thorin in the place where Bilbo once had, shimmering away in hauberk, his hand ever-perched upon the pommel of an axe. Our writer didn’t disturb anyone. He thanked the guard who’d let him through and patiently parked himself in a shadowy spot on the wall.

Presently, two petitioning merchants were lambasting one another about this false signature and that broken treaty (hard for a halfling to keep up). Thorin under Raven Crown looked bored. He listened quietly to their arguments, wearing an unparticular frown—a frown that only intensified when he happened to glimpse the spotty ruff of Bilbo skulking there in the corner. He quickly glanced away. The Dwarfking didn’t look twice in his direction, either. Once the disgruntled lords had besmirched each other long enough, Thorin interrupted, speaking some ambivalent words to placate them, never standing or lifting his hands from their rests. They eventually agreed to temporary nonaggression pact (for what choice have you when your monarch makes a suggestion?), both mutually dissatisfied, but at least somewhat convinced by a Durin’s reassurance that this was a matter best settled after the season had closed.

Petition dismissed, the merchants left—and then it was the hobbit in the room.

The king in his throne did not wait for a formal pronouncement. He looked surprised. “You are here,” he said.

Master Baggins couldn’t argue with that. “Seems so.”

“What need have you to petition me?”

Bilbo crossed the floor. His dwarfboots were graceless on the marble, which may offer us a scientific explanation for why the dwarves themselves stomp around like so—but in Erebor in winter, it is dwarven boots or frozen feet. Stepping as lightly as he could in them, doing an all-around clumsy job, he steeled his nerves and approached the dais. This time, our hobbit did not bow.
“I don’t have a petition,” Master Baggins said. All that untoward swelling from their breakfast brawl had healed, and the fixed tooth only hurt if he chewed overzealously; his business eye, though, was still berryish. Step too far away from the fires in here and you’d see your breath fog the air. “But I could do with your ear.”

Thorin under heavy crown and heavy jewelry seemed a little put-on-the-spot. Dwalin looked mildly annoyed.

“Can it not wait?”

“It can not wait. A minute,” he wanted, because who knew when a dispossessed burglar would get a minute of Thorin II Oakenshield’s time anywhere else. “Please.”

Thorin blinked. His voice was stuck on its kingly flaunt from holding court all morning, and from the childhood of training it had received. Though once-upon-a-time Bilbo had plugged up his ears and complained about such an unnecessary voice, in this echoing chamber—with its soaring ceilings and enormous openness—it no longer struck him as out-of-place; its darkness did not seem so otherworld.

“I will allow it,” he declared. Then, to Dwalin, who was still silent and silver over his shoulder: “Leave us.”

Dwalin did—though shot Bilbo an irritable look as he slowly jingle-jangled down the stairs. The King’s-Guard didn’t hurry. They watched him collect the Duringuard by the door, then step out.

Thorin regarded Bilbo sternly as his attendants left. His face remembered quickly it need not scowl so—no lion-look required to regard a hobbit—but the king’s kingly voice did not manage to change-back so fast. “Say what you will but do not tarry.”

It was difficult to speak to him like this. Always was. Him, propped up there in his grandfather’s mighty carven seat, spread out and magnanimous beneath the Lonely Crown; fluffed and decorated; untouchable no matter whether it was murky velvet or Thrór’s gold plate. All the dressing made him much larger and more historical than he was. But to Bilbo—to see his old friend perched on high upon that ancient rock, arranged carefully among trappings and spoils like a prince in tableau, or a fine bird made to be seen from below—it made Thorin Oakenshield seem smaller, somehow. It reminded him unforgivingly of the boy-king on the crumbling wall.

“May I speak freely?”

“Do not insult me.”

Freedom established, Master Baggins—who was not, of course, a tarrier—got right down to business. “This is your plan, then?”

“Yes,” said the king.

“You’re going to terrify an entire city just to intimidate one person?”

His verdict: Yes.

Hmm. All right, Bilbo said.

But just for the sake of conversation, Bilbo said.

On a scale of them, Bilbo said—you don’t think this would be one of your not-all-that-good ideas?
“I am not seeking counsel right now.”

(Because that was as likely to deter Bilbo as a strawberry candy and a nice firm pat on the head:)
“You don’t think Thranduil would have his army down here in a heartbeat if you gave him the slightest excuse?”

“With a full dwarfish force to meet him?” Thorin dared. His generous brows lifted, then dropped, a chuff of pish-posh from a dwarf who fancied he knew elvish minds and elvish courage well. “No, I do not think. Thranduil is a vulture; he does not desire a matched battle.”

“This is a matched battle, is it. King’s Army of Erebor versus the Week’s-End Wall Watch.”

“This was settled in the Council. Ilanís put forth her design, and I agree. ‘Tis truly of no use to argue it now. Or think you know better than she?”

“No, I just—”

King Thorin cut him off with a dismissive brush of his ring-heavy hand.

“Tch,” said he. “You say I am arrogant.”

Master Baggins recapitulated, glancing at his boot toes and chewing on the inside of his cheek. “I just don’t want to see a thing come to a head when it doesn’t have to.”

Thorin picked up his hand to gesture obviously—a controlled and placating sweep of the arm, an upward roll of the wrist you see pontificating kings do in plays. The thing about putting a hunting bird on a perch, see, is that no matter how deep the color or how alarming the profile of its beak, birds are not decorations. They may preen and pose, but not like a statue. They’re really not meant to have to be so still. “There is naught to see, Bilbo,” he beseeched, a bit set-upon. “We do not march to a war. We do not even send numbers enough to take the city; merely to smash their paltry gate, if I wished. Let the Dale do what he will to convince me against it.”

“You’re assuming Bard knows how many dwarves it takes to seize a city.”

“He knows that if I wished to have his miserly kingdom, it would already be mine.” So said Thorin II Oakenshield—whether you believe him or not, we will leave up to you.

“And the Mirkwood Elves,” he went on, regarding Master Baggins’s previous point, “are fair-weather friends. They will not rush to the threat of battle merely to defend a pathetic face.”

Bilbo’s face—as flinty and stiff-lipped as it usually was—frowned. “I don’t know,” he shot. “King Bard can look pretty pathetic.”

Not much place, you know, for a writer who can’t persuade his own characters, and yet Master Baggins hadn’t budged. Our hobbit crossed his arms, tapped his foot to hear steel-upon-stone rather than drafts around pillars, and grasped in stubborn silence for anything else to say.

Thorin did not gratify him. “If that is—”

“How is she doing,” he blurted.

The king knew what he meant. His face went glum and cloudy, but Bilbo did not need him to sleeve the kohl to see Thorin was worried. “Dís sits with her. She is not well, but she is not worse. Tauriel says it is best she rest until the fever retires. To me it seems she sleeps too much, but what else is there to do?”
“Oh. That’s good.” He fiddled with the clasps down his warlike coat; they were all already snapped. “Do you know what she’ll—”

“Bilbo,” the king said. His face was not cold, and his voice not angry—indeed, it had partway softened in its frankness—but there was a very particular denial to the way he turned Master Baggins away, a finality that could not be argued with, and no gentling would ease. “I cannot speak with you right now, truly.”

The writer bit in his lips. He stepped back, letting anything else he’d just scraped up in a hurry dissolve like so many of bits of snow.

Right, Bilbo said.

Sorry, Bilbo said.

I’ll just, Bilbo said, backing up, swallowing whatever else he had or didn’t have to say. I’ll just let you to it, then.

As he was going out, however, Dwalin came back in. His immutable gut stopped the burglar, who backstepped blindly into it, and his bear mitt gave Master Baggins’s neck a kindly shove-off.

“There’s a party here for you, Thorin. Diplomatic message. They want a special audience,” he announced. Thorin frowned at this, annoyed someone would expect such treatment during an open forum, but Dwalin’s hefted brows didn’t give him time to complain. “Trust me: You’re going to want to take this one.”

“I am already in court. I assume they are females?”

The King’s-Guard hesitated. “Of a sort.”

Weary of distraction, the king bid them sent in with a nod of his head; Dwalin went to do it; and nobody especially bothered to oust Bilbo, so he was still hovering when the diplomats arrived.

They entered Erebor’s throne room in sharp, quick steps. They were sullen and dusted with a light noontime snow. They were all five of them human; none of them especially pleased; and when their leader dropped her rabbit’s fur hood, the hair beneath was familiar brown and the face full of unmistakable bitten-back dislike.

“King Thorin,” the princess said, curtseying, back stiff as a board—and the rest of her, too. It was a good voice: tense and middling and tight in-between her teeth. “I am Lady Sigrid of the Dales. I come to negotiate my father’s release.”

King Thorin seemed mildly surprised to have her here, unannounced in his own hall. Credit it to an early royalty, if you like—or to womanhood—or merely to a shrewd nature—but at some twenty-or-so winters, Sigrid was miles more politically striking than her sire. In her was an echo of his fierce justice, but it had not come out all bulky and wild like a hero’s does; instead, it was fine and pinpointed and bitter cold. She took focused steps and had a good memory. She wore a single polished jade in a leather circlet. She had a stony stare and a form like a reedy, unbending tree—the kind that grows in the wind.

Perhaps she knew enough of dwarves to think they’d been less hostile toward a group of females, too, for Sigrid had brought only handmaidens for guards. Her four attending ladies stopped a dozen steps beyond the door and watched their princess nervously beneath deerskin cloaks. The weather had partially unwound her pinned braid, the embroidery of her amber surcoat had gotten a bit frosty, and there was a thin horseman’s saber at her side; apart from that, she’d brought only a gritted lack of
Dwalin, bringing up the rear, shrugged.

Our king was curious, at least. The drums, if you listened closely, had followed her in. “And what do you offer in trade?”

Lady Sigrid defiantly thrust out her arm. In its fist: a purse, no larger than a tomato from a vine.

Thorin laughed. It rounded the edges of this large room, neither mean nor mannerly. “We sit upon the Silver Fountains, and you offer me coin?” wondered he. “You do not appraise your king very highly.”

The princess did not budge. If you were Lady Sigrid of Dale, my dear, I dare suggest you might not care for Thorin II Oakenshield. The young lady’s jaw jutted, and she squared her chin, struggling to keep a longstanding outrage at bay.

When he came to collect it, though, that brave reserve deflated somewhat. With one hooked finger, Thorin unburdened his shoulders of the hindering lion’s cape, stood, and descended his throne. His manner was more showman than threatening—he was a drama coquette, you know (and, at close range, he was head-and-shoulders shorter than she)—but he was nevertheless the King of the Dwarves, and if this fact didn’t threaten you just a little bit, you were either a foolhardy person or you were Bilbo-himself.

Sigrid—who was, for all that green in her eye, still a mere garden-fresh twenty-two—tensed visibly when he stopped before her, but the princess kept her ground. Thorin, now unsmiling, held out his hand for the coin pouch, which she dropped into it wordlessly, fixing her disdainful stare somewhere else.

He opened it. And his face changed.

The Dwarfking’s brows ascended. His humor, just like that, evaporated; his tone went serious; and his voice was irate astonishment.

“How came you to have this?” he demanded, wide-eyed into his palm.

“One black arrowhead,” the Lady Sigrid confirmed, soldierly backbone and fists at each side. If she was at all afraid, it was fear tangled up with pride of blindsiding someone arrogant, and of knowing Thorin II would never chuckle at her again. “Forged by your grandfather. Always retrieved by he who owns it.”

The anger building in his words was appropriately kingly, but for Thorin, that is real anger, too—as you know by now how fiercely a Durin (especially this Durin) longs for his Family artifacts. The Dwarfking removed it from its purse, and there the arrowhead was: a broken-off, intense blackness, twisted like a corkscrew shell. “You told me it was lost.”

Sigrid chose now to meet his eye. She said: “Our mistake.”

Bilbo thought she would’ve been more of a match for Thorin than Bard was, honestly.

Kingly anger chuffed into disbelief. Brow high, he took a step back, gave the piece a waggle of gesture, and was all-around too amazed by Dale gauche to thunder. The coinpurse was dropped carelessly to the ground. “You were foolish to come into my court with this,” he chided her, blown-back, a genuine bit of advice. “I would never let you leave with it.”
In a moment that finally showed her age, the princess’s face went sour. Arrowhead in his possession, Thorin II returned to the throne, leaving Sigrid to try not to stick out her tongue.

“Do we have a deal?” she demanded before he had even sat down.

The Dwarfking settled back into his furs. “You offer me what is rightfully mine. Remember this.”

But, with an ambivalent turn of his hand: “Bring the bowman.”

And so they did. The women waited in rigid silence, for Thorin had no inclination to make small talk with them. Dwalin returned to his cousin’s side. And Bilbo, my dear, stood washed ashore in the same dusty space, waiting for someone to notice and thrust him out.

Good King Dale, brought in by Guardians from his room in the Diplomatic Suite, seemed markedly more amenable than their last meeting. “Brought,” that is; the dwarves let him walk alone, but their looks were less than gracious, and nobody stopped to chat. He’d not been sleeping well in his comfortable prison, if the dark circles were any indication. There was a catch in his hairtail and his stubble’d overstubbled. His great justice was not so searing as it had been, having heard dwarven drums in the field all day; he’d scraped up some manners; and his voice, barkish as it was, tried more sugar than vinegar.

Except all that flew from him in the instant he saw his daughter standing there on the marble of Thorin II’s court. Jaundiced, Bard started forward instinctively, Sigrid’s name wrenched from his lips, halted only by the way she sternly frowned and looked away.

This seemed to resolidify him. Some of the panic trickled out of his look as Bard, seeing his child scowling her regal best, remembered he should probably be more of a king.

“Thorin,” King Dale said, cautiously, stilling his ornery heart to face the Lonely Throne. “Dwalin. And—”

(Of course, the only one to notice our Master Baggins would have also forgotten his name.)

“Bilbo,” he grumbled, watching Bard drop his grasping hand and blink his blank look away.


As for Bilbo, he sort of wished no one had pointed him out. They waited for the lone man in their chamber to say something worthwhile.

“How is she?” Bard asked, worry that was a little manufactured but sympathy no less real.

Thorin said nothing. The Dwarfking’s look was rocky and cold.

“Your daughter,” he added, better at charming tidbits out of servants than he was at reading dwarfish moods. “I heard she wasn’t well.”

You were more likely to milk blood from a stone than win a smile from Thorin II with pity. Mahal forbid a stranger looks upon an Enduring Dwarf and feels badly for him. There was little, my dear, he could tolerate less.

“I’ve two. Daughters, that is. I know it’s unbearable to see them in pain. I can imagine what you—”

“Open your gates, Dale,” said the Raven King—and that was the end of the fellowship of fathers. “Or we will open them for you.”
It was the end of Bard’s novel attempt at being friends, too. “You threaten me, you threaten my people, you march out to my wall, and now you drag my daughter here before me—”

“I’m here by myself,” Lady Sigrid objected.

“Sigrid, shh.”

Thorin harrumphed to have them both here before him, quarreling everywhichway as humans will. “Listen to your heir, Dale. She comes to bargain you from bondage.”

Sigrid’s explanation wasn’t forthcoming. She glanced down at her clog-heeled boots; the King of Dale swiveled his face left-then-right; and since no one clarified, Thorin merely held Thrór’s famous arrowhead aloft in two fingers.

The bowman, you might guess, was less than felicitous. He rounded swiftly on his daughter. “You gave up the—?” And, furiously, back to the Dwarfking, narrow cheeks burning not so petal-pink as hers but his feelings twice as transparent: “My daughter—”

“Returned what is mine,” Thorin II finished for him, satisfied as a cat with a belly full of cream. He leant back in his chair and looked altogether too comfortable with its position over the room. “Wiser than her sire, it would seem. A liar, and a thief to steal what belongs to me by blood.”

The insinuation filled Bard with blackpowder. “That arrow fell to us a century ago! The only thief here—” (Our burglar flinched in anticipation of being pointed out, but it didn’t happen—and, on second thought, it probably wasn’t Bilbo he’d meant. But he’d never know for certain, because the bowman’s insult wisely petered off before it kicked in the Dwarfking’s door.) “You can’t hold us to an arrangement my daughter didn’t have any business making in the first place. Let alone—”

“I thought you were in a dungeon!” she protested. Her father’s criticism turned Lady Sigrid a mite foot-stompy and impetuous; more to the point, it let some of that Bardish defiance through. “You were gone into Erebor, at the mercy of the dwarves, and we were left to do what we will. Bain refuses to negotiate. He slammed the gates and won’t talk to anyone. Says he’ll fire if a dwarf tries. He ordered me not to speak to them.”

Bard’s bright-hot temper glowed in a way that seemed oddly pleased. “That’s my boy.”

“I came anyway,” Sigrid snapped, obviously.

The beaming intensified. “That’s my girl.”

A sensitive writer would here insert some soulful fluting and a stirring family recoup, but not so. The eldest Dale-child was far too cool-minded to entertain sentimentality at the foot of the Lonely Throne. “There’s no more talking of this. Here; it’s done!” she swore instead. Lady Sigrid’s arms cut-cross through the air, flapping her robe sleeves and startling her ladies. The hall fell silent. (Indeed, she might have better said “Be told.”) “You have your treasure; let my father go.”

“Oh? I promised you nothing—as you have promised me. Since you haggle what is mine to begin with,” Thorin informed her, and here is the diplomatic collapse you probably knew was coming, my dear, since you know by now a Durin thinks in losses and gains: “There is no trade.”

Bard—who really was, for all his pique, a decent strategist—saw it coming from miles away. Bilbo could have guessed. Sigrid’s poise, though, plummeted like a dropped wine bottle, and with nothing else readied on her tongue, she yelled.

“You have been given an audience. Be thankful for that. Be thankful,” said he, a roll of brimstone
encroaching on the smugness, tying short the princess’s outrage as she smoked there on the cold stone floor, “coming, as you have, into my court—bartering what belongs to my family—I did not take the hand that offered.”

Lady Sigrid glowed lividly from ear to neck. The princess’s fists clenched, taking personal umbrage at the threat; a maid’s softer fingers gentled upon her shoulder, but were shrugged off immediately. Bard crossed the floor and attempted to calm her.

“Sigrid,” he insisted, playing deferent father to appease the dwarf who had so cavalierly mentioned removing her hand. “You are in a king’s home; do not anger him.”

Thorin merely stretched his legs, rolled his eyes at the unlikeliness of such a suggestion, and gave the Men his smug sneer. “Your daughter does not anger me, Dale.”

Bard, long and bony hands on each of Sigrid’s still-attached arms, glanced inquiringly to Bilbo. But his search for an ally was useless, for our oathbreaking burglar could not very well help. Master Baggins only shook his head and pointed him tactlessly back to the Lonely Throne. Just in time to see:

“Dwalin,” so ordered Thorin of Thráin. The black arrow moved between his fingertips like an old, cherished coin. “Remove the Dales from my court.”

Nothing today had so startled said Dales as this. With a stupefied “Come again?” stumbling to Bard’s lips and a flanking “I’m sorry?” pouncing to Sigrid’s, they stared at the Dwarfking, flanked by nervous attendants, a guarded mix of disaster and hope-against-hope. Bilbo’s scrunched face wasn’t much better off, my dear.

“What about the coal?” King Dale bid, poking cautiously for the rattlesnake in the grass.

Ah, here we are: Their hope was dashed against some Mountain rocks when Thorin II scowled upon them from his lofty seat. “Coal?” he scoffed. “You have greater worries. In light of your stealing, I rethink my trust and retract my hospitality. There is no arrangement. Hear this only: If Erebor does not receive the heads of her enemies from your people in a fortnight, my army will enter Dale—and if we must pull every board from your houses and burn every silo to the ground, we will rout them ourselves.”

There’s the rattler.

“That is horse shit!” Bard barked, whipping off his neighborly veil, as Bard-the-Hero as Bard-the-Monarch could still be.

“That’s nothing but a toothless pretense to invade Dale! And you know it.” So said Lady Sigrid, pulling wrathfully forward and being tugged absently back by her livid parent’s grasp until it was uncertain who was doing the restraining.

Thorin tsked the insinuation down. “Look around you,” he said, surrounded by obsidian walls and draped velvet, a dare of disinterested contempt. “You stand in the Riches of Azsálul’abad. Dale has nothing for me.”

The princess in hare’s pelt and amber looked stoically around. Seeing with the clarity of everything and nothing, she sucked in, exhaled sharply, and with a brisk tug-and-twist, broke free from her father’s clutch.

“Then send my sire with our coal and keep me in his place.”
Bard’s jaw hit the absolute floor.

“No, my lady!” one of the maids gasped miserably, scurrying out of line to latch on, but Sigrid tenderly extracted her hand.

“Peace, Winne. I say again—” She stepped away from those who loved her and faced down the Lonely Throne with iron eye and teeth like a sprung bear trap. “If you must have a prisoner, have me. I submit myself to shackles willingly in my father’s stead.”

The girl made for a fabulously sacrificial painting in that strong, disdainful stance. She looked resigned to a rack in the dungeons, a hand at her throat, or an axe in her neck (all of which were pretty ludicrous, if you knew Thorin at all, but he supposed she didn’t).

Bilbo rather thought she’d been reading too many books—to offer yourself up to a wicked king like so, like you are some sort of terrific prize. Brave enough, my dear, but it is a little presumptuous.

“Sigrid!” Bard went frowzy and shrill with exhaustion. He snatched her back as a mother does a child with her hands outstretched for a red-hot griddle. For all the horse shit and indignity, you could tell more than anything what this lakeborn king wanted was to gather his daughter and walk out unscathed. “For the love of the world, Sigrid—hush!”

She ignored him. They wrestled for control of the captured limb for a moment, but with loose tresses amess in her lashes and bony fingers scrabbling at her sleeve, the princess spoke only to Thorin II. “I am an heir of the Dales and the oldest of my kin,” she pressed, pausing only when Bard lost his patience, hooked an arm ‘round her middle, and reached to stopper Sigrid’s running mouth with his palm. She slapped it stiffly away, then pushed when he would not retreat. “You needn’t do this over a war table. I make a worthy ransom.”

Thorin’s eyebrows lifted with surprise, but the Dwarfking’s answer was a brusque, refusing snort: unequivocally, no. “Wager your life more carefully, prince.”


But Thorin, who would not have Thank You, glowered. “Think you this a favor between fathers? Look to your people, Princess of the Dales,” said he, the Mannish word sitting his tongue oddly, addressing her as she regained her lonesome footing on his throne room floor, “if you seek your true misfortune. You are a woman born to Men. You are worth nothing to them and so you can be worth nothing to me.”

To this, she said nothing. Young Lady Dale merely stood with her saber meanly aglitter at one side and the cold in her chest, steaming. This bare-bones knowing had made Sigrid angrier than anything else, my dear. Lifelong, marrow-deep anger—for reasons that are, perhaps, more complicated than the petty competitions of humans and dwarves.

“It is sorry for the Dales,” Thorin II told her, beholding the lady in her quiet storm, a small condolence for a bitterness any son of a Durin should be able to understand. “That they would follow your fool brother.”

Their tight clutch of handmaidens exhaled. Winne toed anxiously forward to collect her mistress, buttoning her coat and fluffing her hood, preparing the stock-stiff Sigrid for winter. Dwalin descended the dais stairs again on a bothered sigh.

“No. Enough,” Thorin proclaimed—and it was. In the preceding silence, still as he’d gone, you
might have noticed that the roiling brazierlight made his skin more golden than stone. “I give you no more. Be told! And begone.”

Bard took her hand. Silent Sigrid, as Dwalin ushered them past, glared viciously at Bilbo only because she could.

“I hope your daughter feels better,” the bowman managed, not unkindly, and his family was gone.

And then it was Bill-bow and the king again.

“So.” Our hobbit click-clucked his tongue and rocked forward-back on his clunky dwarfish heels. “That was odd. All this, and they just walk out?”

“Sigrid of Bard plays Dale’s secret hand in exchange for her father’s freedom. If they had answers for me, she would have sooner traded them than this,” Thorin determined. His look had changed significantly in the short space it took the Dales to depart, stonewall disdain relaxing to the not-unpleasant idleness it wore before. The arrowhead rested in the crease of one large palm, and though his gaze upon it was admiring, it was also mildly sad—like a person whose nostalgia could never be balmed. “The bowman has been honest. He does not know. Yet this says nothing for his people. Let him return. I play the role of stubborn despot in mountain high, as they expect of me. Let them see the fear on his face, let them see my army, and those who can speak of their neighbors will.”

“Do you expect disgruntled townsfolk are going to line up to turn one another in just because a king told them to?”

“They are his folk,” Thorin reminded, as though it said enough. “And I have made them afraid today. If he asks, they will listen to him.”

The Durninguard was just outside, but Master Baggins didn’t very well care to leave before Dwalin returned. Irresponsible, you know. So, seeing it was safe—meaning there was no royal tantrum or pent-up fight glinting behind the Dwarfking’s pale eye—he approached the throne again. Thorin seemed discordantly calm given all the extraterritorial argumentation. Still dramatic, perhaps, but the haughty and magnificent tyrant who’d just occupied this olden seat was now merely plain-old majesty again. No matter how much galena and vainglory Erebor had dressed him in, you could always tell when Thorin II Oakenshield King of the Dwarves backslid to Thorin Himself once more.

Which was propitious for Master Baggins, because he’d caught a chill beneath his dark dwarfcoat, and stepped gladly into the orb of the braziers. Our writer felt insouciant doing so, like a puff-chested popinjay sidling up a branch to steal the cheese from a crow. “Would yours?” he dared anyway, propping his foot on the bottom step ho-hum, because this is what small plucky birds do. “Why should a people listen just because a king asks?”

The burglar held out his hand heels to warm them in the aura of flame. It flushed the sleeping scale upon his wrists to a fierce, frightening ruby, remembering a belly full of fire. Sort of incredible, the immediacy of memory. Even the parts that were stripped stone-cold, and even the ones that you were so sure had been killed.

“Because he,” Thorin Himself said, heavy crown and heavy voice—for inside the kernelflesh of all that mightiness, he knew it to be true: “is a better king for his people than I have been for mine.”

And the weight of how difficult it must be for Thorin Oakenshield to face such a thing—let alone say it, sitting in his oiled furs and under his grandfather’s roof—gave our unscrupulous hobbit a softhearted pause.
“For Men, perhaps. Perhaps he is,” Bilbo offered, a humdrum shrug of a yes. He rubbed his palms together in the brazierglow, wondering if time and proximity would turn him to gold, too. “But could you imagine him standing in front of Onushka? In a rain slicker? Oh, what was your name again?”

“That,” the king granted, “would not go well.”

Master Baggins climbed a step or two. “And I know he doesn’t wear a crown, and that’s fine, very humble, nobility from within, et cetera et cetera. But why exactly not, have you wondered.” (Thorin tried to stay straight-backed and stiff-jawed in his throne, but his eyes wondered obviously just what the burglar was getting at, and they followed sidelong.) “Is he really so down-to-earth and so modest. Or could it be that maybe—just maybe—he looks ridiculous? I mean. He’s an inch wide. Can you picture him in one? I can’t.”

“He would wear it for a necklace,” the king suggested. His finger flicked to mime the image, and the grin that crept upon him from underneath his dour bearings was real for all its smirkiness. Perhaps it was the most recherché and priceless thing in this stupid mountain. “It would fall over his head.”

Bilbo plopped right down on the stairs before the Lonely Throne for a chat, then—bumptious as a halfling (or a songbird) can be—one elbow propped on the step behind him, one leg tossed jauntily out. He grabbed his chin ponderously and peered in the Man-king’s wake. “And when was the last time do you think he washed his hair?”

Thorin snorted an unexpected laugh.

“I think you are sore that the bowman forgot your name,” said he, brows high on that frank and winsome look.

Burglar Baggins made his face. “Oh. Why should he remember me!” our hobbit demurred, waving a flippant hand. The leftover dragon glittered haughtily on his arms. “A great and noble King of Men. I barely did anything. Just waylaid a war, is all. Spared his noble greatness some peril.”

“I remember this day differently. It seems to me that the Manling’s peril was twice less grievous than our own by the measure of one thousand elves.”

“Still,” Bilbo said. “Bit ungrateful.” He considered himself in a sidelong glimpse at the golden plate on the Dwarfking’s shin. In the old days, our burglar might’ve shot out his knuckles and thumped it, but in these, Master Baggins kept his hands to himself. “Maybe I should’ve let the old boys arrow them a little.”

Thorin hummed amusement. “The scale has gone to your head.”

The writer’s wince was amused, too—but it was still more wince than smile. He slipped his arm off the stair and leant up, eyeing his reflection in the brazier gut; more than anything else, you could see the fire drake caught there. You could scarcely see the hobbit wearing it at all. “You shouldn’t joke about that.”

“No,” the Dwarfking agreed. “I should not.”

A guard stepped in, then. (It was Habrin; Dwalin had apparently promoted him; good show.) Thorin bid him enter. Bilbo, red-handedly inappropriate, leapt up off the stairs quickly. He stood with every bit of sober rigidity he could muster. The intruding dwarf shot him a tiny hello smile.

“Your Majesty,” Habrin announced, bowing with all the practice he’d gained. “Markhan of Makur waits with a petition, liege.”
“I will take it.”

Habrin rose and went to fetch the deferred dwarflord. Dwalin stepped in behind him. And our forgotten hobbit, who was no longer the King’s-Guard—who had never really been a burglar, even when he was one—stepped away. Master Baggins moved out of the heat, vanished from the brazier gold. Sensing himself begin to disappear again, spirit feeling friable, he trotted down the stairs to leave.

“Bilbo,” said the dark voice at his back.

Bilbo turned oversoulder. The Dwarfking sat once more adamant and expressionless on his throne.

“Should any king think to forget your name again, I will be sure to remind him who it was that saved his ungrateful life,” Thorin said.

And now lucky Bilbo Baggins is doomed to think of all this whenever he hears the drums.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Say what you will about fiction and fairy stories. Any good writer knows there is only one way to untell a lie.

Shire tradition for you:

When a little girl falls ill, it is customary, among hobbits, to bring her a single daffodil. You are really supposed to find it and pick it yourself, but if you absolutely cannot, grocer-clipped is fine. She should have as many as possible. Daffodils are for luck and energy, but Bilbo suspects this particular tradition stands because waking up to a sunburst of fifty happy yellow flowers will make ill little girls smile.

Master Baggins, of course, didn’t have any daffodils at-hand—so he had to snatch a fistful of snowbells from a haberdasher’s sill.

“Snatch” being the appropriate word choice. Bilbo could not find any florists (flower gardens are an irregularity in Erebor), so—rather than leave the Mercantile Quarter empty-handed upon this fine, frosty morning—he spied for himself a defenseless victim. Our hobbit grabbed a clutch of pretty white blossoms straight out of a shop window pot.

Not very polite. Burglar, you know.

It had been a threeday since the King’s Army pushed its siege claw into position outside Dale’s tremendously crunchable wooden gate. Three days, and every one of them, Bilbo awoke with a jumble of words dancing frantic tarantella in his head. Vital words, urgent words, and every night he went to sleep without quite getting them down. The war drums decreased from constant rolling to brisk reminders, thrumming into existence like knuckles upon your door. Our busy writer would hop in-place at his desk when they suddenly fired up, quill scratching into nonsense; the parchment would wrinkle; all these fickle, butterfly words would rush out of his head and scatter midair. It’s a very hard time getting back loose butterflies, my dear. Once you’ve let them out in the open, you must either clap your hands and crush them, or accept the inevitability of saying goodbye.

Or you could run halfway across the continent chasing them—if you’re the particular kind of idiot who does something like that on account of a story, or maybe because of a song.

And here I give you Master Baggins: blowing the dust off his stolen snowbells, standing in front of a black stone door.

Before he let his fist fall, our burglar took a minute to think. He required some sort of legitimate explanation for standing out here before the king’s rooms at nine in the a.m., wiping window soot from his fingers and brushing cobwebs from his catfur, especially if Lady Dís answered. He’d every reason to assume at least one Durin was back there, tending to the baby and mopping off her brow. Wouldn’t do to show up unannounced as a morning glory with no good excuse. And Bilbo couldn’t very well say “I was in the neighborhood,” because the Diplomatic Suite was a whole hall away, the words were bumbling amess between his lungs and his brain and his cold-bitten ears, and he’d just about everywhere else to be.
But the door opened up, leaving Burglar Baggins flower-holding and fist-hanging without a single sentence in his head.

“Look who it is!” Fíli why-helloed, looking under his circlet like a sleepy sunrise. Fresh breakfast sweetened the air behind him and there were vague shufflings of family pottering about. He seemed not-so-surprised. “Just…standing, isn’t it. Right here, outside your door.”

Bilbo’s cleverness organ shut down completely. He had to say something. He said: “I was in the neigh—”

The Dwarfking stepped into view beside his nephew at the door. For all his shades of somber black, he was in a hale mood—buoyant, compared to how he’d been a week ago—for Thorin had a blood-deep appreciation of being around his family. (It was something Master Baggins, in the surfeit of his own, never developed.) They were all of them back there, from the sound of things. You could hear Lady Dís correcting the plunky aubade Kíli sang at Bélarûh; if you looked beneath Fíli’s arm, there was a glimpse of Kashet merrily writing missives and munching cake at the king’s desk. And our writer could not deny a pinch of unjust jealousy. His old friend looked wakeful, clear-headed, and content beneath a half-crown of braid and the princely circlet full of bluestones chosen to favor the Durin eye. Master Baggins was relieved the winter morning light couldn’t sneak in to do anything inopportune to them.

“Ah, Bilbo,” he observed. “A good thing you are here.”

The first prince smiled some lukewarm agreement, looking upon our stock-still halfling. He’d himself a warriorlike plait down the back of his neck and a bunch of gold clank on. They had clearly been about to leave for something at least a little important. “Yes! A good thing. Not creepy at all.”

Bilbo was too rattled to spar with Fíli. His knocking hand bent its way behind his back, managing a little stateliness to right him, and he wrenched on his most appropriate frown. The flowers were chucked as discreetly as possible. They plopped innocently against the wall. “It, aherm. It is? That is—what for?”

“Indeed. I had wished to appeal to Galinyah and Azírë—to apologize,” Thorin explained, “and bid them not withdraw their settlement. Since you are often in their company, I ask that you arrange it.”

Master Baggins had not been aware the king needed permission to call upon a pair of random dames, nor that he-himself might be a suitable mediator in this endeavor. Erebor for you. “I can, uh. Ask, yes,” our writer agreed, as if he had any business whatsoever brokering royal meetings.

This pleased Thorin. “Then let us go now,” he decided, stepping out of his rooms and into the hall, urging Bilbo ahead. “And you will speak to them.”

“What about me?” Fíli was shrugging on a lively red overcoat as he followed, jingle-jangling and shutting the door. Thorin gave him an unconcerned look-back.

“You can address Lív on your own.”

The prince was one part amusement and two annoyance to be so transparently abandoned. “Off to the Table of Gold, then. I’ll confer with you in the solar later and tell you what she says. And Bilbo,” he promised. “Come find me later. I haven’t forgotten that interview. We’ll make up some time.”

That determined, the future king was off—and so the present one, too.

Galinyah, when Bilbo arrived at her nascent shop to announce who was waiting outside, seemed a wee bit caught off-guard. The silversmith greeted Thorin generously and welcomed him inside.
Reddish locs bunned messily atop her head, still dragging the carpet with her wool-lined houserobe, she shot Master Baggins a peevèd look while hustling out extra cups for the samovar. As luck would have it, there Azírë was, too, nibbling in a chair by the cozy den fire. She looked up mid-bite and the toast startled right out of her mouth when the Dwarfking walked in the door.

And so the late Lonely Mountain morning became an exercise in egregious apology. Galinyah for failing to notice the traitors; Thorin for having people who would betray him in the first place; and Azírë, Mahal love her, because everybody else was. They went on professing and regretting like that for some time. Galinyah, who’d been downright petrified by the prospect of connection to such a catastrophe, had even produced gifts for the royal family: four exquisitely plated snow owl quills for His Majesty, patterned cufflinks for three princes, and a dazzling set of earrings for the formidable Lady Dís. They very much did not desire to return with her to Ered Luin, thank you.

As it happened, the silversmith and the king got on like peas in a pod. Thorin spent quite near his entire afternoon there, and Galinyah never did get dressed. She sat with billowing sleeves and slippered feet to comment upon this and that; they had a few tales about each other’s mothers; and he advised them quite frankly on which local lords ought to be romantically reviewed and whose overtures were not worth the energy it took to open the envelopes they arrived in. (Like maids at a spring ball, dwarrow are, when you put them together over a teapot. Hobbiton will teach you well that good politics looks like teatalk sometimes.)

Believe it or not, Master Baggins did a commendable job of minding his own business. He listened, appreciating how surreal it was: to be one moment sitting in your family parlor peering at old atlases, then to turn around next Afteryule and be there, downing milky tea beside two fine ladies and a king who just days ago would scarcely speak to you. It put him in a bit of a diagnostic daze, this—a mist that only dispersed when, during a trip to Galinyah’s red marble kitchen to splash his disbelieving face, Azírë revived him with her mild hand on his arm.

“Bilbo. Are you—are you well?” she bid, winded and worried. The embroiderer looked half of herself, like an icicle that in one bright morning has melted partway. Her colors seemed not so sunwashed as blanched, and the knot which had installed itself between those feather-light brows during that cursed breakfast hadn’t come out. “Please don’t lie. I need the real truth.”

The writer shook his dripping fingers off. She passed him a dishcloth as he twisted off the faucet and deep mountain water freckled the brass basin. Master Baggins patted his troublesome braid dry. “I’m fine, my dear. That’s the truest I’ve got. It was only a bump or three.”

Relief overtook her delicate face; she desperately wanted I’m fine to answer everything, that’s-that. “Really? Bilbo, you don’t know. How awful I’ve been. I’ve been just sick with nerves. If something had happened to you, how could I forgive myself?”

“Lucky for you, hobbits are remarkably unstabbab—”

“And we haven’t—” She overcut him, grabbing the burglar’s wrists, squeezing as though her insistence would keep them from disappearing like candle smoke. “We haven’t known each other for long. But you are my friend, Bilbo. I truly feel that you are. I don’t have many friends, and I want you to know that. You should know that no matter where I am, Erebor or anywhere else, I will repay you that kindness; I swear it.”

Her gravity haunted him. He woke up. “Azírë. Love, who’s—”

But here was Galinyah to chase off the clouds.

“What’s this? Are you sopping over Bilbo in here?” the smith demanded, carrying used cups on a
tray of etched jade. Azîrë dropped his arms and her storm scattered in the clink of glasses on a countertop. Galinyah tutted, giving a sisterly roll of her charmed eyes. “She’s been intolerable. I’ve never seen such a dramatist. How many times can a friend say, ‘Breathe deep and drink this wine?’”

And she swept them up, just like that, back to the den for another pot of tea.

By the time they were all tittle-tattled out (apparently Karûn was an improvident dice-thrower and Poet Magni’s odes were doggerel), day was well into evening. Bilbo supposed he could’ve better-be-going’d hours ago, but he didn’t feel entirely sanguine about leaving Thorin to stride around the place all on his lonesome, current events considered. It must’ve been past five o’clock before they finally left the Jewelers and Spinners Cross, and a pebble-toss from six when the Dwarfking returned to his home hall. Master Baggins, naturally, tromping in-step—dwarfboots and elfblade and gold tooth et al.

So he was there when it blew, wasn’t he.

Thorin entered the Quarter, rounded the dragon, passed the Durin arch, and there was Kíli: beaming far down the empty corridor with one long lady’s-curl rolled fondly ’round his finger.

It was bonfire red.

“You are a prince and a dwarrow grown,” scolded she, prettily pink-cheeked, swatting his fawning hand away from the tail ends of her hair. “I must return to your cousin, and I am sure you might find some better way to pass your time, Prince of Erebor, than by distracting me from my charge. Do not be so irresponsible.”

Prince Kíli ripened his bottom lip to pout. “I’m not distracting. I’m giving you moral support. I can’t believe you’re shooing me for improving morale. If I wanted to distract you, it wouldn’t be with jokes.”

They giggled.

They were standing smack outside the Dwarfking’s door.

Roundabout here, my dear, our own Master Baggins was calculating the necessary velocity and torque for a decently-sized hobbit to tackle Thorin II Oakenshield to the ground—whether he’d be best off butting his head up under the solar plexus or wrapping both arms around the king’s knees—and precisely how long he’d need to keep him down relative to Kíli’s average running speed, Tauriel’s distance from the Lion Door, and the measurements of this hall. But meanwhile, the really egregious infelicity was only now transpiring. His Highness—the Dwarfking’s littlest and most darling nephew, the same dimple-faced tot who was second in Erebor’s order of succession but second to none in his family’s affection—stepped back from the elf in the door. He happened upon Bilbo’s castaway flowers, abandoned in the dust a lifetime ago; he plucked the least withered snowbell; and, chipper-as-a-bumblebee, presented it with his astronomical grin.

“A sign,” he avowed, hoisting it up at her dainty silvan nose. “Elves like these, I’ve heard.”

Tauriel’s fox-eyes darkled. The gawkiness dissolved from her like sugar goes to caramel. She took the surviving blossom from him, swept down to one kneecap, and fit it suavely in the space over his ear.

“Elves admire many beauties grown from the earth, Master Dwarf,” the captain beguiled, tucking his dark hair gently behind, and that cunning voice would’ve seduced the hood from a Wraith. “It sits lovelier here.”
She devastated whatever flirtation he had left with a knock of her thumb under the tuft on his chin. Then she backed inside and closed the door, leaving Kili glowing red, reverently touching his face and his flower like a wooed milkmaid.

He stood there for the longest time, smiling stupidly, before the prince turned away and walked taffy-headed back to his far-off room.

At the other end of the corridor: Bilbo and the Dwarfking, stuck in the paralysis that comes in those few foggy seconds after jolting up from a nasty dream.

“Um,” the Golden-Tongued Master Baggins said.

I won’t insult your intelligence by running through the full file of thoughts dandling our writer’s brain about just then. Instead: be content with the image of six nervous bunnies and a firecracker stuffed in one very unfortunate box. With all that charivari going on between his ears, Bilbo was not at his most articulate. He threw out his arm like to hold back a horse. He stammered.

“WELL. YES. AHEM,” choked the burglar, flinging himself heroically on the fire, because whether or not dwarfish hearing was adroit enough to snatch the words, sometimes flower-language says enough. He had no functional understanding of what came rocketing out of his mouth. But here it came: “You know—I was reading the other day—research for the book, wasn’t it—and isn’t it a coincidence—I learned about this odd elfish greeting custom—to be honest, it’s very—”

What else would’ve stopped him then but Thorin’s hand halting over the heart in his chest. The king’s expression was flat as polished dwarven stone.

“Peace, Bilbo,” said he. “I know.”

One of those panic-rabbits hit fast in a snare. His mind stumbled. He blinked.

“You,” Bilbo rasped. “Know.”

The dwarf at his side frowned. “Think you I am a king who knows not what happens in his family, in his home?” He stopped unamusedly side-eyeing Master Baggins to toss back a loose lock of his weighty hair and chuff. “They are not clever.”

It took a few more spastic beats of blood through him before our burglar deduced with certainty he was not, at present, wrestling the Dwarfking face-down to the Durin Hall floor. Thorin waited Bilbo out. He looked mildly offended to have been so sloppily bullshitted-to.

“You may accompany me to the solar, if you like,” the king suggested when idling out in this dim rock avenue grew tiresome. All was stillness: a hush in the tunnels, crackling flambeaus, and distant chainmail sounds of Erebor’s dusk patrol preparing for the long night ahead. “Fíli will want to speak with you.”

He went, and Master Baggins, unburdened too fast of a hundred-pound secret, tumbled after.

Bilbo loped to catch up to the dark of the king’s cape. Each of Thorin’s large paces called for one-and-a-half hobbit ones, and at the moment, he was not being especially courteous about it.

“And you’re—?” Our trailing couldn’t find the words. "All right, with this?”

The Dwarfking submitted an indifferent grimace and a single-shouldered shrug. His dissatisfied face, nestled above the dappled gray bear plume ‘round his neck, might make you think not so much of the throne-perched raven as it did a black erne atop a sea cliff, braced against bitter wind. “If he
becomes a first heir, he will wed a dam. But he will not be a first heir. In any case, it is his heart; I
cannot tell him how to keep it. Let him spend it foolishly, if this is what he means to do.”

My dear, Master Baggins—for whom everything is still action-reaction; who still chases off the
seven-lived harpies of propriety and decency with a broom in his sleep—wasn’t sure. No convenient
Bungo pocket-wisdom occurred to him. He swallowed uneasily, and frowned at his boots as they
walked.

“Do not look so shocked.” Thorin, striding beside him, sounded a mite hurt. “Think you that after all,
I have learned nothing? Think you I care no more for my sister-sons beyond where they stand in line
behind me?”

“Of course not, but they’re your heirs.”

“I have three heirs. Fíli will have children, as will Bélarûh. Let him have his she-elf. Has he not
given me enough?”

“I suppose. I just thought—”

Thorin stopped at the locked solar. With one palm on the door and his eyes cast skyward, the king
exhaled mightily. He came clean.

“If I take her from him,” Thorin knew, “he will hate me.”

Bilbo does not presume the motives and designs of the royal bloodline. But he has presumed
Thorin’s—sure as he has seen the color of his blood under sunlight—and so our writer forbade
himself to question it any longer. He should really not have been so surprised.

“I have borne much ill will for the good of the Durin Line since I have become its king. But I will
not bear that,” the king swore, and his defiance was for once the quiet kind. He took the ring from
his belt and counted for the right key. “He is my sister’s child. I could not stand it, if he hated me.”

“No question of that. Just—” And here is the detail you, too, might doubt the Thorin Oakenshield of
yesterday—who had watched his ancestral birthhome burn under elven lassitude and elven
abjuration—could work past just-like-that. “A forest elf, though.”

The final key found its slot. The Dwarfking rolled his eyes upward and issued a small, exquisite
noise of dignity in great pain. “Do not remind me. It is mercy itself that Thráin did not live to see a
Son of Durin with a flower in his hair.”

The family commons, when opened, were fitfully dark, with only the last pitch of red sun beyond the
Misty Mountains and through their picture window to see by. It silhouetted this stony room into the
muted gray of ash trees. Dwarf eyes calibrate immediately to such conditions, but Bilbo’s needed a
blink to adjust. He rubbed and fidgeted. Thorin’s snort of irritation came from somewhere in the
murkiness ahead.

“Not here,” he observed. There was a loud clank of keyring on table and a ruffle of heavy fabric as
he shucked and deposited his cape unceremoniously in the cushioned bay bench. You could scarcely
follow the king’s outline in the excess of shadow; without his smoky pelt, he was black upon black
like a clear lake under the witching hour, the edges of his face suggested only as moonlight does the
water. “He is late with Lív, no doubt.”

The first candle, when Thorin lit it, was a relief. A second wick, and there Thráin’s carven menagerie
was inside the bookshelf; there were the emeralds, the handmirror, and the leather-bound tomes.
There was the smell of amber wax, too, as the king rested one stick upon the circled table and the
other high atop the cavernous fireplace to throw its light. He uncased his owl quills to place them, silver tips-down, into a cool lapis vase someone'd left as a centerpiece. Master Baggins only spent a second watching them lazily twirl before realizing he was being useless and haunching down to rustle up a fire.

“If their talk runs too long, you need not wait,” Thorin bid him, setting aside the velvet pouch containing Galinyah’s remaining gifts. “I will tell him he must speak with you another time.”

Bilbo’s task was made easy enough by the hearthsides tools, though he had to climb on a chair to reach the tinderbox. In a commendable jiff, our hobbit inspired some ember and smoke. Dry, hardworking cedar twigs winked awake and smoldered aromatically atop the bed of coals.

“No, no. What else do I have to do?” he chuffed, returning his improvised step-ladder. Master Baggins dealt a pat to the journal tucked inside a breast of his fine coat. “Write something? Sod right off with that.”

“In any case. We will see where he is. One moment.”

He cracked the door to investigate soft footsteps, finding no crown prince but a servant passing with arms full of wash. Bilbo seated himself at the table to twiddle his thumbs and tip-tap as Thorin inquired if the young dwarf had spotted Fíli in Council Hall, asking that he might inform his nephew’s courtier that the king awaited him. But the answer, my dear, was no. He was informed in so many words that his missing prince was not with the Council, but in the bakery—and not reviewing figures with Consul Liv, but drinking hard cider with a gaggle of Dwalin’s guard.

Thorin’s annoyed ruff was not a certifiable squawk, but landed pretty close to it.

Master Baggins, of course, coughed on his laughter. “Chucked for the pub, you were,” he guffawed at the Dwarfking’s back, who turned those redoubtable Durin eyebrows from his conversation to shoot Bilbo a look of do you mind? The burglar didn’t mind; he just snarked. “What’s a king to a ham sandwich? No, no, don’t be sore—nobody holds out that well against a ham sandwich. Too late for me to chuck you for some fish and chips, too?”

Thorin’s mouth pursed. He took his less-than-tickled expression back to the servant and ignored whatever hobbitish chuckling was going on behind him. “Bring us bread and meat,” instructed he, thinly, “then tell the prince he is expected.”

So it was on both counts: the meat and the warning. With no fancy ladies or court politicians to entertain, our writer didn’t bother being mannerly about it. He dug into the tray of sliced goat’s meat and grilled venison, layering it slippshod with white cheddar on airy rye. (Cultural Note: Dwarves, being barbarians, eat a measly three times per day; Men are significantly worse at two; for all he could tell from their limited culinary encounters, elves merely drink and nibble from sunup to sundown.) Thorin eyed him a little for all the rude crunching and chewing, but in end, simply set a bottle of spicy blackthorn wine on the table and sat himself down at the other side.

“I didn’t get a chance to say,” Bilbo said, tucking a napkin into his collar and overfilling a stoneware cup, “you being mad at me. But you’ve all done a swell job on that road. Rest of it, too.” The Raven King seemed disinterested in coldcuts, which was fine, for the burglar could’ve polished all this off on his own easy. The wine was a tad musty but not terrible. “Don’t really care for the statue.”

“Of the dragon.”

“Guess we can’t let that one loose, at least,” Master Baggins joked—but was made to regret it when Thorin’s face stiffened. “Ah, peas. Damn it. And I’m not even drunk. Look,” he cut, fist hopping too
fast to the table, rattling the dishes. His opposite hand leapt to cover the shivering cup. “What I’m trying to say is: It’s been put back together nicely, this old rock. From the ruin and the rubble.”

The king looked darkly in his chair. The sun, bleeding out over the wheat, turned the back of his hair a thin velvet red. “And from what a great mess I had made.”

Bilbo sighed to have spoiled things. But he went back to his sandwich, all the same.

“You did cock it up for a pace, there.”—said around a mouthful of bread. He paused to add another two pieces of cheese. “But at least you had noble intentions. More than can be said for most cock-ups. Me, what did I do.” A chomp and a scattering of crumbs. “And why. All that madness—all that screaming and punching and kicking and carrying on—and when it comes down to it, I don’t have a damned clue why I came along.”

It did little for Thorin’s blue temper. He had leant back in his chair in all that funereal black and touched at his forehead like a dwarf with a headache. His answering smile was a grimacing and sorehearted twitch. “You were a burglar promised a kingdom of gold.”

Bilbo swallowed dryly, and the bite hurt all the way down.

He did not take another. He rested the crust of his bread; he wiped his mouth; his knife, red with sour berry jelly, went tink on the plate.


Doubtless Thorin would now behold our writer strangely, but Bilbo, numb with courage, didn’t dare look beyond his hand clenching the stout stone cup. In moments of extreme nerve, the mind will not bother with what the body thinks. And it’s odd that—in that penultimate hesitation, where a hero must act to avoid disaster or commit to disaster fully—you don’t suffer more, my dear. There is no supreme disorientation. He has found things only become pitilessly clear.

“I suppose, after all, it’s no harm to tell. But I lied,” Bilbo told, a small thing to need tell so badly, and to travel so far from the desperation to say. “To you. I’m afraid I did.”

It wasn’t a deliberate lie, he said, and how surreal to have the texture of that three-lettered word there in his mouth. Not a lie of my own initiative. It was a lie of omission, that is.

But a lie’s a lie, he said, isn’t it.

And what do you do to take-back a lie? Hmm? You tell the truth. The whole truth and the real truth and that’s all. So here it is.

“I’m no burglar,” he said.

Thorin woke up from his mood. His famous voice went fearful and tight.

“What did you say?”

He said: “I’m not a burglar. Not even a poor one. This isn’t me being modest; it’s fact. When I met you all, I hadn’t burgled a bauble in my life.”

The Raven King sat forward sharply, exigently. Bilbo might’ve scowled doughtily back had he not already known so certainly what that expression looked like—the confusion of Thorin’s face five instants before it steels to betrayal.
“Gandalf,” he went on instead, holding his cup tightly, letting it anchor all this in the real and obdurate world. Could you look too closely at his fingers and know, like a flaw in a diamond or a chink in a bracelet, they didn't belong to a thief? “Who knows why—he wanted me along, so he told you a story. And I—kept it up, I suppose. Who knows why.”

But the plain fact is, our burglar stressed—if indeed we ought to continue calling him that—if indeed he did not disintegrate, with nothing meaningful left of him after the dissolution of that word. “I’m not a burglar. I don’t sneak. I don’t steal, I don’t spy, and I don’t burgle.”

“It is not true.” Thorin’s certitude was light and fearful all at once. “How else did you do it? If not a thief by trade, it must be some like profession. Else you would have died, surely. You could not have gone with us. How else,” he insisted, “could you have done what you did?”

Bilbo testified with a handful of flimsy chain ‘round his neck.

“I told you about halfling luck? Well,” our writer declared, pulling the golden ring from its secret place pressed snugly against the dip of his chest. Halfling Luck clicked distinctly on the table. “Here it is.”

The Dwarfking was unconvinced. “Jewelry.”

“Give me your hand.”

Thorin’s suspicion came with a squint that made Master Baggins, abuzz with his hobbling confession, annoyed. He dusted off lingering breadcrumbs and thrust a curt palm out face-up.

“Just do it, will you.”

The ring would fit only his littlest finger. So Bilbo put it there, permitting himself look no higher than the king’s embroidered cuff, holding his wristbone and twisting it on. Thorin’s hand with the silver and gemstones vanished. There was a momentous pause.

“I do not feel lucky,” he said, incidentally.

The hobbit, exasperated, bent the dwarf’s arm at the elbow to show him his own hand. His ensuing gasp was satisfying. Of course, he could not appreciate the shock overrun that pretty face.

“Magic!” Thorin cried, bewildered as this plain and unassuming ring was removed from his pinkie, leaving the royal gaze splashing helplessly around.

“There’s your halfling luck for you. There’s your Bilbo Baggins, Master Burglar.”

‘Flabbergasted,’ you can imagine, did not cover it. Bilbo did not dare look up to watch the king ask: “How came you to own this?”

“I found it. Won it. In the lake beneath the goblin caves. I was separated, and there was this—I don’t know, this nasty little creature. Goblin. Thing. Look, doesn’t matter. Point is: we fought, it tried to eat me, and, long story short, it didn’t.”

“And here comes the body again, doesn’t it. As the mind accepts its changing state, the shame resurfaces, and the lump rises in your throat with a panicky foretaste of tears. There was crumbling into his lungs that made Bilbo’s voice warble. His ear was burning, or maybe it was the warbraid against it, feeling never more outlandish and out-of-place than when it felt undeserved. “I wanted
“I titled you,” said he, blankly. “I laid my life upon you. I sent you ‘gainst a dragon.”

“Yes,” Bilbo regretted, some wryness to undermine the heartache, his voice breaking and his eyeflesh sore from keeping too much in. “Sorry about that.”

If the king was at all distressed to fathom this—to unravel the reality of Master Baggins, unburglarled, waltzing into his grandfather’s kingdom as a dragon slept there—our poor lad could not see it, anyway. Thorin stood up. There was only the daunting shadow and the eek of a chair. “Then what,” he insisted, too soft. “If not a burglar. What?”

Books, said Bilbo—who had never, perhaps, been so sad. He said: I keep books.

So it is the Dwarfking could not decide what to do. He collapsed back into place, vanquished by the knowing.

"This is why you left?"

“Told you I wasn't qualified. And now,” laughed the bookkeeper, bare to the windless look on the Raven King’s face, “it seems I don’t really know what the hell I am or where to put myself.” A pluck of the snaps on his fur coat; a flinch of the mail beneath. He choked on the outrage of it: to be sitting here dressed like a hero as his lie came apart at the seams, revealing nothing underneath but a weakhearted, everyday, unremarkable fellow—a damningly little fellow—who thought one unfortunate night he would play in the bigger world. “I mean, I can’t even call myself a writer, really—I haven’t, technically, published anything—so even that title’s immature. Look at this. Look—!”

Pages shook loose from the chaos of his notebook; he grabbed a crinkly handful, laughing desperately now, just killing himself with it; the sentences were all running wrong-ways. “It’s pathetic. I’m not even a good writer. What would you call a—”

If he had been aware, my dear, he would’ve stoppered it. But the tear that breached Master Baggins’s tough right eye interrupted his cheekbone and was away down the inlet of nose without feeling. He did not even realize he’d anything to sleeve off. So he is left now only with the embarrassed backwards-wish: that Thorin could not see it there, through the firelit gloom of the Family’s solar. Perhaps his less-keen dwarfish senses missed it. Or perhaps it raced too quickly around the nostril and over the first rise of top lip, and maybe, instead of falling, it disbanded stealthily into the nook of his mouth. But this is probably pipedream, because well before Bilbo’s fingers found the condemning wet stain—the least-hobbitish thing that can be done, crying—he heard Thorin’s footsteps rounding the table, and had Thorin’s heavy hands on one shoulder each.

“Yours is the maddest heart out of any I have ever met,” swore the king, and he pushed the burglar upright in his chair with conviction, until Master Baggins could no longer not-see him kneeling on the cold floor wearing the historical circlet on his brow and lovely silver on his ear and the storybook severity on his face. “And it is the bravest.”

Well, Bilbo said, brave heart surging against the ceiling of his throat and against the backs of his eyes and the bridge of his nose, thank you.

He stayed like that a little too long, our writer thought, and he squeezed Master Baggins’s shoulders a little too hard, because their shape stuck on him for a while in a way he does not care to write down.

Bilbo took the span of Thorin returning to his seat to come back to himself. He ahem-hemmed. He downed the rest of his
wine in one punch-drunk flash. He became aware, again, of the journal lying agitated on the table—and he coughed the last dreg of his fugitive sorrow down—and he dropped his palm atop it with a restorative smack.

“That said. That said,” he rallied. Thorin looked over the forgotten dinner at him in cautious surprise. “Since you have nothing else to do. And since I am here anyway. I was thinking you might be amenable to—or at least willing to—help me on a little editing. If you would be so kind.”

Say what you want, if it strikes you as funny: to carry on after that like nothing-at-all. But burglar or bookkeeper or somewhere in-between, this was Bilbo’s nature, my dear. He was not likely to let an authorial error here or there get him down.

“I asked Fili, but.” A dismissive flip-flop of his hand. “It keeps getting put off, and nobody’s settled down with it. Busy being princes and whatever-have-you. But it seems like—for once—there’s a little time, so. Considering,” he considered, marshalling his voice again. “I was thinking we might go over the contents of my book.”

At an as-you-will turn of the king’s wrist, he opened his notes, and unpacked.

“Well. Well I’ll just read some bits to you, shall I. I’ll read,” Master Baggins proposed. “And you stop me—let me know—if something doesn’t seem right. All right?”

Thorin nodded. Bilbo snatched one of the snowy owl quills, puffed a breath out his nose, and frowned.

All right, he decided, and cleared his throat.

Starting from the middle, I suppose.
The letter tucked messily under his door at four in the morning read:

*Boggins!*

*Meet me at Bombur’s before nine. Something funny’s come up, and I could use your sneakiest help.*

(*Seriously, and pretty please.*)

*Thanks bunches,*

*Me*

That is all the explanation Master Baggins got, and so it is all the set-up you need.

OOO

At an empty bakeshop table, roundabout eight-fifteen:

“Bilbo, come on! I’m begging you!”

“Clearly.”

“Then will you?”

“Not if Durin himself descended sidesaddle on a golden goat to ask me personally.”

“Bilbo, please?”

It was a bitter-cold morning in Erebor—the sort of morning that reddens your ears and numbs the tip of your nose. Bilbo had sashed himself into a wool-lined tunic then buttoned his dwarfcoat all the way up, and the winter still got at him. Enough to make him grateful for these obnoxious boots, even, as Kíli sat across from him over buttery biscuits and hot milk tea, plaintively tug-tugging the burglar’s arm.

He’d been at it for some time now—the tugging, that is—pleading in all manner of tones as Bombur and Tanníi’s worknoise livened the kitchen just yonder, clink-clanks and cracked quail eggs competing with puppyish whining from a dwarven heir. The hobbit was shockingly unmoved. Offensively unmoved, actually. He had not bothered to so much as put down his mug. Just looked at Kíli over it, flatly, letting his brows barely twitch and the tea warm his front teeth and the steam run right up his nose.
(He had also, by the way, decidedly not brought up that little mishap with the snowbells and the elf-lass. Nor—for fear of worsening little Prince Durin’s indiscretions—had he mentioned the fact his royal uncle already knew.)

“Last time, Kíli: There is no way on this green earth,” Master Baggins said, “I am going to help you break-and-enter into a Council moot.” It was with stanch finality that our writer ate the last two halves of his pastry. He spoke with a mouthful of partially chewed sweet cheese and his hands neatly clap-clapped free of crumbs. “Besides: Thorin will kill you. If he finds you there, spying?” Bilbo’s eyebrows hopped one last time as he decisively swallowed breakfast. “Straight to the block. Off-with-your-darling-little-head.”

The little prince was undeterred by talk of axes and guillotines, however. Dark-circled but wide-eyed, he gave the table a brisk slap of both palms, and he pinned Bilbo down with a big bitey smile full of crowded teeth. “You’ve ‘til noon to change your mind. And you’ve got to help me, so I’ll just wait here for you to come around.”

“Oh, I’ve got to, do I? Well, that’s convincing argumentation. That changes everything. Let me just swing home lickety-split and pick up my hacksaw, shall I? Polish up my skeleton keys. Alphabetize my—”

“You’ve got to,” he said, smile going to grits. His young face then looked not so excitable as it did thin with a worry that had dogged him all through the night. “Because I think the Council is about to kick Tori out on her ears. And if that’s true, we have to warn her. We can’t let the Six get that kind of a message out first.”

Tannä cursed a stuck jar in the kitchen. Bilbo put down his drink.

“Not ‘her’ as in Tauriel, exclusively,” Kíli added, lip-biting, assiduously not making eye contact as his nervous fingers flexed then flattened again. “But I heard it from Fíli who heard it from Kash who heard it from Rogah who heard it from Ilanís that there’s been a hung opinion on whether or not, in light of recent pointy events, Erebor should even be open to outsiders. You know we don’t let Mirkwood elves wander around, but just try explaining Tori’s connection to Thranduil. If you’re really-really lucky, they’ll still grumble about her ‘traitorous history’ and ‘record of disloyalty’ and more. Which means, if an all-out gate closure happens, we’re royally rawed.”

“Not what I’ve heard. I thought the king was the only one who could oust someone. Erebor being a king’s home.”

“It’s the Council, Boggins. Uncle’s the only one who can officially give someone the boot, but do you think you could live here if the Six were determined to make your life awful? They could disavow just about anyone in less time than it takes you to crank out a rhyme. The humans—easy. Tori—gravy. You?” He poured grimly over the empty clay cup. “Tea cake.”

“Cake, am I! And-what. There’s no bothering about me, my lad; I’ll be gone by summertime. But you need to cut a maid a little credit. Don’t borrow a spade, is what my father’d say. Cake.” He snorted. He finished his last biscuit. “That’s a load. Your lady never struck me as someone likely to let a little bullying push her out of the way.”

“D’you think I want her to stand up to them? Bilbo, they killed Yadreska.” Kíli’s waned to a whisper as he pressed nervous hands tight around his mug. “If I knew they wanted Tauriel gone, I’d send her away myself.”

“What could you do?” Bilbo gentled, feeling badly to watch this maturity growing in dark marks under the prince’s eyes. “Sway the Six from behind the curtains?”
The dwarf frowned. But his perplexion was the inward kind—the Durin kind, you might say—where a prince mulls all the harder to avoid getting a realistic glimpse at himself, and at the thousand things he cannot control.

“I just—” He thumped the table. It was too tough to rattle up a fuss. “I have to be there. I have to know. What they say.”

Our hobbit, back when he was a young fellow (and not considered too unattractive a prospect, by the way), had his fair share of dares and dalliances. But he was never particularly nervy in his courtships. He usually found some willing lass of the appropriate county and social caste to fool around with. So it follows, naturally, that Master Baggins knew nothing about Kíli’s particular pain. Nor about the dread of understanding a parting so momentous and terrible is inevitable. Nor did he know what it might be like: to have a heart that picked so bravely, so wrongly, that you feared it might destroy everything if you only let it run.

He had until noon. He patted the prince’s arm.

“Well,” Bilbo said, and twitched his cold nose, and sighed. “I suppose there is only one question to ask.”

Kíli glanced up from his cup. There was a disturbed edge in that big brown eye, and a fledgling wrinkle doing its work between the prince’s heavy brows. “What question’s that, Boggins.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where they keep those big gold pots, would you?”

As a matter-of-fact, he did.

OOO

Funny thing about dwarven pots: they don’t breathe, at all.

On second thought, it’s not very funny. Bilbo would know.

He’d know because he and Prince Kíli rolled one all on their lonesome from an abandoned library reading roost to those despotic knockers on the Moot Chamber door. And then our hobbit climbed in, didn’t he. And then, ’neath a dinner tray and a table sheet, he was covered in coals—with nothing to spare him a collapse but that thick silver plate he held over his head.

Master Baggins’s arms were sore for three days. Stiff for four.

Of course—as the roguish young dwarrow of this story had repeatedly reminded him—all that discomfort was purely momentary. Soon as Kíli convinced a patrolling Scion that some ingrate servant had up and left his lighting job half-done, there was a fearful clink-clock of massive fortress keys, a scrape of metal against marble, and pot-bound Bilbo was on the move. The helpful Consul’s boy brought him inside. Then he twisted the urn into place, gave its side a good drumming for fun, and—leaving our burglar with rattling ears and chalky mine-breath—left. The crushing bronze threshold shut. Clank-clack; silence, and the oppression of a great, empty, echoing Erebor room.
Bilbo waited. He made to clear some phlegm, and sneezed.

Then—when nobody came to spill him and kill him—he dumped the coal, coughing. He grabbed the overhanging lip of his golden prison. And, with achy triceps, he heave-ho’d out.

The Council Hall was—well, it was something, my dear, though not precisely the something Master Baggins had envisioned. He’d assumed, this being Erebor, an ornate chamber dripping gold and rubies, framed by statues of dwarven heroes looking grim. What he got was much sparser. Barren, by comparison. The room was a cavernous, ancient forum made from hard-cut slabs of gray marble—a great column-ribbed ring inside which there was nothing but an open floor and a half-circle of immovable blocks peering in on incredible silence. The Tables themselves, Bilbo supposed, because there were no other shapes in the place that might’ve conceivably passed for furniture. He did not get too close. He blinked off the coal dirt and got his bearings.

A mighty echo held the Hall—the sort of echo that whispers corner-to-corner no matter how softly you walked across its age-smooth, dusty face. There were no windows. There were instead a hundred ice blue eyes along the walls, glowing from within; magic, he thought foolishly, before realizing they were merely shells carven from crystal and fixed over hanging torches. Someone had already been by to light them in anticipation of the moot, but it was freezing. Master Baggins shook off the dizziness of being so small and cracked one daunting door to let a little prince through.

“This brings back memories!” Kíli chirped, climbing happily into the pot with Bilbo, and—no one the wiser—lidding them in.

He left the top cracked only enough to just-barely-see. And, like that, they waited. They sat—as much as you can in a big golden urn.

It was actually Thorin who arrived first. Early, if the lack of attendant Scions was any indication—well before the stroke of noon and striding into the empty hall, billowing wolf fur and black satin beneath the Lonely Crown and carrying a torch in his hand. He was surprised to find the room lit, then relieved when no one said hello. Bilbo—who could do nothing about it, stuffed in a pot like so—was pretty angry to notice he’d just waltzed over in the midst of revolutionary turmoil without any guards.

And he felt a bit odd about it, you know—watching his old friend be alone. You do not usually get to see your friends being alone. The king had the nervous look of someone concerned a meeting might start without him. Satisfied to find it hadn’t, he disposed of his torch carelessly on the stone, and he walked onto the empty, echoing floor without any real destination. Thorin was anxious; that you could tell. With no table of his own to occupy, the energy was aimless, and he paced a bit—not the purposeful circling of a crow, but the worrisome flightiness of gulls hunting crabs against the wash of high tide.

Then he spoke. And Bilbo thought for a heartbeat they’d been found out—but it was a premature heartbeat—for there came no bold “you, there” or firm “step into the light.” It was merely a to-himself mumbling. Half-sentences, to be precise, and acted frowns; turns of the head, twirls of the wrist; regal gestures he tested on. This is not talking to oneself, here in the dimness of a deserted court. These are the movements of a king trying to plan what he’d say, how he’d say it.

It was a startlingly private way to see someone. Especially someone to whom such behavior had always looked like second-nature; who never seemed to doubt himself or the dignity of his posture or the might of whatever words came to him first. Except here he was, just like that—standing there on the barren floor by himself, facing a council of vacant stone tables, figuring out how he’d tilt his chin and where he’d put his feet and when he’d argue for what it was the Raven King had decided he believed in.
It made him sad in a strange way, to see such a thing. Thorin, who’d always known he’d wear a crown someday, was so used to being looked-at—too used to it—so used to it that there were times he could not stop. So much of him was rooted in *It is Known* and *I Am Certain* and *Be Told*; so much of him was bound to the great sureness his lineage demanded and his ferocious optimism brought.

But there is sometimes great desperation behind great sureness, my dear. Even in daily life—in the moments when no one was fit or present to judge his worthiness—the king often still acted like a character on a stage. He acted as though his every gesture ought to be inspiring and his every phrase a speech. As though if he wasn’t living history made flesh, as Durin as any Durin had ever been, he would be failing, somehow. It must have been an exhausting way to live.

Bilbo was nobody to make history, my dear. But he thought perhaps he could understand a little of that—of desiring so badly to be the epitome of all your people expected of you, the standard by which all other standards should be measured. “His people” did not actually constitute the whole people, of course, as in a nation or a species. His were Baggins aunts and Baggins uncles, not all of hobbitdom. But if there is one real difference between Master Baggins of Bag End and Prince Thorin of Erebor, it is not the status or the height or the dressing of language or the hairstyles each finds acceptable. It is that our writer had given up his quest to please his people. He’d thrown in that towel, good riddance. Making his folk proud didn’t matter a fig to Bilbo any longer. Nothing mattered to Thorin more.

He would’ve liked to leave the whole thing then, but smushed side-to-side with Kíli in this bell of an urn, that wasn’t a realistic option. So, in it for the duration, our writer settled as much as possible with a prince’s elbow gouging his ribcage. He waited for the show to arrive.

Perhaps it would be more economical to just up and give you the list:

· **ILANÍS, CONSUL OF THE TABLE OF STEEL, DIRECTOR OF WARFARE.** She strode in first—the oldest dwarf Bilbo had ever seen under a layer of polished armor plates, maintaining her stature somehow, trembling wrists and foggy stare and tight white braids down the front of slouched shoulders. “*Full regalia, Ilanís,*” her cohorts teased as she scraped along quite on her own with an impressive ivory cane, grumbling them off. “*You snicker now,*” the silvered lady scolded, stabbing her implement down on this dusty marble to punctuate her wide warrior’s walk. She might’ve been a touch winded, but beneath that martial helm—spoked with brutal metal fins like wings along her cheeks, and from which cloud blue eyes burned agelessly—Ilanís made no spectacle of it. She had been, if you remember, the Family’s devoted defender since Thrór, and she carried a gladius at her hip stamped with the prize of the mountain kings: mithril. “*You wait until the next wave of rebels is among us. You’ll be running ‘neath my skirts then. In your sleeping gowns. You’ll make for very—*” She grimaced as one powerful arm lifted the cane to lay across her Table. It was, true to the name, a solid block of pure flashed dwarven steel. “—very pretty corpses. Pretty red poppies in a circle.”

Her mumbling was interrupted most noticeably by

· **LÍV, CONSUL OF THE TABLE OF GOLD, MASTER OF COMMERCE AND MOUTH OF THE CRAFTERS’ GUILD.** It was literarily sensible, if nothing else, for the youngest councilor to follow the eldest. This one was cherub-cheeked but wielded a razor look, garbed in pretty white drappings with shocking crimson trim, lashes long and attention like quick-witted amber stones in a
winsome black face. She was not one to smile without cause, he’d learn, knowing more than the others the exact value of her friendliness. (As junior member, she’d independence to prove, too—particularly from the living lady prince who recommended her for this seat.) Silver and rubies were hers, like chimes. Gilding ink swirled precisely beneath her eyes in pretty, intricate whorls; her hairstyle fountained high; the close-cropped mustache was shaped impeccably along her upper lip. Lív spoke quickly but moved with complete intent. “I don’t want to talk of casual bloodspill today,” said she, bumping a thick stack of parchment upon her gold slab of a Table to straighten it. She carried, always, a plump leather folder beneath one angelic sleeve. “I don’t see the use. Or the point.”

Neither, apparently, did

· TONINA, CONSUL OF THE TABLE OF STONE, KEEPER OF MEMORIES. A fancy name for a municipal archivist. To nicely partner with the untreated Azsâlul’abad stone that was her Table, he guessed. And indeed our writer would be unable to ask, even if he drummed up the courage to try—for Kíli explained she spoke only Khuzdul, thought only in Khuzdul, so that her recollections of the Dwarves’ history, deeds, and song might never be dulled through the filter of translation. She reminded Bilbo a bit of a sleepwalker of myth—the divining sort of sleepwalker, whose dreams and gray gaze and slow extensions are guided by destiny or god-whisperings. No god-whisperings right now, though. To the other two, she gave only a bored, ponderous hmmn of disapproval. Her robes were deceptively simple—heavy, unadorned, expensive midnight satin—and she wore yellow hair free but for her status plaits. Yet you could scarcely see the councilor’s knuckles for all the carven rings there—a band for each—made of ancient heartrock that lived deep below the Mountain cold.

And next to her, one place clockwise:

· HALLEVI, CONSUL OF THE TABLE OF COAL, CHIEF OF THE GREAT DWARVEN FORGE OF EREBOR. Oh, he knows what you’re thinking: a soot-covered engineer with her goggles stickied-on. But you’re still thinking with your own people’s customs, not dwarrish ones, for in this case reality could not be more removed from the cliché. Consul Hallevi was a fine-boned, black-eyed maiden. Unscarred, she, but for the toll an anvil had taken from her tough hands and a mysteriously absent left ear. Those fingers may have looked abused, milky and pink-jointed upon her Table of silver-speckled coal, but the nails were immaculate. So, too, her thick braid, orange as the highest shelf of flame on a working fire. She was not, you must’ve already realized, the only smith to run the massive Great Forge. This dwarf was, however, the sole dictator of its production, thereby responsible for all mundane and divine rights associated with its upkeep. What the councilor’s specific forge-habits were, Bilbo obviously cannot say. Rest assured, however, it is safe to assume if you used her golden silks as a polishing cloth for oily paws, you stood to lose them entirely.

And following Hallevi, taking her place at the very center of the circle, we have

· MAZANÛH, CONSUL OF THE TABLE OF BONE, HEAD OF THE COUNCIL, whose infinitely important role it was to preside over the moots themselves, and ensure all Tables (and
thereby, all facets of the kingdom) were fitting together as they should. Not grim, she, but sober and supreme with the judgment her title demanded. You got the immediate, humbling, oppressive sense of her listening, always, when you spoke—and that sense came ever-accompanied by the knowledge it was this dame who ultimately fostered communication between the most powerful personages in the Dwarf Nation. Whether this made her the most powerful-est among them, it is not a hobbit’s place to suppose. But you cannot possibly overstate the control of a storyteller, if you want this hobbit’s opinion. Mazanûh’s stare was stygian with full cognizance of its mastery; she was big in body and wore ornate rose robes, with a narrow analytical look and magnificent contralto. Her features were all a striking monochrome satin brown from fingertips to smart goatee to a cascade of loose curls. And her Table—thankfully—was not a hodgepodge temple of real bones; it was white opal, and it carried a velvet-draped cymbal she rang whenever the argumentation got out of hand.

And, of course, Onushka was there: seated in red at her carnelian Table, looking impatient to be in the more deserving company of the mothers who trusted her, politicking only as long as it took.

As for the king, he’d no table to call his own—big T or small. Thorin had only to stand there facing the half-circle, unanchored in his blacks and blues amidst this echoing space, looking awkwardly open and on-the-spot. Seeing them all there, you’d doubtless understand why a prince as proud and sure as this one might feel the need to practice, my dear.

Our writer was, if you haven’t already gleaned it from his rough description, more than impressed by the moot. But as to what occurred within, he cannot relay it to you in full. Not because of cultural secrecy or some foolish custom, but because of the obvious fact that the entire proceeding was in native Khuzdul. Bilbo had never heard so much Khuzdul in his life as he heard in that room. Which is perhaps not so impressive, because prior-to, he’d heard—oh, maybe fifteen spare words.

The unfortunate truth: if Master Baggins lives among the Dwarves fifty years and then fifty-three again, he will pick up no more than a handful of phrases. His tongue is too clumsy for their guttering ùm and toothy k, his ear too weak to fathom the delicate nuance of the dwarven o from the ó, and his unclean mouth is forbidden. As it is, he’ll have to illustrate for you via Kíli’s approximate translation—which is limited to what the little Prince Durin could recall afterwards—and which is further limited by your author’s underwhelming comprehension of dwarrish government.

Just the important bits, then.

**IMPORTANT BIT ONE – THE ISSUE OF FOREIGNERS**

**MAZANÛH**

A sentence must wait for a culprit. All else is hearsay and storytelling. Until we have one, I’ll have no more guessing in this room. Talk of what we do have. Which is Men—or so I am left to understand.

**THORIN**

No. They are no longer in my home. That discussion is finished.
MAZANÛH

It is finished—with you. I have yet to hear Ilanís defend her ransom strategy to me, or tell me why she did not think it worthwhile to consult the other members of this council before issuing the Dwarfking advice on such significant matters of nation.

ILANÍS

Don’t say my name like I’m not right here, Consul. I can speak for myself.

MAZANÛH

And yet you did not.

ILANÍS

I would have sought your consul if I’d needed it. But inquisitions and revolts are the stuff of the War Table. And a king’s guests in his home are the business of kings. That whip of a human lord was a guest, as far as I’m concerned, or he’d have been in the dungeons. And still my problem, then.

TONINA

Your interpretation of business is a slight over-reach, sister. Don’t be too quick to look at an arrowhead and call it a revolt.

ILANÍS

Aye, it could be, Keeper. But if you’ve got rebels, somebody had better be reaching. Or your kingsblood ends up on the floor.

TONINA

I won’t argue against you on that. Another dwarf—but not you. Stone rests the issue.

HALLEVI

Good enough for me. Coal rests.

ONUSHKA

Blood rests—with harsh reservation. Tell us, next time.

ILANÍS

You found out quickly enough. Certain things aren’t fit for excessive telling, Consul. If you hear my
meaning.

LÍV
Take care not to forget: Ilanís has an extra interest in the Durins.

ILANÍS
Coming from you? I’m—

ONUSHKA
Not a drop more than I.

LÍV
Gold rests. With reservation, but without surprise.

MAZANÚH
Bone abstains with the assumption she will soon rest—and with the expectation, Ilanís, that we will visit this issue and what it means for future issues like it in confidence later.

ILANÍS
It’s fair, sister.

THORIN
In any case, the Men have gone. Better to face the enemies beyond our walls than to dwell on outsiders no longer within.

ONUSHKA
They were not the only outsiders behind our walls.

LÍV
Ah, yes. The elf.

HALLEVI
The king’s pet elf. Ptui.
THORIN
Councilors. Have we not belabored this enough?

MAZANÛH
Until you cease to speak in her defense, this council will belabor it as much as it pleases.

THORIN
I need not speak. I stand alive before you. That is her defense.

LÍV
‘Less it suits her master otherwise. You ought to trust your own.

ILANÍS
You ought. I keep trying to give you my grandsons.

THORIN
With respect, she is faster than any dwarf and hers faster than any dwarf-made arrow.

HALLEVI
Which is exactly our point. Do you, Thorin of Thráin, understand elves to be loyal friends to the
dwarrow kings?

THORIN
I do not ask after her loyalty to the dwarrow kings. She is loyal to me.

LÍV
You have strange proclivities in choosing loyalists.

THORIN
I tire of this. Think you my trust in my complement is shaken, think otherwise. I will not retire her.

ONUSHKA
She’s not the only foreigner here.
MAZANÛH
I’ve heard about this, too. The Westerner.

THORIN
He does not matter.

ONAUSHKA
He is a halfling.

MAZANÛH
So the dragon stories claimed. A skald, was it?

ONAUSHKA
He is a writer.

HALLEVI
Ah-hah. Uncomfortable timing.

THORIN
You think a writer responsible for the defection of a Nordinbad family?

ONAUSHKA
A writer, no. A spy could be.

THORIN
He is no spy. He does not matter.

LÍV
You say that of every dwarrow, Man, or mer you believe to be a friend. I take a lovely woman-bard for my friend in Dale. I do not invite her into my children’s house.

TONINA
Let me be your memory afore I give you advice. I knew Prince Thráin for many decades, Durin King. And before that, I was a child in Thrór’s court. You are well aware of all this. So you will believe my own memory, I hope, and not just the Long Memory when I tell you what I must. And I
must tell you: Your father’s father would not have had his home—a dwarf’s home—become a port for the rest of the realm. You do know this, Thorin?

**THORIN**
He does not stay, and so he does not matter.

**TONINA**
It matters if you open our city a crack and the outside comes scrambling in. I say without malice and with great love for the Folk that this is a dwarf-home. Look to Esgaroth to see the risk of unshuttering our homeland; they have lost their own sense of themselves. We have a right to live upon our ancestors’ floors and die below their ceilings, all built by dwarrow hands, undisturbed by other peoples.

**HALLEVI**
Aye. A right and a home we’ve only just reclaimed.

**THORIN**
A home we would *not* have, had it not been for that elf. Our doors are closed but for one. I say again I will not remove her—less now with traitors in my house than ever before.

**ILANÍS**
I still don’t like it.

**LÍV**
Ilanís doesn’t like it. We’ll have to change everything.

**ILANÍS**
Ah, well! Let’s start with the Table of Gold.

**ONUSHKA**
I’ve not patience for this today.

**MAZANÛH**
Neither I. All rest.
HALLEVI
I haven’t rested.

MAZANÛH
By my declaration, all rest.

(All of this, of course, is only presumably accurate—as accurate as Kíli’s bilingual ability, post-urn. And if Bilbo was relieved, or in considerable pain, or felt any way at all to be brushed under the rug before a council with repetitions of “he does not matter”—well. That in itself does not matter, my dear. Your writer is confident the issue’s resolution, at least, remains intact, for our little prince was so pleased with his royal uncle hereafter that Bilbo imagined he may have even exaggerated Thorin’s forcefulness under Council scrutiny. Onward, anyway.)

IMPORTANT BIT TWO – THE ISSUE OF LUMBER TRADE

(This bit, in review, is excruciatingly boring. He will spare you, and move right on to Bit Three.)

IMPORTANT BIT THREE – THE ISSUE OF TREASON

Such as it is, I suppose.

A considerable deal has been said on this topic already and throughout. But for the sake of time, quality translation, and drama, we ought really begin with the sudden announcement of:

ROGAH
Mothers. The Lady Dís.

MAZANÛH
Let her—ah. I see the prince has let herself in.

LADY DÍS
Regrets, Councilors. But I bring you a matter of clear urgency.

MAZANÛH
I hope so. Thank you, Rogah. You will go.
Durin-Lord: explain yourself. And who is with you?

Bilbo wishes he could swear by his utter surprise. He wishes his face went as blank and questioning as Thorin’s had, here in the chamber where the Dwarf Nation is steered left or right. But the truth—in itching and dread-bedipped hunches and more than one bad daydream—is that he feared it might be, my dear. Sometimes our stomach gleans these terrible answers before our minds or our hearts will hear.

Maybe you will have guessed it. Here before you, and before them all on the cold echoing stone:

GALINYAH
Pray, listen, Consul—she will not. I’ve kept nothing from this court two seconds longer than I learned my—

LADY DÍS
A traitor, Council.

GALINYAH
I am not! Councilors, please.

LADY DÍS
You’ll speak when invited, churl—otherwise, you hold your forked tongue between your teeth.

MAZANÛH
I sit the Table of Bone, prince, thank you. This court is mine to silence or hear as I decide, and I need no help deciding.
A sister has the right to speak in her defense, and we have yet to know what she’s been accused of. I’d listen to this. Go on—speak. And be grateful.

Grateful was not the word to describe her. Master Baggins fears he does not have one right word to describe the sight and sound of Galinyah there in the ancient space of an Erebor court. He merely knew—the moment he heard that honey-in-milk, joker’s voice shaken low in its fear—that it was all wrong here, my dear. Lady Dís had brought her in with a paw clamped around the back of the silversmith’s neck, and though she could’ve bodily broken away, Galinyah did not. Did not dare. Not with the deadly prince striding behind her in a snakelike coat of shimmering links and white wool. Her face with its eye of bronze and eye of jade was sick like the powder of an old, dry skull and those cheeks were smeared with lash black and tears. Sudden, shapeless tears—the sort that do not fall, but spread before welling. Tears not of sadness but terror, these. She wore bruises of fingerprints beneath the sleeves of her buttercream day gown, and the shirtcollar underneath was a filthy, splotted red. She looked as though someone had pushed her every step, sending soft slippered
feet stumbling fitfully ahead. She looked like a coterie of knuckles had blooded her nose.

Behind her, Lord Prince Dís with a stare of jagged sea ice and steel gauntlets on her hands.

“Bark, cur,” said she, and with one arm, hurled her palms-and-knees upon the stone.

Our writer’s heart lodged wetly in his throat. But Galinyah did not seem shocked. There had been a point of no return—a loss or forfeit or a twist of the bones in her arm—and she’d broken past it, my dear. The abuse and the finality of this betrayal had settled over her like a film of fine, numbing snow. She stood up, neither hurried nor delayed, gathering her dusty skirts and blinking out upon king and council with a thin trickle of noseblood gulleyed between those wonderfully bunnyish front teeth. And he heard every noise of her in this cavernous quiet. Every rustle of fabric; every sniff of the snot and secrets running steadily, finally, out.

He has many secrets and lies of his own, does this only child of Belladonna Took. But in the truest heart of himself, Master Baggins is a writer. This means—while he may not always employ them artfully—he knows, intimately, a great number of words. And this is really the worst one. It is the most unfortunate set of sounds that Bilbo, burglar or not, can imagine having thrown at you. If you cared to ask him. There is no recollection that still stings his lung so badly as the raw wound of the word *traitor* against the sharpest teeth in Thorin’s mouth and behind the wet bleed of his Durin eye.

**GALINYAH**
First—allow me. Allow me, Council. I know every crying fool must say this, but I didn’t know.

**LADY DÍS**
You didn’t know. Imagine. You didn’t know you were playing with fire—and there is, somewhere, a world in which I’d let you walk away from me that easily. You see how easy it is to lie?

**GALINYAH**
I didn’t. I didn’t know anything about it. If I had, I’d never have rehomed. Not with anyone. I would be in Ered Luin today, and if I were, she would not have. She would not have even come. You must believe me, sisters—the monarchy was the farthest thing from my mind. If I’d have known. I would have talked her out of this madness. Because it is madness. This is Brulírë’s poisoning and she would never have fallen into any of it had we not—

King Thorin, believe me. She only wanted to see her mother’s face. She never intended—

**LADY DÍS**
After what your wicked little snake did, and after what you let her, don’t you dare. Speak before the Council; I cannot gag you. But do not dare address my brother.

**GALINYAH**
I only spoke to—
LADY DÍS
If you had spoken then, my brother-daughter wouldn’t be sick with an arrow in her belly. Now you speak to her father, as if there is some penance you could possibly pay? Some excuse? Some rational explanation? Another sentence. I’ll have your jaw before you’re through.

THORIN
That is my subject.

MAZANÛH
First, she is ours.

LADY DÍS
And mine—until she crawled here. I’ll have them both. If you give me one inch of leave, Council. It would have been my problem a month ago, a week ago. I’d gladly take it as my problem now.

MAZANÛH
Have the rehoming petitions been signed into the annals?

TONINA
I’ll have to check, sister. Galinyah of Valdah has, I’m sure. A child of a free-dwarf—I am less sure.

THORIN
I accepted both, not one without the other. I do not believe it. Some mistake or some spyglass witchery is to blame for this confusion. We were all of us taken unawares that day. No, I say again: I do not believe it. She had a blade to her throat.

LADY DÍS
Why do you think? She was no true hostage; they were sent to abduct her, whisk her off, and return to your traitors. Wherever it is they’ve writhed underground. Perhaps they gave her no warning so the louse’s shock looked real. Perhaps they just have no real regard for her and however she feels about their plots. Or perhaps she’s just a damned brilliant actor. What does it matter, Thorin? Why should we care if she was surprised?

THORIN
Dale said nothing of free-dwarves. If they had housed a rebel, he would have told me thus. A fool, but no sneak or blackguard’s piece is he. I would—
**LADY DÍS**

While you were yelling at the bowman over dues and spies, I had this one followed.

Tell them, wretch, what you told me.

---

**GALINYAH**

I made a mistake. A small, soft-hearted mistake. With terrible consequence. And if I make three-hundred years, I won’t have enough sorries to undo it. But I am not a traitor, Council! I swear it on my mother; I swear it on everything. My soft heart is broken, too.

---

**MAZANûH**

We wait and listen. If not you, who?

---

**GALINYAH**

It is just Azírë, sister. My friend.

---

Just Azírë—the one with no other names to give.

---

**GALINYAH**

But I am not her conspirator. She led me, too. And she was led. We all were. I have known Azírë her entire life, and most of mine. She was lonely, sisters. Can you try to understand it? You will never know a lonelier dwarf. And she was so timid. Timid like she might melt on the road, if it got too warm. You have to protect someone so timid. You don’t have a choice, not truly, if you’re a dame. She was one of ours. And she was one of mine. I wanted to help.

In Laketown, Councilors. There was a letter by runner. From Menava; I saw it with my eyes. And I swear with my ears and my memory, she did not know what to do. It was I who told her. Forgive me! But it’s true. I said she ought to throw off her timidness—if only once in her life—and steel her heart, and ease her loneliness, and see her family. And I lied. For her, to Master Dwalin and the rest.

I said I’d an early trade contract waiting in Dale, so Azírë might have the chance to answer. She wouldn’t have gone, Councilors. I don’t think she would have, truly. And when we returned to the King’s Army, I didn’t press; I didn’t take it for my business; can you understand me, too? Can you not look at me and see that I regret all of it? But Mahal, strike me from the block if I am being false: I did not know.

---

Who knew?—and maybe there is dishonesty in asking ourselves such a thing as an afterthought, a way to allay the pressure of responsibility once the anchor’s away and the cat can’t be crammed back into its bag. Maybe the real question in these regret-days is who could have known. Who could have known—her so-sorry hands around his wrists in the cool of an Erebor kitchen, pleading not to lie; the remorseful palms at his back helping him sit on the king’s study floor; the way he had leaned forward in that carriage with his head full of tobacco smoke, wondering if she might remember her mother’s address, swearing to fix everything, somehow.
LADY DÍS
She suspected.

GALINYAH
No, I swear. I did not! Not this.

LADY DÍS
She knew enough. My dame slipped a doorkey and heard them fight over this same letter last night. I took the smith from mid-market. Soon as I wrang the whole confession out of her—and it didn’t take but an hour—I brought it directly to you. Move today. The other rat will be, as far as I can know, unawares.

MAZANÛH
Where is she?

GALINYAH
She’ll be home. At—my home, Consul. She works at noon time. On the den carpet.

MAZANÛH
Then we are to deliberate now. Consider, sisters.

It was barely a pause. A breath, really—and a firm, decisive blink. Two instants of shutting the eyes.

ONUSHKA
Execute her.

It stutters, doesn’t it. The world does, Bilbo has found, during moments like this—like the crumple of paper when a writer changes her mind, and scratches something she once loved out. Galinyah looked stricken. She protested, inarticulate and uncharming for once in her life; her form swished forward as though to stop something; Dís drew from her dwarfish belt a stout, businesslike parrying blade.

Be still, ordered Consul Mazanûh. The prince and silversmith, both. Not two senseless steps toward a Table, Galinyah was taken away by the shoulders and escorted, as gently as was merited, by Rogah out of their room.

Thorin looked shocked, too. He stood in his spot and his blue eye, glossy in the gray dimness of this place, flicked this way, that.
THORIN
You cannot kill a female.

LADY DÍS
You can’t.
She dies.

LÍV
She must be punished, and sorely. But to kill her? I hesitate. Is there no other course?

HALLEVI
It is worth considering. The silversmith is a tool—a tremendous tool, but a guiltless one. Her sin was excess of sentiment, not treason. Strip her shop and let a master-smith work her under punishment wages for a five-year. But that seedling of Menava’s? She can’t work this off.

ILANÍS
That family should have been killed from the start of this ruckus. If a dame is so hellfire-bent on forcing her own sisters’ hands against her own children, let it be, then! Give the whole gaggle of them what Brulirë wants. I said it then, I say it now!

THORIN
We do not discuss this!

ONUSHKA
It is the turn of your hand we have to thank for the reality that Brulirë’s line still exists. You cried the same horrors a century ago. Will you make this mistake twice?

THORIN
You, too, were in my court that day.

ONUSHKA
And you might have listened better to me then. Child-king that you were. Are you still that child?

MAZANÛH
Spare me this. We are not here to review the king’s adolescence. We have a traitor in our halls today.
All went silent for a moment. There was a maddening flip of pages as councilors so inclined took down their thoughts. Bilbo and Kili, as you may have forgotten amidst such drama, were all this time still squashed together in their golden urn, peeping through the coin-edge of peekhole a prince’s fingernails allowed. Joints and toes were beginning to ache. The little Durin smelled of this morning’s mint tea, armpit sweat, and a peppery clothing perfume; he tried his best to move an elbow without flattening his jailmate. The hobbit could feel a dwarrish heartbeat and knew his own must be stamping away.

**TONINA**
That line is rich with females. She may yet bear daughters. Do we strike them from the future for their mother’s wrongs?

**ONUSHKA**
Risk the flesh-and-blood daughters we have given birth to for the *possibility* of daughters not yet born?
This insults me, Consul. At my Table, and to my depths.
Rethink it.

**LADY DÍS**
Ahh.

**LÍV**
That is the right of it—there. I won’t be a party to such audacity or such bad judgment.

**TONINA**
I speak from Memory, and to consider all. I do not claim to speak the right path every time I speak.
These are the fears and the foils of our ancestors. Heed them or do not, sisters.

**HALLEVI**
And we cannot hardly guess how large a risk we take, either way.

**ILANÍS**
We can guess. Look at me. I’m wearing armor, aren’t I?

**THORIN**
Councilors. Hear me speak. None have been given reason to fear for their daughters more than I. I would see her stricken from a tower for my child’s anger, and for her illness. But we cannot do this.
We cannot. It is not our way and it is not the way of The Dwarves.
LADY DÍS
Again: you can’t.

THORIN
I will not tell the males I kill a female within my halls. They would see my banner torn from the wall.

LÍV
What the males think is not this council’s concern.

ILANÍS
Suck in your tongue before you bite it off, girl. You weren’t a wart in your mother’s womb when all this began.
I say she dies, but it needn’t be in this mountain, or before this court. Send the traitor away with Lady Dís to the Blue Hills, where she came from, and cut her head off.

LADY DÍS
That gives her and her nameless mothers months to escape or strike again. Why should I feed a mouth I plan to kill?
I will do it, if there’s no taste for blood in this dwarven hall.

THORIN
This is my home and the home of our fathers since Durin I. I will not allow it.

HALLEVI
Nor I. This is not in our nature, to be so reckless with our Folk. Imprisonment, fine; punishment, without doubt. But are our numbers now so great we can speak of dealing death to one another at will?

TONINA
Children of earth do evil. That is true of every folk. The day we kill our daughters for it will be the Last Days of the Dwarves.

LÍV
She stopped being a dwarf or being or daughter when she met with our exiles. We took their names and it did nothing. I agree with Dís. They should be hunted down and put to death. Start with the one we have at our feet.
ILANÍS
That’s the first thing you’ve said today that makes good sense.
I’d as soon put them to my axe. But I will not do it at the expense of the Durin Line. We’ll find some other way to take her bitey little teeth out.

ONUSHKA
Your prince has a wound in the shape of an arrow. Is she less a Durin than he?
You know what I think.

TONINA
Mazanûh, you are quiet.

The Table of Bone did not rush in anything she did. Wizard’s Time, if you believe Gandalf the Grey, runs on its own merits—punctual according to its own clock and reading its own host of numbers. Consul Mazanûh’s sense of time was much like this. She understood that urgency is always warranted, one way or another—but took precisely the tally of minutes and asked exactly the count of questions required to reach a decision she thought best.

Her quill did not race to keep track of her thoughts as the others’ had. She wore upon her deep-eyed and pontifical face a look of intense inwardness, like the gold at a bottom of a darkwater well.

MAZANÛH
What do we know of Brulirë and her kin’s whereabouts?

LADY DÍS
A clutch of Nordinbad outcasts and the descendants of Old Dale, if my guess means any more than yours. They’ve fled, I’m sure. Cowards throw spears over the fence, then scatter before the first dog barks. I sent my best to sniff them out this morning, but I don’t hold out much hope. Their daughter already did their dirty work. You can bet they will have picked up their things, burned their beds, and loped into the scrubland; my bet is that they left the instant that assassin took his money and started to climb. I admit: I don’t envy her. Having such a family. She was better off with none.

LÍV
Hurting for her loss is no reason to spare her the fate she has gone out of her way to deserve.

ILANÍS
More good sense. We don’t keep a mad dog among our chickens because we feel sad for it. This is as close to murder as one can without needing to wash their hands.
MAzanûh
Then if you have decided, Council—stand on your word.

Dwarrowdames do not vote like Westerners do—Men or hobbits. They do not scribble anonymously on slips or raise their hands or compete for a simple majority. They prefer the thoroughness of inquest to debate, and the strength of unanimity—even partial unanimity—to the contentiousness of eking by on one uneven swing voice. Indeed, a dame thinks nothing of a one-vote victory, for she does not consider it a victory in either the legal or poetic sense. Their councils are count-six, designed for stalemate; for if said councilors’ understanding of an issue is so weak as to divide a panel of their most brilliant thinkers down the middle, then they have no real understanding, a dame reasons. They would rather argue a hundred-and-one nights without pause, until compromise is reached or a new solution created, than dictate their people’s fate without the certainty of covenant. And so they stood, and spoke, and made their choices clear.

And so it was that day in the decision of Azîrê’s death or life.

A stalemate.

And so: for now, she lives.

It was a three-way split between the dames. Tonina and Hallevi were against the axe outright, Onushka and Ilanîs for it. Lîv said she did not have at a snap of her fingers either the historical or immediate knowledge to seize a dwarf’s life; Mazanûh, with her mallet and her sagenst judge’s nod, seemed to agree with this hesitancy. Thorin and Dîs had no vote. They could do nothing but wait in stillness with lethal and anxious eyes.

Again, then, Mazanûh declared, reopening their moot. The king looked relieved beyond measure, like a raven who could finally smooth its feathers down. But he knew—as did his sister, with the foretaste of blood under her tongue—they were far from finished. Some action must be taken today, surely. A stay of execution, or a hearing, or enough of a prison to permit another fortnight of talk.

Bilbo does not remember much of what came after this. His ears were ringing and his head felt full of thick, cold, suffocating dwarven cement.

Then, like a rescue fire in the night: Kashet.

Troubling no Scion to introduce her, the future Lonely Queen poked in. She shimmied sideaways through a too-small gap in the double doors, flouncing sweetly in her favorite clamshell purple, hair wheat-dark and steps purposeful with signature Nordinbad briskness. The dame oozed that quick-witted ambassador’s confidence of hers and effected a shield of enthusiasm at once, two weapons of choice against black-and-blue Ereborian dourness. And Master Baggins was so irrationally, stupidly glad for the sight of that sunny, pug-nosed face interrupting from the world outside, he palmed over his chest to settle the heel-clicking leap within. Oh, you could fall in love with her, certainly. It would be altogether too easy to do, especially in so tragic a place and family; Fíli should not be blamed for his fall from bachelorhood, at all.

Kashet
I’m sorry, Councilors! Pardon me! I mean no intrusion; please carry on. It’s only: I’ve immediate
need of His Majesty, at his soonest convenience and yours. If you don’t mind, of course.

They hard-eyed her in their half-moon ring of perches. She’d not the pull of Lady Dís—not yet—but a Durinbride scheduled for the crown nevertheless swung enough weight not to be roasted right out of the hall. Even one who projected as much North-Dwarf pluck and aggressive, diplomatic cheerfulness as this.

MAZANÛH
For what reason, sister?

KASHET
Most apologetic, Consul, but I couldn’t just say; I’m no more than the messenger. He is asked after.

THORIN
By whom? Who would dare?

KASHET
Well—your daughter, Majesty.

The queen-to-be was full of light and mirth said so, pleased to deliver such news. Lady Dís, too, brightened with the keenness of unexpected optimism and Thorin’s heretofore dismayed or horrified face had become a study in tentative, but consuming, hope.

“She is awake?” he feared to wonder too intensely, as though if he placed aside his darkest worry, it might yet come true. “She speaks?”

KASHET
Yes! And is quite insistent that you answer her summons personally.

If Onushka felt similarly desperate to attend to the child-prince that was her granddaughter, she would not let it overtake her body. The Consul of Blood drew in a pursed breath and seemed to think about reshuffling papers, but did not. Her hidden hands remained under the cuffs of that mighty summer cherry robe. We might only mention that she seemed to share—unless Bilbo’s mind was playing tricks on him, or the coal had blurred his sight—a look, of some unclassified kind, with the lion Lord of Ered Luin.

Thorin, meanwhile, was halfway across the chamber with a stride of father’s purpose—natural, thoughtless, unacted purpose—before the reality of his present audience restrained him.
LADY DÍS
Go, brother. I will attend for you.

But it wasn’t necessary, for in the next second:

ONUSHKA
I request we call a recess.

MAZANÛH
Of course, sister. We will continue this here in two hours. Be told.

Erebor’s councilors gave her their tired call of “it is known,” and with that for an invitation or for an omen, the Raven King was gone. So, then, the Six—collecting their things and departing with varying degrees of haste. Kashet had cleared the hall and Dís had, too—separately, without needing one another—which left only the lingering ghosts of such large voices behind, still enlivening the stone with fresh memories of their presence, and the poundage of history made often in his room.

Then, when the walls were dark and quiet, the gold urn finally—finally—tumped over. And here, unlacing their smarting limbs and groaning backs, spilled Kíli and Master Baggins, liberated, onto an abandoned floor.

OOO

It was some time later that our nefarious duo—Kíli and Master Baggins, that is—stepped modestly into the king’s suite, still wiping soot from their clothes.

The bedroom was busy with those who’d chased the news of the prince. Kashet was there, hands clasped merrily over her stomach and her radiant shadow upon the foot of the bed. Óin mixed a clove-smelling tincture on the end table nearby. Here was Fíli, too, sitting one hip on the far mattress edge, dressed in his wool-lined royals and entirely happy with himself to have gotten his cousin really-and-truly up. Bélarûh had a bowl of hot oats in her splayed hands, steaming gently, utensil rolling ‘round its lip. She seemed stiff and sore—but, for the first time since her laudanum sleep, appeared to be her recognizable crabby self again. That cantankerous little old lady in a baby’s bod. Tiny feet dangled slackly over the bedside and all the girl’s black Durin hair tumbled wearily around a chubby, dark-eyed face.

And there was the king before her, kneeling with the fatigue of his joy, placing and replacing the
spoon in her hand.

“Try a little more,” the golden prince cajoled, giving an arm of Bélah’s sweated sleeping gown a plaintive tug. Her chin lulled ambivalently and the child flexed enough strength for a sneer.

It was Queen Ylva’s old room—the same one Bilbo had awoken in all those years ago, afright by the grave Durin portraits on the wall. Not so frightful when it was dusted and well-lit. They’d turned the place to a nursery, dressing punishing stone beneath soft rugs of white foxfur and replacing grim statuettes with toys. Carven soldiers and a wooden rocking-ram to ride on; a little chest and little sets of drawers; candle-holders encased by pretty colored glass. The family paintings were still there, though—just where they had been—Thráin in battle-pose; his parents’ marriage; his three children arrayed around their grandmother. And there were additions, too. Proud Lady Dís in an extravagantly ruffled surcoat with her adult sons glimmering behind her. An atrociously actressy and atavistic (ahem: Durinish) throneroom piece of Thorin under Raven Crown and in Thrór’s plate, dark and golden and serious as evil itself, with Bélarûh standing there between his wicked boots. And another of a dame—that must’ve been, mustn’t she, Yadreska—who had red hair and a scholarly look and such black eyes you might sink into them, if you weren’t careful, the same way a sorcerer sinks into a secret grimoire.

Bilbo yanked himself away from those eyes. Instead, he searched for the girl’s new lamb, thinking a sick child might like a stuffed fellow for comfort—only to remember how it, too, had been shot.

“Don’t feel like you’ve got to force her,” Óin tutted, flicking his glass vial in a way that upset the gravelly sediment inside. “It won’t taste pretty, but she can drink this down with a cup of goat’s milk well enough. Maybe a drop of honey, too, hmm?”

Fíli tsked. “She’ll eat a little more for me. Won’t you, walnut? You’ve been so agreeable today. Few more bites, and then we see about a little candy; what do you think?”

“Hurghl,” said the prince, fluently, dropping her head forward and drilling the spoon punitively into a lump of oatmeal.

Thorin did not correct her that time, but petted her mussed hair back. The palm atop her crown held it up gently when the rest slumped, letting him look into his daughter’s face. She dandled her head lazily in her father’s large hands, neck achy, eyes rolling up in exasperation with breakfast (and with all these people prodding at her). When he did not send them out or remove the porridge, Bélarûh seemed to cut her losses, heaved a sigh, picked the spoon up gingerly, and put one mouthful in like a bargaining chip. The Khuzdul she rasped after that grudging swallow was more of a puff than a declaration. But what did that matter?—not when these last thirty minutes were more than she’d said in what felt like an age.

Kíli, at Bilbo’s side, gave the whispery whinny of someone who might giggle and might, if relief came too fast, cry. “She wants green cake,” he translated for the writer, and Thorin looked back at them there by the door—excitedly, nonsensically—as if this was the most joyful news he had heard in a hundred years.

And it was like that for a little while, my dear. Kashet called for a sweetbun to be made for the ailing prince, and the bunch of them hovered around her, daring for the first time in many days-plus-nights to exhale that pent dread sickening their blood. Master Baggins kept at a respectable distance with his back upon the far wall, but truthfully, Thorin would not’ve had the rancor to mind if Thranduil’s own pretty child pranced into the bedchamber looking for tea. The king was beside himself with the elation that his belief—in medicine, in time, and indeed in Tauriel—had been, for once, enough. Because it never really seemed to turn out that way for Thorin Oakenshield, did it. For all his fierce hope, for Thrán’s-son-Thrór-son, it was usually fire and mourning songs.
Master Baggins didn’t aim to get in the way of all that. He waited uneasily, not quite wanting to leave just now, but expecting at any next moment Dís or Onushka would push through the door. And what business did he have here, witnessing this? Foreigner, you know. His ears and his gut were still gonging with doom about what he had seen in the moot today. His friends—if they were—and he was so sure they had been. It was all in contention now, all unsteadied in such a way he could no longer imagine what steady felt like. His own promises and loyalties and his own heart, too. This was a dwarf home. He should not matter—even if, perhaps a little bit, he still did.

Except Bilbo never had to explain himself—not this time—because neither dame arrived. Instead, who else comes panting raggedly into the royal suite but another foreigner? A better foreigner than Baggins, I’ll tell you that. The king’s pet elf, right here in her fast, carrot-topped, ever-loyal flesh.

She burst past the hobbit and there, all of a sudden, she was.

“Liege,” Tauriel managed, winded and sharp-faced—the captain who had never betrayed him, and whose oath was as true as her conscience, no matter how inappropriate or ridiculous reality around them became. Thorin startled with his family but did not stand up. She blinked wildly at him, his knees on the carpet and his daughter in bed. Her leathers were awkwardly still after such a raw shock of energy and the lady’s jaw dropped, as though she’d too much to say and no idea how to string the words together quickly enough. Óin set down his flask. Fíli rose beside his wife. Six dwarves watched in surprised disquiet as the mighty, cervine muscles of her neck flexed and fell to take in mountain air.

“What’s—?” is all Kíli got out, starting toward her, and the tenderness unbidden in his voice opened Tauriel’s up all at once.

“My liege. I come from the front field. Your sister—Lady Dís—she leaves through the Lion Door. In haste. A councilor is with her. With complement. They take a war axe and two dams in chains. For what purpose they do not say, but if I guess their intention…”

It was enough for Thorin to know.

The king stood up in the room full of Durins and portraits and toys.

He spoke to no one.

He bolted.

And Bilbo—having spent so much of his past life, his false-life, and his true-life running after him—did, too.

Thorin outpaced our Master Baggins rightaway. His long strides carried him down the echoing corridors until he was a billow of dark cape sweeping corners and gaining ground. Bilbo could not possibly keep pace, but sprinted his fiercest to keep at least the far-ahead flick of fabric and trail of mane in sight. He ran mindlessly, rocks in his gullet, brain blank but for this one focused purpose. He ran within the heaviness of his dwarf boots and dwarf coat and with no thought of destination or distance. He ran as though if he only reached the midday brightness that peered brilliantly through the golden doors when they are partway pried, then he might still fix it, somehow—fix it, as he had pledged—and as, in some sense, he had always pledged, to everyone whose narrative arc might need fixing. And maybe, if he could only fix theirs—if he picked the right similes and noticed the right details and arranged just the right series of subject-verb-objects—perhaps he might turn upon his own life story’s errors—and perhaps he would one day wake to find them fixed, too.

But maybe not. Maybe some stories are not meant to be fixed. And you have only to take them—fire
and mourning—as they are.

They were in the aula regia and through the great gate and on the stone steps and out beneath open blue sky.

Thorin really did try. He really did, my dear. Not merely in this, but in everything he put himself to. And what does it matter if sometimes your legs are too weak or your dreams are too cloudy or your name is too weighty or your heart is too gold; it is bound to be too-much, sometimes; that is, if your hope is so honest and so extreme as to try so spectacularly. And when there comes a day you fail, for you will—you must, in stories; you have no other course, on Those Days—what matters more than metaphor and more than melody is that you did as your willing hope bid you. Thorin has taught him this, through a journey and through being Thorin Himself, existing, in a world that Bilbo had very much insisted had no room or use for such fanciful things as faith and fairytales. And more than any dramatic look or sad old song or daring feat or piece of beauty, it is for this that Bilbo found he very much loved Thorin. Was in love with him, if, after all this poeticism, you wish to finally call a bird a bird and a gem a gem. Because it is with love as it is with hope, my dear, and no matter what lies and distractions and half-fibs Master Baggins has spun you, the truth is that they’ve nothing at all to do with possibility. Sometimes living is the mad hope of swearing words to feelings you know you cannot be allowed to keep.

Desolation: the light of the sun on the axe bit, hovering at its precipice, Prince Dís held high over her head.

And the fall.

Thorin’s two hands seized the haft from behind before she could let it plunge a second time. He had a face full of his sister’s hair and he heaved her around and they broke apart, tussling bodily over the weapon, now glittering wet, and they were screaming at one another, crashing like thunder and pealing roars on the dry grass at the foot of their ancestors’ lonely mountain. Yellow, nearly-dead grass. The plains were brittle and the air was clear and it went in, too deep, like it would never stop and had no walls to end it.

Onushka stood faceless and crimson on the field. A scattering of crow-caw. Rogah sat up shocked from the smacked bloody nose Thorin in his dash to advance had dealt him. Scions in shining mail. Satin and silks on the ground. The lions bellowed. Red unbound.

There is no more to tell you. Bilbo saw none of it, my dear. He is left with nothing to write but the sound of history, and the swift bloom of blood through old grass on a winter day.
Chapter 14

If he has neglected to tell you this story, it wasn’t, this time, by design.

When Bilbo was very young—in the single-digit age where everything needs an explanation but all stories feel as real as you or I—there was a death in the Shire. Death thrives at the heels of everywhere there is both bounty and life, but generally, we expect it will be predictable. We couldn’t very well function otherwise, could we; the fear of unknowing would be too great. Call it the Settled People’s handy crutch. We rely on the false belief—the grown-up fairy-story—that death isn’t some theatrical artist slinging paint, but a mathematician who respects a certain code of conduct. He abides by the rules of cleanliness, carefulness, and clocks.

This specific death was remarkable only in its disrespect for the established Code—its flouting of the security and civility our expectations provide. It was not a grandmam settling into her quilts for a nap much longer than the rest of us would like. It was not an unwell youngster succumbing to the winter fevers that had dogged him since birth. It was not even a farmhand snatched up suddenly by barnfire, snakebite, or a nasty stumble into the hog pen. It isn’t talked about, and maybe that is for the best; the hobbits have never been ignorant to the danger of disorder, or insensitive to the perils of a loose, uncontrolled idea.

She was a little girl. Not too little—just tall and thin-faced enough to be cutely referred to as “miss”—but nowhere near the distinction of “lady.” A ‘tween, as hobbits call this gawky and undefined stage of life. Bilbo wishes he could here describe to you the cleverness in her eye or the color of her curls or whatever it was she most liked to eat, but he cannot. Not unless he were to fabricate something to his authorial fancy, and some things should not be lied about, my dear. Even for the sake of a good story.

Perhaps we should not say this little-miss died. It might be a dishonor, of sorts—to choose such a soft and faultless word—and you know just about as well as anyone by now that Shirelings will defend the façade of normalcy even at the cost of truth. So, in the interest of truth, Master Baggins writes to you now as directly and unsoftly as he has the language to do.

She was killed, my dear. The girl was murdered—and this combination of letters and thoughts is one no good hobbit would ever say. They do not speak of evils there, amidst the clover-dotted knolls and autumn gourds and summer dogwoods. Evils in the Western Hills are rare. But rarity and silence does not banish a thing from the world completely, no matter how much the hobbits wish it might, and no amount of proper manners will bring a slain child up from under the earth.

They will try to forget such things. And perhaps they succeed—but forgetting a horror does not erase it, not quite, and it does nothing to protect the realm of possible futures. It does not prepare you. And when—in one or two of those futures—horror knocks again, there is no recourse for the forgetful but chaos. Chaos, and the desperation to take up your shovel and forget everything evil again.

The straightforward fact of it, my dear, is that this girl was killed by her father. The most unnatural of the unnatural, known to no code or timetable or season. He lost his mind to the drink and from drunkenness, he lost the privilege of his family—and being so lost, he must have thought to take them, too. Her mother they found cast aside in the grass near a blood-wet stone. The child had been strangled on a picnic blanket until her breath whisked away between his own two hands. And then, mad with evil or mad only on the reality of what he had done, he threw himself in the river—and so left nothing to be buried but the ruin of innocence. Hobbiton pushed his body from the reeds and let it disappear over the rapids downstream. They did not fish him out.
There is no explaining why a parent would do something like this. So Master Baggins won’t try. He won’t do evil the courtesy of looking for a rhyme or a reason where there is only atrocity to be found.

*Darling,* Bungo had whuffed, palm-over-heart, as the Baggins family stood around their kitchen table the morning after the funeral, caught in the clutch of a fugue that had taken the whole town. *How could you tell Bilbo such a thing?*

She had tired of the stiff-upper-lip and speaking in metaphor. She had stomached enough of keeping the outrage and the awfulness down. Belladonna was no longer interested in trying to benumb savagery; she knew you could not—not really—dress up such a diabolic thing. Not even if you were a hobbit. Not even a Baggins.

“Why shouldn’t he know? Is it any less upsetting to me or to you?” Bilbo’s mother demanded, delivering a steaming flatcake to her son’s second breakfast plate. It jiggled with butter as she gave the deep pan a particularly aggressive tap-tap, then finally detached, and slid home. “There you go, my bug. Don’t neglect your eggs.”

“Well, you’ll scare him, is all. You’ll fill his head with the notion he needs to worry about these things happening any time they please.”

“Don’t they?”

“No,” cried Bilbo’s father, pale-faced, smacking the tablecloth as fearfully as anyone insisting something so decisive could. “No! Of course not. This isn’t how it really is. Bilbo doesn’t need to know such things; he has enough to concern himself with just being a lad. He has nothing,” Bungo swore, snatching the apricot marmalade and dolling a generous lump onto his child’s flapjacks, “to be afraid of.”

And Hobbiton buried them, mother and daughter. In the literal and the spiritual sense. They would have none of Belladonna Took’s attempts to remember, as years went by and the names for those lost faces faded like sand from the shore. They spoke no more of it. The thought could not be allowed to germinate, or the possibility take root.

“It’s a shame,” his mother would mutter, sighing every time they passed by that old blue smial door on the way to the tailor, sharpening her eyes and cringing with teeth. “See how easy it is, bug? You stop telling stories, and the people forget. They’d forget anything, if they only could. Even something like that. Even that poor little girl.”

*But we don’t let them,* she promised, and tweaked her boy’s nose, and raised up her voice should anyone else stroll by. “Because even if it’s horrible, it’s history, my love. You ought to remember history.”

At the end of the day, she said. *History’s just people, you know.*

And so Bilbo remembers. My dear, he writes it down.
A Durin took her hands.

She’d said so, after all, those too many hours and miles ago on the Dwarf Road reaching towards home. Whether or not you can put your faith in what Azírë of No One has told you is another matter—one that is entirely up to your judgment. Knowing all that has happened, and all he has not seen, and all he has seen and dreaded and felt but never dared to speak on for fear it might come horrifically to life just because he imagined it—well. Master Baggins does not wager it is his duty to inform anyone whose version of a story they ought to trust. He can only write his, my dear. In as many words and as many secrets and as many loves as he has.

*I’m alive?* she kept saying—and not much else—when Azírë woke in a sparse, unfriendly bed in a dark, unwelcoming room with locks on the door and guards in the bright hallway outside. Her fair eyes were glazed so heavily with drug and with pain that they looked, in their slitted disbelief, like misted window glass, like a snowfall inside of her skull. “*I’m alive?*”

It was not a happy wonder, my dear. Her wrists ended in mangled, bloody tourniquets and her voice croaked with hopeless dismay.

Lady Dís had laid her belly-down on the itching dead grass before the Mountain. She had stepped on her knuckles to hold the armbone stretched and vulnerable. And she had let fall the axe.

It came off uncleanly, like the gasp of a beached pale fish. And horror, then, was not the red weeping stump leftover to prove what an Erebor prince had done, but the terrible thought that Master Baggins didn’t know what had become of the sundered hand. If someone had removed it; buried it; thrown it to a hound. Or if, even worse, it had been left to lie there, in that field, fingers curled in its final and unending fist, witnessed only by the obsession of slow black flies.

She took it. And she would’ve taken the other one, too, had Thorin not stopped her mid-chop.

It was hardly much better, my dear. Prince Dís’s steel-capped boot had so stomped that surviving hand, she’d ruined it. The carpals ran together; the nails dropped; the tiny birdbones had been pulverized, and you did not need a surgeon’s report to know those nimble digits would never thread a needle again.

“I didn’t kill her,” sneered the Lord of Ered Luin, later, with her king-brother up in furor and flames, and with the conviction she had done what must be to make their family safe.

Bilbo had wanted to be there when Azírë came-to. No one thought this was a particularly good idea, but he didn’t care for anyone else’s reasoning just then, and insisted his way in. There was no one on-guard willing to stop him. Habrin said *oh, all right*, warned him not to administer any medicine or food without permission from Óin and the Durins, muttered *just don’t tell Lady Dís we did this*, then let Master Baggins—reluctantly—inside.

He had tried to go to Galinyah first. The silversmith hadn’t been damaged—not beyond the roughing and slap Dís dealt her that morning—for the prince intended only that a traitor’s foolish friend learn this sanguine lesson about upsetting the Family in-person. She had been allowed to leave. She had been taken, even, from the field, ushered gently by Rogah as he stifled his bleeding nose. She had been offered a threadbare meal. But he found no nosebleed and no Scion outside that half-furnished shop; her covered tray of hash sat untouched on bulky stone steps. Galinyah had shut herself away in her rooms and would see no one. Our writer, pleading with all the fool’s regret he knew so close to himself, laid one ear against the door to listen for howling or sobs. There was merely silence—deliberate, frightful. He found no words to win her, and, eventually, retreated, giving her up to the
isolation she wanted, so urgently as to demand it without a single sound. You can only beg to be let-in for so long.

Bilbo did not plead such from Azîrë. He held fort in a spare wooden chair, full with the rattles of anger and dripping lung of inevitability, sitting very still for being so cracked. He did not scoot up to her bedside to whisper. He left a handkerchief so she would recall through her fever-sleep that Master Baggins had been there, and in the paltry dark of a low coal-fire, he watched. Sometimes a vigil is all you can suffer to give.

Bilbo’s lasted four hours. And by the time her death-trance had fractured, the laudanum settled, and she slipped back from that one anguished question into something only a little bit more like sleep, evening bled over Azsâlul’abad. He got up; he said “I will come again”; he walked away, and closed the door.

Thorin and Dís were still roaring when Master Baggins approached the Durin solar. He did not have it in him to demure anymore. Not jimmed-in alongside these tired bones or tucked beneath his tired eyes and not, with certainty, cooling down his tired heart.

He picked up and dropped the knocker. He pushed, without pause, right in.

“—Under the Mountain. You act under my mountain,” Thorin was saying, condemning and portentous, something it sounded like he’d said already many times today. “You come into my home—the home of our ancestors—and soil the ground with the blood of a dam you have no claim to—”

The Family room, when Bilbo entered, scarcely noticed. Outside, the Eastern sun blushed rapidly down the mountainside, mellowing upon glass, softening edges of cloudy gray stone. It softened none of the Durins. Lady Dís had propped worn knees and tigerlike disposition at the table, chair pulled out to face her king-sib as he paced and stormed—his a furious, rumbling thunder now. Fíli got a placating word in edgewise, but not many, sitting quite by himself with his fist on the blackwood. Kíli was being small in one of the window alcoves, slouched and tongueless, dismayed like a little boy watching his relatives fight. (And he was, you know. Prince and all, he really was.)

Dwalin had not even bothered Master Baggins in his post by the door. In fact, he shot our burglar what may well have been a commiserating hop of both furry brows—a look of significance, even if it was the stoic kind. The rest of them barely looked up.

Bilbo stepped fully inside, and shut the way behind.

“For the final time—” Dís did not look away from you when she fought. She would turn her head to face you fully and bore straight through to the backs of your eyes. Hers were that spearhead quality of blue. “—we weren’t under the mountain.”

Bilbo shan’t describe the black mood this technical fact brought upon Thorin’s face. “Angry” doesn’t really do the trick. He stood there in his furs and signets and stared at her and breathed so loudly you could hear him all the way across the room.

“The point is,” Fíli tried, wedging his voice into the choleric silence, persistent if nothing else, “that there will be a not insignificant population here losing their minds about what happened. You can’t stick her arm back on; I’d know. Someone needs to say something—anything—about it, publicly, before the Six do. We should be writing that now.”

“What else,” Thorin dared, demanding of everyone and no one in that moment. He took four large strides out of Lord Ered Luin’s immediate view, followed closely by the ominous sweep of wolf-trimmed cape behind him. “Am I to tell them? My sister has maimed a female outside my gate!”
Dís twisted her chin to regard him. Her throat must have been raw from the shouting, but did not show it—rising, impervious to its own pain, immune to trivial weakness like trembles or cracks. There was only a slender rasp of smoke. “Tell them a Prince of Durin delivered justice upon a free-dwarf who would murder a child.”

“Tell them a prince heeds neither their council nor their king? Tell them that when my junior sister throws a tantrum, she spills our people’s blood upon the fields?”

“TELL THEM,” she boomed, to her feet in a breath—and it was lions roaring all over again. “THEIR KING WOULD SEE A TRAITOR GO UNBLOODED BEFORE HE’D DIRTY HIS GRANDFATHER’S NAME.”

You can imagine for yourself what such an arrangement of words did. They went on at each other like this for some time.

The writer was too weary by this paragraph and chapter to let all that noise into his head. He sat his fatigued shell as well as he could against a wall, near to Dwalin, who wasn’t even bristling that uniquely Dwalin brand of annoyance at Master Baggins’s close proximity. It must have looked a little funny—our hobbit propped beside the King’s-Guard like so. They two were brothers in discontented, exhausted silence for a while, stuck hovering on the periphery of the commotion, arms crossed and mouths tight with the unpleasantness of it all.

And Bilbo wouldn’t have come consciously back into that fray, at all, were it not for the suddenness of his name.

“—ilbo,” Lady Dís finished, and just like that, Master Baggins returned to Erebor’s royal solar only to find everyone looking directly at him.

Hm? Bilbo said, sharp with the tension of such an abrupt oh-hello. Me? What.

The eldest prince turned about to regard him, black hair spilled into the ram’s ruff of blue leather dwarfcoat, heavy brows hefted both with frankness and mild apology, the kind you give when no one else will pony up to say the blatantly obvious. Her palm, knuckles-down, drew all eyes toward our hobbit in one commanding glide. “He shouldn’t be a party to this, either. Matters of nation and assassins in the study must be dealt with hard and head-on—and between us. It is no conversation for anyone with ties outside this mountain. Not Nordinbad diplomats; not new arrivals; not your old friends. No offense, Bilbo,” she added, incidentally, and Master Baggins even believed her. (It wasn’t the lady’s nature to offend; it just wasn’t her nature to tip-toe around feelings, either. Rest assured: if she’d meant offense, you’d know it—by the pop of gauntlet ‘gainst your unenviable cheek. Or by the axe at your neck.)

“He has been made as much a party to this calamity as anyone,” Thorin insisted—but insisted in a sighing, inevitable way, like he was sorry about it. (And he should be; Bilbo would be concluding his working vacation to Erebor a couple teeth shorter than he’d began it.)

Dís did not fight the point any further. She supposed-so by pushing in her upset chair. You might notice, if you looked closely—as our writer did just at that moment—the splots of red still clinging in dry drops to her steel toes.

Bilbo was glad not to be seen any longer. He did not quite suppress his answering shiver.

“We need to focus on what come next. There’s still my issue. Who,” the crown prince wondered—with not just a little impatience—smoothing it as best he could, “is going to say something before an open court, and when? Do you want Onushka to give her testimony before yours? Does anyone in
this room want the Family to follow the Council on an execution?"

“I didn’t kill her,” Dís reminded, again.

“Fíli is right.” In a truly shocking move, Thorin chose to heed the voice of reason first, and curbed them. You could see, though, the fury awake and roiling in his too-fast strides and in the way his teeth touched too definitely behind the king’s lips. “What matter, that you did not take what you came for? Do not deny it. It is plain you thought to bleed her to the bone. I must address the Folk, and I alone must do it.”

“What matter? Don’t trouble yourself on my account, brother. I dropped the axe—let me explain my reason. Let me address your people in your stead—as I have protected them.”

So much for the Raven King’s cool temper. Bilbo is quite sure that, no matter how long he lives to upset him, he will never get a knife so completely under Thorin Oakenshield’s skin as his little sister could in one sentence and a just-so huff of breath. Such is the mythic way of little sisters, Master Baggins has heard. Even this one.

“I,” said the Dwarfking, palm over heart, brows high with disbelief and insult as his voice went from distant storm to imminent cloudburst again. “Will address them, because now I,” he told, “must protect you.”

“PROTECT ME,” Dís dared with her toothiest and most incensed laugh: HA-HA. “Is THAT what you think you will do? Do you think THAT is what I am lacking?”

Kíli in his glum window seat flinched, dismal at watching uncle and mother trade blows. His interruption was just a nervous hush. "Mum."

She paid that no mind; her focus, now, was upon her sibling, who in so many “musts” had made Lady Dís feel quite unwelcome in her native halls. And, perhaps—if you could peer behind the Durin indignation, which was bellicose and mighty—more intimately aware of what she had done. “When have YOU protected ME? Was it when the Pale Orc first set upon our pathetic war camp, and I tore his goblin from your ram? When your enemies attacked your breakfast, and I hunted them—and cut them down? Did YOU protect ME from the dragon, Thorin of Thráin? WAS IT YOU WHO SHUT THE DOOR?”

And so we are back to the yelling again.

*Hold on,* Bilbo snapped, finally, outrageously. He cleaved the air with a criss-cross swipe of both arms. “Can the both of you PLEASE shut it off for a second?”

Those two dark heads spun to bear down on him, then—a couple of ice-eyed, carnivorous ravens. Our Master Baggins gulped the rock those eyes put in his throat and, without troubling to reach up and close Dwalin’s loose jaw, plowed through it.

“Sorry. Look. You don’t—neither of you’ve seen her. It’s possible she doesn’t survive. Then what? You think you’ve got a problem now. You’d think so, but—” He could not finish. No rock, no, not anymore—but a hook, or a talon, or a nail—caught somewhere behind his tongue and above his chest, making everything that came up trip, divorcing the feeling from the sound. “The Council isn’t the worst thing that could beat you to a statement. So. So, really: there’s no time to go back-and-forth at each other like this. She’s not going to stay locked away in that room forever. One way,” he knew, “or another.”

“That is what I’ve been saying. More or less.” Fíli, in a moment of mundane but otherwise perfectly
in-character heroism, drew those four eyes upon himself. He had a fresh tear of parchment scribbled with half-formed phrases and tidbits a king or a prince ought to remember to say. (“Scribbled,” that is, for the lad’s penmanship was quite admirable: pretty, but not distractingly so.) One of Galinyah’s owl quills rested, wet, on the paper’s face. “Thanks, Bilbo.”

*My pleasure,* Bilbo answered, irritable, a stiff bob of the chin and how-do-you-like-that.

“Then get out ahead of the death announcement. What have I done to stop you?” Dís snorted, and it was doubtless she knew very well that popular opinion would believe Thorin ought to have been able to stop her. “Go deliver your speech and placate the males before this gets out.”

*“Out? It is already out. You butchered her under open air!”*

“Better than Under the Mountain.” If there was ever a smirk so galling and so catty you could hear it purr, it belonged to Lady Dís. And yet, while she fed the Family fire redwood and oil, she also proposed her amends: “If you need someone to stand beside you and look contrite while you deride the foolishness of ruling harshly upon our own, why, brother: I’ll even submit myself to that. Tell me your plan, and we’ll see what is to be done about the naughty little sister.”

“I will address an open court in the morning. I have said this. What will you do?”

“What will *I* do? WHAT WILL *I*—”

*Mum.* It was her firstborn, this time—and this time, it was not a wretched mumble, but a desperate stopping point. “I think it would be best,” he pressed, worriedly, for you can insist nothing to your mother, even if your brow will one day bear the Lonely Crown, “if you weren’t in the court when he says it.”

It took the lady a long minute, considering her golden son, to decide. Though maybe, my dear, Dís had nothing to decide upon; maybe she’d already figured it. Because the Lord of Ered Luin seemed to lower her hackles, then, not all at once but pretty swiftly. The porcupine quills were still there, but they willingly—gradually—relaxed against her strong back.

“He’s right,” she agreed on a big, shoulder-dropping sigh. It was the second *you’re right* he’d won. “You’re right, Fíli. We’re never going to see eye-to-eye on this, so why fight it any more? Say what you will say, anyway. I—” And she rather shot this at Thorin—not to him, but right at him, like a stickball bat aiming to smack one right out past the field of play. “—shouldn’t have to care what the males think of this House. I shouldn’t have to speak for their understanding. And I don’t; and I won’t.”

“Think you I ask for your speech? Think you I have ever pondered, ‘*Would that my sister could speak in my stead!*’ That I might—”

“Uncle,” Fíli stressed, pen ready, stabbing too many periods onto his page. “From One-to-Helpful, that’s a zero. Please.”

So told, the Dwarfking—unable to argue the truth of his own heir’s words—relented. He grew a sour, forbidding look; his whole expression darkened; and he sat, most aggrieved, on the vacant window bench beside his sister-son. And if you saw them then, my dear, you might thoroughly comprehend the facts behind what Lady Dís always said, for they two really were alike, you know. Different words had made them different tempers and different fathers lent them different faces, but sitting one each seat, it was obvious. Fíli in blues that caught his big, sentimental browns and Thorin in rich black with bitten-back pride and fists on his knees. They had more fear in them than did the other Durins, truly. One hid it with giggling jokes and blithe games, the other with impossible
certitude and beauty that was downright defiant. But it was there, that fear—if you knew them, and if you knew what you were looking for. They felt things a little too fully and a little too fast, as some who have learned loss early do. They could not look at the possibility of everything crumbling. They had not annealed theirs with reservation and the wisdom of toughness, as Dís and Fíli had; their hearts were prone to blood bruises when pressed too hard.

This made Bilbo wonder, then, what it would have been like to meet his friend before he had become the king—or had he not become it—but never too seriously. For he could imagine Thorin no other way, to be honest, and who knew; they might not have gotten on so well.

And you couldn’t lose yourself within such thoughts for long around the Durins, anyway. In the next instant, with the fire in her belly slowed to a simmer but showing no sign of failing, Dís reached a hand out for Fíli’s scrap paper. He relinquished it over the table, and his mother read quickly, her blues racing to-fro, leaving the rest of the room to wait a conclusion out.

When she was done, the old prince broke their quiet with a firm, sober grunt. She pointed at a line on the page—the middle finger, wearing her Family signet. It contemplatively tap-tapped. “And he’s right about this, too. I obviously shouldn’t be there. Nor should I be in Erebor. It is better,” she announced, furrowing those heavy eyebrows with resolution, and there is the steeling of her heart—in the way she admitted her misgiving in light of shrewd advice, and in the way she carried on so steadily at kingmaking and crown-maintaining over the backdrop noise of pained protest from her youngest child. Kíli whined his mum like a pup, this time. Dís frowned more completely, her style of being torn. “If I cut my stay short and return to the Blue Hills before this weather turns. Or I will be stuck until thaw with this Council, and this damnable hesitation, and your hawing nonsense at me. Mahal forbid my people pick up politics from yours.”

“How long do you need? You’ll have to tread your wagon wheels, and nothing will be ready before Uncle’s got to speak,” Fíli observed on a sorry breath out. He rose from the chair to collect his notes, which she handed back without fuss. Forging forward, plus a twinge of regret—that was their Durin Way. A good leader will always keep an eye fixed on the future, for better times and worser ones, no matter what a relief (or what a shame) the present was. “Maybe we can delay a full forum on this, though, until after your complement is a ways down the road.”

“Two weeks. Ten days, if I bully them.”

“Bully them,” Thorin decreed. “Two weeks is too long.”

“Would it inconvenience you, Thorin of Thráin? Would I be in the way of all your kingly plans?”

Before he could bite on that bait, Lady Dís pivoted on her bootheel, and then with no more warning: Master Baggins was all hers.

“Bilbo,” said she, forcing that meat-eating smile, brisk with the anger still smoking away below it. “You would be more than welcome, when the time comes, to join my caravan. It is a small trouble to see you most of the way back West.”

And then, without goodnight or goodbye or another barbed word, the Lord of Ered Luin flashed one last searing look at Dwalin (just because), and in her large war paces was out the solar door.

They idled only a spare moment in her wake. No one else spoke and no one else took the floor.

“Go and see to your mother,” Thorin bid Kíli, finally, when he had squirmed and lip-wobbled enough. Released, the little prince slid sadly off his seat and went padding after her, what he so transparently had been wanting to do.
Fíli was less miserable. The crown prince rounded the dark table only to flop down, long legs outflung, in the chair Dís left behind. He could more clearly remember that this was not the first time a pair of Durins had fought; he could remember, too, the way his mother had clung to her brother when they committed her husband to earth. Some things we suffer make our tethers unbreakable, my dear. Some storms we survive make it impossible not to make-up.

“Haven’t you had a chuckle of a getaway,” he asked of our writer, shaking his head, flattening the parchment face-up with his palm and propping an elbow on the seat back. “Riots, assassinations, capital punishments, and now a family fight.” Then, really: “Sorry about that, Bilbo.”

At this point, my dear, what was the use getting bent about it. Master Baggins puffed some cool air through his nose, and shrugged helplessly as the sun eased from murky orange towards purple, then from there to cold-clear winter night. “Well, what’s next?” he posed. “If you all pull another dragon out of this mountain, I’m leaving, too.”

The King’s-Guard chuffed beside him. Thorin hmmed disapprovingly at his joke—which was, all right, in pretty poor taste. Fortunately, Fíli had actual questions that needed answering, and so went about asking them, ordered nicely from most-important to least. Bilbo found himself playing the role of passive sentinel again, a role he wasn’t (as you’ve rightly observed) very good at; Dwalin had him beat in the patience department, too. (Which really did not reflect highly on Master Baggins, I hate to confess, considering that Dwalin of Fundin was not well-renowned for his sense of kindly understanding. In Master Baggins’s defense, he lacked a bushy beard to hide his impatient expressions behind.)

But what else for it? The king and the king’s heir were already knees-deep into the finger points of talking down a social calamity, what with the latter swooping loopy consonants across his page and the former standing behind him to offer over-shoulder criticism. Bilbo was quite glad to have no cause for such writing, you know. He preferred by leaps and bounds the distance of history; he was not so fond of current events.

And so he didn’t listen very well, did he. He leant his head back against the stone wall, and closed his eyes, and heard less the whys and whens of government, and more the breathing of Azsâlul’abad. Wind through the tunnels, circling endlessly. Far-away pipes and armored footsteps and the fireplace coal-crackle. No singing tonight. The sound of impending snow drawing the first freckles of frost upon this thick window glass. It became dark outside. Inside, for the Mountain Dwarves, there was no dark; it was always dark; they told their time according to their stomachs and their hearts.

He heard without listening so intently that Bilbo’s thinking mind could no longer coordinate the sounds of language, either. It might have been Westron or Khuzdul, for all our hobbit knew in that long moment of being and not-being. He could tell you only the difference between the deep draws of Dwalin’s chest as the dwarf waited sleeplessly nearby and the noises of quill-scratching; between the snap of calm fire in here and the jangle of patrolling guards’ lamellar in the corridor beyond; between Fíli’s smart, even rain patter and Thorin’s sonorous, heavy-eyed hum. Because when you lose the frills of yourself and your situation so thoroughly as to shut down listening, then it becomes quite difficult to manage horror, doesn’t it. It becomes a challenging thing to remember the way an arm looks broken in two, or the way blood smells as it slows against a bandage, or the way a voice asks: am I still here?

Proving our writer still was, at any rate; Dwalin’s index finger, prodding him once in the pit under his crossed arms.

Master Baggins sucked air and popped fully awake.

“I said,” said the Dwarfking, something he had clearly just done one hard blink ago, and Thorin was
right there, close enough to throw a punch at his gut, speaking directly to Bilbo on the chilly solar floor. “That you must consider your own protection, if you are to be attending a prisoner’s bedside in my halls.”

Jotting a mental note to thank Dwalin for the half-asleep save, Master Baggins cleared his throat, and gave that you-must his best preposterous scowl. He had not even noticed Prince Fíli leave the room.

“Got it. Logged. Next time someone I am rather friendly with lets in the assassins and loses her hand, I’ll be a better sport about it. Won’t let it rattle me. Move-it-right-along.”

“Ahh. You hear every counsel I give you as a warning. I do not criticize,” he professed, annoyed to be met with such toothy resistance, but for that no less sincere. “I merely say: take care. In whom you speak to,” Thorin warned, “and in whose earshot you call upon the enemies of this House.”

“Guess that means I’m off the Family suspect list.”

“Do not be outrageous.”

(He almost—but did not—bring up as counterpoint that little tiff with Lady Dís outside Óin’s. Thorin was wroth enough with his sister this night, and Bilbo felt beyond certain he’d no desire to see Lord Ered Luin earnestly angry at him.)

“You were never suspect. It is not our family you need be concerned about. The Six—I cannot say. I would not say. Only: mind your company carefully. You will find in the Moot Hall few favors and few friends.”

No kidding, Bilbo nearly cracked—but remembered, disappointedly, he ought to keep that particular exploit from Thorin, too. There was still, if you put your nose too close and sniffed, a distinct after-aroma of coal clinging to the writer’s underclothes.

“What’s to be done about security on the prisoner?” Dwalin, who had a head for such things—and who was probably feeling a touch frazzled, himself, after lugging those two dames the whole length of the Dwarf Road—prioritized troop movements to speeches. “I put Habrin there ’til morning; he’s good for it; but he’s all by himself at the door.”

“Then give him a half-complement of Guardians. He should not be there alone.”

“Little young for a Guardian command.”

“You trust him, and that is merit enough for me. She will not escape,” the king knew, darkly. For if he had not been to see his traitor, he had seen lost limbs enough to understand what it was to lose yours. And if he had not lost his own, he had held Fíli’s surviving hand and wept with him through many of those long, painful nights after the battle. Think what you will of Thorin Oakenshield, but you should not doubt that he’d’ve traded places with his sister-son to bear this pain for him—this and every pain—for Thorin bore pains both ancient and new like it was his duty as a dwarf, and a Durin, to do so. “Your worry is in keeping the Folk out. And in keeping Onushka or Ilanís from cutting her throat.”

“That or stirring a thimble of poison in her gruel. I’ll post a spy in the kitchen.”

“Do it,” he agreed. The king returned to the table to look over Fíli’s notes, placing himself recklessly into Dís’s left-behind chair. It was a noticeably informal, slack-bodied way for Thorin to sit; if you needed proof of his weariness—and of his distraction—this should be plenty. He pulled the sheet across the blackwood and peered at some wording they’d disagreed over. “If she dies Under the Mountain, it will be her own dying.”
“You ought to put her out, then.” Dwalin unanchored himself from the wall now that Lady Dís was on to other business. He went to squint into the dark night, as though you might predict a flurry from some detail hidden out there among white fields and distant pines. “Tie her off, dose her up, and boot the dam towards Dale. If she ends up face-down in a thicket, instead, so much the better for us.”

“I will not do that.”

“Specifically saying, you won’t have to. Your sister leaves in a hurry, maybe we blame that on her, too. Doubt Dís’ll care a rat’s tail one way or the other.”

This lit a twig of Thorin’s temper again, and his dismissive _ahh_ was now more of exhaustion than irritation; the frustration caught in him like a dry cherry branch snapping underfoot. “And if she walks up to the gates?” he snapped, rotating his palm face-up on the table as if to ask _what-then?_ “Think you _I_ mean to stock our detractors in Dale? I do not use the city as a dungeon to cast away my prisoners. If I loose her, it will be to the care of a dwarf. I have offended Bard enough.”

Bilbo piped up: “Didn’t Kashet say something about a Nordinbad family? If she’s got any connections,” he figured—dared, judging from the dead-of-Blotmath look Dwalin shot him from the window. “You could make them shoulder a share of responsibility for this. Gets her out of your hair, anyway.”

“Oh, aye!” (Not much about the King’s-Guard’s blank stare or his tone suggested it was good _aye_, though.) “That’s a turn of brilliance, halfling!”

“Is it.”

“I should sodding say so. _Push it on Nordinbad_! Why did not I think of that? Answer just one little question, ‘fore we sign up and ship her off. Where’s Nordinbad, hobbit?” Dwalin had to cough some pressure out of the mean, can-you-believe laugh chomped down between his eye teeth. He gestured this way, then that. “Which direction—just point it! Can you even find Nordinbad on a map?”

Master Baggins, who was developing a bit of a mean edge, himself (and who could positively not identify Nordinbad on a map) began positing that Dwalin ought to try finding the flagpole lodged up his own arse sometime, but Thorin at the table simply sighed.

“Bilbo. I appreciate what you are trying to do, but,” the Dwarfking—his elbow now propped on the wood and his forehead propped on the fist—suggested, as diplomatic as he could presently be. “In this—perhaps it is best if you do not participate.”

To this, Master Baggins had no immediate commentary—not besides making the one face that he makes.

You’ll forgive a writer, then, if he skips over the remaining security dialogue and advances right to the point in which Dwalin left.

The quiet in his wake was less suffocating than the one following Lady Dís out of a room. But he seemed to rope up and haul out on his mail-clad back the whole bushel of Bilbo’s own anger, my dear—for his fighting spirit dropped, didn’t it—right out of Master Baggins’s folded arms and ’cross the stone like a handful of spilled jacks. It was too cold in here to fall completely asleep, even with the steady fire; this cold is the sort that whooshes through all your marrow, making your palms sweat and your fingertips twitch. An inside-cold, all-around and ebbing from your pores. His tired was not the kind you can nap away, but one that must be worked off, like scraping ice from the sill.

Since there was no one left to keep him from it, Bilbo rounded the table, and placed himself in a
wobbly-legged heap into Fíli’s chair. He gave a worn-out huff upon contact. And if he sounded like a stricken rug on laundry day, my dear, it’s probable our unintrepid hero also felt like one. His limbs went all boneless and his knees bent boyishly over his heavy dwarfboots and his chin rolled forward to bop the spotted fur ’round his neck.

It must’ve been dramatic enough, because the Dwarfking spoke some unprompted peacemaking. “I am sorry that took so long, but you understand, I must hear what I hear when I hear it according to urgency and rank. What is it you needed?”

Except he didn’t need something, did he. Bilbo’s fatigue wasn’t born of waiting his turn in line; it was merely there. He scowled for a moment to remember what it was that brought him here, but there was naught, and never had been. There was only the first taste of a headache and nothing, really, to say.

So he said so, figuring honesty was the bare minimum a king ought to be able to expect after such catastrophe, and Master Baggins owed Thorin that, at least. He owed it to everyone, now.

“I—don’t.” came surprisingly easy to the tongue. “I don’t need anything. I just—” And here is the rushing of all that held air out of his lower lung. He let it go through his front teeth, for there was no stopping, and the punctured hiss kept coming until Bilbo’d no more breath to give. His body melted the rest of the way down into the seat, ensuring a morning of back pain our writer could not spare a mild damn about right now.

He was dismally inarticulate. His hands grasped open space helplessly, as thought they might latch on to a haphazard word. They didn’t. Only: “Is it always like this?”

Thorin across the table was a little more circumspect. It was getting properly dark in here, though Dwalin had lit the chandeliers an hour ago; Bilbo had to keep reminding everyone throughout the big Adventure of yesteryear that his low-light vision really wasn’t so keen as a dwarf’s. It was a lucent night, but not an unblemished one—every so often, a purpled cloud would trawl by and whisk the moonsilver off the king’s face, leaving him silhouetted in damp darkness, not unlike the metal variety he wore on his hands and his hair. Master Baggins was glad he received no protest upon reaching forward for a sitting candle cluster and lighting them all with Bofur’s bottle of pocket-fire.

“Not like this,” Thorin granted. The Raven King did not precisely frown at whatever memory was guttering out. “But it is always some thing.”

Though Fíli’s page was near enough to read in candlelight, he couldn’t, for the lettering was runic. But that’s all right, Bilbo reminded himself, noticing the way flame tried to turn this old friend’s face to gold but could not quite overcome the subsumption of his color black. No one is really allowed into the secretest secrets of Mountain Dwarves. Sometimes you have to let a person have their secrets. He knows the peculiar condition of feeling your secrets are all that persist in holding your fragments together.

“Was it like this in the Blue Hills?”

“In its own way,” he supposed.

Post-execution (though she didn’t kill her), this scenario was too draining to be considered with utmost writerly thoroughness. You’ll just have to be content with a monarch’s word and a touch of abstraction tonight.

“In the Blue Hills,” Thorin went on, standing to stoke the fire. He seemed averse to sitting there with Master Baggins, which would have troubled Bilbo on any other day. On this one, though, there was
no energy leftover for such trifles of worry, or to feel badly in an ambiguous way. He watched from
the corner of his eye as the king tossed in a cut log of cedar, then found something dissatisfactory
about the nearby bookshelf to adjust. “It was more a matter of securing our walls from raiders and
thieves. These walls will never fail. And yet, how much easier a feat it is for enemies to slip inside
them, when they are neither Men nor orc but our own Folk.”

Not that a hobbit’s opinion counts for much on matters Ereborian. But Bilbo said: “It didn’t feel like
this, before.”

“Before,” Thorin answered, the smallest bit amused; he applied himself at correcting a handful of his
father’s fallen figurines. The fox, the swan, the boar. “I was a king; I was not the Lonely King.”

“Well,” Master Baggins reviewed. He looked up at the ceiling until the thatches of his neck went
sore. “If this is the difference between regular and special edition, I don’t much like it.”

“You do not like or dislike being king. No more than you like or do-not being a hobbit. It is what
you are.”

He had righted all the animals, but didn’t come back. There are only so many times you can reorder
an eagle, a cat, and a hound.

“I dislike being a hobbit,” Bilbo joked—but it was a gloomy sort of joke, and his jaw went stiff and
his nose itched derisively. “Sometimes.”

“And I dislike the realities of being a king. Sometimes. When it is like it was today.” He considered it
for a moment, his fingertips on the back of a carven wolf. “But no sooner could I or would I stop
being a king than you might stop being a hobbit.”

There was a collapsing of coal in the fireplace. Master Baggins rather wished it would snow.
Blizzard, even—the kind so quick and howling that a white sky will turn gray-green and no one goes
outside for days. Then, of course, when the gale died down, the embers settled, and the blanked-
draped people crept to their doorways again, everything beyond would feel new. The whole world
as it is only after such a snow—unmarred, twinkling fresh, and promising a place for every foot to
make its mark.

Thorin was quiet. When he spoke, pausing for the words, it was to say only: “She was your friend,
this tailor?”

Perhaps our writer didn’t know how to put it. Or maybe he didn’t know the answer, itself—because
plot has a way of sending your dialogue reeling, of making the lines and the rules go topsy-turvy.
Bilbo breathed out sharp through his nose. For lack of wisdom or fables, he shrugged. “I thought so.
But I’ve had cockeyed notions about people before.”

“I know,” the king told him, gently, with such an unexpected look-back of pain and sympathy that it
quite disrupted whatever blasé thing Master Baggins had been about to mutter his way.

“Wait a minute—’you know?’” Bilbo cracked, making his face go beady-eyed in funnily as he could,
though his ducts felt dry and his throat was weak like it had been the one shouting upon a bloodied
field. “What kind of consolation is that? Oh, well. If I’ve got to be a fool, at least it’s known. No
surprises here. That’s just Bilbo Baggins, known haver of cockeyed ideation.”

If Thorin rolled his eyes—which was not a definite, as he turned back to the stone shelf where his
fingers still rested, but a highly probable—at least this time it was with a wingbeat of smile.

“Perhaps you should,” he admitted, softly.
I should, Bilbo said.

I should what? Bilbo said.

Bilbo said what, Thorin. What should I do?

“Leave,” Thorin said—and, well.

Are you familiar with a certain Mannish expression? The one that goes: something-something *pulled the rug out from under me*? Truly, it doesn’t matter whether you’ve heard this particular turn of phrase or not. Because it wasn’t so much like that, when you comb back over this scene to analyze relevant details. Bilbo was sitting safely in a stalwart dwarven chair, for one, and the carpet was still exactly where it ought to be. And so was the king—which is to say, standing solidly in the solar, not too close, now facing our hobbit to explain some appropriately important things to him. Which he actually cognated, rather than drifting partway into waking dream. Thorin spoke to him, and he replied—several times, in fact—phrases and expressions in any language and every dialect be damned. Maybe there was never a rug under Belladonna’s young son to begin with. Maybe she had rolled it up and replaced it straightaway with parchment and ink. Her form of kindness, you know. If you lack a soft underlayer—and you’ve grown up with freely-given knowledge that the world is full of beauty and horrors, both—how can you be so damaged by the jaggedy twists of your own story? He listened to Thorin’s very sound reasoning and looked easily past Thorin’s very black hair to Thorin’s very serious face, not unfriendly or bitter anymore, and here really was his favorite person in the whole of everywhere, do you know that? You’ve put up with him this far. You probably do.

It is not so much like having terrain torn from beneath you. It is more like the ground beginning to crumble, just slightly, so you’ll not be comfortable putting your feet with confidence anywhere, anymore.

“You are welcome, of course, to return. But Erebor is not itself, and with the Family’s detractors close at hand—and with your connections to them—and with the Council’s discontentment, with me and with my sister—it may be wise if you do not linger.”


“You must believe me: I do not mean to send you away. I have no wish to turn you out, but—do you understand?”

“Oh. Yeah, of course. Nothing to it.”

“It leaves your work unfinished, I am aware. We will discuss it at another time. But if you were to leave—and when you do—there is no safer way to do it than in her complement.”

It was somewhere roundabout this sentence that Master Baggins realized he’d been nodding for a while. He put an end to that mindless business, and he sat up straight, and he swallowed the nothingness building around his throat’s apple. Perhaps he’d been wrong in thinking Thorin was avoiding him, too, since here the king was—taking up a chair right beside him when the one directly across was open, not minding proper table manners, hobbitish or otherwise. Who could pay any attention to table manners on a night like this one?

A Baggins could. For good manners, my dear, can make a fine shield to duck behind. If your lip is stiff and your back is strong enough.

“She wasn’t just being polite, was she,” a good guest ought to check, asking lowly, like there was any risk of offending Lord Ered Luin now.
“Dis? Pish. Nay. Nothing would be so unlike her.”

Oh, Bilbo said.

Good, Bilbo said.

That’s—that just about seals it, then. Far as I’m concerned. Yes. Good idea, Bilbo said. I had better off and take her up on it.

And then he was rising from the table, unconfident feet and sticky knees. Or he was about to, for—halfway around, his fingertips ghosting sable wood—something snared him fast.

Wait, Thorin said.

And oh, Bilbo waited. He waited for the heavy grip around his arm, and the indentation of Durin rings upon his wristbone, and the sunlight through the curtains of the king’s study in morning. For something, at least, he knew before. But none of it came.

When Bilbo looked, there Thorin was yet—unmoving—his great hands resting placidly on the tabletop. He shot our writer a modest almost-smile.

“Until she is less fire and brimstone,” the king confided, a tip as good as a wink-and-goodnight.

Ah, Bilbo said. Right. Point taken.

I’ll just get along to bed, then, he said. And he turned around to go.

That is really all it is, sometimes. The door was chilly and final beneath his palms.

“Do not write,” Thorin scolded him, nicely. Behind Master Baggins, the king dragged a candle closer and had already dipped a crisp white quill. “Sleep.”

Fat chance of that, Bilbo thought—but he was already leaving—and so there was no time to say anything more.

Not quite through with your lessons on hobbits, are you.

Three things, my dear, that the Shirefolk are (in)famous for: their penchant for fieldwork, their love of well-prepared food, and their sense of civilized society. (All right, well—four things, if you count the notorious population rate.) But there is one element of civility they are not especially known for. That is, their particular feelings regarding Big Folk.

Namely: they do not like anyone else.

Outsiders of any unfamiliar make, shape, or breeding are not welcome in Hobbiton. There’s no fine-
print rule tucked away in a town hall library forbidding them, no; there is no semi-militarized force
dedicated to their removal; there is simply an understanding, conveyed through disapproving
comments and prohibitive inn rates and downright nasty ahem-hems, that strangers are best off
staying strange. They do not cozy up to unusualness. Theirs are a people who told curiosity to go
take a hike up a craggy mountainside.

(Probably sent it right to the dwarves, in that case. Oh, well.)

Now. This is all fair useful information to know off the top of your head, provided you (a stranger)
are contemplating an (unwelcome) visit into the Western Hills. But what we are really getting at by
picking apart the hobbit tendency for isolationism is this: hobbits do not often make history. It’s
difficult to wind up in the annals of Momentous Deeds and Valorous Feats when you allow yourself
to get steamed under the collar if an innocently lost Man so much as stumbles through your potato
crop on his way to trade in Ered Luin. (Another place that is not especially peachy-sweet to
foreigners, albeit for entirely different and probably more sympathetic reasons. Those rarified annals
of glorious destiny have been a pebble’s toss harsher to the dwarrow than they have to the Shirelings,
so far.)

Fortunately, their own appendix-mention-only appearance in world history aside, hobbits have been
known to write plenty of nonfiction. They print guides and songbooks; they compile topical
periodicals, assemble farming journals, and have been occasionally known for their sestinas. It’s not
that they don’t nurture writers; it’s merely that they give rise to wordsmiths of a certain stock and
genre. You have likely inferred for yourself, then, why a writer fantastically stupid enough to
endeavor something as pig-headed and egotistical as a history book might cast his eyes to faraway
lands. And your inference is quite probably spot-on, at that. But Master Baggins would humbly
sequester a moment of your inferring time to post this question:

Do you suppose the hobbits write many books about love?

Your answer is No. No, they do not.

Oh, there are plenty of hobbitish authors penning romance, if that’s what you aim to ask next. No
people’s literature has ever escaped the tawdries, you know, not even a people this blisteringly polite.
Bilbo, being a serious writer, has never found much use for those. Hobbit notions of romance are
generally preoccupied with bouquet arrangements (uninteresting), courtship conventions (pass),
wedding parties (horrific), pastoral imagery (guilty), and tidy social matching (clearly, Master
Baggins has failed at this outright). They are more concerned with procedure and tradition than
daring and zeal. Not what you or I will call riveting stuff.

Romances are not love, my dear. Neither weddings, nor gifts, nor Ginger Sandover and a pile of
straw in the back of the Burrows barn, nor a handful of apple blossoms and tulips dressed up in
ribbons of white.

Mind you, no one is suggesting you take up a hobbitish nom de plume and start chicken-scratching
some sweaty tales of roguish wayfarers and highborn ladies. It would be dishonest—and, frankly, it
wouldn’t sell. Because the truth of it is, for all their appreciation of simple pleasures, hobbits are not
an articulate or creative folk. They do not love less; they merely do not make it a habit of conveying
their loves through words. With them, it is much with talking as it is with touch. There are, they have
learned, better and more useful ways to say You Matter than a squeeze ‘round the ribs and an
overwritten birthday card.

So, now. Understanding this, maybe you will understand why a person who dares call himself an
author could never seem to say what he meant.
Bilbo Baggins, who was a truly deplorable excuse for a hobbit but a quite splendid example of Took, gleaned most of his knowledge from scholarly pursuits. Well before history had come rudely knocking at his door, he’d studied literature, and atlases, and numbers, and dates. As much of the world as was available to him at the tail end of Bagshot Row, he read. But as you might imagine, his selection was tragically limited. And his knowledge was all gathered through a foggy, distant lens. Who could promise all these writers and academics knew what they were doing, speaking through such space and time? He could only, Bilbo decided, believe what also proved by observation true.

Of truth:

There were inter-caste scandals now-and-again in Hobbiton, certainly. (Our writer even participated in one, though was never caught, and his adolescent affair blew over in a month.) But nothing worth writing down, and nothing that was not swiftly chased out or willfully forgotten. They did not let such oddballs break them out of their order or their stride. He had absolutely never heard of a hobbit taking up outside of the species, Green Lady forbid; not every folk is as amorously indiscriminate and biologically haphazard as Men. (He had never obviously seen a pairing of the other atypical consideration at hand, either—though, to be realistic, it had probably been in front of his nose all along. Two upstandingly chummy neighbors no one discussed in much detail, or a couple of sweet old ladies in a bluebell-covered smial who had been perfect friends for eighty years. You could conceivably miss something like that, if you were really desperate to do so, or if no one had given you the right idea.)

At any rate. One thing at a time.

As excruciating as it is, we are left with no other recourse but to sift through all this cultural background now. And not too slowly. Bilbo had ten days, give or take a sunrise, to codebreak the entire file of his life in a clambering attempt for language he did not possess to describe something he did not yet entirely understand. Or maybe he did understand it—just not how it happened. Or maybe he understood exactly how it happened, but not why such happenings are possible. Or maybe he even understood that, my dear—though he had never read it in any book or memorized it in any class—but knew it intrinsically, automatically, a truth as deep to his mind as was blood to his heart. Because if there is such a knowledge so intimately laid within you, inside the very bones and meats, beneath all the trappings of what you have or have not learned to be ashamed of, then it cannot be unnatural. And what fuss can you make about natural, anyway, when you have seen so much magic stitched right into the fabric of world.

But magic is not love, either, dear one. Magic could not possibly captivate us if it were so small and mundane as love.

Hobbiton does not casually speak of devils and witchery. But it is said, here and there, by several peoples: The only certain way to execute your demons is to pull them out in the sunlight, shrieking and screaming, where you might heft up your mallet and smash them to dust. Why shouldn’t it be the same with other things? Like promises, and worries, and history—and, perhaps, with love you do not want.

There are infinite shapes of love, of course. Everyone knows two or three. You love-like-family, you love-as-a-friend, you love a favorite story or a memory or the smell of a beloved place. But there is also a formless, complete variety—the one where you know all of these loves at once and yet none of them, even combined, can explain it. If it isn’t romance and it isn’t magic and it isn’t madness and it isn’t disease, than what is it—this unclassifiable manner of being that knows incredible weight but no lineation, that can flood you with sickness until you swear you cannot fit any more and then, in the space of a frown or a laugh or a sneeze, turn all that misery to irrational wonder. And how do
you kill something like that. How do you expunge it without obliterating yourself in the process. Maybe you have to be obliterated, if you want to be out of love.

Bungo once said: The surest method to empty your conscience is to dash all your lies, and patch up the left-behind holes with some truth.

Well, then, it’s true: Bilbo Baggins is an awful letter-writer. His words never come out with the meaning they should.

But words are not love, either. Love is a quieter thing.

And if you know how to write such a letter—to put upon paper words imbued with such alchemy that it might kill off anything like love—then by this point, my dear: you should probably just keep it to your damn self.

When he stepped out, the old dwarf was dozing in the Durin Hall.

“Balin,” Bilbo blurted, not much of a question, for it was unmistakably him. He snorted awake abruptly and opened one hazy blue eye.

“Oh. There you are, my lad. I was just waiting for Thorin.”

“Were you out here all this time?” our hobbit fussed—part worry, part complaint—helping Balin to his feet. The marshal had crossed his legs and sat down against a far colonnade to nap, apparently, upon the unforgiving stone floor. His hinges popped audibly as Master Baggins insisted on giving him a mostly-unnecessary hand. “Are you sleeping. You should have come in.”

“Oh, there’s nothing to fret over. Don’t mind me. Dwalin said you might take a minute or two. Far be it from me to interrupt.” He dusted his heavy red trousers and the white dovetail of his beard in tandem, one-two. “It has been a long day. No harm in stealing a little sleep.”

“You could’ve knocked, at least. I wasn’t doing anything important. Not more important than you’ve got to do.”

“I never said you were more important,” Balin granted, not without a crackle of humor, but not without honesty, either—the sort that’s graceful while putting you into your place.

Steadied upright (not that he’d ever truly been unsteadied), the dwarf gave Master Baggins’s upper arms a friendly pat-pat. His wince was the private, gingerly concerned kind.

“All right, then?” he wondered, and it wasn’t much of a question, either.

No, Bilbo said.

He said: “I am not all right, Balin. Not in the slightest.”
Balin sighed for the sincerity of those words—and, at least, there was no lying here. No number of plucky, ironical, burglarish hahs could obscure the harrowed look still beached beneath the writer’s eyes. You cannot always tell with people, or from what they say. But you can always tell when eyes have recently seen blood. “Aye. I know that feeling. And I know that face.”

It was out of no objection to Marshal Balin that Master Baggins, face and all, harbored zero intentions of having such a conversation now. He didn’t possess the presence or the center or the gravity of thought. And wouldn’t, most likely—not for a good, long while—however long it takes to recover from the first after-tremors of witnessing your friend’s future so succinctly and so gruesomely destroyed. He gave a brisk, tough nod—a soldier’s code. But before Bilbo could extract himself from the hallway, he was being spoken to. Not about arms and executions, no; not about leakers and dissent; not about whether or not traitors deserve his sadness or the care-darked indentations below his eyes. Balin spoke of kingdoms, my dear. What else certain, in all his tumultuous life, had there ever been?

“I have seen three kings in my time, Bilbo. I saw Thrór’s madness and I saw, for that briefest instant on the field of war, Thráin’s wrath. And I’ve seen Thorin with both in measure,” this old commander chuffed, bemused in a fashion that spans an age. He looked younger than his years whenever Balin spoke so, voice rich and full of stories, under the plinth flare and the winter rock. But it is always—without fail—the eyes that give poet-warriors away. “You’d think I’d’ve had my fill of Durin kings. Raising and burying. But here I am, and here I stay.”

“Goodnight, Balin,” Bilbo wished, because it was the best and brightest wish he had just then. Except it was not goodnight. Not quite yet. “Don’t judge Lady Dís too harshly. Can you imagine what it is to lose your home in such a way—a way as likely to lose your people, too? he asked of the corridor, toward Master Baggins’s weary back in retreat. “It’s that same root in all of them. I’ve grown it up in Durin kings before. Some seasons, it twists more than you’d hope.”

“They’re alike. Is what you’re saying.”

“I am saying, aye.”

Bilbo pursed. He paused long enough to glance, haggardly, back over a furry shoulder. “Bit cheap, Balin.”

“They are alike. But they are different, too. If Lady Dís is fierce, it is the ferocity with which she loves what she’s charged to protect—and you cannot damn her for that, my lad,” he knew. “Not you.”

The hall was too silent. The brief fight of the torches tried to sound like continuous fire.

I’m sorry, Balin, Bilbo said.

The old dwarf seemed only halfway confused. “What for?”

“For leaving you all. Oath-breaking. I didn’t mean it like it was, but I guess it doesn’t matter.”

Balin seemed taken aback. Callused fingers, perturbed, flattened down the snaps of brownbear cowl worn loosely ’round his neck. Not forgiveness, maybe—not yet—but a step nearer to realness. Words, as it is, between friends. “Your ways aren’t our ways.”

Bilbo grinned a stouthearted grin that, for all this realness, hurt. “Nobody’s ways! I suppose.”

He meant to write. He had intended on going back to his room and settling rightaway down to pour
all this ugliness out in a letter, in words he could tear out and leave behind. But the truth is, my dear, that our writer never made it to his desk. No—he took off his boots, and he washed clean his face, and he fell into his bed, wordless.

And that night, whether you believe it or not, Bilbo Baggins slept deeply—until the morning was behind him—and all he had leftover were nine merciless days.
Chapter Summary

The counting of days is not always a march, my dear. Sometimes it is a slog. And sometimes, a race.

**Day Nine:**

It was already half over by the time Bilbo awoke—cold, since the embers spat dry during the night. He spent the remainder of it either in search of palatable food (little of which settled well) or at his desk, scouring for language, watching the candles burn themselves out.

**Day Eight:**

Three successful paragraphs and a solid introductory line. Charged by a burst of optimism, he took the evening off for dinner with Ori, Dori, and Nori. Later rereading yielded the usual number of cross-outs and corrections. He slept comfortably.

**Day Seven:**

Total disaster. Master Baggins woke panicked, didn’t leave his rooms, and got absolutely nothing done.

**Day Six:**

Better.

**Day Five:**

Not better.
Day Four:

Early start with respectable progress. Progress that was curtailed, unfortunately, by a splitting headache midway through his flatcakes at Bombur and Tannä’s.

Bilbo finally got in to see Galinyah, who struck him as bizarrely numbed to it all—though “got in” was inaccurate, for he’d bumped into her at marketplace, where she didn’t seem to quite realize how her hands shook or how many cups it was appropriate to buy. Our writer gently moved seven of ten from shopping basket and back to sales rack, then walked the silversmith home. She would not go to inquire after Azírë. No; never; Master Baggins had to visit alone.

There were more guards on the door, though. They apologetically would not let him through.

Instead, on the pretense of closing interviews, Bilbo allowed Bofur and Bifur to get him extremely drunk. He did not sleep. He sat awake and waited for the sun and the smell of open ink to drag him back inside himself.

Day Three:

Habrin knocked too early in the morning to say: “King Thorin summons you to the forward wall.”

Bilbo, who would really rather not venture out on any walls unless he had to, didn’t bother getting all dressed. He shrugged into and buckled his coat, scrubbed the filmy sleeplessness from both eyes, then left—and that’s just what there was to it.

It is no use relaying the stronghold’s current mood to you. He is a foreigner, after all, and has little business dolling out his estimations on Ereborean political favor. But perhaps it will do the job to mention: On the way up a spiraling stairwell, our writer found himself face-to-face with a hastily-tacked flyer. Upon it, in not-so-flattering rudimentary sketch. At first, he mistook the thing for a caricature of Thorin, but it wasn’t. It was Prince Dís—with blood under her feet and the Raven Crown upon her head.

Master Baggins tore it hastily down.

It was a relatively mild week, for an Erebor winter. A fortuitous stroke of good traveling weather, blue-skied and enough backwind to dust the snow from tall pines, dragontailing it intermittently into clear air. From the forward ramparts, you could see minters loading wagons with crated coal, dwarven wheels cleaving a crackling sheet of thin, brittle snowmelt. The Dwarfking was not one for sentimental apologies—but when he had been wrong, as Durins not unoften have been, at least this one would admit it. He had sent to Bard twice the usual yearly allotment in recognition of his own monarchical misstep, and their tracks smashed wet paths over the fields. At this height, it was possible to follow them all the way to the still-there wooden gates of Dale.

At this height, too, it was possible to find Thorin Himself—because he was right here, as promised, and as Habrin had described. His dark hair was horse-black and polar in the slushy, pneumonic weather, and a good thing it was so thick; the Raven Crown must’ve been cold. From behind, heavy coat and all, you could see the king’s breath fog the air beyond the battlement, where he stood to presumably watch his diplomatic orders underway. Truth was, his old friend looked so at ease there,
in this little moment between duties, Bilbo almost hesitated to disturb him. But his soles on the stone gave him up.

Thorin’s head turned. He’d a touch of odd look upon his face, but smiled well enough when Bilbo in bulky furs stepped hum-drump out.

“You called,” the writer joked—but only just. “Need someone to help watch for lazy guardsfolk? Spit on them over the side?”

Thorin’s welcoming smile was frail, but genuine. And not so frail that he didn’t, as usual, shake his head to brush aside whatever irrelevant wisecrack Master Baggins made. “I am here but for a moment. My attendants are changing the court. I apologize for calling you out into the cold.” Then, spying the fistful of parchment: “What do you have?”

“Oh. This. It’s nothing. Just some trash. Is what it is.” Bilbo, who a) didn’t know if he’d seen this particular artwork and b) would rather not upset Thorin II before having to speak with him, crumpled the flyer and stuffed it into his coat. “Have you talked to your sister?”

The king looked at him mildly—like he’d already guessed what it was crammed into Master Baggins’s pocket, but didn’t press. In Durin gold and dark-eyed, he indeed did appear like a monarch only stepping out from the throne room for a bit of fresh air. Bilbo inwardly panicked when no words came rightaway up, then recalled he’d been summoned. Summoned; not merely permitted; not allowed-for. When there is room for you, it is simple enough to breathe out and step out. He did—right out onto the wall.

“Nay,” said Thorin of his sister, stubbornly. With the between-teeth hiss of disapproval, the king looked back to the field below. “And I will not. That is why I called for you—to ask after your arrangements, and to see if she is yet planning to leave when she said.”

“Everything’s set and steady-goes, far as I’ve been told. She sent me a runner with a missive just yesterday. Dawn departure, I’m sure. Less sure of where I’m supposed to walk, but maybe somebody’ll be willing to roll a good-sized gourd off their wagon, let me hop in the back.” (Only partway a lark.) “For my sake, hope so. The lads have already sworn to send me off with a midnight bash. Bofur has personally guaranteed he’ll get me so rotten drunk I’ll wake up in Bywater.”

Thorin hummed in confirmation, though of course a king cannot attend such uncouth things. There was an upswing of wind, just then, whisking fine snow from the towerhouse roofs overhead and dragging it afield. A toothed wind—or one toothy enough, at least, to make Bilbo’s nose go atingle and to wet his eyelashes with a fleeting, misleading gloss of pain. He watched a dwarven cart creak away towards Dale until the phantom stinging retired.

“You will write this time, won’t you? If you have any more children,” the writer threw in, because damn it all, he really was like that, even after. Even when he meant no harm. “Or if you don’t.”

Thorin’s yes was feeble, sister to his earlier smile—a forced twitch at the edge of the king’s mouth. “I will try,” said he—and I suppose that is all one can.

And “Who knows?” Bilbo proposed. He joined the king by propping his elbows upon the parapet, feeling the bite of winter air on his un gloved hands. “Maybe the next time your sister comes back this way, she’ll bring me along. Unless I make a nuisance of myself.”

Thorin laid a beringed palm kindly upon the cuff of Master Baggins’s sleeve. “I am glad that you came,” said he, and truly was so. “It is well we part as friends once more.”
Bilbo eyed the royal hand there over his wrist, heavy with Ereborean silver and Durinul gold, and he
could not help the crumb of frown. “I was always your friend.”

“Ai. Would that I, too, had said so,” Thorin agreed—true about that, as well—and did not try to
cloak his unfortunate sigh. The king looked, as if worried, down the Dwarf Road. “But perhaps you
would not have come, if I had.”

There was a faraway scolding and clamor of correction below as a wagonwheel fell victim to some
snow-hidden ruts. Above, ravens unsettled in the tower eaves; black bows circled, briefly, over the
white and under blue. Thorin removed his hand from Master Baggins’s arm.

“Speaking of writing.” Bilbo thumped the coat pocket in which he kept his book of carrying notes
only to hit himself in the chest—he’d mistakenly left them behind. “I never did get my revisions
squared away. Should I send a copy by caravan? You can imagine why I’d rather not leave a whole
manuscript. Part undone, like it is.”

“You need not. I will approve your publishing it.”

“Just like that, eh? Sight-unseen? Risky,” the writer warned, clucking tongue and shaking head. “I
could put any old thing in now. Who knows what might occur to me on the road.”

Thorin gave a half-amused grunt. “No worse than a drawing of my sister, The King.” And then,
brow high: “Do not make me say anything unreasonable.”

“You? Unreasonable? Perish the thought. No one would believe it.”

“Deem you that a joke? I am full serious.”

“Oh, so am I. Far be it from me to sass the monarchy. All about monarchy, hobbits. Politicians and
barons, the lot of us. Bloody crown-chasers.”

“Now I know you are making light of me. Beware you do not exhaust the privilege.”

“No, no; not I. Wouldn’t dare dream, O Dwarfking, Your Majesty.”

And here Bilbo meant to mock-bow, sweeping one out with all the courtier flourish his sarcasm
could manage, swinging his fanciful arm, clicking his heels. But Thorin stopped him with a tap
against the shoulder and a real, rueful flinch.

“Do not,” bid he, eyes wounded, doing his best not to bleed from a joke. “Do not say so.”

Master Baggin was floof-mopped from the aborted genuflection and his blink more than a touch
confused. “I would dare?”

Thorin obviously regretted interrupting the fun for a moment, but only as long as it took a not
especially eloquent king to find the right words. He withdrew his wince—the one that, if you were
paying close attention, revealed those gently crowded bottom teeth—and relaxed the pain that had
surfaced on his face, too. It slipped back beneath dark water in a sad way, one that did not guarantee
it wouldn’t come back again. An uneasy settling of pain—like rocks on a seabed, or black feathers in
the snow.

“You are the only person I have ever met not to know me first as king,” he said, sorry he was unable
to continue the game, but no less unable for his sorries. “I would not hear you say it now.”

And Bilbo here recalled, my dear, because how could he not: the merciless way Thorin had looked
upon him during the unfortunate night of his return, and the even less fortunate bow. And like lifting stained glass against light, he held that clear-cut image against the one he had now, of a king standing black and gold against pale-gray, foggy-breathed and quite like history. Which is the way Thorin looked most of the time, in these days—and maybe in the old ones, too, a thousand unfathomable years ago when Master Baggins could behold this very person without understanding exactly what and whom he was looking at. Monarchs necessarily have that far-off quality of library murals and hall statues. But this particular statue didn’t feel that way, not once you got used to him. And you remembered in your voice and your backbone and your heart that under Raven Crown and plate and fur, this was still precisely who he had once been, before. Though Master Baggins could not, perhaps, justify the meaning of “before”; for Thorin had always been The King, or the one who would become The King. It was a feeling, before—not a hard truth or archival discovery or even a well-defined fact. Save for the fairy truth that is always inherent in the creation of feeling: there had been a certain leaf of this story in which Thorin belonged first to Bilbo, for he was Bilbo’s best friend, above and beyond that inexact day he became everyone else’s.

“You know. I really didn’t mean—"

“I know,” he assured him, for Thorin knew better than anyone whatever it was Bilbo was trying to say, and Bilbo believed him. Though belief did nothing for that underwater sadness, either. On such a pale day, the black birds in the tower could not keep themselves from being picked-out. “A king has many friends who are friends for his fortune and his crown. But should I lose my gold and crown tomorrow—” He left it there; it need not be finished. Incidentally, Thorin told him: “If I did have a friend for my own sake, it is you.”

It really was a cruel thing, that bow. Thoughtless feeling often is.

He did not say I am sorry. Nor did he fumble an excuse. Bilbo merely set his elbows deep against the mountain stone and promised. He swore, you might say, a little ivy leaf of an oath: “On my honor, I’ll never polite at you again.”

Thorin gave an affirmative hmn. “Good.”

“Ah—that was a trick, see. Burglars have no honor.”

“But you are not a burglar.”

“True! Unless, of course, I lied about that, too—which is just what a burglar would do. What-ho; you’ve fallen into my web.” His was a spindly, delicate humor, and his face felt brittle, but here it was to stay. “You’ll never get out now. Tangled in the deceits and deceptions and—"

Stories, Master Baggins would’ve told him, had the Dwarfking of Erebor not covered his whole mug with a palm.

“What!” Bilbo choked on a pleased squawk of outrage, staggering back from the playful shove and—in the force of how many things hadn’t really changed—quickly regaining his balance, body and heart. “That was not dignified.”

“I am a dignitary,” Thorin informed him, a theatrical know-it-all, a sass of a brat. “If I do it, it is dignified.”

“Getting punched in the bags is about to enter the realms of dignity.”

The king laughed—himself as he ever was—a grand sound that Master Baggins had once thought, standing leftover at the foot of a black and wartorn hill, he might give up his fingers to hear but one
more time.

The sigh from Thorin’s belly was content and infinitely true. “I will miss you,” said he, “when you leave.”

Repetition seemed superfluous. Inspiration, instead; a moment of idle eye-wandering, and Master Baggins stooped to retrieve a miscellaneous whatsit from the rampart floor.

“Here you are,” he resolved, crisply, fobbing it off with an unserious plunk into the king’s receptive palm. “There’s your answer.”

Thorin looked down at the supposed answer, sitting dumb and lifeless in his cupped hand. He seemed a mite confused.

Flatly: “It is a rock.”

“Dwarves like rocks,” Bilbo observed—then, at His Majesty’s snort: “Technically, it’s a piece of your damned dwarf-wall. But it’s like my Aunt Belba said. Put it on your desk. When you see it—even if there’s a lot of council business and whatnot running around—you’ll remember to write me a letter once in a while, won’t you? Won’t you.”

He looked again at the cold chunk of rubbed mountain stone, uncertain. It was slow to warm in the crevice of his hand, and Thorin hefted it gently deeper-in, then closed his ringed fingers, burying the bizarre token from sight. “This,” he noted, “is very odd, Bilbo.”

“Stands to reason, doesn’t it. You having hired the oddest hobbit in the land.”

The king worried down at his fist. “I have nothing to give you.”

“I’m wearing a piece of a dragon,” our writer reminded, giving the scales a pat down his arm.

“Not like this.”

And it seemed he would not give it up. So “No,” Bilbo granted, shrugging. “I suppose that’s not untrue.” And, after a moment, gathering not so much courage this time as the intellectual gumption to say exactly what he meant. “Thorin. What is to become of Azírë?”

“I do not know,” answered he, and if Thorin Oakenshield at all suspected Master Baggins might ply intangible favor for a concrete favor, did not so say out-loud. There came a dent, though, into the king’s heavy brow as he lowered his grip with stone encased to consider again the snowy path to Dale. “No doubt my sister would soon take her back to the Blue Hills. And no doubt some would rather see her imprisoned here. What think you?”

It was quick to his head and so quick to his tongue and his teeth. “Don’t send her away with Lady Dís. She’ll never survive the trip. And if she did, she wouldn’t survive your sister.”

“This is important to you?”

“Yes. In fact,” he ventured—dared, though advantaging himself of his old friend’s golden crown seemed decreasingly daring since they were, after all, friends restored. “I shouldn’t mind asking you personally. As a gift. She really couldn’t have thought they’d—not about the child, at least.” It caught all cottony in his throat, leaving only the certitude of feeling you would know evil when you see it. Down below, the overstacked wagons were groaning away through muddy white. “I believe her that, at least. If nothing else.”
Thorin gave a grave hum of contemplation. “A life is no gift. But I will do as you ask, for your counsel is—usually—wise.”

“Usually,” he echoed, trying for peevish, winding up equally grim. He could not tear himself from the sure, steady hobbling of the coalcart wheels. “What will you do with her?”

The king leant his forearms upon the parapet, not entirely prepared to have this life-or-death conversation in the interim hanging between one formal audience and the next. “I have not decided, truly. But—” Reticence, if not regret. Qualms, if not grief, for the price of a hand and a name. “—I expect it will not make much difference to what she has already lost.”

He supposed not. There are some losses, my dear, no amount of succor or clemency will aright. Bilbo breathed thinly out his nose and realized, only now, that the stinging from their battle was no longer there.

“Thorin,” he posed—not dared, this time, for his voice was too placid with the mark of things passed. Our writer, with some difficulty, hopped up and sat himself like a much spryer lad on an embrasure of the mighty wall. “Can I ask you a cheeky question?”

The Dwarfking grunted consent. “Ask.”

“What’s become of the Arkenstone?”

It did not turn him dark and forbidding, as Master Baggins had guessed the memory of such a color blue might. Thorin merely looked a mite uncomfortable, as though troubled by a nervousness he’d been hitherto pussyfooting around. “Ah. I had wondered if you would ask.”

They waited in bleak peace for a moment there together, ignoring the next sudden whisk of ice off the towers overhead, finally looking at something large in the room they’d not looked-at for too long.

“Worry after it no longer,” the king assured him, deciding how much of the History of Dwarves he would share. “I had it shattered long before you left.”

Bilbo could not say what he felt, for he truly did not know. The ghost-weight of that deathless jewel, if he cupped his hands and closed his eyes deep inside the mountain where water and wind move unseen, was as real as the heart in his chest and the gold ring pressing coolly over it. Relief is a kind of sadness, too, for sweet possibilities dashed and for the darkness of what almost-was.

“You never told me,” he said only.

Thorin did not strike him as angry—just certain, perhaps, in a way he had vowed he ought always have been, and would be. “It is not your anchor. I told none but the wizard, who lent me his wisdom in its undoing. Such a thing cannot be destroyed, merely divided.”

“Then you—what. Broke it?”

“Ai. A cursed thing, as you know well. And if it was not, ’twas evil for the dwarves, for it did us much ill. Magic or madness matters not.”

“What did you do with—?”

“Nay,” he insisted, breath fogging, watching the Folk leave prints in the snow. “I would not deny you answers, so do not ask me. For I shall tell no one where the pieces lie. It is our homeland but it is my mountain and the keeping of its heart is my charge and mine alone. May its scattered bones never again be found by Durin hands.”
Bilbo didn’t ask. In fact, he rifled for a suitably Bungoish anecdote to lighten the mood—to backstep to laughter and play again. Before he could settle upon a good one, though, it went as it always did in these days of councils and kingship. A courtier stepped out, and bid Thorin back to his throne.

Wind recouped. Bilbo slipped off the parapet. The Dwarfking turned to acknowledge his summons, and when he turned back, found Master Baggins with fallen face and the panic of a ten-ton tongue caught in his throat.

“Worry not,” Thorin promised, with a smile deserving of a monarch and two metal-heavy hands upon the writer’s shoulders. It was only farewell for now, he promised. But it felt very much like goodbye. “I will come to see you before you go.”

And then he went. And Master Baggins was left, holding his own arms tight, shrugging up his coat on a cold crow’s day.

OOO

When he walked home, there she was, waiting anxiously outside his dwarf-made door.

“Bilbo,” Galinyah began, wakeful, wretched. She thumped a fist over her heart and held it there, dour as a captain on his very last watch, before reaching both pleading palms face-up and bowing her red head of curls in shame. “Friend, forgive me.”

Having recovered his old friends, our writer took the outheld hands of his new friend and resolved to recover her, too. The silversmith was dressed in humble eggshell white like a penitent, which indeed she was; in public expression of apology, she’d tucked away her gems and baubles until a day arrived in which being noticed by other dames would not bring her painful memories of how she had failed and been failed. It was a strange, melancholic way for her to look. She looked like someone who belonged by the sea. More than anything else, she looked like she was wearing something Azírë had made.

“I used you,” she went on, squeezing his fingers and attention, but too aware of her own strength to wound him as a warrior might. “I am so sorry. I didn’t know and I did know, too. But what do the reasons matter?”

Galinyah released him, and his knuckles slipped out like a gentle tug of lace from a curtain rung. She used a thumbnail to draw the swell of tears from her lashes, one set then the other. Kohl came away on those careful smith’s hands. She held them carefully away from her simple gown.

“You were my friend,” she pledged, and it occurred to him that perhaps she—to Azírë, to Erebor, to the dwarrowdames—was an oathbreaker, too. “You were my friend, and I betrayed your friendship.”

“You got caught up in it. That’s what it was. We all get caught up in it, sometimes.”

A hiss through the rear teeth and shake of her chin. No dwarf appreciates too much mercy, even one as injured and lovely as this. “Half of my story, and the kinder half. I wanted so much to be right about her.”

“She was your friend, darling.”
“Yes, and you were our friend, too.”

“I was,” Master Baggins concurred. Then he captured her unsmeared hand, and there in the empty evening hallway, dealt it a grandmotherly pat. “And I am. We are still friends, you and I. At least, I should like to think so. Too much revising, otherwise.”

She did not laugh through her silent crying, but there are times when a watery snort will do. Galinyah bravely recovered enough voice to doubt. “I’m not sure. Should I be thankful for a forgiving friend, though I’ve done little enough to earn him, or should I just count myself lucky you’re such a lazy editor?”

“Bit of both, I think. You’re not an easy character to write.” A joke; he wouldn’t write any of it; not of this trip or of this history, too close and too new to be managed anymore. Bilbo was not the same kind of writer he had been those years ago. He was too quickly aware of his devices and his favoritism and his unwritten words. “How about a cup of tea? Give me a chance to look over my notes.”

The silversmith shook her head, but for all that Galinyah looked like a sad lady of saltwater, she donned a heroic, careful smile. “You’ll have to mail them to me, if it’s a proofreader you’re after. I’m being audited for my punishment reassignment tomorrow. It’s better that I sleep. Early to bed—isn’t that your father’s expression? I only wanted to be sure I’d speak to you again before you left.”

A pause. The fragile, valiant face struggled, but—for his sake—did not flag.

“You are leaving, I’ve heard. Dwalin told me when they brought my sentencing letter, though he didn’t want to. It took some creative bullying on my part.”

Bilbo sighed. The door to his suite looked both welcoming and bitter. “You ears work correctly. There’s some concern about my book, I understand. It turns out not all dwarrowdames are as easily charmed as you are, after all.”

“Relieving. I can finally admit my suspicion that not all hobbits are as idle as mine, either.”

Sorry silliness, it seems, is the mood of goodbye in this chapter of Bilbo’s life. He cannot say with certainty if it is more healthsome than the strange sickness of the last. He can only tell you what he thought in the moment and afterward, and how it felt to him to be standing in front of a place that was home only in a provisional, temporary sense.

Master Baggins made the best foil he could be. He finessed a so-it-goes smile of his own.

“I’m sorry,” the writer pledged, “that your journey didn’t end up like you hoped it might.”

Galinyah had refused his sympathy, but accepted this. She dipped her head not in shame but in the wordless sister-brotherhood that toughens the bones of all dwarves. “And yours,” said she.

“How do you mean?”

The silversmith—with tear-smudged eyes—gave him a chiding, humbling look. “It’s painfully obvious, Bilbo. You might cut down on the metaphor, don’t you think?”

My dear: If you have ever choked midway through a hiccup and a sipful of curiously strong five o’clock tea, sucking whiskey into your already beleaguered lung, then you can estimate with some accuracy how Master Baggins felt in the following second.

Oh, you’ll interject, it’s no use. No need to play the naïve, offendable ignorant. ‘Dispense, please,
with the embarrassment and horrors,’ you say, because you’ve already been flat-out told our writer’s principle dilemma by this margin-in-time, and you likely surmised the gist of it many margins ago. And you’d not paint an unsympathetic picture of yourself to complain so. However, we might grant poor Bilbo the benefit of nuance. For it is, you’ll admit, a very different matter to whisper something devastating inside the secretmost caverns of yourself than it is to have that same momentous thing noticed by someone else. Pointed-out, even. Casually observed.

He did know, of course—being quite well-versed in everyday dwarfish cultural mores—that Mountain Dwarrow, for all their strange hang-ups and notions of honor, do not seem so spectacularly fussied about certain societal orderings. Social orderings your friendly neighborhood hobbit would scarce dream of challenging. Whether he’s hitherto written about it or not, the main takeaway is that he knew your average dwarf should hardly blink at the personal particulars our Master Baggins has been internally grappling with. And if he knew that, he knew about other things, too.

I mean, obviously, all this was not a completely foreign concept to him. Of course he knew about such things, in theory. He had lived in the rugged wilderness of greater Arda with dwarves for the better part of two years, one must realize. You hear things. See them, too. Too many things. Thing you frankly wish you could forget, if you get my meaning. (And if you don’t, you are luckier for it, because he sincerely hopes you never stumble upon your own friends in a position so compromising as the one he found Nori in—not once, not twice, but three whole separate times in three whole separate towns, and not a one of them with repeat company.)

Case-in-point, Bilbo—when Galinyah said what she said to him there—was not caught utterly by surprise. But he nevertheless had very little power over the paralysis affecting him in the wake of that accusation. Happily, the silversmith didn’t know enough of hobbits to fully appreciate the extent of damage her cavalier advice did him. She merely shrugged, emphatically, as if to profess it was only advice.

“Are you upset? Please don’t be; I was merely suggesting. Your way of telling history is less than conventional. Probably good for sales, though.”

All bets to the contrary, Bilbo managed to cough it off. He banged on his chest. He slapped the front of his door.

He rasped: “How about a cup of gin, instead?”

Sometimes friendship is like that, my dear. It is often a matter of knowing when to step back and when to smile, wait, and ask again.

He drank with Galinyah, and when she left, Bilbo brushed all his scattered story papers aside. He pulled one sheet of fresh parchment and a crisp, sharp pheasant quill. He filled up his oil lantern. He rapped his desk for good luck. He sat down.

And, really, he wrote.

**Day Two:**

Nothing, really, at all.
He woke calmly to the sounds of the softly glowing fireplace and to his dark desk, clean.

Bilbo was in no hurry. A sense of tranquility and certainty of fate had settled into his blood like a storybook middle, turning him syrupy and slow. He bathed in the morning, skipped breakfast, and unhurriedly packed the contents of his ornate dwarven closet back into his travelling trunk. He nicely folded the new garments. He counted the buttons and ties on his worn shirts. He bundled his presents safely, and tucked them like osprey eggs into the next.

There was really no time, and yet it seemed there was all the time in the world now. Time for history books, and fables, and long letters. And for other words, too.

Our writer was kneeling with a handful of loaned-out scarves he fully intended to steal when a brisk, upbeat knock livened up his door.

He knew it was Fíli by the timbre of that good morning rap-rap, but answered with an expression of pleased surprise, anyway. You shouldn’t let on when you are this at-peace with the final act of your fairytale. You should at least try to act like things can still excite you, now and again.

“Hello, Bilbo,” the prince said with his typical congeniality, which was that of mild midmorning sunshine. Enough warmth to inspire happiness, but not enough to burn the tip of your nose. He cocked his braid-heavy head and gave a teasing *hmm* of disapproval. “Packing away awfully late, aren’t we? Not very like a hobbit, I’m told.”

“And you’re up awfully early, prince—not at all like a dwarf,” he sassed back, in decent bandying form once more, and glad for it. This was the way Master Baggins and Fíli of Dís talked to one another, and on a day as auspicious and a dénouement as soft, it would have been a shame not to honor it.

Barbs accomplished, he stepped aside to bid Fíli enter, and it should’ve given him ill feelings to have an unannounced visit from a prince, but it didn’t. It should at least have tickled his pessimistic sense, should have rankled his suspicion. And yet such an all-seeing calm had come upon Bilbo, he seemed to already know everything. And to understand—with airy heart and weary contentment and stone-sure constitution—what every inch of it meant.

“Best to get all of your bags sorted now,” his royal caller mused, not yet dressed for a court or council but merely striding about in a smart blue coat and his comfortable boots. Fíli observed the diplomatic suite as if he had something to be nosy about, but it wasn’t a place our writer had lived in long enough to betray his habits or his mind. There was only Belladonna’s portrait there on the mantle, and she’d tell no secrets of yours. “Trust me: in a few hours, you’re going to be in no state to organize. All ready for your go-away bash this evening?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be to drink myself drunk on whatever swill you’re calling good mead these days. You’re not too craven to show your face there, I expect.”

“Kíli and I will be there, of course. We wouldn’t neglect a chance to darken the doorstep and spoil your party.”

They smiled stiffly at one another. Bilbo thumped the trunk shut and watched it fall with only a faint, certain soreness in his chest, demarcating the place where muscle had once clustered hopeful and tight.
You know, he said. He said I was sort of expecting your uncle.

Fíli turned away from the casual study of Master Baggins’s candelabras to grimace over his stale grin. His eyes apologized in a way that knew they could not really make up for it, not with all the quick-witted jibes or tall-tales in the world. “I know that, yes. I’m sorry, Bilbo. He did send me with this.”

A small parcel, unfussy, quick enough to be slipped into the prince’s front pocket between the ram’s wool and the Durin blue. Bilbo accepted it gracefully, understanding well that this would be the way of it, too.

“It’s not that he didn’t want to be here,” Fíli offered, a frail and awkward excuse, trying to weaken the blow and smother the anger and communicate what he could not. Bilbo wasn’t listening, though. He did not have any questions or hunger for answers. He gave the red dwarven paper a halfhearted shake, but there wasn’t enough there to do anything apart from an empty, uninspiring thump.

“Can I open it?” he wondered, and the merry question in his untroubled voice would have taken him off-guard, if it had been a year ago.

“You’d better,” Fíli egged. “I want to see.”

Bilbo saw no reason not to. Nothing on this green earth could have upset him now. So he unfolded the modest wrapping and shook its contents into his hand.

Fíli squinted down at it, confused. He may have been expecting a sigil of some sort, or an emerald, or at least a key on a chain. But he had clearly never seen this humble, age-worn thing before in his life. It annoyed him, if the prince’s face was any indication, on Master Baggins’s behalf, and he peered harder, trying to decipher meaning from a symbol that contained no message he could read.

“Don’t look at me,” fobbed the golden prince, throwing in his towel. He shrugged uselessly and gave an irritated, unimpressed sigh. “A pretty lackluster parting gift, if you’ve any interest in my opinion. Does it make any sense to you? Is there a note?”

More astonishing than anything else: there was. A missive, of a sort. Written on the paper in a florid, guilty hand:

I am sorry. I cannot come. Return, someday.

No, Bilbo said, pressed Thrór’s carven black arrowhead into his palm, and crinkled the paper up in a fist.

“Who really knows with Uncle. Well, at least I didn’t break it on the way over. Which means my job here is done,” Fíli announced, a little too buoyant, shoring up some happiness with a mouthful of teeth. Bilbo mirrored it without difficulty. The prince gave the hobbit an affectionate cuff in the arm with his paw. “I’ll see you tonight, then?”

“Would I skip my own party? Tonight,” Master Baggins agreed, cuffed him back, tossed out the used paper, and walked his guest calmly to the door.

And shut it again.
He gave no reason why. But Bilbo reckoned he didn’t terribly need one. Or want one, perhaps—not from Thorin—for he has learned there are certain words that ought not be written, and certain blank pages that ask from their reader nothing but mercy. And here you will learn one last thing about Master Baggins. For your writer may have been a liar, and a thief, and an oathbreaker, too. But he had never been cruel, my dear. He would rather live in that unfulfilled summer unending than cause the people he loves any pain.

And if he breaks his tale here, for the sake of himself and his own history, he hopes you will be merciful, too.

Bilbo opened his notebook to think a little longer on his project of the past nine days. It should have been a closing chapter, or a file of notes, or a list of quotations and lineage documents that needed correcting. But it was none of those things. Instead, a letter—half-written, ragged-edged, weak from creasing and uncreasing, tucked there safely away.

He tucked it back. He closed the book. He fastened its latch. He slipped it into the top of his trunk, and buckled the lid neatly, until there were no seams or scarves or weak spots showing through.

He capped a final ink bottle.

He put his stray quills away.

*Words aren’t everything, you know,* he told Belladonna, folded her picture back into his pocket, and departed his desk.

He went for a walk in the winter, instead.

**OOO**

Captain Tauriel tripped over him and sent them both onto the thin wet snow.

She was, to put it kindly, unbraided. She looked every bit like a lady bowled out of a hayloft. The elf, who was still stuck in the final stages of tripping and dressing alike, had bits of wool in her hair like déjà vu; she was carrying a suspiciously comfortable quilt to have found in a stable; and—for a warrior on afternoon watch—she was missing a questionable number of snaps at the neck of her stitched hunting coat.

They sprawled into the slush. Tauriel, staggering to hands-and-knees; Bilbo, smack-whump on his rear.

There was a moment of cursing and clambering as the elf and the hobbit relocated their limbs and righted them again. There was another moment of achy-joined, skinned-knee standing. There was a moment of speechlessness, too.

“Bilb—” Her apology skittered to a stop. He was positively glaring up at her, arms crossed, toe tapping, hair drift-damp, daring an explanation to climb out over Tauriel’s tongue. Their breaths fogged. Faraway, in the wide-open flat fields, a shepherd was chasing black ewes back into their toasty lean-to for lunch.

“Master Baggins,” she corrected, trying to placate a Shireling with good manners. Or as good as manners can be after you’ve gone sprinting boldly right over a gentlehobbit while he was out for a
one o’clock stroll. “I was just—”

It wasn’t her fault, really. No more than the last time. At least, she hadn’t meant their unfortunate encounters maliciously. But, through no wrongdoing of her own, Captain Tauriel seemed fated to violently catch our writer in his most pensive and grumpy moods.

“Oh, save it,” Bilbo snapped, shaking off a weather-induced shiver, and reaching down to snatch up her castaway blanket. He thrust a handful of fabric up and out for the lady, bright-cheeked under her freckles—mortified, really—to collect. He steamed. He thought about poking his head into the barn to scold a second-prince right out of whatever haypile he was hiding in, but determined he would rather not witness little Kili in a state of undress. He glanced grudgingly about, looking for threats, and saw no one in earshot—no one but a farmyard tom, emerging from the stable to curl around her long shin.

He grumbled: I know.

It did not seem to rightaway click. Tauriel stood in her place, blanket bundled nervously around her arms, smaller and smaller until she’d no more space to roll. Cat green eyes blinked. A goat snug in its stall issued a contemplative baa.

“You—” She swallowed. “—know?”

He dusted some snowfall from his lapels, and stepped back onto the cobbled path curving into the barn, trying to keep cold mud off his boots. The sky above them was a sodden purple-gray, the humid and still variety, undecided if it would next flurry or sleet. Every footfall could be heard as a crunch or a slop or a tap-tap on the stone in this rising mist.

“I can’t believe everyone doesn’t,” Master Baggins marveled, flippant, giving his already muddy heels a heavy stomp. “The way the both of you dance around. It’s indecent.”

Oh, the clever elf! When cornered, she loses all of her cattiness and drops her quills. She stands petrified like a tame doe in the face of a bear and swallows, swallows, swallows. The bored orange tabby, winding gaily around Bilbo’s leg now, was a much more comfortable red than that tumble of brushfire hair. Tauriel stood stock-still. She gave no one and nothing away. She did not even seem to breathe.

Our writer was getting bored, too. He picked up the friendly tom and gave it a defiant ear scratch.

“He told me,” she finally managed, scraping sound up from the lowest and most rusty depths of her gut. “He told me that if confronted, I should tell them. I should tell them about—”

“‘Speciological contrarieties!’ Bah!” Bilbo groused, shouldered the cat, and walked on.

Until it was night. And until it was morning again.

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