Come to Morning

by sunryder

Summary

John Watson was a Shire Hobbit, born and bred, but he was really quite terrible at it. Perhaps that's why Bilbo Baggins has never heard his story before. Or maybe he's never been told because John Watson ran away from home, then darted around Middle Earth trying to stop a serial killer, and fell in love with an Elf.

(LOTR fusion with Sherlock, and an extensive explanation for this insanity in the notes.)

Notes

A little over a year ago I wrote a fusion with Sherlock and LOTR and though I was happy with it, it was never quite what I wanted. I'd yet to see the second series of Sherlock when I wrote the story and I always meant to come back to it with that new information in mind, but I just never got around to it.

And then I saw The Hobbit.

Back when I wrote the story the first time I visualized Gandalf telling this story to Bilbo, and now that I've seen the movie (and started re-reading the book), I know where I always wanted the story to go. So now, fully armed with series two and my newly developed infatuation with the Bagginshield ship, I'm remixing my own story.

The main story will be a LOTR/Sherlock fusion, framed by The Hobbit where Gandalf will
be telling this story to Bilbo & Co. I'll keep the framing sections in clearly labeled separate chapters so that the people who have no desire to read about *The Hobbit* don't have to and can jump straight to the parts about John and Sherlock.

(If any of that gets confusing, let me know and I'll try and clean it up. Also, I warn you, this is presently un-betaed.)

ETA: There's now a translation of this story into French! The lovely Nordremo's translation is [here](#)!
It was Bofur who asked, that first night after the Trolls, which Bilbo supposed was to be expected. Before surviving the Trolls most of the company had been fond of Bilbo in the way that a Hobbit was fond of their favorite sheep, but buying them all time until Gandalf's sunrise seemed to make the Dwarves suddenly see Bilbo as someone useful.

Well, most of the Dwarves. Thorin Oakenshield was still Thorin Oakenshield and no amount of clever Hobbit-speak would change that.

New status or not, Bilbo knew curiosity when he saw it – he'd been looking at it in the mirror for 50 years, after all – and Ori had wanted to ask about Hobbits from the very first moment he stepped into the Shire. Now that Bilbo was something more than a sheep but less than a Dwarf it was finally acceptable for Ori to ask. Of course, despite Ori’s full day of longing looks while they made their way through the forest, it was Bofur who felt sure enough of his friendship with Bilbo (and sure enough that Thorin wouldn't cut him down where he stood) to actually ask a question.

At the end of their latest day of trekking Bilbo settled in on a relatively flat rock near their fire, while Kíli and Fíli took care of handing out the bowls of stew, both as their punishment for letting Bilbo out of their sight the night before and a precaution against Bilbo stumbling across any more Trolls. Bilbo had barely taken a slow spoonful of the hot concoction when Bofur plopped down with a thump on the dirt beside him. Bilbo paused between bites, anticipating the friendly, jarring thump of Bofur's hand on his back before it made him spill. However, the month he'd spent constantly surrounded by Dwarves had not prepared him for the blunt way Bofur asked, "So, how does a Hobbit meet Gandalf Tharkûn?"

Bilbo quirked an eyebrow and repeated back, "Tarkoon?"

Ori dropped down on Bilbo's other side and opened his mouth wide, as though that would help Bilbo see his tongue while he over-enunciated, "Tuh-huh-ar-koon."

Bilbo muttered the word to himself several times trying to find the right rhythm to the Khuzdul word while Ori repeated it with him. The dwarves rarely spoke Khuzdul around Bilbo, so every time they dropped a word in their native tongue Bilbo soaked it up with fascination. When he'd finally mastered the pronunciation he turned back to Bofur and asked, "What's Tharkûn?"

Bofur looked up from licking his empty bowl (he'd devoured the whole thing in the few moments of Bilbo's lesson) and replied, "Staff man." Bilbo looked up at Gandalf who was seated on a pile of rocks nearby their encampment, slowly puffing away at his pipe, his staff propped up beside him with his hat perched on the wood’s gnarled peak. Considering that staff had cracked a rock and brought the sunrise not 24 hours before, he supposed it was a good identifying feature.

Bofur nudged him, "So, how did you meet him?"

Bilbo plucked his pipe out of his coat pocket with a deliberate smirk, one that Gandalf ignored with a muted grumble and a deliberately irritated puff. Bilbo steadily lit the Old Toby in his pipe, ignoring the warning that came attached to an irritated wizard and answered, "Mr. Gandalf has the best fireworks you've ever seen."
Kíli and Fíli stopped dead in their distributions and pounced over to the fire, with Kíli demanding, "Fireworks?"

Bilbo let out a pleased circle of smoke and replied, "He'd come for the Midsummer Eve, set off his fireworks, cause a ruckus, and be gone with a barrel of the finest pipe weed in the Shire before the Thain even had the chance to scold him."

Gandalf humphed, "Gerontius Took never scolded me a day in his life. In fact, if your grandmother had been a less formidable woman then he would've fled the Shire with me on many an adventure."

Having been on the receiving end of Grandmother Adamanta's switch more than once in his youth, Bilbo knew precisely what Gandalf was talking about. "She was a Chubb," Bilbo shrugged, "you know what they can be like."

"Says the Baggins of Bag End." Gandalf snorted.

Bilbo bristled and pointed the mouth of his pipe back at the wizard, "You cannot complain about my family while you are smoking my pipe weed Gandalf, its just bad form."

"What's a Chubb?" Fíli interrupted.

"Chubbs," Gandalf explained, "are the family of Bilbo's mother's mother. They are wealthy, well fed, and even more prone to avoiding excitement than most Hobbits. In fact, they are not unlike your Stiffbeards."

The rest of the Dwarves around the circle grimaced at the mention of the other clan, and after a lifetime of dealing with Chubb cousins, Bilbo couldn't find it in himself to object to the comparison. "So this 'Thain'" Kíli asked, "he was your grandfather? Was he a burglar too?"

Bilbo popped out of his comfortable slouch, bristling at the insult. "Gerontius Took was not a burglar. He was the Thain of the Shire for 72 years and is famous for being the oldest Hobbit there ever was."

Ori looked up from the small book where he was scratching down notes and asked, "And how old was that?"

Bilbo leaned close and stage whispered, "Gerontius 'The Old' lived to be 130."

The Dwarves in the circle 'round the fire paused at the declaration, thrown by the pride in Bilbo’s voice and Bofur gently asked, "How long do Hobbits usually live for?"

Bilbo seemed surprised by the question, so Gandalf replied, "Most Hobbits average 100 years, Bofur. Gerontius was the remarkable exception to the rule."

The Dwarves shared quick glances at the realization that there was probably a reason that Hobbits were so prone to home and hearth if that was all the time they had, but every Dwarf was careful not to look at Thorin’s reaction to the news. Noticing the change in mood, Bilbo asked, "Why, how long to Dwarves live for?"

The circle exchanged awkward looks before Balin replied, "About 250 years, laddie."

Bilbo’s eyes widened, "250 years?"

"Aye, Kíli here is the youngest of us and he's 77."
Bilbo very nearly dropped his pipe in shock while he twisted around to stare at the brunette Dwarf in question, "You're 77?"

"Of course." Kili puffed out his chest, "Why, did you think I was young?"

"No! I just," Bilbo paused to backtrack, "wouldn't have guessed that. I'm 50, practically middle-aged for a Hobbit."

Kili ruffled Bilbo’s curly locks in amusement; “If you were a Dwarf we would’ve deemed you too young to accompany us, Master Baggins.”

Bilbo shrugged off Kili’s teasing hands while Fili laughed at them both and asked, "So this Gerontius was the Hobbit who brought Gandalf to the Shire?"

Bilbo was about to reply ‘yes, of course,’ when Gandalf interrupted, "No.” The dwarves saw the look of surprise on Bilbo’s face and looked to Gandalf for a bit more explanation. “Make no mistake, Gerontius drew me back to the Hobbit’s corner of the world when I had not been there in centuries, but he was not my first Hobbit companion."

Bilbo stared at Gandalf, his pipe hanging dumbly by his side and said, "Grandfather always said you acted like you'd never seen a Hobbit before."

"It was not that I'd never seen them," Gandalf scolded, "it was that it had been so long that I'd almost forgotten what they looked like."

"How long, Gandalf?" Kili asked. "How long were you away?"

Gandalf leaned back against the rock behind him and looked up at the stars, letting the smoke trail out slowly over his lips like he had to think for a long moment before he could remember. Their bowls of stew set aside, no Dwarf was willing to rush him, and so they waited in patient silence until Gandalf answered quietly, "Over a thousand years passed from the first time I entered the Shire until I returned there and Gerontius persuaded me to stay."

The silence broken, the Dwarves called out questions to Gandalf, demanding to know what had kept him away, had he been injured, was he perfecting his fireworks? They would have gone on, the moment for the story lost to their curiosity, but from his place on watch outside the circle Thorin interrupted with a "Stop," and a certainty to his voice that the rest of them lacked. "The question is: why did he leave in the first place?"

Dwalin snickered, "Perhaps the Shire really is just that dull that you don't need to visit it for centuries."

"I have known many people on my travels Master Dwalin," Gandalf snapped. "Some of them I am far more fond of than others, and none more than the first Hobbit of my acquaintance."

No one dared speak, a little frightened of the wizard’s irritation, until Bilbo leaned forward and asked, “Gandalf? What happened?”

The wizard drew a long breath on his pipe, then let the smoke trail out so slowly that Bilbo could almost see it preparing to take shape like one of his smoke rings. The camp was utterly silent in anticipation, no Dwarf snickering about the grand tales of Hobbits, and no one bothering to conceal their attention.

When the silence was almost too much to bear Gandalf began, "John Hamish Watson was a Shire Hobbit, but to be honest, he was really quite terrible at it."
Chapter End Notes

1. Old Toby is a kind of pipe weed, purportedly the best in the Shire.
Concerning John Watson (J)

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the abominable delay in getting this to you. I caught the flu soon
after posting and it took me down hard. (It is surprisingly difficult to write, let alone
play in Tolkien's world, when you're doped up on medication.)

Again, I apologize, and it shouldn't happen again. I don't say *won't*, because that's
just jinxing myself. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John Hamish Watson was a Shire Hobbit, but to be honest, he was really quite terrible at it.

His father was from the virtually unknown Watson branch of the sometimes infamous Brandybuck
clan -- but the paternal Hobbit in question was so adamantly average, even for the Shire-folk, that
in three generations no one but the family historian would remember his name. Since anonymity
was a right and noble state for any Hobbit, no one could blame John Watson's strangeness on his
father.

No, the fault for John's peculiarities undoubtedly lay with his mother (She was a Took
after all).

Ianthe Took had been quite the lovely maid in her youth, with a smile like sunshine and a gift for
going even the most intractable of vegetables to grow. But despite those most Hobbit-like of
characteristics, her inborn Tookish sense of wildness was never truly tamed by her husband's
efforts to be nothing more than ordinary.

Ianthe had first borne Harriet Juniper Watson, a girl with chestnut curls and a Hobbit's love of quiet
afternoons and good ale. For years, father, wife, and child lived together in Buckland, a prosperous
territory just past the easternmost border of the Shire and the last stop before the road took you out
into the village of Bree and the world of Men. Most Hobbit-folk thought that Ianthe's oddities had
been worn down by the unrelenting plainness of her husband and child, but then John was born,
and Ianthe would never be ordinary again.

Little John Hamish Watson came two decades after his sister (what Hobbits considered far too
wide a gap between siblings), and from his very first moments he ran wild through the Old Forest
outside Buckland, reading books, learning Elvish, and seeking out trouble. The Shire gossips liked
to say that if John had been their child such outlandish behavior wouldn't have been tolerated.
(Honestly, books of all things!)

Of course, if John had been common, then he never would have wondered about the Elves,
tracking down every bit of myth and story he could find and being discontented with the little that
the Hobbits knew. Which means John never would have persuaded his mother to take him into the
woods to look for any passing wood Elves, and then he never would have run across a pack of
Orcs, and never would have had his leg broken trying to save his mother, and then he never would
have caught the interest of Gandalf the Grey, and then, well then we would have no story.

But as it was, John and Ianthe did roam into the woods in the hope of finding some passing Elves
(the two of them already developing a plan to visit Rivendell if they couldn't find any Elves closer
to home). They headed into the Old Forest outside Buckland early in the morning, with packs full of a picnic lunch and Took journals on plants, just in case they came across something new. That something new came when they sat down together for lunch on a blanket spread out in a glade dappled with sunlight. Ianthe was deftly assembling a sandwich while her baby boy rambled about all the questions he would ask his Elf when he finally found one (a conversation mother and child had had many times before), when three Orcs stumbled across the picnic.

Or at least, Ianthe and John assumed they were Orcs, never having before seen one beyond the bounds of their imagination. The Hobbits and the Orcs just stopped and stared at one another for a long moment, neither group having expected the presence of the other. Soon enough one of the foul creatures hissed, "What a tasty little mouthful." The Orc licked his sharp teeth and lurched forward on his awkward legs, his two companions still standing behind him dumbfounded. Ianthe was not a Took for nothing, and threw the knife she'd been using to slice bread at the Orc's face and shoved John to the side, screaming, "Run!"

The knife did nothing of course, but it bought them a moment while the Orc screeched in irritation. All three Orcs gave off fierce cries and came after the Hobbits, spears shaking and strange swords raised. But the Halflings were small and sure on their feet, and mother and son managed to evade the Orcs for several long minutes, darting around trees, ducking behind rocks, and slipping away just before foul Orc fingers seized them by the neck.

Eventually even Hobbit luck had to run out, and the lead Orc caught Ianthe by the back of her skirt. The fabric ripped when she twisted out of his grip, but she had been slowed down enough that one of the other Orcs could seize her by the waist. John heard his mother's shriek and turned on his heel to get back to her, accidentally shifting just in time to avoid the clutches of the third Orc. Ianthe fought against her captor, thrusting both large Hobbit feet hard into the main Orc's face. He stumbled back with a broken nose (or what John assumed was broken from the blood, but there was no telling with the creature's deformed features). John grabbed a branch off the forest floor while he ran and clubbed it as hard as he could across the Orc's face, sending him down to the ground.

John had been so focused on the Orc in front of him that he forgot about the Orc following behind, and was caught up in his grip. Thankfully the younger the Hobbit the smaller, and with a quick wriggle John dropped to the ground, twisting around to smash the branch into the Orc's face. While the creature was distracted John made for his mother, but Orcs didn't fight like Hobbit children, and rather than keep giving chase, the Orc that John had hit reared up with a shriek and unleashed one of its arrows at John's back. The Orc had terrible aim, even for so short a distance, and instead of piercing John's skull like he had intended, the arrow struck the young Hobbit in the thigh.

The pain of the wound drove John's small body to unconsciousness, and for many years John would not have been able to tell you what happened next.

When John came out of the darkness the sun was low in the sky, and his mother was running her shaking fingers through his tangled hair, gently crooning a sweet lullaby. She had paused just long enough to catch her breath in between bouts of hefting John's body towards their village and regular screams for someone from Buckland to come help her. Eventually other Hobbits found their courage and followed the noise into the Old Forest, dashing into the woods to help Ianthe carry her son.

At first light the next day the bravest of the Hobbits (Ianthe among them) strode back into the woods to gather up their fallen packs and to burn the eviscerated corpses that were all that was left of the attacking Orcs. (It wasn't until days later that anyone thought to ask Ianthe what had saved them both, but she'd just smiled the sort of mysterious expression that made people mutter about Tooks, kissed John on the forehead, and held her tongue.)
Despite still being alive. John's leg had been ravaged by the filth of the arrow, and though the Shire's resident healer was gifted enough to handle stubbed toes, hangovers, and overfull stomachs, he lacked the skill to properly see to John's limb. (It probably didn't help matters that the healer Hobbit had spent his afternoon drinking at the local pub in order to summon up the courage to tend to the wound.) And so John Watson had his leg wrapped up in a splint, and forever left with a limp; not enough to stop the stubborn little Hobbit, but enough to make him different.

(Those Hobbits who couldn't bring themselves to blame Ianthe liked to whisper that all John's oddness had started with that leg.)

John had been so bothered over the use of his leg that he'd hobbled out of the village as soon as he was able. There was a witchy old Hobbitess who lived beside the Old Forest on the road out of town, and John went straight to her hut and demanded that she teach him how the Buckland healer should've done things. After that he limped to her house¹ every day for months on end, wanting to know every last thing she knew about medicine so that the next time one of his fellow Hobbits needed healing they'd have someone who knew how to tend to them properly. After years of that, the witch Hobbit declared that she had nothing more to teach him, and so John went on and demanded the same treatment from every other healer in the Shire.

There was quiet gossip amongst the other Hobbits about how all that learning was unnatural, but for the most part they wrote it off as one of those odd phases young people were so prone to go through. It wasn't terrible to have another healer in the Shire, especially one who travelled the whole length and breadth of the land, as John was prone to. But they generally assumed that sweet John Watson would soon find a lovely Hobbit girl who would cure him of all these silly notions about medicine, and then he'd settle quietly back into the family garden with the whole affair forgotten.

However, the day John started roaming out of the Shire and into the village of Bree to consult with a human on the subject of healing, his fellow Hobbits decided that things had gone too far. The whole Watson family (and quite a few Brandybucks) sat John down for a good meal (for all weighty Hobbit conversations must be conducted on a full stomach) and John proceeded to be scolded by his father, then his sister, then his neighbors, then the nosy widow down the hill, then the head of the Brandybuck family, and finally the healer who'd crippled him in the first place. (Needless to say, that last confrontation hadn't gone particularly well.)

John had ignored them all, kissed his mother's cheek while she kept feeding him cake and sympathetic looks throughout the conversation, and moved out of his father's home that very night. He set himself up in the particularly small wooden house that had years ago belonged to the old Hobbitess who'd first trained him, having been left the structure and the land in her will, but never before wanting to go. The house sat at the very edge of Buckland, right on the pathway out of town and into Bree, and John lived there quite contentedly for years. He became the healer for the braver of the Shire-hobbits, most of the Menfolk and Hobbitfolk of Bree, and a surprisingly large number of the various peoples who travelled through that town as well.

And so John Watson spent his years, buying books from the town of men and demanding stories about the wide world outside his house in exchange for remedies, until one day he hobbled home from an afternoon walk and found a Dwarf waiting in his herb garden.

The dwarf was plump (even to a Hobbit), with ruddy cheeks and a sandy beard that -- before it had devolved into fuzz -- might once have been considered curly. He wore thin spectacles and a thick brown coat that stretched down to his knees, and under other circumstances he might have been considered nothing more than a particularly tall Hobbit. The dwarf was called Stamford, and the
human healer at Bree had been unable to help him with his stomach problems. The man had sent the Dwarf on to 'that Shire-Hobbit' who might be able to do more.

With a smile John waived the Dwarf further into the garden, past the strictly organized rows of medicinal herbs and straight to the wide bench John had put under his willow for any species too large to fit in his admittedly tiny home. John chatted aimlessly with Stamford while he checked over the Dwarf, asking about what had brought him to Bree. (As for the digestive troubles, they were nothing a strong peppermint tea before dinner for the next few weeks wouldn't solve.) Afterwards John brewed some of the tea in question and brought out a plate of biscuits while he listened to Stamford's tales of life in the Dwarvish stronghold of Moria in the Misty Mountains.\(^2\) (Since Bree was the furthest John had ever been, and was ever likely to go, he rather enjoyed taking payment for his services in the form of stories of places he'd never see.)

At the end of their chat John led the rather genial Dwarf to his front gate, offering to buy him a pint at the local pub, only to stop at the sight of a Wizard standing outside his gate, drawing long puffs on his pipe and staring at them both with a smile in his eyes.

Mind you, John hadn't known the rather intense, grey-cloaked human was a wizard at the time, he'd just assumed that one of the more eccentric travelers through Bree had come for some healing of his own. It wasn't until Stamford sobered and dipped his head so low in respect that his thin beard trailed along the ground that John first thought anything might be odd. "Gandalf Tharkun, it is an honor to greet you," Stamford said, elbowing John in the side to make him to genuflect in whatever way suited a Hobbit.

When John merely raised an eyebrow at Stamford like it was a ridiculous suggestion, the dwarf stumbled on, trying to cover up for John's slight. "I am Stamford son of Stamfred of the Mines of Moria, and this is John Watson, of the Shire."

The Wizard gave John a long and appraising look, while the Hobbit merely gave a polite, if equally assessing, nod in reply. Gandalf grinned at John as though he'd passed some test by not puffing out his chest and pretending he was uninterested in the outlander staring at him. "I've heard a great deal about you Doctor Watson."

John snorted, "All of it distasteful, I'm sure. And I doubt any of them called me 'Doctor'."

"We cannot control the foolish decisions of others, and any who does not recognize your gift is nothing less than a fool." The wizard replied with a very pointed puff of his pipe.

John scoffed at the Wizard's fine words and asked, "How can I help you, sir?"

Gandalf smirked at John, sure from the slight blush to the Hobbit's cheeks that John knew full well he was a talented doctor, but that didn't make it any less lovely to have someone actually say so. "Truthfully, I thought I might be able to help you, Master Doctor."

John folded his arms across his chest, adopting a defensive position and ignoring the way Stamford glowered at him for doing anything that might be considered an affront to the wizard. "Really, and how might that be?"

Gandalf chuckled again and leaned on his staff as he strode up the walk and settled himself down on the Hobbit-sized bench in John's garden. "I'm on my way to Rivendell, to the house of Master Elrond, the great Elven healer." John froze, willing himself not to leap to any conclusions about the conversation. Then Gandalf proved the leaping quite correct, "I thought you might like to come along with me."
John tamped down his flair of excitement and asked, "Sorry-- why would you want to take me with you?"

The Wizard smirked, already sure of John's answer, "I've spent the last month traveling around the Shire, getting know its people and its customs, and you my young friend are the only interesting thing I've found since I've been here."

"Oh now, that's a bit harsh."

"I admit, your pipe weed is lovely," Gandalf gestured with the pipe between his lips as though that would make it more true, "and your ale isn't bad, but the whole of the Shire is so petrified of the outside world that they panicked at the mere thought of men coming to visit you, even here out on the edge of Buckland. They live in hiding, ignoring the realities of life in this world. All of them... except for you. You go seeking it. And from the whispers I've heard, you've been preparing to move to Bree anyway, so why not go a few steps farther and find someplace where they've still got something still to teach you?"

John stopped himself from accepting the plan quite so easily, "Why would an Elf be willing to share the secrets of their healing with a Hobbit?"

"Because a wizard asks them to!" Gandalf guffawed. Now tell me child, are you going to keep on questioning your turn of fortune or are you going to accept it for the luck it is?"

John held up his hands and sputtered, "Now wait just a minute-"

"Come, come lad," the Wizard prodded, "we don't have all day!"

"Do you always insist that people make life-changing decisions at the drop of a hat?" John snapped.

"You know your answer already, John Watson. It's a waste of my time and yours to pretend otherwise." The small Hobbit and the elderly wizard stared at one another for several long moments, Gandalf trying to goad John into going while John was busy trying to get the measure of this man standing in his garden and offering to whisk him away like some dream come to life.

John said yes, just as the wizard knew he would, and took an hour to sneak to his mother's house and say goodbye where his father couldn't see, then pack up a few of his journals, some extra clothes, the best of his books, and was almost gone before he found his sister Harry at his door.

She stormed into the house, slamming the door behind her and looked at John with terrified, incredulous eyes. "There's a dwarf in your garden!"

"Yes," John smiled, "he's going with Gandalf and I as far as Bree."

"What?" Harry screeched.

"Well we offered to bring him along with us to Rivendell since it's on his way home, but he just muttered things that I do believe were Dwarvish curse words and refused."

"What!" she demanded once again.

John put on his most innocent of faces and replied, "I know, it seemed strange to me too, but apparently Dwarves and Elves hate one another just as much as the stories say."

"John Watson!" she snapped, "That's not what I'm asking and you know it! What on Middle-Earth
As much as John would like to believe otherwise about himself, there was no one in the world who made him lose his temper like Harry. "I'm thinking that I hate it here, Harry. I'm thinking that if I get called 'that sad, strange, Watson boy one more time that I'm going to do something that will get me thrown out of the Shire anyway, so I might as well leave first!"

"And you think you'll be happier out there?" Harry spat.

"Anyplace has got to be better than here!" John shouted back.

John wasn't the only member of the Watson family with a temper, and Harry lashed out and struck John across the cheek. The Watson siblings stood there for one long, silent moment before Harry surged forward, hands out, murmuring, "Oh, Johnny, Johnny. I'm so sorry-"

John just caught Harry by the wrists and kept her from touching him, ever so gently pushing her back. "I can't stay, Harry. I just can't. I won't spend the rest of my life wondering what's beyond Bree when I can go there and see it! Not when staying means that I'll be hated for wanting to go."

"John," Harry sighed, like he was missing the point, "it's not about being the most Hobbity of Hobbits, John. It's about staying where you belong."

John gave her an exasperated laugh and moved back to finish packing, "Harry, you and I both know that I don't belong here. And I won't spent the rest of my days pretending like I do. Not like you."

"I belong here completely." Harry huffed.

John slammed down the books he'd been trying to stuff into his pack and shouted, "You're in love with Clara, but you're marrying her brother! All you care about is 'what's proper' rather than what makes you happy!" Harry looked absolutely stricken, and John stepped forward to gather her hands in his, "I can't live like that Harry. And more to the point, I won't."

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead and tucked a stray curl back behind her ear before he finished, "I love you Harry, always will."

With that, John put on his pack, quietly enduring while Harry fussed over the straps with tears in her eyes, straightening invisible wrinkles with steady hands. Until finally she whispered, "You have to come home."

John gave her a gentle smile, "I mean to. After all, what's the point in seeing the world if you've got no one to tell about it?"

Chapter End Notes

1. Only particularly wealthy Hobbits lived in Hobbit Holes, and the rest had actual houses. (Which is why the size and beauty of Bag End tells you quite a bit about how well off Bilbo is.)

2. I know what you're thinking, 'Sunryder, Moria is that place in Two Towers where the Dwarves got driven out on account of the Balrog. Dwarves don't live there.' But in fact, Dwarves lived in Moria until 1981 of the Third Age. This story happens before
they were expelled. (And yes, I know what year this story happens, but you don't get to
know that yet. It's part of the plot.)
Chapter Notes

I told you I'd jinx myself.

My only defense is that it's now tax season and I got a job with a new firm last week. However, I have successfully re-written enough chapters ahead that I intend to start posting every other day rather than ever ten. I can only hope that I haven't fallen far enough behind that you've decided to give up on me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I mean to. After all, what's the point in seeing the world if you've got no one to tell about it?"

The wizard delivered the quote in the same amiable tone that he'd used for the rest of the story, spinning out tendrils of magic that interwove with every word the tale. If you let yourself believe, you could almost see a younger version of Bilbo, hair a few shades lighter and features a little harder from years without Bilbo's own creature comforts.

But the innocence of Gandalf's tone wasn't enough to lure in Thorin.

The Dwarf prince snorted at the wizard's utter lack of subtlety and walked away from the spot outside the circle where he'd been pretending not to listen. The Company had spent their lives watching their king, and they took Thorin's departure as a sign of his disapproval. That meant that despite their own preferences, the tale was done for the night. With a grace born from years of moderating the line of Durin, Balin patted Bilbo on the shoulder and said, "Come my boy, the hour grows late and we all ought to get some rest before the morning is upon us."

Bilbo wanted to object, this was his story, his people, but Fíli's steady hand on his shoulder kept Bilbo from demanding anything. The young Dwarf and his golden-haired brother had always been warmer with Bilbo than most of the company, maybe because of their youth, or maybe just because few things seemed to irritate their Uncle like the continued presence of Bilbo Baggins. (Either way, Bilbo was certain that relations between him and the young Dwarves had only been helped by Bilbo taking all the blame for 'charging headfirst' into the Troll incident without first calling for help.) So when Fíli gave just the slightest shake of his head to warn Bilbo off, he took it for the sound advice it probably was and grumpily adjourned to his bedroll.

As with most nights, Bilbo settled as close to the edge of camp as common sense would let him, always careful to put the whole diameter of their group between him and Thorin. On this particular night, had Bilbo been a bit more devious, he would've noticed the way Bifur set himself down for the watch between the Hobbit and the rest of the company, a dividing line to give the Halfling the peace and quiet he needed for the conversation Bifur was certain Bilbo didn't know he was about to have with the princes. The inability to speak with non-Dwarven folk did not mean that Bifur had forgotten how to watch, and Fíli had been so obvious about calming the Hobbit that Bifur was frankly disappointed more of the Company hadn't noticed. And even if they hadn't noticed that, surely they'd notice the way Fíli and Kíli had forgone sleeping beside their Uncle for the first time in their journey to instead bracket the Hobbit. Bifur snorted at the foolishness of khîm\(^1\), certain that never had he been so unsubtle when he was a youth.
Of course, that was the moment Nori chose to amble past, laying with his feet to the fire and his head right beside the trio. Despite having to walk the length and breadth of the camp to get there, Nori's chosen profession of thief and troublemaker meant he could make the whole thing look natural. Kíli tried to stumble out some kind of plausible objection to Nori's presence, but before he could make either an ass or an idiot out of himself Bifur kicked the Dwarfling's foot and the boy shut right up.

With Nori there to glower at them whenever they opened their mouths, the Dwarvlings at least had the sense to wait until the rest of the Company had fallen asleep.

Finally, Nori turned his stare on the Hobbit and waited until the boy realized he was the object of someone's attention. Had the small khîmbeen a Dwarf he would've been trained from first breath to know when another's eyes were on him, but as it was, Bilbo didn't even notice Fíli and Kíli twitching in the hope it would rouse him to suspicion. Eventually Fíli slipped a foot out from under his blanket and kicked Bilbo in the shin. Or, at least, he tried. Considering he was aiming for the spot in the blanket where Kíli's ankles would've normally been, all he did was jerk the cover off Bilbo's feet.

The Hobbit squeaked and flopped over to hiss at Fíli, "What are you doing?"

Bilbo was obviously irritated with the whole night, first hearing about this hero-Hobbit and then having the story cut off before it could get anyplace. Fíli raised his hands in placation and replied, "We, I mean-"

"He's a Wizard," Nori interrupted.

Bilbo turned his dissatisfied glower on Nori and declared, "I'm well aware Gandalf is a Wizard, thank you."

"No boy, you're not. As fond as Mister Gandalf seems to be of you, that doesn't mean he wouldn't douse your fire if need demanded it."

Bilbo sputtered in offense for his friend, but from behind Bilbo's back Kíli reached out and grasped his shoulder, pulling him onto his back so Fíli could talk to more than his curls. "Gandalf is a good staff to have on your side in a fight, but he's still a Wizard. He's not a Dwarf."

A flare of pain that Bilbo's innocent face had never been able to conceal slipped across his features before he smoothed them out, "I'm not a Dwarf either, does that mean I'm untrustworthy?"

Kíli somehow found a way to leap onto Bilbo's side despite lying down, "We trust you Bilbo, it's just-"

"Thorin doesn't," Bilbo snapped.

Nori snorted, "Don't let that get to you, boy. Thorin doesn't even trust people with his blood."

"You mean other Dwarves?"

"No, he means Uncle Thorin's cousin, Dáin," Kíli explained. "Dáin is Lord of the Iron Hills, next in line behind Fíli and I."

"And Thorin doesn't like him because he stands to inherit?"

Kíli tried to backtrack, "Uncle Thorin likes him fine, he's just…"
"A spineless, passionless, waste of the line of Durin," Nori interrupted.

Fíli laughed against Bilbo's back, and Kíli tried desperately to keep a straight face and object, "He's really not all that bad," but it was difficult when he couldn't quite restrain his giggles. "Dáin's a good King, and if something happens to the three of us he really is the best sort of Dwarf to take over. He'd be able to protect our people, and to get them back on their feet."

Fíli couldn't let that stand and added, "No one is like Thorin, though. He's the kind of King that our people will remember until the rebuilding. While Dáin, Dáin is a footnote. Dáin will be remembered because he was related to Uncle, and because he refused to stand with Uncle on this quest to reclaim the Mountain. That's all they'll sing about Dáin."

Kíli smacked his brother upside the head, "He's still family, Fíli."

"What does this have to do with Gandalf?" Bilbo interrupted.

"Gandalf is a wizard," Fíli began again.

"Yes," Bilbo interrupted, "You've said that several times now, with no explanation for why you think that matters."

Nori scooted closer and pressed his lips to Bilbo's ear, whispering, "His concerns are not our concerns. He's not here for love of Thorin, or love or Erebor. He's here for some reason that the rest of us know nothing about."

"And that means he's not to be trusted?" Bilbo snapped.

"It means that all trust in him should come with noggin of mead." Fíli took the conversation back before Nori could drive Bilbo to enough irritation that he'd snap at them all and wake up the rest of the Company. Gandalf included. "What Nori's trying to say is that no one knows why Gandalf agreed to come on this quest. Why he even thought it was a good idea in the first place. Maybe he's here because he really does want us to get our home back, or maybe he wants someone else to take care of Smaug for him, or maybe it's something completely else. None of us know, and until we do, Gandalf will be under suspicion."

Bilbo very obviously rolled his eyes at the Dwarves, finding the whole argument ridiculous, but rather than pointing it out to stubborn Dwarves when all Bilbo really wanted to do was sleep until he wasn't angry anymore, he asked, "But that doesn't tell me why you made him stop the story."

"Balin says that Wizards and Elves always have more than one purpose, and no matter how much they seem like they're helping you, you have to be ready for them to do what's best for them, not what's best for you." Fíli explained, like he was reciting a speech he'd heard many times before.

"Yes, you've said that."

"He's saying that Gandalf was giving your John Watson words that he wanted Uncle to hear," Kíli interrupted. "Gandalf doesn't like how Uncle hasn't forgiven the Elves, and doesn't like how Uncle was ready to come on this quest with just the fourteen of us rather than spending more time trying to convince more of our kin to come along." Kíli leaned all the closer along Bilbo's back, whispering into his ear, "Great-grandfather Thrór was ill in the end. We don't talk about it, but it was a sickness of the mind, a lust for gold that drove him mad. Gandalf knew Thrór, knew him near his last days, and it was Gandalf who encouraged our people to pay more heed to Grandfather Thráin than Great-Grandfather Thrór."
Bilbo looked past Fíli to the far end of the camp, where once again Thorin was sleeping upright, his back propped up against a tree and his sword resting in his lap, ready for anything that might befall them in the night. Bilbo whispered, "Gandalf thinks that Thorin might go the way of his Grandfather."

Bilbo could feel Fíli's head nodding beside him, and Kíli murmured Gandalf's final words tonight, "What's the point in seeing the world if you've got no one to tell about it. He meant that there's no point to this quest if we don't get a home at the end of it, and there's no point to gold if there's no one to share it with."

"And Thorin didn't want to hear it."

"It's a good story," Kíli consoled, "and the rest of us want to know what happens next."

Bilbo knew full well that if he kept pushing them, the boys would spill to him far more than they meant to about their family history in an attempt to pacify their Hobbit, but Bilbo didn't want to trick the boys into anything, not when they'd been so good to him. Instead Bilbo smiled, "Of course you do. It's a grand story about a Hobbit. Everyone should want to listen." Fíli and Kíli laughed happy and warm now that they felt like they'd properly explained things to Bilbo and made life right with their Hobbit again. The three youths all settled into their bedrolls, content to tease Bilbo about great Hobbit warriors until they dropped into sleep.

Nori tilted up his head and looked over their pile of blankets to meet eyes with Bifur, who had been watching the whole exchange with a furrowed brow. Durin's Folk had all known that Thrór wasn't in his right in the head when he went, but most of their people assumed it was the tragedy of losing Erebor that had done his mind in. That Thrór's madness might be something passed from father to son, a curse that would drag down the whole line of Durin, that had never entered their thoughts.

Bifur was no lord of Dwarves, no nobility in his blood like so many of the Company, just the son of miners and smithies. But that simple blood meant he knew the value of Thorin Oakenshield to their people in a way that the Lords of the line of Durin would never understand. Through Thrór's madness and Thráin's disappearance, it had been Thorin who'd led their people. The Dwarfling had risen up after the fall of Erebor, guiding their people to a secure safety that they'd all thought they'd never know again. Then, at the Battle of Azanulbizar, not even fully grown in the eyes of their people, he'd taken up that tree branch and made himself a legend.

For Thorin Oakenshield to fall to the madness that had driven his father and grandfather before him into the dirt would break the spirit of Durin's Folk in a way that neither Elf, nor Orc, nor Dragon would ever be able to achieve.

Bifur gave Nori a nod, signaling that on this matter he spoke for Bofur and Bombur as well, he'd tell them about the truth of it in the morning and their family would be in accord. Nori smirked, giving his own agreement on behalf of Ori and Nori as well, then dropped back to his bedroll. Nori would keep an eye on the Halfling, seeing to it that the little creature received all the information he needed to innocently keep prodding Gandalf to tell the story, and perhaps even let the lad do some prodding of his own. Óin and Glóin were Thorin's cousins, while Balin and Dwalin were trusted counselors, so Bifur assumed they already knew about the illness that was ravaging Durin's line. By lunch tomorrow the whole Company would know that whatever the fate of Erebor and Smaug, the mind of Thorin Oakenshield was more important.
FN 1: According to the only neo-Khuzdul dictionary I could find, khîm means "young".

FN 2: My own Dwarven equivalent to the idiom, 'sell you down the river'.

FN 3: Dagor Dagorath is basically Armageddon in the Tolkien universe. Morgoth (the ultimate big bad in Tolkien's universe, who is in fact, Sauron [the floating red eye]'s boss) will escape from the Void to which he has been expelled. Then after that there will be the greatest battle in the history of Middle-Earth and the land will be renewed by all the destruction. While the Men and Elves have their own parts to play in the renewing that may or may not be mentioned in a footnote later because they're important to the plot, the Dwarves believe that that after the end of the world they will all come together with their creator and rebuild Middle-Earth.

FN 4: noggin = small cup or mug; small amount of alcoholic liquor. I figured that the Dwarves wouldn't use 'grain of salt' as their idiom for maintaining skepticism, so this is a derivation of that. Fun fact, 'grain of salt' came from the Ancient belief that a grain of salt would be an antidote for poison. I figured Dwarves would believe that alcohol would serve a similar impossible purpose ;)

FN 5: The Dwarves are divided into seven different clans, Durin's Folk are all descended from Durin, one of the first Dwarves created by the Dwarves' god. Thorin & Co, as well as Gimli, and really any Dwarf you meet in Tolkien's stories all descend from Durin.
Sword Fight (B)

Chapter Notes

Contrary to what passed as popular opinion among the Dwarves of Erebor, Bilbo Baggins was not a stupid creature. He was well aware that he'd spent most of his life stocking his pantry and fussing over fabric while the rest of the Company had been fighting to scrape an existence out of dirt and fire. No, he hadn't been driven out of his ancestral home by a dragon, but, he'd survived the Fell Winter¹, and he'd taken the homeless and the hungry into Bag End where they might survive. To say nothing of how he'd been one of the few Hobbits willing to venture out into the harsh snow to meet with Gandalf and his Rangers so that they could pick up the supplies of food the Wizard brought and offer what little help the Hobbits could supply to the Big Folk in return.

No, Hobbit or not, Bilbo Baggins was not incompetent.

And yet, the Company of Dwarves had gotten… peculiar over the course of the night.

Bilbo had laid down to sleep nestled between two gossiping princes and woken up to find that nearly all the Dwarves had grown fond of him. Fíli, Kíli, Bofur, Balin and Ori had always been gentle with their burglar, teasing and treating him like he belonged with their Company rather than just an unfortunate side effect to dealing with a dragon, so their behavior was nothing odd. But the rest of them… well, Bilbo just didn't know what to make of it.

Breakfast had begun as ordinary, but then, instead of glowering at Bilbo when he came near the pot, Bombur had shifted his bulk out of the way and asked Bilbo what he thought of the spices the Dwarf had used. Bilbo had glanced over at Bofur to see if the other Dwarf might know why his rotund brother had suddenly developed an appreciation for Bilbo's palate when the morning before he'd threatened the Hobbit with a cleaver for getting too close. But Bofur just grinned and nodded Bilbo forward to give his counsel. Bilbo had steeled himself and taken a sip from the outstretched spoon. He had smiled at Bombur and 'hmm-ed' since honestly, it was quite tasty, even though it could've used a few more pinches of dill.

Bombur suddenly deciding that Bilbo wasn't a threat to his status as cook would've been easily excusable enough, perhaps just a delayed reaction to preventing Bombur from being chomped on by a Troll two days before. But then ancient Óin had kept step with Bilbo the whole morning, his ear trumpet tucked into the breast pocket of his cloak, rambling at Bilbo about the history of the Dwarves. The subject was quite interesting (they didn't hear much about Dwarven history in the Shire), but that didn't make the situation any less odd.

By the time they settled into camp for the night Bilbo had spent most of the afternoon spinning a story to himself about how one of the items they'd taken from the Troll's cave must've been infected with some sort of spell that was slowly driving them all mad. However, when the time came to set up camp Bilbo politely excused himself to go check on Gandalf and raise his concerns. When Bilbo finally did prod the wizard down into a crouch so the Hobbit could hiss the warning into his ear, the Wizard just laughed. Bilbo huffed at the Wizard's complete and utter lack of concern and declared, "I was being serious."

"I know you were my dear boy," he smiled.

"It's a legitimate concern, Gandalf!" Bilbo object, torn between the shouting he felt the situation deserved and not wanting to alert the rest of the Company.
"My dear Bilbo, you have spent the entirety of this journey wishing that the Company was just the slightest bit more fond of you, and now that they are, you suspect foul play."

Bilbo blushed at Gandalf's painful but accurate assessment of his relationship with the Dwarves and snapped, "It honestly doesn't seem more likely to you that the Dwarves would've been infected by something magical in that cave than they would suddenly find my company appealing?"

Gandalf had settled himself on a nearby rock and pulled out his pipe, content to let Bilbo fuss until the gentle-hobbit talked himself out of his own concerns. But upon that last declaration Gandalf froze in the middle of wiping the mouth of his pipe with a bit of his tunic and fixed the Hobbit with one of those looks that Bilbo was fairly certain meant the wizard was trying to pick things out of his mind. "'Infected'? That's an interesting way to describe it."

Bilbo flushed and as casually as possible avoided looking Gandalf in the eye while he replied, "It seemed perfectly accurate to me."

"Disturbingly accurate, young man. What do you know?"

"Know? I don't know anything. Unless of course you're talking about cooking," Bilbo rambled quickly, "because then I know a lot. Did you know that Bombur asked me what I thought about his spices this morning? We had a lovely little conversation about the best sort of seasonings that go with lamb and…" Bilbo just trailed off at Gandalf's steady puffs, patiently waiting for the Hobbit to accept that he wasn't going to be distracted. Bilbo cleared his throat and stumbled out, "The boys and I might've had a conversation."

"And what brought about this conversation on magical infections?"

Suddenly Bofur sprang up out of nowhere and grabbed Bilbo by the shoulder, "Beggin' your pardon Master Gandalf, but Dori is ready for sword practice with Bilbo."

"Sword practice?" Bilbo squeaked.

"Too right, can't be having you run around with that letter opener if you're not going to learn how to use it." With Bofur's grip on his arm Bilbo stumbled away from Gandalf and towards a flat stretch in the forest that most of the Company had been working diligently on after they settled in for the night. Bilbo had noticed how the Dwarves had been scraping leaves out of the way, shifted over the larger of the rocks, and tamping down bits of the ground to make it as level as possible, but he'd assumed that they had just decided that tonight of all nights was the time for creating a better sleeping place. Apparently they'd been crafting a place for Bilbo to learn swordplay where the only thing he'd be tripping over were his own two feet rather than rocks.

One did not live as long as Gandalf only to be a fool to the unsubtle ways of Dwarves, but rather than put up a fight at having the Hobbit stolen out from under him before he could be properly interrogated, Gandalf just took a long draw on his pipe and watched them go.

"The princes wanted to be the ones to do the teaching since we've only got a few swords-dwarves in the Company," Bofur explained, "but Dori says they're still learning themselves." They stepped into the newly made clearing at the precise right moment for Kíli to take a roaring leap off a log, his sword upraised to hack down onto Dori's exposed back. Bilbo started forward to do something about that, but Bofur grabbed him by the back of the coat and the Hobbit watched as Dori slipped easily to the side and left Kíli to bury his sword in the ground. "As you can see," Bofur smirked, "the princes didn't take too keenly to that estimation, but they've yet to prove Dori wrong." Fíli took a swing at Dori, putting himself between the older Dwarf and his bother, only to catch the flat of Dori's sword to his chest like a bat to a ball.
Considering Dori's own love for tea and the fine red wine that had once populated Bilbo's pantry, the Hobbit hadn't expected this particular Dwarf to be one of the fiercer warriors of the Company. Bilbo had taken one look at Dori's fine doublet and jerkin, choosing out the finest vintage in Bilbo's not unimpressive wine cellar, and assumed that of all the Dwarves invading his house, this would be the one who would understand him. Of course, because that's just the way Bilbo's life was doomed to go, Dori came a close third behind Thorin and Dwalin as the most dangerous member of their little group.

(According to Ori, who was more than happy to look up from his knitting and tell stories about his beloved eldest brother, their family was a distant cousin to Thorin and the rest of the line of Durin. They'd been Dwarves of no note until Dori had bested the young prince Thorin in training one day. Then suddenly he'd earned himself a place beside the up and coming and swiftly grew to be one of the best and most trusted warriors in the kingdom.) The superior clothes were a mark of Dori's own preferences for the finer things in life, not out of any sense of gentility. The delicate, grey braids that ran along Dori's temples and down behind his ears, as well as his well-trimmed beard with his mustache bound back in a clasp, were the marks of a warrior, designed to keep his hair and his beard out of his face so they wouldn't get in the way of striking blows.

Needless to say, it was a rather complicated life story that Bilbo hadn't been expecting at all. That had been the turning point for Bilbo, the moment where he'd decided that the intricacies of this quest weren't something to be endured just so he could tell people about it later, it was something to be enjoyed. From that moment on he'd tried so desperately hard to make friends with the Dwarves, to get know them as something more than 'that bald one,' or 'the redhead.' Weeks of effort had gotten Bilbo acquainted with a few of them, and now that Gandalf had confirmed that nothing they'd pilfered from the Troll's hoard had driven them mad, he wasn't too terribly concerned about why they'd grown kind.

Kíli looked up from where he was sprawled on his back after Dori knocked his legs out from under him, and laughed, "Bilbo! Are you ready for your lessons?"

Bilbo didn't know how the prince could be quite so happy when he'd obviously lost the fight, but understanding Kíli and Fíli had thus far evaded him, and he doubted that today would be the day they began to make sense. Dori grunted and pulled back from the blow he was about to deliver to Fíli, waiving the tip of his sword at the lads to clear them both off the small training field. Bilbo was content to stand where he was at the edge of the clearing – conveniently nowhere near Dori and his bluntly squared blade – but Bofur shoved him in the back and onto the field.

Dori had always been apathetic towards Bilbo, never cruel but never particularly interested either. But today he gave Bilbo a dull grin, "Come along Master Hobbit, I only bite if you're Kíli, and only then when he bites me first."

Bilbo turned to the young Dwarf in scolding shock, "You bit him?"

"That he did," Dori interrupted. "And that's the first rule of fighting, Master Baggins: you do what you must to see that you and your fellows survive. Kíli had lost his weapon and I had Fíli cornered. So the lad jumped on my back and attacked me with the only weapons he had at his disposal."

Bilbo looked horrified at the thought of putting his teeth near anything that hadn't been properly seasoned and Dori snapped, "If the difference between living and dying is a set of teeth then you better damn well bite, Master Baggins. And you never know when that will the last option you have."

Bilbo looked at the other Dwarves for confirmation and received twin nods from Fíli and Kíli before Balin interrupted, "Don't let them tease you, laddie. I've been in more battles than anyone
save Master Gandalf, and I've only had to bite an enemy twice."

This was not at all comforting to Bilbo, and he turned to Gandalf, who continued puffing on his pipe with a secret smile that might've meant he'd never had to bite anyone, or it was his preferred method of attack. Though Bilbo wasn't sure which.

Bilbo came back to the task at hand when Dori took a slow tour around the Hobbit, occasionally nudging him to test his balance, with hands coming up to measure the width of his shoulders. When Dori flipped up the back of Bilbo's coat and set his hands on the Hobbit's hips and then shimmied them ever so slightly, Bilbo lit up in a blush that could probably be seen all the way back in Hobbiton. The Dwarves grinned at him and his Hobbit prudery, and in reply Bilbo just stuck out his chin and pretended that he wasn't embarrassed at all.

After a long minute of violating Bilbo's personal space, Dori grunted and declared, "Now, if I had my way we'd be getting you a staff. A piece of thin metal with a good bit of bite so you could flick it about and stay out of range of anyone coming after you with a sword. But since that little letter opener is what you've got, it's what I'll have to teach you."

Bilbo huffed and tried to object to his quite fine blade being referred to as a 'letter opener' once again, but Dori had moved to face Bilbo and didn't look to be in the mood. (Though, Bilbo was fairly certain that Dori was never in the mood for anything that wasn't fine dining, so he didn't take offense.) Dori crossed his arms and declared, "Alright, draw your sword and show me what I'm working with."

Bilbo looked around, taking in how most of the Company was scattered in a circle to watch him endure his lesson. Some of the Dwarves gave him encouraging nods, while others looked far too amused by the whole process, and Thorin and Dwalin were in steady conversation someplace out of Bilbo sightline. Bilbo smiled back at Balin, who seemed the most genuinely supportive of the lot, and pulled his sword from its sheath with as much certainty as he could manage. Bilbo held the sword in both hands, arms out straight, point tilted forward and Dori just sighed, "Mahal help me."

Bilbo's sword point thunked to the ground in disappointment, "If I may remind you, you haven't taught me anything so I can defend myself properly."

"Don't worry, it's not that Dori thinks you're incompetent," Bofur excused, "It's that he needs to know where you stand before he can get started."

"Correct," huffed the Dwarf. "And because you stand so close to the ground I'll need to make some changes to your fighting style."

"I am perfectly sized for a Hobbit, I'll have you know!"

"And perfectly sized for a Hobbit is still shorter than everyone else."

"If I may point out, my apparent shortness is precisely the reason I'm a part of this Company."

"That, Master Hobbit, it is. No one here believes your height to be a disadvantage, we'd be fools and hypocrites if we did. But, you cannot deny that in comparison to most of the creatures you'll be fighting you're on the short side, and to ignore that and teach you to fight like you're you're human-sized would do you a disservice that would probably get you killed."

Bilbo stared at Dori for a long moment as though he was puzzling something out, "So, you all have a different way to fight?"

"That we do. Different weapons have different techniques, and even then those techniques have to
"change based upon your own size and style." Bilbo looked the slightest bit confused so Dori explained, "You'll notice that the princes and I fight differently, despite all of us carrying swords. That's because I'm larger than they are, with a bit more heft to put behind my blows. I drop my sword down on an opponent and they hit the dirt, the lads do it and they’re countered in the next blow. Nothing wrong with admitting we're two different sizes when pretending otherwise might get them killed."

"So you're going to teach me to fight like Fíli and Kíli?"

"Not exactly. Because, you see, a Dwarf is about the size of your common Orc. That's why I said I'd prefer to have gotten you a staff, with just a touch more reach to it. Let you get out of the way of an incoming sword. But since that sword is all you've got we'll have to teach you to get in, strike your blow, and get out fast."

"Get in close?" Bilbo squeaked.

"Indeed. You don't have the reach to stay out of the say, so don't even try. Get in close, deliver your killing blow before they realize where you are, and get out again." Dori gave Bilbo a moment to stare helplessly before he drew his own sword and declared, "Now, when you're short, the first thing to remember is that most blows will be coming down on you from above, so your ready stance has got to reflect that." Dori waivered Bilbo back into the stance he'd had before, then nudged his hands higher so they were parallel to his throat, and then pushed him so he wasn't on center, instead with his feet staggered and his hands out the left while the sword tilted back to the right. "There you go, Master Hobbit. Now you can block all those hits that come in from above. See?" Dori swung his sword around in a massive arc and brought it crashing down on the blade Bilbo had tenuously suspended over his head, and both the Hobbit and his sword went down to the ground.

Bilbo groaned from his spot in the dirt and Fíli held back his giggles long enough to shout, "Don't worry Bilbo, you'll get it!"

While Bilbo pushed himself back to his feet, Kíli slid up next to Gandalf from out of nowhere, "After all, it's not like you're the first Hobbit to ever carry a sword."

Gandalf snorted at the youth's unsubtle attempt to get back to the story and replied, "John actually solved his reach problem by carrying a staff, and eventually a particularly lethal bow."

Fíli popped up on Gandalf's other side and smirked, "I'm not sure how that would work out, Master Gandalf. Why don't you tell us about it?"

The Wizard rolled his eyes at the two young Dwarves who were practically climbing on top of him. He looked up and already the rest of the Dwarves had abandoned their idle watching of Bilbo and had gathered around Gandalf, though some of them were brushing dirt off Bilbo's jacket and telling them about their own humiliating first experiences with a weapon. Bilbo was red with blushing, but he laughed along with the Dwarves, finally secure that they were smiling with him rather than at him.

Gandalf flicked his gaze to the far side of the clearing, to what Bilbo was too concerned with his lesson to properly notice. Thorin's eye's had tracked the Hobbit through the whole of his instruction. The Dwarf king had adopted an expression of irritation at the Hobbit's mere existence cut with some amusement at watching the soft creature learn to fight, and to most it would be convincing. But Gandalf had known Thorin when he was a Dwarvling no taller than that same Hobbit he so derided, and he saw better.
Thorin liked to ignore things that irked him, letting them go about their merry way while he pretended that they didn't exist. But Thorin did not ignore the Hobbit. He devoutly pretended not to see the creature while he instead tracked every last movement. In the twitches of Thorin's hands, and the tense line to his shoulders every time Dori gave instruction Gandalf could see that it was taking every last ounce of Dwarvish discipline to refrain from storming over and taking control of Bilbo's lessons himself. Not because Dori was an unskilled teacher (pessimistic though he may be, Dori had the patience of an Elf, while Thorin was as likely to beat a student with the flat of his sword as teach them. But because Thorin's palms itched at the thought of taking Bilbo in hand. Though Gandalf doubted that Thorin understood the sensations he was feeling were more than the usual desire to make people comply with his wishes.

Kíli dropped his chin to Gandalf's knee and looked up at the Wizard with falsely innocent eyes and prodded, "Come along Gandalf, tell us about John and his staff."

Gandalf snorted, "The staff didn't come until much later my boy, we must meet the rest of his traveling companions first."

Chapter End Notes

1: The winter of 2911-2912 of the Third Age is referred to as the Fell Winter because of the harsh conditions. Wolves and Orcs crossed the Brandywine river and came into the Shire looking for things (aka: Hobbits) to eat. Tolkien makes mention that the Hobbits were attacked, only to be fought off by Gandalf and the Rangers (Strider/Aragorn's people), but makes no mention of casualties. I assume it wasn't too terrible an incursion because Tolkien is clear that the only 'battle' to take place in the Shire happened around 200 years before this winter. (The same battle where Gandalf says "Bullroarer" Took knocked the Goblin chief's head clean off his shoulders and invented the game of golf.) Bilbo would've been 21 at the time of the Fell Winter, with both of his parents were still alive, and I assume that the Rangers took care of any roaming bands of Orcs before they took any Hobbit lives.

2: Mahal is the Dwarvish name for their species's creator god and patron, Aulë.
Chapter Notes

In my defense, it's still the 12th where I live, so I maintained the every other day posting schedule for the first time in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Considering that John had been hobbling along the road to Bree for years now, the journey was an easy one. He knew to stop for rests where the best berries grew, and the good places to slip off the road and make camp for the night. The Dwarf and the Wizard proved to be decent company, with Stamford telling outrageous tales about what the Dwarves got up to in their mountain, and Gandalf sharing his pipe weed. When the plump little Dwarf left them any room to talk, John would add his own obligatory Hobbit drinking stories, which would just set Stamford off on another rendition about how the mischief Hobbits could get up to was *nothing* compared to the Dwarves. John would smile politely and let Stamford talk for another hour, occasionally sharing a smirk or two with Gandalf at Stamford's ability to go on so long without drawing a breath.

Stamford was pleasant company despite his distaste for silence, and were they still in the Shire John would've enjoyed settling down with him in front of the pub fire and drinking the night away while the Dwarf regaled the whole of Buckland with his stories. But John wasn't in the Shire anymore, and for some reason the simple act of crossing the border made John feel like he was a different Hobbit then he'd been just this morning.

John was restless in a way he hadn't been since he'd first discovered healing. The desire to be somewhere else, to do something more than he was doing was itching under his skin, driving him to push a little faster and a little harder on their path. He felt like there was something out there waiting for him, some grand adventure that he'd spent his whole life preparing for, and he couldn't take the delay any longer.

Their little band of three reached Bree just as the sun was setting on the second day of travel, and Gandalf immediately slipped off to see about... something, leaving John to find their accommodations with Stamford. (John supposed random disappearances were something he was going to have to get used when traveling with a Wizard.) Stamford dragged John off to his favorite inn, complete with raucous pub on the ground floor. It was one of the more disreputable establishments in the town (and for Bree that was saying something). John lasted through half a dirty mug of ale before Stamford was sufficiently distracted by his human drinking companions that John could slip out the door.

It was early spring, and air that had been pleasantly brisk back in the Shire was close to frigid here in Bree. John usually kept to the more dignified parts of town when he came to visit, the place where the Hobbits of Bree had set down roots and the friendlier of the Men had come to join them. Stamford's inn however, was not in that neighborhood. The air stank of untended animals, and the streets were a mess of freezing mud that clung to John's bare feet, weighing him down. John hobbled down the road toward one of the smaller gates that led out of the fence that surrounded the town. He didn't intend to roam far, just to get some air that wasn't plagued by the worst bits of
Bree.

John was small, even for a Hobbit, and the human who was supposed to be tending the gate was too busy swapping stories with a Man who was on the way in to Bree to notice one little Hobbit making his way out. He limped along uninterrupted, past the tree line before he settled himself down on a log in a patch of moonlight.

For the most part John enjoyed tracking down all the excitement he could find, since such a thing didn't occur naturally in the Shire. He liked the rush that came with the bustle of a busy day where he actually did something with himself. That excitement was far easier to find in Bree, and no matter how disgusting Stamford's pub, John could've gone someplace else for a good drink and some better conversation. But tonight John just wanted a moment to himself, a chance to think about all the things that weren't bothering him.

Because he should've been bothered.

John had been away from home for enough days that he ought to be pining for the Shire, worrying to himself about how his father had taken the news of his departure, and whether or not his patients knew better than to go to the old Hobbit that John had replaced to get their medicines. He should be looking up at the stars above him and taking solace in the fact they were the same here as they were those few miles away at home. But he wasn't.

John was well aware that this whole plan was insane, and if he felt like walking hard he could start off this very night and be home in time for a late supper tomorrow. Harry would be happy to have him back, though his mother would be disappointed, and John could settle into his sane little life, find a Hobbit lass, and spent the rest of his days pretending he was the kind of normal that his father had always wanted him to be.

But on this night, staring up at those stars, all John could think was that he wanted to be on his way.

He was ready to head back to the inn and get a good night's sleep so he could run off with Gandalf into the unknown tomorrow when the clear, cold sound of a horn echoed through the night.

John was on his feet in an instant. The men of Bree weren't ones to use horns, neither were the Dwarves who so often made their way through the town. In fact, John had no Middle-Earthly idea how he knew the noise was a horn since he'd only heard about them in books. But he knew full well that the only people in this part of the world who were likely to have one were the Elves, and that sound meant trouble.

Before John had the chance to think better of himself he went running straight for the noise. Darting around trees, light on his feet and careful to make as little sound as possible, John dashed.

Whatever the cause of the horn, John's instincts told him it was not something to be crashing into blindly (particularly when he wasn't all that sure what good he could do). He went for a few minutes, doing his best to follow where he thought the noise had originally come from. Finally he had to pause to reorient, standing there in the unnatural quiet of the forest for a moment before he heard it. Not another call of the horn, but the hunting shriek of a creature that was neither Elf nor Man.

John knew that noise. It had chased him across his nightmares for years after that day in the woods. It was the call of an Orc, a demon who had no business being this close to Bree, and judging by the sound of the horn, it was hunting an Elf who was in desperate need of some help. Common sense dictated that John turn straight back to Bree and get someone who actually had a weapon (preferably Gandalf), but John had never been one for common sense. Instead, he followed
the echoes of the Orc cry, which the closer John got turned into the thumps of a fight. Soon enough John found himself stumbling to a stop at the top of a rise, looking down through trees at a scene that made his blood boil.

It was an Elf lass, probably a few centuries old, but with a face that without pointed ears John would've taken for a youth. And on her tail was a party of five Orcs.

The girl was faster on her feet than her hunters, and cleverer too. She slipped through trees at full speed, only to dart around the trunk in a complete circle and bury a long, curved blade into an Orc's neck. There were bodies of other Orcs scattered throughout the woods, marking out a clear trail of where the maid had been in her attempt to escape. She ripped the knife back out and stepped over the still bleeding corpse, but this time she wasn't fast enough to avoid the foul claws of one of the creatures. The Orc slashed at her, cutting across the maiden's shoulder blades, and something in John's mind snapped. He released a great bellow and barreled down the hill, sparing a thought that this was absolutely insane just before he slammed his slight frame into the Orc's vulnerable knees.

The Orc hadn't even turned to look at the Hobbit dashing towards him, which meant John was unheeded as the creature dropped to the ground with a pained scream. The other Orcs giving chase were too shocked at this new player to respond for a long moment, leaving John free to jump on one of the others and use his medical knowledge to pop out the creature's kneecap. The maid was quicker on the uptake than the two remaining Orcs, and with a spin of her torso she slit the throat of one and threw her blade into the chest of the other.

The fight ended so abruptly that Elf and Hobbit both just stood there for a long moment, too surprised to move. Then John grinned at the girl, bright and a little wicked, and she smiled unsurely back like she hadn't been expecting it. That breath of peace was all they got before a vicious snarl echoed from deeper in the forest, followed upon by the guttural growls of others Orcs in reply. "What-?" John stumbled out, before the maiden grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him back into a run.

"Wargs," she intoned, managing not to sound terrified of the snarling that John could hear coming ever closer.

Along the way the maiden had pocketed her knife rather than keeping it ready for their next fight, and John didn't take that as a good sign. Rapidly growing breathless from the pace of the Elf's much longer legs, John stumbled out, "Shouldn't we be heading back towards the wall at Bree?"

"My companions are this direction."

John kept to himself the belief that they were probably going to get eaten before any rescue turned up. John could feel the vibration in the dirt below them, Wargs and Orcs coming ever closer. There was a growl off to the side, giving John just enough warning to grab the maiden by the wrist and haul her down to the ground. The growling Warg went careening over their heads and John put all his effort into hauling the maiden back to her feet and out of the way when the Warg wheeled on them to try again. John reached out the side, desperately grabbing for something that he might be able to defend himself with while the Warg bared his teeth and went straight for John's throat. The Hobbit tossed a handful of leaves and dirt in the creature's face while it dove, not enough to stop the forward motion, but enough to keep it from sinking teeth into John's flesh.

John tried to push back, to shove the Warg off him, but it was the Elf maiden who saved him, burying her knife in the Warg's throat directly into an artery. Blood slipped across John's face and the Warg reared back, teeth snapping for the dagger still buried in its wound. John threw his back into it and shoved the Warg off of him and grabbed the maiden's hand to break into a run. Only to stop at the sight of an Orc mounted on a Warg blocking their way. He twisted around and there
was another Warg rider behind them, back the way they'd come. There were three other Wargs surrounding them, blocking off any direct route of escape. The creatures had crept up on them while John had been dealing with their companion, waiting patiently for their orders to move in.

John reached down to the ground and plucked up a tree branch, pressing back to back with the Elf behind him. He felt her tense and assumed that she had seen some tick in the Wargs that meant they were ready to attack, but instead she tightened her grip on John's hand and pulled him to the ground.

John grunted in surprise and went down hard, just in time for something new to go springing over their heads.

The first thing John saw from facedown in the dirt was a set of hooves cutting knife-point divets into the ground. He could vaguely hear one of the mounted Orcs hiss out something foul, and two of the Wargs snarled before they leapt. The night-black horse reared back on legs that looked too thin to properly carry its bulk and buried one of those sharp hooves into the Warg's forehead. The horse's rider was a shadow dressed in black, until in one smooth slash he drew a curved, silver sword and slit through the vulnerable tendons lining the neck of another Warg.

The rider was... perfect. His black hair wasn't long and straight like the stories said an Elf's should be, instead untamed curls tumbled down his forehead and into his knowing gray eyes, with every inch of him lit up in the pale moonlight like a fallen star.

Orcs screeched at the new Elf and hissed something in a foul language that John had never before heard. The harsh scrape of the words against his ears was enough to snap John out of staring and bring him back to common sense. He grabbed his tree branch and put the maiden behind him, keeping her safely between him and the other Elf. The last of the riderless Wargs looped around and came straight for John as the weak link while the two Orcs steered their beasts for the new Elf. John knew full well that he had no hope of defeating the Warg, but at least he could hold the creature off long enough for the chap with the sword to do something about it.

John vaguely recognized the squeals of Orcs being gutted behind him as he took a massive swing at the Warg lunging at them. The creature wheeled around with a snort, like it found John's attempts to stop him amusing, then dropped dead from the dagger sticking out between its eyes. John whirled around, branch raised in defense against fallen Wargs and Orcs whose bodies were no longer attached to their heads.

The Elf twisted off his mount and in one smooth turn lifted the maiden into his seat, like they were dancing. "Sherlock-" she objected, only to be stopped by a harsh glare. The Elf handed her the reigns and only after she was safely out of the range of John's branch did he look down at John.

The Hobbit had expected to be summarily dismissed, perhaps with a thank you if the Elf was feeling particularly generous. But instead, the Elf's eyes sped over John's skin, settling briefly on his branch and the hair on top of his feet before coming to rest on John's eyes. The Elf -- Sherlock, apparently -- quirked an eyebrow at John, "Aren't you interesting."

Before John had the chance to puzzle out whether or not 'interesting' was a good thing, the Elf swept him up and dropped him on the saddle as well. Sherlock's eyes focused on John, ordering, "Get her to Bree and find someplace to hide where she's out of sight."

"But the others, Sherlock," the Elf maiden objected.

"I'll take care of them."
"Sherlock," she scolded, "we cannot just leave them."

"One of them betrayed us, Arwen!" Sherlock snapped, and the maiden's already fair skin paled to something sickly.

"That's not possible," her voice shook, "they are our friends."

Sherlock had a flash of sympathy that John was willing to bet was rare for the Elf, and took the maiden's hand, "They're your father's servants, that doesn't make them your friends". She opened her mouth to object again and Sherlock snapped, "Think, Arwen! Who knew you would be accompanying me to the Grey Havens rather than safely to Lothlórien?" Arwen opened her mouth to reply, but Sherlock spoke over the top of her, "Your parents trusted this knowledge only to the people in this company, and now there are Warg riders on our tail. What does that tell you?"

Arwen looked young and terrified for a moment before her expression settled into something gentle and serene, "That perhaps one of the company has betrayed us, but not all should be condemned for the mistake of the one."

Sherlock rolled his eyes and petulantly snapped, "I wasn't going to kill them."

"No, you were just likely to abuse them until one of them broke down and told you what you wanted to know."

Sherlock's smile was absolutely feral, "It would've accomplished the job." Arwen tried to object once again, but Sherlock was done attempting to placate her and turned back to John, "You'll take her to Bree, you'll keep her safe, and I will find you when the situation is handled."

Sherlock moved to smack the horse and send them careening off into the night and John gripped the pommel before him, more than willing to let the maiden keep ahold of the reigns. Then he realized something and called out, "Wait!" Sherlock gave him a look that declared that this better be good or John was going to go the way of the Orcs. John puffed up a little at the Elf and his unwarranted irritation, "Can I take her to Gandalf?" Sherlock looked dumbfounded, which John took no small amount of pleasure in and continued, "I mean, certainly a Wizard is to be trusted?"

"You'd be surprised," Sherlock murmured. Where a normal person would've asked John how he knew Gandalf, Sherlock took another long look at the Hobbit before he replied, "That's convenient."

"What's convenient?"

"You're on your way to Rivendell, as are we. Traveling with Mithrandir has its uses."

"How on Middle-Earth did you know that?"

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow, "Why else would you be looking for Gandalf?"

"But, Rivendell?"

"You're obviously a fearless little thing, already comfortable with the thought of going to Bree, which means that Gandalf has talked you into going someplace else. Someplace more exciting. Perhaps a tour across the whole of Middle-Earth, but you're still a Hobbit, closer to home is better and Rivendell is the closest of the grand destinations."

"That's brilliant," John stumbled out before he could think better of himself.
Arwen froze behind him, and Sherlock rapidly blinked at John like that was completely unexpected. John blushed and shrugged, because it was brilliant, and he wasn't going to be embarrassed that he'd said so. "Yes," Sherlock grinned, "definitely interesting."

Chapter End Notes

1: Yup, you read that right. Arwen Undómiel, daughter of Elrond of Rivendell and canonical wife of Aragon. She features much more heavily in the LOTR trilogy then in the books, and she is played by Liv Tyler.

2: Just a reminder, Lothlórien is the forest home of Galadriel, the blonde female Elf Queen played by Cate Blanchett. The Fellowship visits Lothlórien in The Fellowship of the Ring. Galadriel is Arwen's mother's mother, so she is Arwen's grandmother and Elrond's mother-in-law.

3: Mithrandir is the Elvish name for Gandalf, meaning the Grey Wanderer
"I don't think I like this story anymore, Gandalf." Kíli interrupted.

Bilbo whirled on him and the Dwarf actually backed up at the simultaneously baffled and furious expression on the Hobbit's face. "What do you mean you don't like it? Why wouldn't you like it? John just battled *Orcs.*"

Gandalf snorted, "I do believe Kíli's objection was rooted in the cold reality that John is more than slightly attached to an Elf."

Bilbo fixed Kíli with the same look he gave the Sackville-Bagginses when they were being particularly lunkheaded and declared, "That's not possible, Gandalf. Kíli is not so daft that he'd care about a thing like that. *Not* when there was a good story to be had. Isn't that right, Kíli?"

Kíli blushed like the Dwarfling he'd been not so long ago and replied, "Absolutely, never even crossed my mind."

Fíli snickered at his younger brother, "Really, Kíli? Then what didn't you like?"

"The Orcs," Kíli replied with no hesitation. "You know how I hate Orcs."

Bilbo just stared at the boys and muttered, "I cannot imagine having to raise you two hooligans."

"As Uncle is so fond of telling us," Fíli smiled, "it was a trial."

"I doubt trial even begins to cover it,"

"It doesn't," Thorin interrupted. "Nor does it cover my own distaste at being forced to hear a story about Elves. If you're so desperate to hear a good tale Master Baggins then let Balin tell you about Durin the Deathless."
The elderly Dwarf took that to be an order from his king, and despite his own desire to perhaps know a bit more about this Hobbit (despite his unfortunate association with Elves), he began to tell. "Durin the Deathless was the first Dwarf-

"No," Bilbo interrupted, then he assumed a polite smile to continue. "Thank you Balin, but no. I'm sure we'll have plenty of time on this quest to hear about Durin the Deathless and every other Dwarf you think a Hobbit should know. But now, now is the time to hear about John Watson, whether or not he spends his time with an Elf."

"Master Baggins," Thorin began, in that deep, kingly tone that had made far more terrifying creatures than Bilbo stop and take notice, but the Hobbit wasn't having it.

"No," Bilbo declared, with all the force that came from being the favorite grandchild of the Thain of the Tooks.

All the Dwarves stopped moving, a lifetime of avoiding dangerous predators having taught them about the look in Thorin Oakenshield's eyes. But of course, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire simply puffed out his chest in his pretty green vest like he didn't know he was about to be eaten. Dwalin quirked an eyebrow and shared a strange look with Nori and Balin. Thorin was not the most patient of commanders, this they all knew, but rarely was he quite so short-tempered as he was with this Halfing.

Dwalin was vaguely reminded of the first lass Thorin had set his his axe to.

Of course, the lass hadn't been so much a lass, as she'd a Dwarven maiden fifty years Thorin's senior and already betrothed. To say nothing of how Thorin had been only twenty at the time, and was only in the blush of his very first crush. (Not that the lovely lady had ever let Thorin forget.) No, Thorin hadn't liked to hear a word spoken about the lass's betrothed, like he couldn't stand the thought that she might want to pay attention to someone who wasn't him. And here was Thorin, tempestuous as any fire at the thought that the Hobbit might want to hear a story about someone who wasn't a Dwarf.

Dwalin could barely hold back a chuckle at the thought of what the princes were going to do when they figured it out.

Thorin very slowly raised his eyebrow, like he was trying to feign amusement because even he realized that this was a ridiculous argument to be having, but he still couldn't quite let it go. "No?"
The smart thing for Bilbo to do would've been to give one of his traveling companions a pleading look that would pull someone in to draw fire so Bilbo could have a respite before Thorin lost control. But the Hobbit simply shifted to his feet and crossed his arms, putting himself between Thorin and Gandalf like the Wizard had something to fear. "No," Bilbo reiterated. "No one is forcing you to sit here Thorin Oakenshield, and no one is demanding that you listen. Gandalf is telling this story to me, and as far as I'm concerned the rest of you are eavesdropping. So if you don't want to listen then go away."

Kíli slowly rose to his feet (it was always best not to startle a wild animal with quick movements) and stood next to Bilbo as the only person in the Company that Thorin was definitely not going to kill. (Only humans killed their heirs, never Dwarves, and not even the Elves had sunk quite so low yet.) "It really is a lovely little story, Sir. And it's one that none of use have ever heard before, and aren't those the best kind for the road?"

Kíli, devious little lout that the dark haired youngest got to be since he was the spare, sidled right up next to his uncle and murmured, "And really, look at how excited he gets, Uncle. A happy Hobbit means a happy Wizard, means stone Trolls rather than Dwarf stew."

Bilbo still stood in front of Thorin, arms crossed and looking about as intimidating as a bunny rabbit, but they all knew him well enough to know that Bilbo would not be moved. Rather than grab Bilbo by the scruff of the neck and shake him until he understood who was in charge of this company, Thorin just snorted and walked away, like he had never really cared about winning the fight at all. Bilbo just rolled his eyes and dropped back down in front of Gandalf, raising an eyebrow at the whole silently stunned Company before he demanded, "Well, then what happened?"

Chapter End Notes

1: The Thain is actually the military leader of the Hobbits. It's basically an honorary title passed down among the male leaders of the Took Clan of the Hobbits. Bilbo's mother was a Took, and her father was the Thain.

2: Once again, my own take on an idiom that I thought might be more natural to Dwarves. In my head 'set your axe to' is the rough equivalent of 'set you cap on,' which means that you're determined to win someone's affections.
See the end of the chapter for more notes

"That's brilliant," John stumbled out before he could think better of himself.

Sherlock rapidly blinked at John like that was completely unexpected. John blushed and shrugged, because it was brilliant, and he wasn't going to be embarrassed that he'd said so. "Yes," Sherlock grinned, "definitely interesting."

"I've never travelled with anyone who was anything less than fascinating," Gandalf interrupted, conveniently arriving after the fight had ended and perched atop a horse he hadn't possessed the last time John saw him.

"You waste your time with humans," Sherlock snorted. "The only people worse are Dwarves."

"Considering that you despise most living creatures, Master Sherlock, I shall take your opinion with an appropriate amount of skepticism."

The massive horse that Arwen and John were still astride huffed, like he found both Elf and Wizard ridiculous. "Don't pretend you disagree," Sherlock retorted, a gentle pat to the horse's nose to keep him from interfering. "You simply think that one of you Istari\textsuperscript{1} must be considered approachable, and with Saruman busy sneering and Radagast off tending to his trees that responsibility falls to you. If they left you on your own you'd--"

"Do exactly as I have always done," Gandalf interrupted. The night's darkness coalesced around the wizard, throwing shadows across his face and making him appear far more fierce. "You forget, Sherlock Naenwauva\textsuperscript{2}, I was a pupil of Nienna\textsuperscript{3} long before you were a thought in your mother's head. Before your people were born out of the good earth did I sit at her feet and learn compassion the likes of which you have never cared to understand."

Gandalf swelled so there was no telling where he ended and the shadows began, but up against Sherlock, who stood there with nothing between him and a furious Wizard but a sword, he still looked small. John shifted to slip off the horse and put himself between the Wizard and the Elf to prevent any bloodshed, but Sherlock just smirked. From one breath to the next Gandalf folded in on himself, and an almost unwilling smile spread across his face. The Wizard smothered it down and raised one bushy eyebrow like Sherlock was a naughty Hobbitling in need of a night without supper.

Sherlock smiled like he'd grown accustomed to Gandalf's displeasure and drew some strange sort of satisfaction from bringing it on. Gandalf snorted and slid from his horse, dropping into a polite bow aimed at the Elf maiden sitting behind John. "Tell me Lady Arwen, why is it Sherlock had sent you and John to seek me?"
"She's not supposed to be here," Sherlock explained before Arwen had the chance.

"No," Gandalf paused, "I can't imagine who was fool enough to suppose that it was a good idea to bring Arwen Undómiel into the long stretch of Eriador with nothing but a handful of Elves to protect her against the threat of Angmar."

"Sorry, Angmar?" John interrupted, "Who's Angmar?"

"What is Angmar," Sherlock snapped. "Not who."

"Alright then," John replied, unruffled, "what is Angmar?"

"That, my boy, is something we will have to discuss later," Gandalf interceded. "Right now, we are alone in a forest surrounded by dead Orcs, and when their companions discover that they have failed, more will be on the way. We need to move." Sherlock pursed his lips, obviously frustrated that he was being denied the opportunity to show off, but he couldn't refute the necessity.

"Come, you will ride with us to Rivendell." Sherlock turned on his heel and strode deeper into the darkness, no thought to whether or not they would follow. Gandalf came up beside them with a huff, "I hold out hope that one day he will learn to say please."

John snorted, "I think you'll be waiting a while."

"Come on!" Sherlock shouted from somewhere in the woods, "You're the one who's so concerned with getting attacked by Orcs."

Arwen nudged their horse forward and Gandalf pulled in behind, protecting their flank. John let them trot along in silence for a few minutes before he started to fidget, trying to figure out exactly how to ask his questions. John was all for an adventure, but he did like knowing what was going on. He finally cleared his throat and asked, "So, where are we going?"

He could hear the smile in Arwen's voice, "Back to camp."

"Uh huh, and I was under the impression that one of those people sold you out to Orcs?"

John supposed that if he could've seen Gandalf, the Wizard would've looked surprised, but as it was, he could hear the forcibly light way he asked, "Pardon?"

From somewhere off to the side, still wrapped in darkness, Sherlock replied, "You didn't think me fool enough to spread around the word that I was taking Elrond's youngest child across Eriador to visit the Grey Havens, did you?"

"I think you capable of anything, Sherlock," Gandalf replied, and it did not sound like a compliment.

Sherlock's huff managed to sound pained, affronted, and petulant all at the same time, which was rather impressive for just one exhalation. "According to everyone who isn't Elrond, our whole company left for Lothlórien."

"And the reason you have not yet arrived?"

"I claimed we would take the Gap of Celenardhon across the mountains rather than Redhorn Pass. The Grey Havens are 500 miles of easy riding west, the Gap is 500 miles of hard riding south."

"Ah, you intend to return to Rivendell before you're due to arrive in Lothlórien. And I assume you
claimed it was too early in the year to take the high Redhorn pass, that Arwen's gentle companions would be unable to handle the last of the spring snows?"

John decided that he was quite fond of Arwen, because while the Elf and the Wizard were busy discussing Sherlock's plans within plans, each trying to out-reason the other like it was their favorite sport, Arwen was making John a map. She'd gently peeled his right hand off the saddle's pommel and spread his palm out horizontally. She tapped the last knuckle of his middle finger and whispered, "The Shire," then the tip of his middle finger and added, "The Grey Havens." Then his thumb was stretched up, and she traced the line down the meat of the digit and across the heel of his hand to add, "The Misty Mountains." When Gandalf mentioned Eriador she ran her fingers across the whole length of his hand, and John assumed that meant Eriador was the region of Middle-Earth than John had called home his whole life.

When they ignored his question about Angmar, Arwen tapped the high point of his thumb and wiggled her fingers above their temporary map, so John assumed Angmar was some far north country that was causing problems that made Gandalf nervous. Rivendell was a spot at the juncture between John's palm and his thumb, while Lothlórien was the center point where John's hand and wrist met. The Redhorn pass was the line across the base of John's thumb, while the Gap of Celenardhon was down at the bottom edge of the heel. It did seem a terribly long way to travel when you were just trying to cut across the mountains. John thought that if the decision had really been left up to Sherlock he would've taken the Redhorn pass, snow or no snow. And he would've enjoyed telling all the people who couldn't handle it that they weren't allowed to come.

"You honestly think that an Elf of Imladris\(^5\) has betrayed you to the Orcs?" Gandalf asked.

"I think it's far more likely that whoever has betrayed us has done so without realizing it. Sharing hints with some Elf clever enough to realize the truth behind what they'd been told."

Arwen paused in her sketching across John's palm and declared, "They are not so simple as you make them out to be."

"Few people are so complicated as you make them out to be." Sherlock's voice faded ever so slightly and John got the impression he was moving further away from them, widening the circles he was keeping around their small party to avoid having to explain his reasoning. At John's back, Arwen huffed out a breath so frustrated that she sounded nearly human.

"My Adar [Father] teases that Sherlock was better suited to be a Wizard than an Elf."

John hummed thoughtfully and asked, "Why is that?"

"Sherlock is nothing if not ruthless in his application of logic."

"And Elves are known for their gentleness, are they?" John asked, unable to keep the slightly snide tone out of his voice. Arwen stiffened, but there was enough light filtering through the trees that John could see Gandalf's mouth quirk up in a smile. The rest of their journey was made in silence, uncomfortable for Arwen and unimpressive for John (he'd endured far worse conversations over the years).

Eventually John saw the flicker of a the camp's fires through the trees. Sherlock slipped back into John's sightline, as though he hadn't felt the need to creep through the dark and make sure they weren't being snuck up on. Sherlock strode into the Elvish camp without so much as a pause, and went straight to a small pile of packs that had obviously been kept separate from everyone else. The Elves silently watched Sherlock, taking in his disgruntled state, then almost as one they turned to stare at Arwen, like she could offer them some insight. Then, they seemed to realize that Arwen
wasn't alone.

At the first sight of Arwen one of younger -- at least John assumed he was younger, an probably smitten -- Elves sprang to his feet and came over in a panic. "Man marte?" [What happened?]

While the rest of the Elves looked too baffled to move, the young Elf reached up and lifted John from his seat, then raised a hand to steady Arwen on her way down. Before Gandalf or Arwen could explain, Sherlock declared, "Ni nowa naglân. i'Glam cronhe he." [That should be obvious. The Orcs attacked her.]

"i'Glam?" [Orcs?] The Elf demanded of Arwen, while one of the other Elves puffed up and declared, "Manen nánern gerlye sinwa?" [How were we to have known?]

John watched the dialogue in confusion, but he quickly discovered that knowing the content of the words didn't matter quite so much as watching Sherlock's reactions. Whatever that Elf had said in response to Sherlock's own snide comment was enough that Sherlock whirled around and declared, "John, if you hear a woman screaming in a dark wood in the middle of the night, what is probably going on?"

John tucked his hands into his pockets and ignored the frustrated attention the bundle of Elves was starting to pay to him and replied, "Probably that something had gone wrong and she was in danger."

"Why John, such a strange notion," Sherlock replied sarcastically before tossing him a packet of something that he'd been digging for in his bag.

John smirked at Sherlock's feigned astonishment, but stuck next to the horse while the young, fussing Elf bundled Arwen over to their campsite and Gandalf was pinned down by the rest of the group. He stood there for a long moment, left alone just long enough to wonder what in the world he was doing here, and that was the moment when he felt the horse step up behind him.

Sherlock's mount was a massive thing, black as his master's hair and quite possibly the largest creature John had ever come across. And for one, frankly terrifying moment, John was concerned that the horse might actually try to eat him. (Based on the way a few of the Elves were trying hard to be subtle in how they were watching John with no small amount of displeasure, they expected the horse to be as foul tempered as its rider, possibly smashing John into bits the same way he had with those Wargs.)

But instead, the creature snuffed and dropped its chin onto John's head.

John froze, just like the Elves who had given up on any pretense of subtle. The horse fidgeted, like it was trying to nestle into John's curls like it was a much smaller creature. John tentatively reached up a hand and rested it on the horse's muzzle. The creature gave a nudge to John's palm and he could all but hear Sherlock's voice in the back of his head declaring, 'well, get on with it,' so he started to pet. The horse whinnied in pleasure and started to nuzzle into John's hair, casually bumping John forward. John laughed at the abrupt turn of friendliness, only to look up at the sudden, echoing silence across camp. Every last person in the place was staring at John like their minds were blown, Sherlock included. The horse just snorted at them all like they were fools and began nudging John forward once again.

John stuck out his chin, and strolled across the length of the temporary encampment, looking like there was nothing about this situation that he found off, while the massive horse trailed along behind him like a puppy.
As John was certain was common for Sherlock, the Elf shrugged off his shock with narrowed eyes, moving past the confusion that had clouded everyone else and straight into deducing what was going on. While Sherlock put his massive brain to work, John opened the little packet Sherlock had tossed him. It looked to be nothing more than flatbread, but when he stopped walking and stared at it a little too long Sherlock interrupted, "You're supposed to eat it."

"Yeah, I got that part, but..."

Sherlock rolled his eyes in frustration and waived John over to his corner of the camp. "It's waybread, specially baked for traveling."

John broke off a corner of the bread for the horse to nibble. "And it's special because...?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes and said, "You were too excited and then too disgusted to eat properly at the inn this evening so you're starving. Now take a bite of the bread and see."

John sighed at Sherlock's impatience and took a large and obvious bite just to placate him, and stared when halfway through the bite he was full. "Well that's brilliant," he muttered. Sherlock grinned unexpectedly at John's reply and the Elves seemed even more thrown by Sherlock's show of approval than his horse's. The horse bent down and started nudging the packet in John's hands, looking for another bite.

"Man den agor?" the boldest of the Elves asked Sherlock. [What are you doing?]

John stopped his munching to look at the Elves around him, all of whom seemed completely baffled and uncomfortable that they'd let Sherlock out of their sight for half an hour and he'd come back with a Wizard and his horse's new best friend. When Sherlock didn't deign to respond one of the other Elves, a male who'd claimed Gandalf's attention as soon as possible, continued, "Sâdenc ingae nadolen." [Our location is supposed to be hidden.]

"Aegel?" [Your point?]

The Elf shared a long-suffering look with his companions and snapped, "Ne thel lerta û tog gwraith an sâdenc." [That means you can't bring people to our location.]

Sherlock flowed like water to invade the Elf's space, looming over him with his extra height, "E avornië." [He is staying.]

The Elf tried to glower back at Sherlock, but puckered his nose and drew back instead,"Amadad." [You are a fool.]

Sherlock fixed a stare at the Elf that declared that he was the most ridiculous statement he'd ever heard. John watched the silent conversation between Sherlock and the rest of the Elves and did his best to ignore all the whispers that sprang up as he came back to John's side. Sherlock ran deft and gentle fingers through the horse's mane, murmuring "Kwód torso ai ricdiped." [You could at least attempt to be subtle.] John held out another piece of waybread, amused that Sherlock showed more affection for his horse than he did for his species.

"So," John tried to begin, only to have Sherlock interrupt, "His name is Faun."6

"The horse?"

"Of course the horse, who else would I be talking about?"
"I don't know, perhaps the chap who keeps glaring at you like talking to me is an offense to get you banished. Or maybe you were talking about the lad who's fussing over Miss Arwen."

"Why would I be talking about them?"

John shrugged, "You're an Elf, how am I supposed to know how you do things?"

Faun snorted, like he knew full well that John was teasing Sherlock. John smiled at the horse and gave him another pat before he asked, "So, do you enjoy pissing them off?"

"Them?" Sherlock shot a snide look at the rest of the Elves, "No."

"But you enjoy pissing off other people?"

"Obviously." Sherlock declared before he stepped away from Faun and began laying out his bedroll.

"But not these folk, then?"

"Of course not. They're too dull to respond in any way that's remotely useful."

"Sherlock!" John hissed, "They can hear you."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, "They've heard me say far worse about them, John."

"Doesn't mean you should be saying it. And if you find them all so terribly dull then why did you go after Miss Arwen?"

Sherlock huffed something under his breath in Elvish and John stretched out his leg to poke Sherlock in the side with his bare foot and grinned, "Sorry, what was that? I don't speak Elvish."

"I thought that perhaps the experience might be interesting." Sherlock retorted before flopping down on his back and pointedly ignoring John's smile.

"Did not, you great softie."

Sherlock popped up and sputtered in indignation while John continued, "You went after her because it was the right thing to do. Now tell me Master Sherlock, what does that say about you?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about. Arwen's father placed her in my care, I upheld my responsibility."

John just laughed at him, with no malice to the sound. Sherlock was so stunned by the experience that he gave John an actual grin and from behind them Gandalf declared, "I leave you alone for half an hour and I find you've broken Sherlock."

"I'm still cleverer than you, you doddering old fool." Sherlock retorted.

Gandalf snorted and settled down on the other side of Sherlock with a devious smile of his own. "A doddering old fool who brought you a Mellon." [Friend]

"Mellonea ilante." [Friends are unnecessary]

"Uma, that's tea manko lile lele elendili ilya ilmen quena a Periannath n'lembe tar Bree n'al a're." [Yes, that's exactly why you've been ignoring your companions all night to speak with a Hobbit who's never been beyond Bree before this day.]
"Chaps, "John interrupted, "I have no idea what you're saying but I can tell it's about me. Now stop it."

Sherlock huffed a sigh at John but continued the conversation in Westron and purposely ignored the smug grin Gandalf wore. Before too long the whole band of Elves settled into their own bedrolls, with the tempestuous Elf who'd challenged Sherlock setting up a watch for any approaching Orcs. Gandalf settled at the outside edge of their little troupe, putting himself between the rest and the forest, while Sherlock laid down beside him, with Arwen on the other side. John had meant to take a place out of the way and closer to Arwen, but Faun clenched John's blanket between his teeth and dragged the Hobbit to the scant amount of space between Sherlock and Gandalf.

The ground was too hard and the night air just a bit too cold for John to fall asleep quickly, so he was awake when the last of the Elves sunk into sleep and Sherlock rose silently to his feet. He'd been so flagrant in rifling through his pack before that when he tossed John the waybread it was all they saw. No one noticed the small pouch of finely ground powder that he pocketed in the maneuver. The small pouch that he spilled over the still smoldering fire nestled between the rest of the Elves.

Chapter End Notes

1: Istari is the real and proper name for Wizards

2: Na = prefix meaning see, Enwa = tomorrow, -uva = puts things in future tense. So Naenwauva translates to "See-er of tomorrows".

3: Nienna - One of the Valar (the rough equivalents of angels in Tokien's universe) who helped create Middle-Earth. She is known as the Lady of Mercy, and it was her power that first brought grief into the world. As terrible as that sounds, her concern with grief and mourning means that she pities the suffering of others, which leads to healing, hope, and the endurance of the spirit. Before Gandalf came to Middle-Earth he was her greatest pupi.

4: Eriador is the name for the whole region between the Misty Mountains and the Blue Mountains. It stretches from the port of the Grey Havens, across the Shire, past Bree, and through Rivendell. As a reference, the Misty Mountains contain Moria in LOTR, and the Goblin Town in the Hobbit. Everything in the stories that takes place before that, takes place in the region of Eriador.

5: Imladris is the Elven name for Rivendell.

6: Not 'faun' like the goat-legged creature, it's an Elvish word for cloud. And according to my guide to Tolkien's languages, it's pronounced f-ow (like how)-n, or like the way my country-style cousins say 'phone.' I appreciated the thought of having Sherlock's horse be called after the one thing he can't seem to live without, his phone.
(If I could've found an Elvish word that sounding like 'texting' I would've gone with that.)

7: Westron is the Common Tongue
A Healing Unmasked (J)

The smell of strange spices burning away at his nose forced John out of the sleep of the exhausted. Instinct drove his head to the side, trying to huff out whatever he was breathing in, but the prick of spices followed after him. John started to thrash, too drowsy to properly struggle, but aware enough to know that something was wrong.

At least, wrong until steady hand slipped through his hair and the burn lifted away. John's next breath in was shaky, but it didn't ache, which was enough of an improvement that he bothered to open his eyes.

Sherlock was perched over him, one eyebrow quirked like there was something amusing here. John glowered as much as he could while his facial muscles weren't quite responding. He cleared his throat to prevent the usual late night cracking and replied, "You know it's strange to stare at people while they're sleeping?"

"You know that being accused of being strange has lost all meaning to me?"

John didn't mean to laugh, it didn't do to encourage Sherlock, but he couldn't help it. Sherlock reared back wide-eyed, and the expression looked so foreign on Sherlock's self-assured face that John giggled again. In his surprise, Sherlock had slipped off to the side of John's field of vision, and the Hobbit got distracted by the sky above him. The stars were glinting cheerfully, like they found Sherlock just as amusing as John did. Gandalf, of course, chose that moment to interrupt and popped in between John and the stars, staring down at the Hobbit with no small amount of concern. Not for the first time John noticed that the Wizard's fluffy eyebrows bore a striking resemble to caterpillars just before their molt, and he told the Wizard so.

One of those fuzzy caterpillars rose ever higher up Gandalf's face while John mumbled out something about forest creatures, only to end up trying to imitate the sound of a caterpillar, and giggling when he realized he hadn't ever heard a caterpillar speak. "Did you remember to adjust the dosage for a Hobbit, Sherlock?"

"He's as far away from the fire as you can get."

"Which I suppose means that you didn't take his size into consideration."

"I took it into consideration and determined the regular potency of the smoke was necessary to render everyone sufficiently unconscious and would not have any adverse effects upon John."

John snickered at the two of them looking so terribly serious and Gandalf drawled, "Yes, no adverse affects at all."

Sherlock huffed something back in Elvish and John didn't need to speak the language to know it was rude. "You should be nice to the Wizard," John scolded. Or at least, he thought he scolded. It was difficult to be certain about what the said when his tongue was being so terribly uncooperative. Gandalf gave Sherlock a look that screamed 'I told you so'. Rather than attempt to reply Sherlock grabbed John by the wrist and hefted the Hobbit up and over his shoulder.

John flopped there for a moment like he was a bag of flour to be carted from market to kitchen, then he remembered he was no such thing and whispered to Sherlock, "Hobbits aren't meant to be carried," like this was brand new information.

John felt Sherlock huff from the shoulder at his stomach and the Elf replied, "'Meant' has very little
meaning to me."

John pondered on that for a moment before he pointed out, "Perhaps it might be be time to start."

"Change is for people who lack conviction."

"Personally I think it's it for people who don't like being carried on someone else's shoulders," John retorted.

"Thankfully my unchanging disposition is the kind where people don't try to carry me places."

John was going to tell Sherlock that he didn't think that was much of an excuse when the Elf dropped John down to the dirt beside Faun then strode away. John laid there, not nearly so amused as he had been moments before. He opened his mouth to shout at Sherlock, only to forget what he'd meant to say and instead renewed his acquaintance with the speckle of stars peeking through the trees. He cocked his head to the side, dragging his already sleep-flat curls through the dirt and thought to himself how strange it was that the stars didn't look strange. He knew he was no further from home than the forests around Bree, but it seemed it was a world farther than that. Like weeks had passed since he'd left his home just a few days ago.

Arwen's face appeared between John and the sky he'd been mulling, long strands of sleek, black hair slipping out of her braid and tumbling down towards him. "Sherlock, you're being rash."

Sherlock snorted, which John was fairly certain translated to, "Putting the Hobbit on the ground is a mark of nothing." Though his brain was a little fuzzy at the moment so there was room for translation errors.

Arwen glowered at Sherlock like that was exactly what he'd said though, and she slid to her knees to check on John. She ran one pale, cool hand over John's forehead and murmured a string of words with a lilt to them that made John think they weren't meant to communicate anything more than the hope he would heal. "This is unnecessary, Sherlock. These people are our friends, the most trustworthy companions my ada could think send with us and you're turning on them with no provocation. Leaving them spelled asleep in the wood with no one to defend them."

"They'll be fine." And John could almost hear Sherlock's eye roll.

Arwen rose to her feet, all regal fury and John started to see the princess buried underneath the fussing she'd been doing. "There are Wargs out there!"

"What on Middle-Earth is it like in your tiny little brains?" Sherlock muttered, and John could see enough of Arwen's face to know that all females, Elven or not, responded the same way to being called stupid. Before Arwen could lose her temper, which really was justified, Sherlock carried on, "their in-built adrenaline response will react to the presence of a threat and will easily overpower the effect of the sedative."

"But what if it doesn't?"

"Then obviously they lack the basic skills necessary for survival and I'll be doing our species a favor by removing them from the pool of potential contributors."

John knew the look on Arwen's face, even from this angle. It was the same look Harry gave John when he explained that Farmer Cotton's sheep were sick because he'd been feeding them rotten grass, not because his sons were so naughty they made everyone around them ill. Rather than listen to the two fight it out in Elvish that he wasn't going to understand and wasn't going to enjoy it even if he did, John contemplated getting up.
Well, he thought about contemplating it, and gave one limp wriggle to the side thinking that he might roll to his stomach and push up from there. But halfway through the attempt the thought that perhaps he wouldn't actually make it to his feet and would end up choking on the dirt underneath him. Then he thought that perhaps he ought to just lie there like a good little Hobbit until someone remembered where he was.

Faun snorted at John and the horse shook his long neck until the reigns slipped from around the saddle's pommel and slid to where John could grab them. It took John a good sight longer to understand what the reigns were meant for than he would like to admit, but eventually he caught on. He fumbled for the straps, eventually wrapping them around his wrist enough times that Faun could pull him to his feet.

And right off them again.

As John lay there staring at the dirt underneath him, he listened to Sherlock snap mean things to Arwen because he'd decided that none of their Elven companions were to be trusted. Arwen didn't like leaving them all undefended, and Sherlock was ardent that nothing was going to happen, and if it did it wasn't nothing worse than they deserved. Which then spiraled into a frankly ugly discussion about how death was an overreaction to the possibility that they might have shared sensitive information. Faun nosed John, trying to turn him over and get him back on task, and John decided he was done. There were Orcs out there, hunting them across a forest near Bree, near the Shire, and if they stayed here for much longer there was no telling what those creatures would do on their hunt. And these Elves were too busy with who was right and who was wrong to think about all the lives that were at risk while they shouted.

With a stubborn grunt John forced his left leg under him and rose to his feet. Of course, with Sherlock being particularly tall for an Elf and John being particularly short for a Hobbit, he only made it so far as Faun's belly. Hands on his hips, John stared at the stirrups dangling in front of him and mulled options for a moment, immediately disregarding the notion of asking Gandalf for help. The Wizard was moving between the sleeping Elves, quietly murmuring to himself what John assumed as a spell of his own that would rouse them all from their sleep at the first sound of danger.

John decided to approach mounting Faun like he used to with climbing trees. Once you got one leg up, the rest was just a matter of determination, but the trouble was actually getting your leg hooked over a branch. John grabbed the edge of Faun's saddle and all but jumped, trying to get his foot into the stirrup. It took an attempt or two (and if Faun crouched ever so slightly to help him get up, neither one of them was going to mention it), but finally John got his right leg into the stirrup. From there, mounting was a matter of half jumping, half standing, trying to force himself high enough that he could plop belly down on the saddle and kick his left leg over to keep himself in place.

It worked, eventually, and John turned to demand that Sherlock and Arwen get a move on, only to find Sherlock staring at him with a triumphant smile. "What?"

"How's your leg Master Watson?"

Only then did Jonh realize that mounting Faun had required the use of a leg that he'd been limping on since he'd been a Hobbitling. He stared down at the right leg he'd used to force himself up, and for the first time in decades, it didn't hurt. He ran the heel of his hand along the muscle of his thigh, feeling for the scar where the Orc arrow had ripped through his limb as a child. He could feel the healed pucker of his skin through the material of his pants, the remnant of the wound hadn't gone away, but the constant ache from infection wasn't there. His limb finally felt whole.
"What did you do?"

Sherlock stepped beside him, silent with the smallest of smiles in reply. "You didn't limp when you came for Arwen, but you limped when you remembered you were supposed to be injured. The limp doesn't come from your wound, it comes from your mind."

John just stared at his leg like it was entirely new. Sherlock slowly placed his hand on the scar, the chill of his skin pulling out the warmth that came from John steadily massaging the skin, too baffled to stop. They were silent and comfortable together for a long moment before Gandalf snorted, "You crafty little Elf."

Sherlock gave John an eye roll, mounting Faun behind John and ignoring how Arwen was staring at him like her entire understanding of the elder Elf had been proven wrong. She stood at the center of where they'd been wrapped in their bed rolls a moment before, almost unwilling to move. Sherlock ignored Arwen's concern and pointed Faun away from the camp and deeper into the forest. John twisted as much as possible in his seat and said to Sherlock, "Aren't we supposed to be protecting her?"

"She's wrong and she knows it, and I won't pander to her any more."
The House of Elrond (B)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo grabbed Kíli’s knee and clenched. The lad was almost vibrating with restrained amusement, and despite Bilbo’s reminder he couldn’t take it anymore and erupted into laughter. Fíli, Ori, and Bilbo tried desperately not to follow Kíli’s terrible example, but there was nothing for it. As it usually went when Kíli was involved, Fíli broke first, a booming chortle that echoed through the courtyard they’d been tucked into upon their arrival at Rivendell. Ori slammed two mitten-covered hands over his mouth to force back his lilting giggles, but it did no good. And Bilbo, Bilbo took one look at Thorin's pinched expression and didn't even bother trying to stop.

With curious expressions the rest of the Company turned to the four of them who were gathered together in a tangle of Dwarf and Hobbit. Something about being safe after so many nights of sleeping with someone on watch for Orcs had unwound the youngest members of the Company. Ori, Kíli, and Fíli had the excuse that they were barely grown, while Bilbo just chalked his excitement up to being infected by his friends' good humor.

Which is why when Thorin looked at them all like he was having flashbacks to turning his nephews over his knee, Bilbo didn't wilt with Ori and let Fíli’s safe status as heir handle him. Instead, Bilbo laughed with a lightness he hadn’t had since he was a Hobbitling himself, "You sound like Sherlock."

The dwarves all froze, some furious that the King Under the Mountain had just been compared to an Elf, and others trying not to draw attention to themselves at what was sure to be a violent rush of temper from Thorin. Bilbo was no fool and knew precisely the wrath that was coming, but it was hard to be wary of Thorin when the Dwarf had spent all day fussing like a Hobbit housewife.

Since the last time Gandalf had had the chance to tell the story of John and Sherlock their little company had stumbled across Radagast (and if that was Gandalf’s definition of a great Wizard then Bilbo was frankly concerned about how the rest of them were going to survive this trip), been ambushed by Orcs, and been snuck through the back door into Rivendell. Last night the Company had glowered at Elrond and been fed vegetables in retaliation until they collapsed into their appointed beds, all with no concern for stories.

But on this their first full day in Rivendell Kíli and Fíli had burst into Bilbo's room and snatched the Hobbit out of bed before he had the chance to object. With Bilbo as the one in charge, Dori and Nori let their little brother Ori go scouting with the princes, thinking that the Hobbit at least would have the common sense not to do anything foolish when surrounded by Elves. Or perhaps would just put down his hairy foot when the lads tried to break into rooms that would get them struck down by some Elvish curse. Bilbo had indeed kept them out of Elrond's herb garden (the most likely place to be inadvertently poisoned), but had instead led them on a quest from one end of the house to the other.

The moment Thorin's back was turned the princes each grabbed their companions and slipped from the balcony where breakfast was laid out. Kíli and Ori went over the balcony's edge and down a trellis, while Fíli and Bilbo used the door like civilized folk. (The brothers had long ago learned that it was best to split up when you were being hunted by Thorin Oakenshield, that way one of you would make it out alive to try and spring the other from captivity.)

Since they'd skipped out on the finer points of breakfast, Bilbo insisted that before they went
anyplace else that they find their way to the kitchen so he wouldn't be forced to starve for the sake
of the Dwarves' curiosity. The brothers whined the whole way down the stairs and to the heavy
doors of the kitchen, only to perk right up at the sight of a perfect Hobbit breakfast laid out for
them on a Bilbo-sized table that was pushed up beside the windows and out of the way of the
general flow of cooking traffic. Bilbo ate his scones and drank his black tea, explaining to Ori how
Hobbits went about making the crumbly, little cakes. Kíli and Fíli, of course, bounced in their seats
and fidgeted incessantly until Ori blinked with his wide, innocent eyes and asked the princes if
perhaps they could see if there was a cookbook he could study. Rather than stroll over to one of the
numerous Elves maintaining the kitchen, the brothers took that as a sign to creep around corners
and peer over counters in their quest.

Bilbo gave Ori a look torn between scolding and gratitude, and the young Dwarf just shrugged like
it wasn't his fault that everyone underestimated him. Bilbo supposed that he should've expected
that from a lad whose older brothers were a chief tactician and a master thief.

The moment Bilbo finished his tea and leaned back in his chair, hands on his braces and ready for
a good smoke, Kíli popped up beside him and dragged him from the room. Bilbo had just enough
wits to twist in Kíli's grip and shout out his thanks for the breakfast. What was meant to be a
distraction so Bilbo could eat in peace had turned into a quest for the brothers to find Ori that
cookbook. (Not that they would ever condone the eating of Elvish food except in dire
circumstances, and they conveniently ignored how Bilbo could simply write out the Hobbit recipes
for them. But they wanted to prove that they could make off with something from Elrond's house.)

Their quest took along the main hallways of the house's lower floors, peeking their heads through
open doors and trying to goad one another past the closed ones. The journey was very nearly cut
short by the boom of Thorin's voice echoing down the stairs and demanding to know if anyone had
seen his nephews. The four of them froze, and Ori's face crumpled in guilt for aiding the princes in
their escape from responsibility. But before his conscience could force him up the stairs to report
all to Thorin, the brothers hauled their companions out the open windows and off into the trees.

The rest of the day was spent slipping away from Thorin, and getting acquainted with every last
unknown corner of Rivendell.

Fíli was besotted with the forge, examining all the delicate tools the Elves had fastidiously laid out
on a great stone block beside the constantly smoldering embers where they worked. His expression
was that of a Brandybuck moments before they filched a pie from some unsuspecting window
ledge, so Bilbo grabbed Fíli by the ear and hauled him away before he committed some
unpardonable crime. (Either unpardonable to the Elves for stealing or unpardonable to the Dwarves
for lusting after the tools of Elven smithies.)

Meanwhile, Kíli had to be forcibly removed from the stables when he decided that he should try
and ride Lord Elrond's massive, white steed. Though it did take Bilbo a moment to realize that's
what Kíli was planning since all four of them just stood at the stable's entrance in dumbfounded
silence, staring at creatures that Bilbo was almost certain were the size of Trolls.

Unlike the others, it wasn't a building that entranced Ori, it was trying to get everything down on
paper. He would stop mid-dash, his little notebook in hand, and trace out that the stables were 487
steps from the side of Elrond's house, only to have the charcoal slip off the page when Kíli grabbed
Ori by the scruff of his knitted sweater and hauled him back towards whatever they were
fascinated by now.

After a whole day of 'searching for the cookbook' and avoiding getting caught by Thorin, Kíli
decided that he wanted to scale the bell tower that hung over the center of Elrond's home. Bilbo
tried to talk them out of it, too concerned that the lads would try to scale down the sides of the
tower like it came with the built in handholds of a mountain. However all of Bilbo's concerns about
the younglings slipped out of his mind the moment he actually saw inside the tower.

The tall building housed Elrond's library, a series of rooms might now be Bilbo's favorite place in
the whole of Middle-Earth. The room was circular, one floor stacked upon another rising ever
higher under the soft, lilting bells that called out meals and meetings. There was a delicate staircase
winding up the outside edge of the room, pausing for a landing at each subsequent floor and then
pressing on uninterrupted. The dark paneled wood at the center of the main floor was cut to look
like branches, as though the whole tower was suspended within a tree. Amongst all the twigs and
leaves crafted into the floor there were the main limbs stretching out to the open windows, the
eight points of the compass rose leading out to reading benches covered with pillows.

It was assumed that whoever was in the library actually belonged there, so there were no signs to
tell their group how the books were organized. Fíli and Kíli took that as permission to ignore the
books entirely and instead guffaw up the stairs looking for the top. Ori distracted himself with a
quest to discover the logic behind the arrangement. While Bilbo, Bilbo just roamed, tracing his
fingers over the finely wrought spines.

Despite his best efforts, even Bilbo's carefully tended library at home would accumulate dust. The
oldest of his books, the ones passed down from father to son, Baggins to Baggins, would
occasionally get torn; their pages turning yellow despite the tenderest of care. But here the books
looked freshly bound, despite holding a dialect so old that Bilbo only recognized it because he was
curious.

He followed the books up the stairs, pausing to look out the open window that showed the long
stretch of the valley down below. He thought that perhaps the Dwarves didn't really need a burglar,
because Bilbo would very much like to stay here. Excellent tea, seven square meals a day, books
that never aged, and the chance to spend some time looking at this view. No, the Dwarves couldn't
really need him all that terribly could they?

"Master Baggins." Bilbo had been so busy justifying all the reasons why he really shouldn't be
dragged into someone else's quest against a dragon of all things, that he didn't notice he wasn't
alone on this floor. Bilbo whirled around, certain that he'd just been caught someplace he was not
supposed to be, but the female Elf didn't appear irritated. Not that Elves ever seemed to display an
overabundance of emotion.

Her face was unlined, her black hair long and straight, and she had her father's eyes. But more than
that, it was the way she looked at Bilbo, like something about him made her unbearably sad, that
told him who she was. Bilbo dipped into a bow, "Lady Arwen."

She smiled like her father, lips pressed together and almost unsure that her own facial muscles
knew how to carry out the expression. "Mithrandir has been telling you tales."

Bilbo looped his thumbs through his braces and casually shrugged, "That's what Wizards are for,
after all. Well, that and fireworks." Arwen had no response to that, the awkward silence stretching
out like it did so often when Bilbo had tried to talk to the Dwarves. He rocked on his heels
uncomfortably, thinking that according to the story the maiden hadn't improved much since the last
time she'd dealt with a Hobbit. "So, do you remember much about John?"

It had seemed like a harmless question, the only commonality that the two of them might share
since she didn't particularly look like the sort of girl who had a fondness for scones. And yet, what
little color there was drained out of her features and her mouth went pinched. She smoothed out her
expression almost immediately, centuries of practice at apathy Bilbo supposed, but it wasn't fast enough. Bilbo crossed his arms and stuck out his chin the way he'd seen Thorin do a hundred times. The pose the King Under the Mountain assumed every time he wanted someone to understand just how unimpressed he was.

Arwen glid across the room, with one thin, leather-bound book in her hand. "I meant no offense, Master Baggins. I knew Master Watson in passing, for only a few days as he joined our company on the journey from the town of Bree to here in Imladris.\(^2\) Rather than respond with deference like the Baggins side of him so desperately wanted to, Bilbo raised his eyebrow the way Gandalf liked to when he thought the Dwarves were being particularly difficult. Like there was more to the story that they were conveniently not mentioning. "I knew little of him when I had the chance, Master Baggins. But I know his story well."

Bilbo didn't even bother attempting to be stalwart and disapproving at that pronouncement and asked, "Is it a commonly told Elf tale then?"

"The opposite, in fact. There are few people in Middle-Earth willing to speak the name of John Watson, and Mithrandiris one of them." All influence of Thorin and Gandalf gone, Bilbo puffed up like the mighty offended Baggins that he was. To think that just because the story involved a Hobbit, Elves didn't think it worth telling. Really it was almost more than his sensibilities could bear. Arwen could see that she had stepped in it and with as much humility as an Elf could muster she explained, "You will understand when you reach the story's end why the tale of Sherlock Naenwauva\(^3\) is not a favorite among our kin."

Bilbo reminded himself that he was a Baggins of Bag End, and as such he didn't lose his temper with maidens, because Elf or not the lass probably didn't mean to imply that when Bilbo knew better he'd detest a story where one of his folk finally got to be the hero. The lass seemed to have said all she intended to on the subject and handed to Bilbo the thin manual she'd been examining. "When I was told that a Halfling was within our walls, traveling with Mithrandir, I thought this might be of interest to you." Bilbo gave her a polite smile and tugged on leather strap that had been methodically wrapped around the book, keeping it closed. He tossed it aside with little care, then froze at the sharp ink on the first page that proclaimed, "The Personal Journal of John H. Watson."

"I thought that perhaps, in case you are separated from Mithrandir, or if your Dwarves grow tired of hearing about an Elf, you would be in a position to tell the story to yourself."

She left it at that, gliding past Bilbo and towards the stairs. Keeping his eyes on the words before him Bilbo declared, "Maybe, instead of me understanding why you don't like it, someday you'll understand why I do."

Arwen didn't both to reply to that, but she did pause for a moment before floating down the stairs and leaving Bilbo to himself.\(^4\)

The book was green and unpatterned, with a back cover that folded up and over the front and a thong of leather that wrapped around half a dozen times. Rather than turning past that first page and gorging himself of the story, Bilbo called out, "You can come out now, Thorin." The Dwarf didn't bother pretending he wasn't there, and stepped down from the floor above Bilbo where he'd been listening to the entire conversation. "You spotted the boys while they were mucking about on the tower, then?" Bilbo asked, still looking at the book before him.

Thorin grunted the affirmative, "Usually it doesn't take me so long to find them." The implication being that Bilbo was a far better sneak than Thorin had given him credit for. Bilbo just shrugged, not feeling the need to explain that most of his skill in avoidance had developed from trying to skirt
Thorin paused, loudly contemplating something before he stepped forward and dropped one large hand on Bilbo's shoulder and declared, "You handled it well."

Torn between the desire to blush at finally receiving some bit of praise and the urge to tell Thorin that he'd snapped at a woman and that was never the right response, Bilbo just nodded. The two of them stood there awkwardly for a moment before Kíli's voice rang out from the floor above, "Did you want us to give you some privacy, Uncle?" Thorin rolled his eyes, but the moment that might have turned into actual friendliness was broken.

Thorin proceeded to haul the four of them down the stairs and back to the courtyard where their Company was set up. In order to prevent further escapes he forced bowls of soup into each of their hands, set them down on the ground before Gandalf and asked asked the Wizard what substance Sherlock had put in the fire the last time he'd told them about the Hobbit and his Elf. (The whole Company had been so shocked about Thorin asking for the story that not a soul had objected that the Elves might overhear them listening to a story about an Elf.)

When Gandalf worked his way through the next portion of the tale and told them how Sherlock so distrusted every last Elf that he'd potioned them all to sleep, Bilbo bit his lip and tried not to think about Thorin hunting them all through what was undisputedly one of the safest places in the whole of Middle-Earth. Kíli, however, lacked the same restraint as Bilbo and burst into laughter.

Bilbo would've liked to blame what happened next on his lingering exhaustion coupled with the newfound sense of safety and the absurdity that Thorin had actually tried to be nice to Bilbo earlier, but really it was just his poor Tookish timing. Bilbo laughed along with Kíli, Fíli, and Ori and when Thorin turned his thunderous glare on the boys, it was Bilbo who explained. "You sound like Sherlock. You chased us around the whole of Rivendell because you don't think anyone here is to be trusted." Thorin's expression had been tired, mildly annoyed, but still mellow, and the moment the words left Bilbo's mouth he realized that Thorin must have been legitimately concerned for them while they scampered about the grounds. Thorin had been scared that something might befall those in his care, and Bilbo was mocking him for it.

The second he stopped speaking Bilbo knew the words were wrong, and he intended to rabble until he made the situation better, but Thorin would have none of it. The haggard but peaceful expression the Dwarf had been wearing shut down entirely. Thorin was at root a King, so even though Bilbo knew he would've preferred to snap back something cruel, Thorin just stuck out his chin and raised one eyebrow at Bilbo like he found the Hobbit pathetic, but mildly amusing in how ill informed he was.

The story was done for the night, and as Bilbo fell asleep with a thin, green book pulled tight to his chest, he tried not to think about how he'd just bungled his one chance to be something more than the necessary burglar. What little ground he'd gained over the last few days would mean nothing when stacked up against the mistake of today.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Mithrandir = the Elven name for Gandalf.

FN 2: Imladris = Eleven name for Rivendell.
FN 3: Naenwauva = my made up word for 'Seer of Tomorrows', the special Elven name for Sherlock. It appears to me that if you are particularly famous among Elves then you get a second name, like Arwen Undómiel (Evening Star) and Elrond Peredhil (half-Elven). I wanted to give Sherlock that sense of epicness.

FN 4: I know, I'm a little harsh on Arwen here, but when you read about her in Appendix A, Part V of LOTR she sort of gives Aragorn the brush off. Which, immortal Elf, child of Elrond, kind of makes sense, but it's always been my opinion that Arwen would be a bit stuck up until she finally was exposed to humanity in the form of Aragorn. That it would be his influence that really transformed her into the bamf character she was in the LOTR movies. Aragorn meets Arwen when he's 20, and at the time of the Hobbit he was 10, so for the whole of this story Arwen hasn't yet begun to change, hence her less than personable disposition in both of the story arcs. And Bilbo's bit of foreshadowing.
After a night’s hard riding with Sherlock at his back John began to suspect that spending too much time with Sherlock might eventually drive him mad. And even worse, John didn't think he’d much mind.

Their small party rode so quickly that John recalled his Hobbitling dream of learning to fly. They were sped along by the Elven breeding of Arwen’s horse and Gandalf’s shoring up his own human-raised steed with whispers of magic. But none of that was fast enough for Sherlock, who rode Faun at an almost frantic pace, bursting out ahead of the others then looping back around to check on their trail. They rode straight through the night, with Sherlock’s intention to get them as far away as possible before the rest of the party woke and realized that they’d been left behind. Around dawn Arwen had hinted that perhaps it would be best for the horses to take a short break, and Sherlock’s response had been to spur Faun on all the harder.

Gandalf had the common sense to know which member of their party was the one with power over Sherlock and stared at John until he caught the Hobbit’s eye. Then the Wizard gave a particularly pointed look at his own horse, who, taking John’s limited understanding of horses into account, really did look exhausted.

John shuffled as much as he was able to atop Faun’s saddle, trying to figure out how you were supposed to convince an agitated Elf that his crusade was likely to end in tragedy of the horse-ly variety. Furthermore, how you were supposed to convince Sherlock of anything that didn’t involve extra chances to deduct interesting things, John didn’t know. Like he knew the train John’s thought’s had taken, Gandalf raised one exceptionally bushy eyebrow trying to communicate that the Hobbit already had his answer. Which, now that John thought about it, he supposed he did.

John cleared his throat in that awkward way that means you’re trying to draw attention to yourself and felt Sherlock heave a sigh at his back. “What?”

John rolled his eyes at the requisite huffiness that came from interrupting Sherlock’s train of thought. “I was just wondering why we’re not on the road.”

John didn’t need to turn around to know that Sherlock looked pained that he had to explain himself. “We’re not on the road because we’re being hunted by Orcs.”
“Yes, but wouldn’t the road be faster?”

“While simultaneously raising the probability for Orcs to track us.”

John “hmm-ed,” which he had discovered about ten minutes into meeting Sherlock was the most effective method of nudging the Elf the way you wanted to go. To Sherlock a “hmm” was the possibility that you might know something he didn’t, or secretly possess some evidence that would change his deduction.

“What?”

John started like his mind had wondered away from Sherlock, an unacceptable state of events for the Elf. “Oh, nothing.”

“Out with it.” Sherlock demanded.

“There’s nothing to be out with.” John soothed Sherlock with his most genuine tone. “I just haven’t been this far away from home before and I’m trying to take it all in.”

Being cleverer than most creatures on two legs, Faun knew Sherlock’s response to that and slammed to a stop as fast as his gallop would let him. Sherlock didn’t reprimand the horse, and instead let him pause for a half a moment before Sherlock re-directed them towards the north. John could hear Gandalf shouting behind them, but Faun put on an extra burst of speed and they were gone before John could parse the words.

And so began the pattern they would follow for the rest of the short trip to Rivendell. Sherlock would unilaterally decide that there was something John needed to see, and suddenly they’d be gone, tearing off in a swirl of pounding hooves to enlighten the Hobbit about the beauties that existed outside his country, even in the wilds. Sherlock would take John to half-forgotten ruins, telling long stories about events in levels of detail that made John suspect that Sherlock had to be there when they happened to know so much about the telling.

John only once made the mistake of asking about Sherlock’s history. They’d ridden far out ahead of Gandalf and Arwen (who, while Sherlock was away from them, were moving at a far more reasonable pace, including stops for water and snacks). The Elf and Hobbit were perched atop the highest hill in the region, waiting for their companions to catch up. Sherlock had called the crumbling fortifications at the top of the hill Amon Sûl, and rather than telling John a story and
 Sherlock rambled off the barest of facts. “It was a watchtower, built by the High King Elendil to watch the Great East Road for traces of his great enemy, Sauron the Deceiver. Eventually servants of Sauron destroyed the tower while they ripped apart Elendil’s heirs.” John had meant to ask questions, since not a word of that explanation made any sense to him, but Sherlock flitted off to check the rest of the tower for signs of visitors.

John let Sherlock go, knowing that following after him and asking questions wasn’t going to do any good. However, despite Sherlock’s assertions about John’s ability to observe things, one didn’t get to be a healer without the slightest ability to notice the little details.

Amon Sûl\(^1\) jutted up above the plain below it, not terribly tall in and of itself, but compared to the ground below, it was massive, like a Dwarf among Hobbits. As they approached, John had looked up at the hill and seen the crumbling remnants of fortifications perched atop it like a mangled crown. Despite Bree, and the Elves, this seemed like the most foreign place John had ever seen. Not because it was the furthest away from home, but because John had never felt so small. Never felt so insignificant in the grand scheme of things.

Amon Sûl was old, even the blindest of people would be able to see that. The stones that made up the walls and watchtower were wide, cut to the perfect square, and underneath the moss and wind-bitten smears of dirt they were all white. There was an outer wall that ran along very edge of the hill’s top, with thin windows carved through the surface so archers would have a place to fire. Between the wall and the tower John could see patches of grass now growing wild that had once been finely trimmed by peckish horses. The outside wall was mostly crumbled, the occasional portion still standing tall where it had once been whole. The tower itself was worse off than the wall, and it was only John’s imagination that told him that once upon a time it had been two human stories tall. Jutting up fiercely from the top of the hill, white and glinting in the sunlight as a warning to all those who travelled below. The tower reached its original height at only one place, with the upper floor lined with windows open to every direction so the watch would be uninterrupted. The rest of the tower had been ripped apart by some force that John couldn’t imagine. The smashed stones that had been the walls and the rotten wooden debris that had once been floors and furniture were now scattered about the building.

There had been a battle here, something fierce and horrifying, even to Sherlock.

The realization struck John like a hammer to stone: Sherlock had been here when the watchtower fell. The only reason he would be unwilling to burst out his knowledge about the place had to be that the telling of the story would be worse than the joy he got from seeing John fascinated by all he knew. John had been feeling insignificant in comparison to Amon Sûl, to this place older than the Shire, John’s homeland. And Sherlock had been here when it fell, old enough to fight.

John wasn’t prone to thinking of himself as young, and hadn’t since the day he’d been attacked by Orcz. Yet, the reality of Sherlock’s actual age when put together with the visual of this place was
enough to stun him. To make him feel small.

Faun slid up behind John and dropped his chin down to the Hobbit’s head, thumping him out of his reverie. John rolled his eyes that the horse was just about as subtle as its rider. “It’s a legitimate concern, you know,” John said. Not at all concerned that he was talking to a horse. “I don’t want to have come all this way only to be forgotten.”

Faun slipped his muzzle to the side and nudge John upside his head, like another would do with their hands. “Well no, I haven’t told Sherlock that I’d like to stay with him, but that’s not exactly the sort of thing you say to a bloke that you’ve only known for a day.”

Faun ducked his head down and nudged John in the thigh, “Yes, thank you, I am fully aware that he fixed my leg. But there’s a way these things are supposed to go.”

The horse actually snorted at him, which John supposed was a pretty good indicator about the strength of his argument. “I don’t care that a Hobbit isn’t supposed to be friends with an Elf, but I do care about making plans with someone who I’m not going to see beyond tomorrow.” Faun just dropped his chin right back on John’s head with a whinny, which John supposed was the horse equivalent of how Sherlock liked to roll his eyes and flop back onto the nearest flat surface when he grew irritated with John’s lack of deductions. “It’s a legitimate concern!”

“John!” Sherlock bellowed. The Hobbit twisted around to figure out where the Elf was calling from and only when Sherlock shouted again did John realize that the Elf had somehow scaled his way to the crumbled top of the tower.

John just stared for a moment, certain that he had to be seeing this wrong, before Sherlock sharply gestured at him like he was demanding that the Hobbit get the hell up there. Instead, John took a half step forward like he actually thought he was in a position to catch Sherlock should he fall. “What on Middle-earth are you doing?”

Rather than answer that question with any sort of explanation for his reasoning, Sherlock instead demanded again, “You need to see this!”

John buried his head in his hands and fought the urge to swear. When that was moderated, he called, “I don’t want to watch you break your neck, thanks!”

John could feel Sherlock roll his eyes from there, “You’re my assistant aren’t you! Get up here!”
Faun was smug. John didn’t need to speak horse to know that. And he wondered when it became natural for him to take into account the reactions of a horse. “This still isn’t how you’re supposed to do things, you know,” he muttered.

He knew full well that if the horse could’ve spoke he would’ve replied, “Maybe not, but that’s the way it’s going to go.”

John nudged Faun’s nose off his head and grumbled, “Oh, shut up.” He stormed over to the one remaining piece of tower that jutted straight up to where Sherlock was perched on top. John ran his eyes over the smooth line of the stone, and though the rocks were pockmarked by the forces of wind and dust, it wasn’t enough to stand in for the branches he would’ve had on a tree back home. “How am I supposed to get up there? I’m a Hobbit!” he shouted.

Sherlock glowered like he’d just declared that the sky was blue and that was brand new information. John was about to shout that assistant or not he was not going to stand for any of this nonsense, when Sherlock kicked down a rope that John hadn’t seen him carry up. “Come on, John!”

John very seriously thought about reminding Sherlock that he was a Hobbit, and Hobbits, no matter how terrible their reputations may be, were not supposed to climb buildings. And since Sherlock wouldn’t listen to that, he would then point out the respective height of a Hobbit as compared to an Elf and how that would make climbing a building of this size practically impossible. However, considering that John was muttering these things to himself while he was tying a rope around his waist and figuring out what in the world he was going to grab to hoist himself up, he didn’t think the objections would have much weight.

John got the rope settled and tried to wedge his thick Hobbit fingers into one of the gaps in the mortar. When that didn’t work, he balanced one foot on the base brick jutting out and tried to stand and give himself a few extra inches of height to see what that would change. Only the moment he put his weight on that foot his toes slid right off, scratching them on the stone’s sharp corner.

John hissed at the sudden burn of pain and Sherlock’s head of floppy curls popped over the edge of the wall and called down, “You’re doing it wrong.”

“Well excuse me!” John snapped. “Some of us weren’t born with legs as long as the ruddy horse!”

Sherlock raised an eyebrow like he had no idea what John was talking about, but he knew better
than to ask. “You’re too dense.” Of course, it might have been better for Sherlock if he hadn’t said anything at all.

“I am not!” John snapped.

“Yes, you are. Your density is equivalent to that of a Man, which means you’re too dense to climb up the wall without aide.”

John understood that Sherlock had been talking about his body not his brain, and blushed that he’d jumped straight to the assumption that Sherlock was mocking him. “Oh, what’s the right way then?”

“I pull you up.” Hobbit or no, John typically only let people carry him places when he was unconscious. However, he’d lost his temper with Sherlock so many times in the last few minutes that it wasn’t worth the effort. With nothing more than a sigh, John shifted the rope under his bum and leaned back to test that the knot would hold his weight. Sherlock apparently deemed the knot good enough because he started dragging John up the side of the tower before John called out that he was ready. It was bumpy for a few moments, with John trying to find his balance so he didn’t go slipping through the rope and Sherlock not having the patience to let him get adjusted.

John muttered disparaging things under his breath and told himself to keep looking up at Sherlock and not down at the ground, but of course he did. Pulling him hand over hand, Sherlock had John rising quickly, and by the time the Hobbit broke and looked at the ground he was perilously high up. John rocked forward to grab the rope and make himself feel a little less like he was going to plummet to his doom.

Of course, reaching for the rope sent John forward into the wall, and in his attempt to get his face out of the stonework he twisted the rope around and found himself staring at the uninhibited view of the surrounding plains. Sherlock’s smooth tugs pulled him ever higher and the sight of endless dirty green stretching out with the occasional bump of rock was enough to distract John from his rather precarious position. The place was wild, so unlike the sweetly rolling hills of the Shire that John couldn’t stop himself from staring at their strange, jagged beauty. It was enough to distract him from arriving at the top of the tower until Sherlock groaned that John wasn’t even trying to be helpful anymore and plucked the Hobbit up under his arms and hefted him up and onto the sturdiest part of the roof.

John finally came back to himself, too swept away by the sight before him to be bothered and laughed, “Sherlock, what are we doing?”
“We’re keeping a lookout,” the Elf drawled as a tease.

“And we couldn’t do that a little closer to the ground?”

Sherlock stood beside John, tall and fiercely proud while he looked upon the earth spread out beneath them, like he was deducing all that had happened since the last time he’d been there. John could almost see it on his face, the pattern of the dirt telling him who’d been here last, the way the leaves bent telling him what creatures had made the hilltop their home. “Why look at things the same way as everyone else when you can see them from up here?”

John smiled at the thought that perhaps Faun had learned his complete lack of subtlety from his owner. Both Elf and horse had their own particular fondness for being deemed odd, but that didn’t mean they strove to be forever misunderstood. Sherlock had probably eavesdropped on John moping to Faun and was doing his best to explain his attachment in the only way he knew how. John just grinned at Sherlock for being unable to say the words and declared, “You’re amazing, you know that?”

Sherlock’s mouth did that twitch that meant he was pleased and didn’t want to acknowledge it. “You know you say those things out loud, don’t you?”

“They’re true. And they make you happy.”

Sherlock smoothed out his expression. “No they don’t.”

John just smirked. “Yes they do.” Sherlock rolled his eyes but didn’t object. They sat in silence, watching the breeze roam over the wild, content in each other’s company.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Amon Sûl is better known as Weathertop in the Fellowship of the Ring, where Frodo gets stabbed by the Ringwraith. Otherwise known as when Strider does that awesome throwing of a torch into the face of Ringwraith where I first developed my crush of Viggo Mortensen.
Bilbo had been little more than a tween the first time he’d snuck out of the Shire and into Bree with his cousins. They hadn’t done much, mostly roamed around the streets gaping at the unnecessarily large buildings, gossiping about how one of the lesser Sackville cousins was purportedly in love with a human, then blushing about how the couple was supposed to come together, and frankly just giggling like the children they basically still were.

It was a dare that had pulled them into the human inn, the call of raucous laughter overriding what little of their common sense had survived the day. The Hobbit lads had prodded one another on, closer and closer to the door with a “You go,” and then “No, you!” until finally Bilbo stuck out his chin with all the furious poise of a Baggins and swanned into the building. The ale really was quite as terrible as Bilbo’s assorted relations had made it out to be, but worse was the company. Looking back on that night years later, Bilbo supposed that he and his cousins hadn’t been quite as discreet as they could have while they complained about the strange taste to the human beverage, and that indiscretion on their part probably triggered what happened next.

It was nothing so distasteful as a row, but one of the human traders loudly began explaining to his companions that all Hobbits were originally born large, the size of a regular human baby, and instead of growing up, they shrunk in upon themselves until one day they simply vanished into a speck of dust.

At the time, Bilbo didn’t know what offended him more: the thought that Hobbit would ever be tall, that a Hobbit would ever be less than thrilled with the height he was, or that a Hobbit would turn to useless dust rather than fertile dirt. Were it not for his cousin Lotho’s level-headed and thoroughly Baggins demeanor, then Bilbo would’ve picked a fight with a human and found himself smashed into the frankly disgusting floor. They all left the inn in a huff, to the pleased laugh of the human occupants, and the experience had been so terrible that most of Bilbo’s cousins had never again set foot outside the Shire.

Bilbo had been thinking about that trader and his biting words because he was beginning to suspect there might be some truth to his tale.

The last words spoken to Bilbo in more than passing had been Thorin’s demand for the Hobbit to keep up on the path away from Rivendell, or he might be left behind. It was silly of Bilbo to think that Thorin’s temper would fade with the passing from one day into the next, of course it had to be as permanent as the mountains themselves. Thorin’s displeasure was so palpable that the rest of the Company knew better than to try and subvert his wishes. Bilbo thought he’d known isolation during his first few days with the Dwarves, but that seemed like nothing compared to the way not a
soul seemed to care that Bilbo was still with them.

He tottered along near the end of their column, a new Dwarf behind him and a before him every time they started out, like none of them were willing to take the risk that they might appear too close to the Hobbit. What time they had to rest on the path over the Misty Mountains, Bilbo spent alone, separate from the Company with John Watson’s journal curled up in his lap.

Bilbo was inclined to devour his books, bursting through them to soak up their stories before depositing the tome safely back on the shelf and moving on to another. But for this particular book, Bilbo forced himself to move gently, pouring over not only the story, but also the choice of words, the things he chose to describe, the shape of the letters and even the pressure of John Watson’s pen on the page, all trying to draw out the reading as long as he possibly could. Bilbo had gone back to begin with the first pages of the journal, meandering through scenes that his imagination had already given life with the voice of Gandalf narrating. Now that they had left Gandalf behind in Rivendell, John Watson was Bilbo’s only company, and the Hobbit was loathe to be without him.

Bilbo had thought back to that Man in Bree and began to wonder if maybe his tale was more truthful than the young, offended Bilbo had given it credit, because Bilbo had begun to feel smaller. Night after night he would curl up with John’s green book and wrap himself tightly around the pages, as though he could capture the spirit that was within them, taking the story into himself and having John Watson by his side for the rest of the next day’s lonely travel.

Several nights away from Rivendell, Bilbo slipped away from the Company’s nightly preparations and away to the other side of the rocky outcropping where they were setting up camp. The Dwarves were building their fire on the leeward side of the rocks, giving themselves some shelter from the breeze that constantly roamed over the Misty Mountains. Out of sight from the rest of the Company, Bilbo tucked his knees to his chest, his arms pulled tight to his sides, and his back to the wind so he could protect the pages of the book from the unpredictable temperament of nature.

Of course, Bilbo was so caught up in losing himself in the reading that he didn’t notice Bofur perched on the pinnacle of the rock, idly smoking while he kept an eye on both the Hobbit and the Company. Bilbo didn’t notice Bofur keeping watch tonight just he same as he hadn’t noticed Nori the night before, or Glóin the night before that. In truth, Bilbo had been carefully watched and fussed over by the Dwarves of the Company since the moment they had crossed the boundary leaving Rivendell. The Dwarves were forced into silence, not out of any great fear of Thorin (at least, not any that they would willingly admit to), but because fighting with Thorin about it would only make the situation worse for their Hobbit. So long as Balin held his tongue, the rest of the Company trusted that silence was the best course of action for them all.

However while the Company was not in a position to outright defy Thorin, they didn’t abandon their Hobbit.
Though Bilbo didn’t know it, the Dwarves had a rotating schedule that kept one of them near Bilbo’s side at all times. Someone to defend him should they be attacked, and to make sure that no harm befell him while he sat alone at night. Though, his appointed guards were doing less to keep Bilbo safe from the potential terrors of the world than they were to clear the path in front of him, casually nudging aside rocks that might cut into his unshod feet, and twisting the path to make the journey a little easier for his short legs.

They hadn’t been terribly worried, almost certain that after a day free from the Elven confines of Rivendell that Thorin would return to as good a humor as he ever had, but their king remained unmoved. The Company had then been thrilled when Ori figured out what the small, green book that Bilbo had pulled out of his pack was, thinking that Bilbo had decided to take matters into his own hands and begin luring Thorin with the temptation of a good story. But instead, Bilbo had tucked the book to his chest and walked away from the camp, like he didn’t want to share.

The Dwarves could understand Bilbo not wanting to share the story of his Hobbit predecessor with them, after all, the Hobbit probably felt rather hard done by where Dwarves were concerned. But they couldn’t understand the pleasure Bilbo seemed to get from taking the book and reading.

To Dwarves, books were an unfortunate necessity for the preservation of information. Not something to be adored… or stroked as Bilbo seemed so fond of doing. No, Dwarves preferred their stories to be told aloud, the deep bass of a Dwarven voice met with music ringing, echoing through the caverns of their homeland and sinking into their bones. To read the words on a page seemed nothing compared to that. Not only had Bilbo been tossed to the side by concerns for Thorin’s temper, but also all he’d been left with for company left was a book.

Gentle Ori had broken first, barely making it past the border out of Rivendell before he started sending pleading looks between Thorin and Bilbo, silently begging the Dwarf king to say something to the Hobbit. Nori, whose attachment to Thorin was nothing more than a subject to his king rather than from one axebrother to another, took one look at his dejected baby brother and plotted to steal Orcrist out from under Thorin while he slept and have Bilbo retrieve it in some heroic manner. (Considering that he hadn’t quite figured out what that heroic manner was supposed to be, it was probably a good thing that Ori turned those dejected eyes on his brother and stopped him before he could carry out his plan.)

After Nori it had been Bombur, trying to silently prompt Bilbo to pull out some of the spices that the other Dwarf knew he’d snuck out of the Elven kitchens, thinking that a good meal would lead to the heart of the King. When Bilbo hadn’t noticed the looks, the baton had passed to Fíli and Kíli, who decided that acting like fools would give Bilbo the chance to make them behave and distinguish himself from the naughty Dwarflings. The whole Company had thought that would be a foolproof plan, Bilbo never having been able to refrain from inferring with the boys before. But by the time they tried that tactic, Bilbo had passed the point where he could be so easily prodded back into his formerly genial behavior. As the days went on, nearly the whole of the Company tried
scheme after scheme to goad, induce, and deceive Thorin into showing some sign that Bilbo’s presence was something more than a necessity to be tolerated. But days in the Misty Mountains had done nothing to change his temperament and their Hobbit began to sink more and more into himself, to the point where the poor boy no longer even bothered to look sad when his Dwarven companions ignored him.

On this particular night, when Bilbo scurried away to seek solace in the pages of his book, it was Dwalin who decided it was time to be done with this. Like his brother Balin, and their father before them, Dwalin had been in service to the line of Durin since his birth. However, while Balin had needed to see Thorin face down Azog at the Battle of Azanulbizar to know that he would follow him, Dwalin had known that since the first time he set eyes on the young prince. He had spent his whole life beside Thorin, certain that he would follow the younger Dwarf into death and darkness if he asked. However, that loyalty didn’t mean that Dwalin tolerated Thorin acting like a fool. In fact, it meant Dwalin was one of the few people in the world allowed to tell Thorin he was being terrible. It wasn’t a privilege that he utilized often, but tonight he thought he’d make an exception.

Dwalin slipped his battleaxes off his back and handed them off to Balin, trusting that his brother would keep Kili and Fili from touching the weapons. His warhammer, however, Dwalin kept with him. (Oldest of friends or not, it was never good to challenge Thorin without a weapon at your side to keep you company.)

Thorin had stayed with the main body of the company just long enough to watch Bilbo retreat out of the corner of his eye, then settled in as far away from Bilbo as he could without relinquishing the ground of the encampment. (And if his spot put him in the perfect position to keep an eye on Bofur keeping an eye on Bilbo, then that’s something no one needed to know.) While the Company prepared for the night, Thorin had pulled out a wet stone to sharpen Orcrist. The Elven blade didn’t need tending to beyond wiping off blood, but Thorin would never acknowledge that something crafted by the Elves would require less fussing than a Dwarven blade. So he ran long, sure, unnecessary strokes over the blade, ignoring the way most of his Company was glowering at him.

Dwalin strode over to Thorin, warhammer in hand, and stood with one foot to each side of Orcrist. It was a dangerous position, exposing one of the more vulnerable places on any person’s body to Thorin’s sword, but it was ballsy enough that Thorin actually bothered to look up.

Dwarves were not a particularly talkative race, Dwalin even less so than most of his species, so when he raised one bushy eyebrow, Thorin knew what he was asking. Thorin had first met that look when he’d lost his temper with his tutor and called the old, bumbling Dwarf a fool for thinking poorly of Thrór’s leadership skills and trying to teach Thorin from his grandfather’s mistakes. Thorin had stormed straight to his grandfather to see the old Dwarf fired, but Dwalin had stopped him, telling Thorin harsh words he needed to hear about his grandfather and the gold lust that plagued the line of Durin. From that first time, Thorin had learned when Dwalin’s expression meant Thorin was taking steps down a path Dwalin would stop him from following. Thorin had been subjected to Dwalin’s well-meaning insistence enough times that, although he didn’t
appreciate it, he had come to accept that it was the best advice to be given.

However, that didn’t mean that on this particular day Thorin was willing to listen.

Bilbo… Bilbo was complicated. Had any Dwarf overstepped as Bilbo had, Thorin would’ve simply thumped them upside the head with the flat of his axe and moved on, but Bilbo required special handling that Thorin felt was beyond his skill. Bilbo was like fine filigree work on a delicate broach, and Thorin’s fingers were too bumbling to carry out the task. Even more, Thorin hadn’t expected Bilbo to be one to fall in league with Kíli and Fíli and their recklessness. Bilbo was small, and delicate, too fragile for Thorin. In any way.

Dwalin watched all that hesitation play across Thorin’s features in a series of twitches that most other people would take as a sign that he was searching out Dwalin’s weak spots before he attacked. But Dwalin knew better, and his other eyebrow went up to join the first in an expression that demanded to know if Thorin had lost his spine.

Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain, did not blush. Blushing was for men, and for weak-willed Elves, and for one particular Hobbit who seemed unable to control the way his all too expressive face spilled out every single thing he was feeling, and Dwalin’s eyebrows just went higher as all this split across Thorin’s face.

Thorin huffed in embarrassment, because Dwalin understood now. Thorin had been cold, had blocked out the Hobbit, not because he was still furious with Bilbo for disrespecting him, but because Thorin’s feelings had been hurt. Because it was better to push away the tiny, fragile creature who had somehow gained the ability to do damage to the King Under the Mountain. Better to have done with the Hobbit than to invite him in and be hurt all the worse for the folly.

He turned his attention back to sharpening Orcrist, content that now Dwalin understood and would leave him and his isolation be, but Dwalin was unmoved. The other Dwarf let slip his warhammer, dropping the massive head to the ground with a thump. The whole Company stilled at the sound, everyone paused to see what Thorin’s reaction would be to so blatant a show of force. Dwarves carried their weapons with them at all times, it was a fact of their lives that they never knew when the weapons might be needed and it was better to be caught with than to be caught without. While for Men, brandishing your weapon was a call to fight, Dwarves knew that such a dramatic display was best left for drunks and fools. If you drew your sword or threatened someone with your axe, there was no backing down from that, no chance to fix things without a fight. No, if you wanted to challenge someone’s Dwarfhood, you drew their attention to the weapons you carried. Either the other party would do the same and the fight would escalate from there, or they would take it for the warning it was and you could resolve your matters with the honest decorum that it seemed only Dwarves were capable of.
Thorin rolled his eyes at Dwalin, and kept sharpening his blade, ignoring the insult and call to action inherent in Dwalin’s motion. Rather than take the brush off, Dwalin twisted his wrist and brought the warhammer sharply against the flat of Thorin’s sword. The force wasn’t enough to damage either weapon, but the collision rang through their encampment, and the vibration of the impact was just enough that Throin couldn’t sharpen any more.

That forced Thorin to look up. He met Dwalin’s scolding expression with stubbornness of his own, the King declaring to his guardsman that now was not the time for this. Usually Dwalin let his concerns be foisted off to the side by Thorin’s need to clearly be king, but this was not one of those days. Dwalin snorted in distaste at Thorin’s actions, and despite his years, Thorin still had the grace to know he was beaten.

Thorin heaved a sigh and called out, “Hobbit!” The Dwarf’s voice cut through the silence that had descended over the camp from the first moment that Dwalin had moved, echoing around them in the way that meant Bilbo would be unable to pretend he hadn’t heard.

From his spot atop the rocks, Bofur could see Bilbo’s shoulder’s sag at the call, his head dropping down to hover over the pages in dejection. After a long moment Bilbo forced himself to his feet, taking a few firming breaths to straighten out his vest and coat and prepare himself for what he undoubtedly thought was about to be his dismissal from the Company, abandoned to the wilds and left to find his own way to back to Rivendell.

With his chest puffed out and his shoulders thrown back, Bilbo marched around the rock outcropping and back to the Company, like he wasn’t terrified at all. Bilbo stopped when he was just visible to the rest, looking as unmoved as he could but unwilling to come closer to Thorin than he absolutely had to (probably to give himself enough space to get a running head start should Thorin’s anger turn violent). The whole Company tensed, each of them silently debating with themselves what exactly their response would be if Thorin told Bilbo to be gone, whether or not they would betray their oaths and their contracts to see the Hobbit safely back to Rivendell.

However, their concerns were out of place, because one look at Bilbo and Thorin sighed at the terror roaming in the Hobbit’s eyes. He raised a hand and waived him forward, calling out, “Come Bilbo, I want to know what happened to your Hobbit.”

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Rohhiric is filled with conjoined words like sister-son (sister’s son, or nephew), and shieldmaiden (female warrior). The people who eventually became the people of Rohan spent a lot of time hanging around the areas near Erebor, and I think they would’ve picked up some of the same speech patterns, this one in particular because for some reason it sounds particularly Dwarvish to me. As there are shieldmaidens,
there are a shieldbrothers in Rohan, and since Dwarves aren’t really shield people, an axebrother is their equivalent for pseudo-brothers forged from battle.
The House of Elrond (J)

After slightly less than three days of poorly restrained riding, Sherlock pulled Faun to a stop at the edge of a long canyon. From the loose set to his shoulders John could tell Sherlock was waiting for something. Tension slipped away from Sherlock when he’d discovered something that no one else knew and was waiting for John to catch up. John was ready to guess something ridiculous about the kind of trees, just so Sherlock would sigh and declare something demeaning before he explained what John was supposed to be seeing, but then John paused, and his breath caught when he finally understood.

There was a massive house at the end of the valley, delicate white beams looking like they’d sprouted out of the earth and just happened to grow into a building. The house’s gentle curves edged out from between the bright green of trees in early Spring. If you didn’t know what you were looking for then your eyes would glaze over the building, assuming that the finely wrought pale wood was just trees, and you’d miss it entirely.

"Welcome, Master Doctor, to the House of Elrond," Sherlock murmured in John’s ear, and now the Hobbit’s breath caught for an entirely new reason.

John swallowed, to clear out what else he might’ve said, and replied, “It’s nice.”

Sherlock snorted. "Nice? It’s better than nice."

“Yes, alright then, it’s beautiful.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.”

John just rolled his eyes and patted Sherlock’s arm soothingly for having the gall to suggest the building was either too plain or too perfect. Sherlock knew he was being mocked and kicked his horse into a gallop in retaliation. John yelped and leaned back into Sherlock’s body, trying to reach behind himself to cling to the Elf as they rode down the steep and narrow trail to the house.

It seemed being so close to their destination had made Sherlock a little more reckless than usual, and he pushed Faun on, down hills and a at pace that John was fairly certain the horse wasn’t meant to be able to do. Yet Sherlock guided the horse so surely that John calmed after a minute and started to laugh with excitement. Faun carried them deftly over a thin bridge and to the fine white house, pulling to a sudden stop at the party waiting for them.

Hobbits had a love of simple buildings, but despite that, John wanted to follow Sherlock around the house and see all the beauty that laid within. However, judging by the line of Elves waiting for them, he supposed that was unlikely. There was a long porch stretching across the front of the house, different levels rising up and twisting around so that wherever you were you had a clear view of the valley laid out before them. However, the Elves didn’t seem to be using the balconies to watch the valley, but instead they were flowing out of the house and gathering to stare down at Sherlock.

The assembled party all waited for several long moments, no Elf speaking, but their numbers steadily growing. John thought for half a moment that Sherlock had done something particularly terrible the last time he’d been here, and they were all waiting to see him shot for the offense. John stuck out his chin and tried to look as formidable as he could, so at least they would know Sherlock didn’t stand alone.
Arwen and Gandalf, having taking the more practical road, finally sauntered into view. They looked pristine, slowly making their way through the mist that burst up from the impact of the waterfall that coursed underneath the bridge. Most of the Elves unclenched at the sight of Arwen, and John wondered for a moment if they’d all be gathered there waiting to see if Sherlock would declare that Orcs had gotten the rest of the Company and he’d left Arwen’s body out in the woods somewhere. He huffed to himself that none of these Elves seemed to have the common sense to look down the road rather than at Sherlock and see if the maiden was coming along or not.

John didn’t have to look at Sherlock to know that the Elf had picked up on what he was thinking and his lips had quirked in the most natural of his smiles that happened to look more like a flinch. John didn’t have to watch, because a considerable portion of Sherlock’s Elven companions seemed just as unsubtle as he. The ones who were watching Sherlock rather than Arwen started to blink, like Sherlock’s smile had been a trick of the light, while some of them actually went so far as to gasp.

Arwen flowed from her horse in one practiced motion, and if there was a graceful word for bounded, then that is what she did over to the Elf standing at the center of it all. He was waiting at the edge of the stairs, and out of all the company of Elves who had been watching, his was the only face that remained placid. He appeared unmoved by Sherlock’s arrival, and just as even about the appearance of Arwen and Gandalf. John suspected that out of all of these Elves, this was the one with the most common sense. And perhaps the only one whose opinion Sherlock would listen to.

That was enough to convince John that this was Lord Elrond, the master of the house.

Arwen swept straight to her father and the Elf Lord wrapped her in his arms as she buried her face in his shoulder. John’s father had been an excellent Hobbit, but not a particularly good parent, at least to John. But John had seen the expression on Elrond’s face when talking with his own dear mother. Though Elrond had been steady and dispassionate, something in him unclenched when he finally had his daughter safely beside him. John hadn’t seen the tension before, but the Elf’s face smoothed, going from austere to gentle now that his daughter was home.

It was enough that for one moment John ached for his mother, to know what she would say, to hear her voice when he told her about the madcap dash he’d just had across Middle-Earth on the back of an Elven horse. But Sherlock chose that moment to slip from Faun’s saddle and, without checking with John, seized him by the waist and lifted him to the ground. Sherlock’s hands slid ever so quickly from John’s waist up the back of his jacket and brushed over his shoulders. Homesickness fled at the thought that the adventure wasn’t done yet, that he’d made a friend along the way.

John ducked his head with the slightest of smiles and knew better than to acknowledge that Sherlock had shown affection. It would mortify him (as much as Sherlock was ever embarrassed) to be accused of gentleness in front of this hoard of Elves that seemed to regard him with the same fascination that they did the suddenly arrived Hobbit.

Before the mass could descend and ask Sherlock questions that would drive him to say something vicious, Lord Elrond pressed a kiss to the crown of his daughter’s head and looked up at Sherlock. The Elf raised one mild eyebrow and said, “Master Sherlock, you seem to have misplaced much of your company.” Rather than explain or acknowledge, Sherlock snorted and strode up the stairs and past Elrond. The waiting Elves parted like flesh did before Sherlock’s sword, none of them daring to touch him.

John paused for half a beat, uncertain about what would happen to him, before he tugged down on his jacket, straightened his spine and strode after Sherlock like that was exactly what he was meant to do. The Elves didn’t so much part for John as they just stayed parted, all of them staring at John with something less like the fascination they’d had for his elven companion and more like they
were concerned that he might carry some sort of sickness that was driving Sherlock mad and if they go too close it might do the same to them.

John didn’t bother to turn around and watch their reactions because the moment he stepped past the doorframe many of the elves whirled on Gandalf and in their own tongue began to interrogate the Wizard for the events of the last few days. Before he could be penned in by his own Elves wanting to know more than Elrond was ready to reveal, the Elf lord pressed one last kiss to his daughter’s head and passed her on to a soldier he trusted before turning on this heel to follow after Sherlock. With a few long strides the Elf caught up to John and somehow matched the Hobbit’s pace without shortening his own stride.

John was expecting some idle chatter, asking his name or subtly inquiring as to why Sherlock felt John’s presence necessary, or why John felt the gall to follow after Sherlock without permission from the master of the house. But instead, Elrond gave him a polite nod and didn’t speak. Elrond went up even higher in John’s estimation. Not only did he have the common sense to know Sherlock would never lose someone entrusted to his care, but he also understood that Sherlock was keeping his mouth shut, not to be mysterious as it seemed to everyone else, but because the information Sherlock had was not something to be shared lightly. Elrond didn’t know what the news pertained to, so he knew better than to ask John for any details on the off chance that perhaps they might be something that should not be divulged in the open air of a hallway.

Elrond and John followed after Sherlock, though somehow Elrond made it seem as though he wasn’t following Sherlock anywhere, he was simply letting Sherlock act as forward scout. They shadowed Sherlock through the whole trail of the house until he came to a set of double doors that arched high above even Sherlock’s curly head. Sherlock reached out to shove open the doors but his hand bounced back like something in the wood had stung him. Sherlock cocked his head to the side, leaned close to stare intently at the grain of the wood, then knocked on the carved leaves in some syncopated pattern that John had never heard before. Half a moment after Sherlock’s knocks but before he shoved on the now easy to open door, Elrond sighed. John figured that Sherlock had somehow deduced a lock that no one but Elrond was supposed to be able to surpass.

John turned to the Elf lord and smirked with a shrug. He’d been deduced by Sherlock plenty of times in the last three days, but couldn’t imagine how frustrating it must be for a creature several thousand years old to be outthought. Surprisingly enough, Elrond quirked a smile back at John, the same slight twist of lips that made for a genuine grin on Sherlock face, but on the Elf lord it looked far less unpracticed.

Together they strode into what John assumed was Elrond’s private study. There was a massive, cluttered table set in the middle of the room, taking up the space in front of a wall of windows. What limited wall space there was found itself lined with rows upon rows of books. The space looked lived in, as though Elrond had been rifling through the various tomes and spare pages hunting down one particular piece of information that he had yet to find.

They arrived just in time to see Sherlock pace past the table, running his fingers along the table’s edge while his eyes quickly catalogued all of the information that Elrond had spread out for study. Of course, Sherlock didn’t want to be caught paying too much attention, so when he’d done his quick brush by he twisted around and dropped into one of Elrond’s chairs with more force than the furniture looked like it could stand. He slumped down, legs spread, like he was bored already before the conversation even began. John suspected that if Elrond had been anything less than the lord of Rivendell he would’ve rolled his eyes at the action. Unlike Sherlock, Elrond deftly set himself down in one of the chairs, and rather than demand information he just raised his eyebrow at Sherlock as though he would wait until the end of the world for him to share what he’d been concealing.
Since it was no fun when people didn’t react, Sherlock immediately explained, “We were
betrayed.”

That was enough to inspire some sort of reaction out of Elrond, though it wasn’t more than a
tightening of his lips and a raising of his right hand to press his first finger to his mouth. Elrond
didn’t waste breath by asking the obvious questions of “betrayed how” or “by whom?” He waited
for Sherlock to come around to speaking. With sparse words Sherlock explained to Elrond that he
and his companions had been set upon by Orcs and Warg Riders just outside of Bree.

The lack of Sherlock’s usual rapid-fire deductions told how irritated the Elf was by this situation.
That there was something he here he did not know and he didn’t have enough information to put
things together. Sherlock went on to describe that the attack was perfectly timed. Arwen had been
away from camp thinking that the woods so close to the human settlement were safe, taking a
moment to herself after so many days with “fawning sycophants who debased the whole species
with their behavior.” The Warg Riders had gone straight for her and were it not for John’s timely
intervention, Sherlock would not have gotten there in time to help her escape unscathed.

Elrond turned to John and gave a polite nod, “My thanks to you Master Hobbit.”

“Master Doctor.” Sherlock interrupted. Rather than snap about how was he supposed to know that
John was a doctor and then get than nothing in reply but a string of deductions about John’s sleeves
and the faint smell of mint that came from the herbs the Hobbit carried in his pocket, Elrond just
replied, “My thanks stand nonetheless.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and bounded up out of his slouch. He tucked his feet under him and sat on
the chair’s back, his hands perched in front of his mouth as though he was praying. He began to
mutter, rambling off the facts of the situation as though stating them again would make them
clearer. “The timing was too perfect. Someone had to know precisely where we were and precisely
when Arwen left the group. There weren’t enough Orcs to take down a company of Elves, there
weren’t even enough Orcs to take down me. But they knew that all they needed was to stop one Elf
maiden with nothing but a dagger on her person. They came from the north and had to circle
around from the west to reach Arwen without crossing the path of the rest of the company. We
were directly in their line of travel but they avoided us. They were hunting her and they had enough
information to not only know who they were meant to hunt but to be able to track her without
interference.”

Elrond now mirrored Sherlock’s pose, both his hands brought in front of his face though he was
still more dignified in his seating. “Wargs track by scent.”

“But they would’ve had to have something of Arwen’s with enough scent to hunt her across the
empty space of the wilds outside of Bree.”

“We were betrayed.”

“Yes, I said that,” but it’s worse than someone turning over Arwen’s robes to the wrong person.
The timing was too perfect, someone was in contact with the leader of those Orcs.”

“And so you left them all behind.”

“They’ll be along eventually.” Sherlock huffed.

“It would be unwise to presume that the members of that company are the only ones who pose a
threat.”
“Considering that you hand picked the people who went with me on the presumption that they were completely trustworthy, the only way to be sure that you’re safe would be to empty out your house.”

“Which would be dangerous for its own reasons considering the number of foreigners we are offering shelter to at the moment.”

Sherlock froze and neither John nor Elrond moved while Sherlock puzzled out whatever had struck him. Suddenly Sherlock whipped around and demanded, “Who?”

“Men of Gondor-” was all the explanation Elrond got out before Sherlock bounded to his feet and burst out of the room.
John chased after Sherlock, whose long legs carried him swiftly past the Elves who had gathered outside Elrond’s door waiting for some word about what had gone on inside. Sherlock ignored them all to take some vague and winding path through the interconnected rooms of the house before he burst out a back door and upon a group of humans. The Men were hunkered over a pot and debating in hissed whispers about whether or not it really was so terrible to eat dinner with the Elves. John tried to grab Sherlock by the back of his tunic and force him to stop and think for a moment, but he was too slow.

Sherlock walked straight across the human’s little encampment, going past several gaping soldiers and stepping over their gulping pot. (John took half a moment to cruelly think that if these Men were so concerned about Elves then they really ought to set up a watch so they weren’t set upon, and maybe shouldn’t be staying in the safety of an Elf’s house.)

Sherlock went to a man on the far side of the camp who seemed content to let his subordinates squabble over the ridiculousness that was their foul-smelling soup until they came to the realization for themselves that their Elven dinner wasn’t going to be poisoned, and it was going to be delicious. The man in question had a good face, not harsh with command, but not gentle either. He had flecks of grey dusting his temples, though they made him look more distinguished than tired. He was dressed in dirty browns, and was polite enough to at least remove his sword from his person, even though it was still within drawing range.

Sherlock stormed over to the man, furious and more than a little dangerous, and demanded, “What are you here for?”

John had to give the man credit that he only looked stunned for half a second before he opened his mouth to reply, and Sherlock talked over the top of him. “Don’t lie. You can’t be soldiers on your way to offer relief efforts to Arthedain, because you bear the sigil of the white tree. That makes you the best and most beloved of Gondor’s soldiers, Men who are not to be wasted on someone else’s war since Angmar will come for you once they’ve razed Arthedain.”

The man puffed out his chest and stuck his finger in Sherlock’s face, “You can’t scold my people for wanting to refrain from the same battle as your people, Elf.”

Sherlock stepped closer and loomed over the human, “I have been fighting the forces of Angmar since before your people created them. There are battles that belong to Middle-Earth as a whole and battles that belong to the people who began them, and my people are wise enough to know the difference.”
The man opened his mouth to snap something back, but Sherlock was done with that part of the conversation. He continued, “You’re not a scouting party, because you would’ve gone straight to Lord Elrond and asked him what he knows. Only an idiot would come into an area looking for a fight and not ask for the most current information. You can’t be travellers, because no one from Gondor is fool enough to travel into Arthedain when it is being besieged by Angmar. So what are you doing here?”

The man just stared at Sherlock, gaping. The whole of his company was silent, staring at Sherlock like they couldn’t believe he existed. John couldn’t help the little grin that always came when Sherlock showed off his skills. Finally the man asked, “Who are you?”

“Sherlock, called Naenwauva.”

“Sherlock Farsight?”

Sherlock tolled his eyes. “If you’re going to butcher the translation, yes.”

The company of men looked between themselves, like they were making sure they’d all heard that right. Like Sherlock was someone they’d heard of and never expected to meet. Their leader cleared his throat and as casually as possible asked, “You mean to share information with us?”

“Of course not.” Sherlock snorted. “I mean to take your information and do with it what you never could.”

The puffed out a slow breath and looked at Sherlock with something resembling respect. His people apparently knew what that look meant and the only woman among them shouted, “Sir, you can’t intend to--”

The man tossed up a hand and silenced the woman before she could embark on a rant about the evils of Elves. Sherlock merely raised an eyebrow as if to say, “Well? Out with it.”

Rather than explain, the man stuck out his hand in the traditional human greeting and said, “Gregory Lestrade, Commander in the King’s Guard.” Sherlock stared at the hand like it was distasteful, until John pointedly cleared his throat and Sherlock returned the man’s gesture with a grimace. Lestrade smirked, like he more amused than offended and explained, “We’ve had a string of murders in Gondor.”
“What else? You wouldn’t come all the way to Rivendell for that. There’s something that makes you think you’ll get information here that you can’t get at home.”

Lestrade nodded in agreement. “There are words carved into the bodies. Words in Elvish.”

“And there’s no one in your city who reads Elvish?”

One of the men had been hissing viciously with the company’s only woman, and at the derision in Sherlock’s voice he snapped out, “I read Elvish just fine, but the text doesn’t make any sense. The words aren’t real.”

Sherlock snorted, his back to the man who’d interrupted. “Should I assume you had the common sense to make a copy of the text?”

Lestrade pulled a folded up tuft of paper out of his breast pocket and handed it over. “This is the same thing on every body, carved into the skin across their chests.”

Sherlock flipped open the paper with no small amount of disdain, then paused. He grunted something, that were he anyone else might have been a “hmm.” Sherlock whirled away, paper in hand, with no parting words. A good portion of the human men looked ready to follow after him, but Lord Elrond had arrived in the interim and announced, “I will keep a watch on Sherlock and let you know when he finds something. As it stands, there is little to be gained by keeping him company while he works.” John tried to object and follow after him anyway, but Elrond murmured, “My word to you, Master Doctor. At this moment Sherlock wants nothing but the peace of his own deductions.”

John was unhappy with the arrangement, but he gave Elrond a nod to admit that he would comply. “If you are amenable, there is room for your people at my table, and perhaps together we can puzzle out what has befallen your countrymen.” Before his people could interrupt with something crass and vengeful, Lestrade sunk into a deep bow and told Elrond that they would be honored for the chance to join with the Lord of Rivendell for meal. His company looked mutinous at the declaration, but they kept their thoughts to themselves.

With Elrond’s announcement that Sherlock would be someplace deducing and wouldn’t want to be disturbed, John decided that it would probably be best to accompany the Men to dinner, and see what information he might be able to fish out of them.
Dinner was mainly vegetables, which a few of the Men grumbled about until Lestrade shot them a look that declared he would take them out back and beat them if they didn’t behave. Lestrade also fussed over John, asking him if he needed anything else, and discreetly trying to test everything before he put it on John’s plate for consumption. The man spoke to John like he was a valued member of the conversation, so John assumed that Lestrade wasn’t actually trying to demean John with the fussing. Finally John interrupted, “You know that I’m short, not incapable, right?”

Lestrade didn’t even bother pretending to be embarrassed and nicked a bite of some sort of mutated purple potato before he scooped in onto John’s plate. “You’ve heard what Elves do to people who hurt their mortal companions, right? Your Sherlock is the type of Elf who’d have me skinned and delivered back to Gondor as a warning if anything happened to you when the last place he saw you was in my care.”

“In your care? I’m a fully-grown Hobbit! More than capable of taking care of myself!”

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” the woman interrupted. Lestrade had done a round of introductions when John sat down at the table, and had called the woman Sally, explaining that she had fought tooth and nail to join the Tower Guard\(^1\), though she was still in training. “That Elf doesn’t have an ounce of humanity in him.”

“I should think not, what with being an Elf and all,” John teased, hoping it would break the tension that had just descended on the table.

Sally, apparently, didn’t take well to being teased, and pressed on like John had made a joke of it because he didn’t understand, not because he disagreed. “We’ve all heard stories about Sherlock Farsight, John. He’s dangerous, even his own people think so.”

“I don’t think the woman carrying a sword at the dinner table gets to accuse other people of being dangerous.” If Sally would’ve had a bit more common sense she would’ve realized that the tone in John’s voice at that moment was more dangerous than anything she’d come across with a weapon.

However, Lestrade knew better, and reached around Sally to smack her upside the head. "Leave the lad alone."

"He should know what he's getting into, Sir."

"He's no fool, Sally, I'm sure he knows damn well what he's getting into."
"He can't possibly, otherwise he wouldn't be having a thing to do with this nutter!"

Lestrade stiffened and waived her down, trying to get her to keep quiet before their whole party got beaten by an offended Elf. "He's not a nutter." John replied in a quiet and determined voice. "He's brilliant, and if you can't see that then you have my pity."

Sally leaned down to John and got her face unbearably close to his to snipe, "He'll abandon you, little Halfling. Elves don't know how to be fond of mortals, not like you are of him. He'll walk away and forget all about you while you spend the rest of your life missing him."

"Sally!" Lestrade snapped. "Get yourself someplace that's not here."

The woman stomped off and John muttered, "She hates him."

"She hates all Elves, and these deaths haven’t made it better." Lestrade explained.

"Why?"

Lestrade sighed, and looked as though he didn’t quite know how to explain this to someone who was hearing it for the first time. "We tell stories in Gondor, about men who fell in love with Elves, gave them years of their short lives and then they were just left behind. Forgotten by those with long life."

"They're just stories."

"Yeah, but they're old stories, the kind of thing human children have heard about since the beginning, and since most humans only see an Elf in passing, they never have the chance to get the misconception fixed."

"But you’re not one of those humans?"

Sherlock dropped down beside John and declared, “Lestrade thinks that because he’s been the law
in Gondor he’s seen some of the worst evil the world has to offer and that has made him open-minded about the evils of the Elves.”

Lestrade quirked an eyebrow and didn’t seem surprised by Sherlock’s sudden arrival. “What makes you think I’m the commander in charge of city security?”

“Because you are. You’d like me to think that you’re the special division in charge of keeping an eye on Gondor’s allies, the spymaster. But a spymaster wouldn’t come to Rivendell, he’d want Elrond to be in the dark about his presence in this part of the world. Added to that, your men have no concept of silence. They speak whatever is on their minds and say it loudly. If their opinions weren’t enough to get them shot their inability to sneak would be.”

“Maybe that’s part of their training: to look as unlike a spy as possible.”

Sherlock snorted. “Gondor thinks there’s dishonor in deceit.”

“And you think otherwise, do you?”

“There’s dishonor in losing. If you have to cheat to win the day then you’ve acted in the way your people need.”

John laughed, because there could be no better summation of Sherlock’s opinion about things than doing what you have to do to come out the winner. Sherlock stared at John for a moment, like he was unsure how to interpret John’s reaction. He gave Sherlock a conspiratorial smile, and Sherlock’s furrow of confusion slipped into a slight grin that he was understood. John grabbed a spare plate and nudged Sherlock to start eating while he asked, “So, what did you find out?”

Sherlock just stared at the empty plate like he didn’t know what to do with it, and Lestrade started piling on the food just like had for John. Eventually Sherlock realized that he’d been distracted by their fussing, and cleared his throat to explain. “The writing is Tengwar, Elven letters. But the language is not.”

“You didn’t know the language?” Lestrade asked.

Sherlock glowered at him. “It is the Black Speech of Mordor.”
Lestrade paused. “You mean Orkish?”

“What is it like in your sad, strange little brains? No, it’s not Orkish. Orkish is a pale, guttural derivation of the Black Speech. It’s spoken by foot soldiers and has never been committed to writing. The Black Speech is the high language of Mordor, bastardized from Valarian, the oldest language of Middle Earth.”

“And that’s why Anderson didn’t know it then? Because it’s so rare?”

Sherlock quirked an eyebrow and John leaned in, “Anderson would be the chap who said he knew Elvish well enough.”

Sherlock huffed, “Technically, if he’d been fully versed in all dialects of Elvish then he would be able to at least determine the basic possible meaning from the communal word roots.”

Both John and Lestrade just stared at Sherlock, neither quite able to translate what that meant. Before Sherlock got frustrated and tried to explain again, John asked, “So, you know what it means, then?”

“It’s a standard spell to keep the victim alive for as long as possible.” Sherlock took an exploratory bite of the potatoes Lestrade had put before him, while both John and Lestrade put down their forks in disgust.

“Why would he do that?” Lestrade asked, horrified.

Sherlock shrugged, “He needed more time to accomplish whatever he hoped to gain from the deaths than he would’ve gotten from the regular amount of time it takes to bleed a person to death.”

Lestrade paused, and John could see the man running over details before he looked to Sherlock, “I never told you how the men died.” Sherlock gave Lestrade a look that declared the human an idiot, and if he really wanted a listing of all the details he’d given away that told Sherlock the precise manner of the murders, then he’d be willing to do it. Lestrade just sighed, “Oh, sod it.”

“So what happens now?”
“Now, Gandalf has needlessly reminded me that Hobbits are not Elves, and you shall require food and sleep before we ride to Gondor and examine the deceased.”

Lestrade snickered and John retorted, “I’m not incompetent, you know.

Sherlock looked baffled for a moment, like he didn’t understand why John was objecting. “Of course not, you’re John.”

There was a multiplicity of meanings to that statement. That John would never be incompetent, or at least that Sherlock wouldn’t call John impotent. And that maybe, whatever his flaws might be, John was Sherlock’s, and for the Hobbit he would indulge in taking pauses for sleeping and eating. John blushed and looked away from Sherlock, trying to ignore how Lestrade’s smug expression.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Guard of the Citadel, sometimes referred to as The Tower Guard are the elite soldiers of Gondor charged with being the personal guards of the King.
This is not how the books said adventures were supposed to go.

This was supposed to be a straightforward quest. A direct route starting the moment a wizard showed up at your door, perhaps with a detour of a minor scuffle or two to up the tension, and then a rousing but predictable battle so you could be home two days after you had the chance to get homesick. (Bilbo had been homesick for far longer than two days, but that seemed like the least of his problems.)

Bilbo lay there, staring up at the dripping roof of the cave, cradled by mushrooms that were so large he could use them for a boat to float down the Brandywine river, and thought that this was not how adventures were supposed to go.

Things with Thorin had gone well for the whole length of the supper after Bilbo had last shared a story, and he’d gone to bed light with the notion that in the morning things were going to go the way they were supposed to, the way the story said they should. The commander of their company had forgiven him and things had been restored to better than the way they had been before. Bilbo was actually looking forward to the next day of trudging over the Misty Mountains.

Of course, when he woke up the next morning apparently Thorin remembered that secretly, or not so secretly as the case appeared to be, he hated Bilbo. He was blunt with the Hobbit, nearly violent in his verbal expressions of disdain, and moments after waking Bilbo shrank in on himself, heartbroken that things had already gone so poorly and this time he had no idea why.

Thankfully the rest of the company seemed to have taken Thorin’s temporary forgiveness as approval to return to their prior state of affairs, and for most of them they were even more affectionate than before. Before they even left camp Nori tossed his arm around Bilbo’s shoulder and pulled the Hobbit close to his side. Bilbo stared at the Dwarf, not entirely sure what to do with affection from a person that he didn’t recall ever having a conversation with before. Of course, Bilbo smiled politely and tried not to look too awkward about the situation. To make matters worse, Nori kept calling him mimagrīfat\(^1\), which Bilbo didn’t understand at all. At least when the lads called him Mr. Boggins he knew where that came from. (Strangely enough it was Bifur who
tried to explain to him what the name meant, but considering that Bifur no longer spoke Westron, that didn’t go particularly well.)

Glóin grew unamused by the banter before the rest of his companions and bumped Nori out of the way. Glóin grabbed Bilbo by the shoulders and spun him around until the Hobbit was looking directly at him, then the Dwarf slowly pronounced, “mim-ah-gr-eye-faht” until Bilbo repeated it back to him with something close enough to accuracy that Glóin relented.

When Bilbo got the word right, Glóin thumped him on the shoulder with something like congratulations, then headed back down the trail. Bilbo stood there for a moment, holding up the rest of the company while he tried to piece together what just happened. Strangely enough it was Dwalin who grabbed him by his backpack and hauled him back onto the trail, muttering, “He’s calling you a little thief.”

Bilbo sputtered in outrage. “I haven’t stolen anything!”

“No, but you’re going to,” Dwalin grunted. “And to Nori that’s the same thing.”

“But I’m stealing for you, why would he be upset?”

“He’s not upset lad, it’s praise.” Judging by his grunt, Dwalin didn’t seem to think that thieving was something to be well regarded. Bilbo cleared his throat, trying to think of something to say instead of just scampering away. In the end he decided to follow after Dwalin’s example and let the rest of the conversation go unspoken. Dwalin huffed in amusement, but he kept pace beside Bilbo the rest of the day, either enjoying the silence or keeping Bilbo from talking to anyone else and getting himself into more trouble. Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure, and he wasn’t sure he minded either way.

Despite that quiet companionship, every so often Bilbo felt the hairs on his feet stand on end. He’d look around, almost expecting a Warg to be peering down at them from around a tree, salivating over a feast of Dwarves and Hobbit. But it was never a Warg, it was Thorin. He would be at head of the company’s train, watching Bilbo over his shoulder. Then Thorin would catch Bilbo looking, scowl, and face forward, dragging the company on at an even faster pace.

Thorin’s temper was begun by Bilbo’s existence, compounded by an incoming storm, added to by the descent of rock giants, and now Bilbo didn’t even want to imagine how Thorin was responding to being captured by Goblins.
No, Bilbo was not entertaining the possibility that perhaps Thorin was no longer alive to be glowering at Goblins for interrupting his quest. The thought of Thorin Oakenshield cold and still was beyond Bilbo’s comprehension. Bilbo liked to think that there was something hard in Thorin, something as ancient and timeless as the mountain he so desperately sought. And just as they could not wear away, Thorin could not wear away. No, that wasn’t quite right. Yes, his hair was black as the dark under the mountain, with streaks of grey running through in just the same way as the veins of silver Bilbo imagined cutting through the roots of Erebor. And his eyes, though Bilbo would’ve thought of them like the color of sky, they were probably the same shade as sapphires. After all, they did glint like stone when Thorin was furious.

Bilbo paused for a moment, cocked his head to the side, scraping his curls over the rock underneath him, and watched a pinprick of water bulb out and then drop with a plop down to the ground below. After some unknown stretch of this Bilbo began to think that perhaps when he fell into the dark he might’ve hit his head. Goodness knows that that was the only reason Bilbo would be waxing poetic about Thorin Oakenshield’s hair.

Of course, when Bilbo decided that it was probably time to get up and figure out just where he was, his ears finally connected to his brain and he realized that the sound that he’d thought was just a strange wind rustling through the cave (not that there was anything in the caves to rustle) was in fact the pained breathing of the Goblin who’d come after him.

Bilbo froze, the perfect stillness borne from years of practice at pausing outside kitchen windows so the Hobbit housewives inside wouldn’t know he was waiting to snatch their pie. He thought that perhaps if he just laid there for long enough then the Goblin would die all on his own without Bilbo having to use his sword to get him there.

Yes, Bilbo was quite pleased with this plan, right up until the moment a pair of eyes appeared in the dark.

To Bilbo’s shame, it took him a long moment to realize that the strange flashes were more than just some fragment of the cave, they were eyes reflecting back the scant light. More terrifying than their silent, disembodied presence, the eyes seemed hollow, like there was nothing there for the light to show, just emptiness.

All too soon the creature attached to those eyes slunk into plain view, and Bilbo thought that perhaps it might’ve been better to be dragged off with the Goblins.

The creature was lank, a wisp or two of hair dripping down into his eyes and Bilbo fought the urge to flinch. The thing wasn’t foul, like some of the Hobgoblins who’d taken away the company, no, he was something worse than that. Something darker than that.
Bilbo stayed where he was, silent and unmoving until after the creature had seized the Goblin by the ankles and begun to drag him away. The Baggins portion of Bilbo’s soul was certain that now was the time to go the exact opposite direction of the creature and to desperately hope that before too long Gandalf would appear and tell him this was all just a bad dream and it was time to go back to Bag End.

(Bilbo was beginning to understand just how wretchedly useless the Baggins part of him was when there weren’t table manners involved.)

Instead, Bilbo waited until the scraping noises of the creature had faded to next to nothing before he sprang to his feet. He slipped his sword out from under the pile of toadstools that had kept it safely hidden from the thing’s violent attentions, stopped to pick up the strange little ring the creature had dropped, and started off quietly into the dark.

And if while he went he murmured to himself comforting thoughts about what he thought might happen next to John Watson, that was no one’s business but his own. (And perhaps the sword’s.)

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Khuzdul is the language of the Dwarves, but Tolkien didn’t give us a whole lot to go on. So for the movies Jackson got a linguist to put together a more complete Khuzdul language called Neo-Khuzdul. All of my Dwarvish comes from the best online Neo-Khuzdul dictionary I’ve found thus far.

FN 2: According to the dictionary mim = little, and agrîfat = to steal, translating here to “little thief”
Sherlock was not an Elf prone to sleeping. Few of their species were, but as in most things, Sherlock was unique. He would turn up in Rivendell with no warning and spend days locked in the library, refusing to eat or to sleep no matter how Elrond’s poor servants fuss ed at him about how he would fall ill, or fade if he didn’t stop to take care of himself. Mostly Sherlock just ignored them until they went away, but occasionally these well-meaning servants would interrupt him when he was piecing together some crucial fragment of whatever puzzle had brought him to Elrond’s library. Without looking up from his research, Sherlock would spew a torrent of information about the offending Elf, listing off every embarrassing detail that they had accumulated in their long life.

With this pattern in mind, when one of Elrond’s servants informed him that Sherlock had declared that John Watson needed sleep, Elrond bit back his own surprise at Sherlock paying attention to another person’s needs and sent someone off to warn the library that Sherlock would likely be descending.

However, Sherlock never arrived.

(Elrond was informed of this by a stiffly polite note from the head librarian, asking that Lord Elrond not tease her in such a way.) Elrond had expected that should Sherlock choose to cause a ruckus someplace else then he would have heard about it over the course of the night. And yet, there had been nothing. Silence from Sherlock usually implied that he had snuck away in the dead of night (which he wouldn’t do with John still in residence), or that Sherlock was silently working on something that would make Elrond regret the other Elf’s existence. Elrond discretely sent around his aides to check all of Sherlock’s usual haunts, and to be sure that John Watson was still in the room he had been assigned.

One by one his aides returned, each growing more and more concerned that Sherlock had holed himself up in some quiet corner of the house where he could peaceably smoke his pipe weed until he started launching arrows out a window as an experiment on how people would react. (Tragically, because Sherlock has done this before, Elrond didn’t expect it to happen again.)

Finally, it was the aide who Elrond had sent to watch over John Watson who returned. The Elf was pale, as though he’d seen Sherlock doing something horrible. One of the other Elves burst forward, demanding to know what happened, but the original Elf gaped, unable to speak his concerns. The other aides reached for their swords, possibly a little too happy with the thought that they would
get to turn them on Sherlock.

But before they could form a mob and hunt down Sherlock (not that they’d be able to find him if he didn’t want to be found), the silent Elf who still, it seemed, was unable to speak, stepped past them all and pushed open the balcony doors. Elrond had expected nothing but the gentle sound of rivers, and perhaps the hum of his people and their music, but instead he was confronted by a giggle. The whole room paused at the sound and Elrond swept out to the balcony.

Down below was Sherlock, showing off for his Hobbit by deducing things about the people walking past on their way to breakfast. Sherlock would deduce, John would tease him about making things up, and Sherlock would rattle off the details that had led him to his conclusions. John would stare at him for a moment, making all the connections that Sherlock had leapt to so easily, then laugh. No, not laugh, giggle. Like Sherlock’s string of information was some great game that he was thrilled to be a part of. John’s response was enough that Sherlock smiled in reply, each time his mouth going a little higher like he was genuinely contemplating laughter.

Elrond was so occupied with watching Sherlock behave as though he’d lost his mind, that he didn’t notice Gandalf sidle up beside him. Elrond didn’t need to turn around to know that Gandalf had emptied the room with his presence. Nor did he need to look to know that Gandalf had a devious smile gracing his face. "What do you know?" Elrond asked.

"Know? Nothing yet. But I have suspicions."

For all that his species was accused of being vague, few people could match a Wizard when he was in a playful mood. "What sort of suspicions?"

Gandalf closed his eyes and tilted his face up to the sun, soaking in its warmth. "Can't you hear it, Elrond?"

"The breeze? Or the laughter?"

"I admit," Gandalf chuckled, “Sherlock's laughter was a sound I thought I might never hear again, but it’s more than that.” Gandalf tilted his head to the side, like a dog trying to pick up the call of its master. “It’s ever so quiet, like the slightest shock would drive it away. But it’s there, and it’s growing.” Elrond just sighed, regretting that despite the hundreds of years he’d known Gandalf he still didn’t know how to force him to talk when he was in the mood for dramatic effect. Gandalf began to sway ever so slightly and murmured, “There’s music, Elrond. Music trailing after Sherlock. Life and rhythm that I never thought I’d hear from him. Sherlock's soul is singing, and that song will bring to him life that none of us thought possible.”
John’s morning had been pleasant and simple. He’d been woken by a sixth sense informing him that he was being watched, which turned out to be Sherlock sprawled across the end of John’s massive bed. John had been so tired the night before that he’d collapsed into bed still wearing his jacket, and at the sight of Sherlock he popped up out of the covers and tried to tug the coat back into something comfortable. “What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you to wake up,” Sherlock replied with no inflection, just laying there and staring up at the ceiling as though there was something interesting to be found.

“And why didn’t you just wake me?”

“Hobbits are unaccustomed to traveling long distances so you needed rest to properly recuperate so that you aren’t damaged and will be able to keep up.”

John was tempted to laugh and remind Sherlock that John wasn’t a toy who was liable to break if he wasn’t properly tended to. However, now that he thought about it, Sherlock sounded like the kind of fellow who would snap his toys in two just to see what they were made of. “You’re repeating things Gandalf said, aren’t you?”

Sherlock barreled on without responding, almost embarrassed about not knowing the proper care and feeding of Hobbits for himself. “Are you done yet?”

John just snorted. “Did you get any sleep?”

“Sleep is boring. Are you done yet?”

John flopped back down to the mattress, tempted to tell Sherlock to shove off and let him melt back into the soft sheets and sleep until the sun burned through his windows and refused to let him stay abed any longer. Sherlock gave an impatient little hum, like he was about to drag John out of the bed whether he intended to go or not, and John huffed out, “Yeah, alright.”

By the time John had gotten dressed, Sherlock had pilfered the kitchen for of all John’s favorites, and he dragged the Hobbit outside so John could eat his breakfast while Sherlock observed the
Elves who were up and about before breakfast. John devoured his meal, teasing Sherlock into explaining the ins and outs of his deductions before he accepted them as accurate. Really, there were only two interruptions to their mellow morning, the first when Sherlock stopped in mid-deduction and whirled around to glower at Elrond and Gandalf watching them from a nearby balcony. The second interruption came from shouting near the front of the house. Sherlock, of course, went after the noise like chicken after feed, leaving John to grab the scraps of his meal and dash along behind.

By the time they arrived, the front courtyard of Rivendell was filled with glowering Elves being shouted at by irate humans. At Sherlock’s arrival one the poor Elves who looked like he’d been trying mediate the situation turned to Sherlock as though he would somehow make everything better, but instead Sherlock went straight for Lestrade. “And what sort of interesting thing have you brought with you this morning?”

Tucked safely behind some of his companions Anderson shouted, "It's not interesting, it's horrible!"

Sherlock fixed the man with a glare that John thought might melt his face and stated, "It had to be something dramatic for the humans to willingly fight with Elves rather than defer like your species normally does."

"We do not defer!" Anderson snapped, and Sherlock merely quirked an eyebrow as the human chocked on his own tongue at Sherlock's sneer.

Lestrade pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose gave a pained sigh that the lot of them couldn’t seem to keep from shouting at each other for more than a few minutes. “Anderson, keep your mouth shut if you’re not going to help the situation. And Sherlock, now is not the time.”

Sherlock just snorted, “It’s always the time, Lestrade. Who died?”

The humans all froze at that announcement and Donovan shoved her way to the front of the crowd and drew her sword on Sherlock. “How did you know?”

As sensitive as the Elves may have been in Sherlock’s presence, every one of them reached for their own weapons when Donovan put a blade to Sherlock’s throat. Sherlock just smirked, like he knew something she didn’t, and this time John knew what it was. John had seen Sherlock take down the Orcs of a few days before. He was a vicious combatant when crossed, and the thought of Donovan able to best him in a fight seemed ridiculous with the way her hand was shaking.
There was a dead human out there, and Lestrade wasn’t in the mood to deal with this posturing, so he reached out and grabbed Donovan’s wrist, whipped her around and wrenching the sword out of her hand. “What are you thinking?” he hissed.

Donovan puffed out, “I’m thinking that last night Dimmock went to bed with an Elf and this morning he woke up dead.”

Another of the Elves interjected, "One could argue that an Elf who was willing to demean herself by laying with a human would be too sentimental to kill one of you."

Donovan looked ready to scream something back, but Sherlock shouted at them all, “Shut up. Shut up. Shut up!” while he held his hands tense, fingers spread, palms hovering just beyond his temples like he had to protect the thoughts inside his mind from the contamination of all these people around him. Everyone quieted, though there were some grumbles among the humans that had to be silenced by Lestrade’s glower. Sherlock whipped around to Lestrade and demanded, "The body."

"The what?” Lestrade asked.

“The body Lestrade! I have to see the body!”

"We're not letting your kind anywhere near him!" Anderson shouted.

Lestrade gripped the other man by the scruff of his neck and hauled him to edge of the courtyard, snapping under his breath, "Get yourself sorted someplace that's not here. You're making this whole damn situation even worse, so stay away until you can do or say something that's not going to get us all shot."

Anderson huffed and stomped away from the group while Lestrade turned back to them all and said, "Dimmock was his friend. A friend to all of us, actually."

"Dimmock?” one of the gawking Elves inquired.

"The victim." Sherlock replied in the same way that someone else would use to say, 'you idiot.' "Now, the body." Sherlock bounded out of the courtyard and down a hall, off to wherever he thought the body would be kept, not needing anyone to tell him the precise location.
The whole group of men and Elves just stood there, like they didn’t know what to do next and it wasn’t until John started after Sherlock that the rest followed along behind. (Yes, behind. Every last person trailing along kept John in between them and Sherlock.) John all but trotted to keep up with the Elf, following him around several corners and up a flight of stairs that led back to Elrond’s study. The books and maps were cleared off the thickset wooden table in the center of the room, all pushed aside to make a place for the victim. The entire group paused at the door, all of them looking timidly at Elrond as though he had already thrown them out of this room with orders to conduct their yelling match elsewhere.

Sherlock was roaming in deliberate circles around the body, occasionally stopping to stare through his small magnifying glass at the shoes, or the hands, or the knees. Only John and Lestrade dared to enter the room while the rest of the group stayed skulking outside the door. Once Sherlock had made a complete tour of the corpse one of the Elves still cowering in the doorway demanded, "Well? What have you learned?"

Elrond very obviously stifled a sigh at the impatience of his younger counterpart and knew the behavior would only incite Sherlock. Sherlock popped his head up from looking at the state of the victim’s ears and glanced around the room until his eyes lit upon John. "Doctor Watson! Come here and tell me what you think of the body."

John flushed under the scrutiny of the Men and Elves and tried to defer, but Sherlock waived him over once again and said, "Come along John, show them exactly what they missed."

There were more than a few glowers from both sides of the aisle as John shuffled over to the corpse. Sherlock lifted John up to the tabletop so he could examine the body for himself. John didn't walk around the edge of the victim like Sherlock had done, he simply ran his small hands over the man’s arms and stared for a minute more than he was comfortable with at the gaping knife wound in the dead man’s throat.

Sherlock gave John the time to examine unhindered and then quirked an eyebrow in question. "So?"

"He didn't fight before he died."

"What?" Donovan snapped.
"You can see it on his arms and hands," John pointed out. "When you get in a fist fight you bruise your knuckles striking the other person, and when you defend yourself you get bruises up and down your arms. He doesn't have any of that, in fact, there's no sign anywhere on him that he's been fighting."

"But the room was a mess," Lestrade interrupted.

"I can't speak as to the state of the room; I can only tell you what I see on the body." John deferred, trying to be as polite to the human as he could considering that the man had just lost his friend.

Sherlock donned a smug smirk and asked, "What do you notice about the knife wound, John?"

"Looks to be a standard slice. Like the person doing the hitting had the knife point facing out, and they swung without planning to connect with someplace specific."

Donovan leaned over to one of her fellow humans and murmured in a voice that was meant to be overheard, “And how does the Halfling know about things like that?”

John glanced up at her with a look that he'd stolen directly from Sherlock, “We eat meat in the Shire, you know.”

Sherlock smirked at John’s response and leaned in beside the Hobbit, examining the wound. "Are you sure about the manner of death, John?"

"As sure as I can..." John turned to look at the wound once more and trailed off as he studied it more closely. "No, wait. The wound's not bloody enough."

"We cleaned it," another Elf interrupted.

"It's not a matter of cleaning the surface of the wound, it's a matter of the blood pooled in the wound because it's got no place else to go. But this, it's like there wasn't any blood there in the first place."

Elrond stepped up to the table and everyone went silent to let him do the questioning. "What does
"That mean, Doctor?"

"It means that it looks like he was, well, bled."

"Bled?"

"All the blood was drained from his body before this wound was made."

Elrond leaned over John's shoulder and studied the wound, obviously wanting more of an explanation. "You see here," John pointed out, "there's puckering around the original wound, puckering that comes from suction. It looks like your killer stuck a tube or something in the artery and sucked out as much blood as possible rather than just cutting the chap across the throat."

John looked up from his explanation to see Sherlock bestowing him with a smug grin, and a few humans echoing the pleased smile, happy to be proven right. John flushed and smoothed down the front of his ruffled and dirty shirt and looked back to Elrond to finish, "And, there you have it."

There was no reaction from Elrond beyond a flick of his wrist at one of the guards standing beside the door, probably to go and make sure the murderer was still in custody. Sherlock interrupted the appraising look Elrond was giving John to declare, "It's obvious whoever did the killing was tricked into it by Moriarty." One of the Elves legitimately squeaked at the mention of that name and Sherlock rolled his eyes in disdain.

"What? How? The last we heard Moriarty was clear on the other side of Middle-earth, why would he be back around now?" another Elf asked.

Sherlock glowered at his fellow Elf for having the indecency to contaminate the rest of the room with his stupidity. "I was under the impression that typically our species, and those favored by Elrond in particular, weren't prone to draining a human of their blood and then trying to make it look like an assault. That doesn't strike you as odd?"

"You mean to tell me that the only possible explanation is Moriarty?"

"The only one that addresses all the facts." Sherlock snapped.
"But," John interrupted, sticking his chin out and carrying on when all the big people turned their stares on him. "It's taking another life, Sherlock. When is that ever logical?"

Against all odds, Sherlock's glare devolved into something warm, as though he forgave John for not quite understanding how the world really worked. "Everything is cause and effect, John. Everyone has a reason for their actions, no matter how ridiculous those reasons may be."

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Tolkien’s Elves are immortal. However they can die either through physical injury or they wan simply waste away if they lose the will to live.
“I think we should make Bilbo do it.”

“Make Bilbo do what?”

The boys froze, their shoulders hunched up while they slowly turned to look at Bilbo, like he was a Warg that had snuck up on them when they were supposed to be keeping watch (or perhaps a troll who had stolen the horses they were supposed to be looking after).

The Eagles had laid them all gently down on the Carrock, and together the company had roamed down the hilltop’s massive staircase to someplace free of wind and clear of observers. Now, they were all tucked into various outcroppings, lying on the soft moss that scaled the entirety of the rock face, comfortable, tired, and jubilant after the night before. While most of the company had settled in, each quickly winding down from the joyous rush of escaping with their lives and seeing the Lonely Mountain in the distance, Kíli and Fíli had instead shuffled off to the side.

They were checking over their shoulders and whispering to each other in a way that Bilbo couldn’t imagine the boys thought was sneaky. Bilbo’s Hobbit feet, however, were sneaky enough for the three of them, and he silently padded over to listen to their hushed conversation. After a moment he latched on to the first fully audible phrase and interrupted. He should’ve suspected that the boys wanted something from him, but considering how well their deviousness had gone just a week before, Bilbo was not in the mood to do something that would damage Throin’s sudden good humor.

The King Under the Mountain had hugged him, had thanked him, had welcomed him in as a member of the company and it was like some great veil that had kept part of the company’s hearts from Bilbo was suddenly lifted. They were clapping him on the back, calling him Bilbo the Valiant, and already telling the story of how Bilbo had faced down the Orc as though they hadn’t all been there to see it. (At the last rendition, Bofur had somehow placed Bilbo in one-on-one combat against Azog the Defiler after slicing the white Warg’s head from its body.) Bilbo had just rolled his eyes and moved on, not willing to disrupt how excited the company was that they could finally be whole. Whatever the boys wanted, Bilbo couldn’t imagine it being worth ruining this moment of peace and harmony. Contrary to popular Dwarvish opinion, Bilbo was not naive. But he had hope that, although things might not remain as perfect as this moment, perhaps the rest of the journey could be good, perhaps things could even get better.

The boys just stared at Bilbo for a moment before simultaneous wicked grins spread across their faces. They popped up, grabbed him by the shoulders, and hauled him down into their not particularly secret place. Rapid fire, Fíli began to explain, “Bilbo, we need you to do something for us! We’ve got this excellent idea—”
Kiíli smashed the flat of his palm over his brother’s mouth and hissed at him to be quiet. Together the brothers looked over their shoulders at the company, who wasn’t paying them the slightest bit of attention. But the brothers still dragged Bilbo further down the trail so that they were completely out of sight of the rest of their companions. Together they smashed Bilbo’s back to the rock face and then Fíli ducked around the corner to make sure that they hadn’t been followed. Kíli smoothed out the front of Bilbo’s battered vest and said, “Bilbo, we have a proposition for you.” Bilbo had learned his lesson about engaging when the boys were like this, so he smacked Kíli’s hands away from him, crossed his arms over his chest and stared at them with one raised eyebrow.

The boys looked so genuinely thrilled about whatever they had to propose that Bilbo had a hard time remembering that they were, in fact, hooligans who wanted nothing more than to cause the greatest havoc known to Middle-earth. “We need you to do something for us,” Kíli pleased. “You see, Uncle Thorin is higher up on the trail.” He paused, obviously expecting Bilbo to succumb to politeness and reply, but instead Bilbo pursed his lips and tapped his foot as though to demand that they get on with it.

Fíli sidled up next to Bilbo and pressed against the Hobbit’s side like he was imparting some great secret. “You know Thoin is injured, and he’s up there all alone. He forced Gandalf down the mountain saying he didn’t need any Wizard to tend to him, and he’s up there trying to wrap his ribs all by himself.” Fool of a took that Bilbo was, he let his concern flash across his face thinking that that was not at all a clever thing for Thorin to be doing. He schooled his expression as quickly as possible, but unfortunately the boys pounced on it like the wolves that they were at heart.

Kíli pushed up against Bilbo’s other side, the two boys trapping him up against the rock face blocking out his escape routes and confronting him with their wide, innocent eyes. Like they were proposing something that could only be for good, and someone needed to do it and only Bilbo had the skill to pull it off. It was the exact the same expression that they had given Bilbo before they snatched him away from the breakfast table at Rivendell, and the exact same look that he imagined that they had perfected causing trouble back at home.

“He can’t tape his ribs by himself, no Dwarf can.” Kíli leaned forward conspiratorially, “We’re just not that bendy.”

Fíli grinned, his innocent expression fading as he snorted, “Well, we’re good at other things.” Bilbo furrowed and looked between them for a moment, trying to discern what they could be referring to, then the lecherous grins on the boy’s faces explained plenty. Bilbo blushed unwillingly and tried to dart out from between the boys, which turned out to be exactly what they wanted. Kíli tossed his arm around Bilbo’s shoulder while Fíli wrapped his arm around Bilbo’s waist and together they frog-marched him back up the trail and past the company. Bilb was about to call out for help when those infernal, treacherous Dwarves just tossed the boys a roll of bandages and a jar of ointment.
Bilbo sputtered, “All of you?”

“There’s nothing for it, Laddie,” Balin placated. “You’re the only one he’ll let help him.” Bilbo stared at the medicines that had somehow appeared in his hands and looked back down at the rest of the company, betrayed.

Bofur shrugged. “Well, you did kill an Orc for him. That means he’s less likely to shove you off the mountain than the rest of us.” Bilbo tried to think of a reply to snap over his shoulder and shame all those smirking Dwarves, he really did, but it seemed all words faded the moment he stepped around the corner onto the east side of the rock face. It wasn’t the flat stretch of stone that interrupted Bilbo’s attention, or the sight of the faded line of the Lonely Mountain rising up out of green mist. No, it was the long plane of Thorin Oakenshield’s unclad back that stole Bilbo’s breath and pulled a blush to his face.

Considering that Hobbits took pride in girth around their waist and not the breadth of their shoulders, Bilbo supposed that he could be forgiven for his reaction. Thorin’s skin was dark, the whole stretch of it tanned like the forearms of a farmer. Though he supposed that description couldn’t be quite right, since no Hobbit over the age of thirty would be caught out in the sunshine without a shirt. The bronze shade of Thorin’s back suggested that he’d spent quite a bit of time stripped down to the waist, nothing between his skin and inquisitive eyes.

Bilbo dropped back into his common sense when he felt a slight rumble by his sides, which turned out to be the boys snickering over Bilbo’s slack-jawed reaction. Bilbo elbowed them both in their stomachs, stuck out his chest and reminded himself that he was not some besotted tween from over the hill. He was a Baggins. And as a Baggins he strode over to Thorin and demanded, “What are you doing?”

Thorin jumped at the sudden sound and he twisted around, his hand reaching for Orcrist like he thought that something nefarious had gotten the drop on him. Where an hour again, a week ago, and even from the very beginning of their acquaintance, Bilbo would have stammered out an apology and held out the bandages as an explanation for his presence, on this day—so thoroughly humiliated and exhausted from his un-Hobbit-like behavior, Bilbo just snapped, “Oh put that down.”

He plopped onto the rock beside Thorin, ignoring how the Dwarf was staring at him with wide eyes like he’d never seen the Hobbit before. Bilbo huffed out, “You can’t honestly expect all of us to sit down there while you try and bandage your ribs yourself.” Thorin glanced up from Bilbo to his nephews who had conveniently vanished back down the hill so they couldn’t be scolded for Bilbo’s actions.
Thorin jumped again at the press of small Hobbit fingers to his left side. Thorin instinctually held his arm out of the way so Bilbo could examine the injury, testing its tenderness with his fingertips and figuring out just how far the bruises had spread. Most had blossomed onto his skin the deep purple of a hyacinth, but Bilbo had seen enough Hobbits tumble down hills to know that the full extent of the bruising wouldn’t be visible for hours yet. Thorin just sat there still, as though Bilbo was a deer that would startle and dart if Thorin moved too quickly and reminded the Hobbit where his hands were. Bilbo assumed Thorin was silent and still because that was the best way to receive treatment and he knew better than to fight with a Hobbit in a huff, but Bilbo didn’t catch the look of confusion because he was so consumed with the injury he didn’t catch the look of confusion mingled with tenderness that graced Thorin’s features while he watched his Hobbit.

Eventually Bilbo slowly spread out the fingers of his hand and rested his palm down across the expanse of Thorin’s ribs, ever so gently rubbing his thumb along the mountains and dips from of bones so close to Thorin’s skin. He wondered if it was a Dwarvish tendency to be so thin, if all they needed was skin and bone and muscle to work within their mountain halls, or if perhaps it was all these centuries of lean living that had driven Thorin to this state. He thought to himself what Thorin might have been like as a boy, what that young prince under the mountain so secure and so safe would’ve been like. Whether there would be meat on his bones and more smiles on his face.

Thorin’s breath caught in his chest at the gentle touch of the Hobbit’s hand to his skin. He stilled, not wanting to call Bilbo’s attention to the reality that he was touching Thorin not with the clinical detachment of a healer but with the caress of a lover trying to reassure themselves that their heart was still alive after the pains of battle.

With no prodding from Thorin, Bilbo came back to himself. There was an abrupt clearing of his throat and a blush while he looked away, fussing over the ointment and bandages so he didn’t have to look up at Throin.

There was a moment there when Thorin thought how perfect it would be if he just reached out and touched Bilbo on the cheek. The slightest pressure would be all it would take. No, Bilbo would be embarrassed, would think that Thorin was about to scold him as he had so often done. No, Thorin would have to cup the hobbit’s cheek, and turn his head to face him. Even then the Hobbit’s eyes would be directed down to avoid Thorin’s temper. Of course, Bilbo would realizing that to look down at Throin would be to put his attention on the Dwarf’s bare chest. Bilbo would flush an even worse crimson and look off to the side, as though he was fighting the urge to scamper off and disappear until Thorin forgot that he existed.

But Thorin would wait until Bilbo realized he wasn’t going anywhere, he was going to sit there, calm and quiet outwaiting Bilbo’s just like any hunter did his prey. Until Bilbo bit his lip, steeled himself and looked to Thorin as though he was anticipating his doom. But then Thorin would surprise his hobbit, and his hobbit Bilbo would be from that moment on.
Thorin would lean in and he would press his mouth to those plump lips that he had inadvertently thought of every time Bilbo huffed and puffed on their trek through the Misty Mountains. He would finally know what the hobbit tasted like, whether or not his goodness came through in sweetness on his lips. Whether or not those golden curls felt like the finally spun silk that Thorin had known in his youth. Whether or not Bilbo would tremble like the startled, domesticated little thing that he always appeared to be.

Thorin let this all play out in his mind, thinking how perfect that moment could be. It was as though the Valar had given him this moment where he could change the rest of his life, where he could take the Hobbit into his arms and keep him the way he had never had gotten to keep anything before.

But instead, while the Hobbit looked away, Thorin asked, “Tell me a story.”
Chapter Notes

Apologies for the severe delay in getting this chapter out. I didn't get in into the graduate program I wanted and after that it's been unsurprisingly difficult to write. I'm doing better though, and there shouldn't be such a gap again.

Elrond efficiently cast everyone out of eavesdropping in his doorway flicking the door shut in their faces. Donovan squawked and tried to leap past before she was locked out, but one of the Elves grabbed her by the tails of her coat and held her back. Before the door even closed John could hear the woman shouting obscenities about “tree-humping Elves,” and he was grateful for whatever spellwork on the door that kept out the noise. Lestrade looked suspicious about being locked in a room with two Elves and instead asked, “Who’s this ‘Moriarty’ fellow?”

“He’s not a fellow,” Sherlock snorted. “He was an Elf.”

John and Lestrade glanced at one another, exchanging a look that said, ‘did you catch that? Because I caught that.’ Lestrade gave a speaking glance from John to Sherlock, obviously asking the Hobbit to take care this. John pursed his lips and shook his head slightly, disavowing any responsibility for this conversation, but Lestrade gave John a look that so obviously meant, ‘please don’t make me do this,’ so John rolled his eyes and turned to Sherlock. "Was an Elf? It’s my understanding that being an Elf isn't really a condition you can change."

"Well technically," Sherlock started, but Elrond glowered at Sherlock so harshly that even he knew to move right along. "Sauron got to him."

Lestrade sucked in a breath, and John guessed that this was a name that carried meaning to those outside the Shire, but John had never heard it before. He'd grown accustomed to asking questions that Sherlock deemed ridiculous and John deemed necessary to his survival, and so without embarrassment stuck his hands in his pockets and prodded, “Sauron?”

Sherlock just stared at John for a moment, like he was absolutely certain that John was teasing him. When John didn’t start giggling like it was all some great joke, Sherlock grimaced like it was physically painful for him to swallow whatever scathing thing he’d been about to say. Elrond took the burden of politeness from Sherlock’s shoulders and explained, “Sauron the Deceiver and the Abhorred was the great evil of the Second Age. He led the children of Men into a darkness that nearly destroyed them, and with them the whole of Middle-earth. All the free peoples joined together in combat against to ensure his defeat.”
Polite as ever, John nodded along then turned back to Sherlock and asked, “What does he have to do with this Elf?”

Before Elrond could offer another slightly vague and deliberately stripped explanation, Sherlock interrupted, “Moriarty was an Elf. Brilliant and beautiful in a way that few creatures are capable of contemplating. Then Sauron tortured him until his mind snapped. Twisted all that made him clever and interesting into something tedious and dangerous.”

Sherlock stopped as though that was enough information to put the whole spree of killings into perspective. John supposed that to Sherlock, it was. Probably so much information that with the same amount of detail Sherlock would’ve been able to tell Moriarty’s shoe size. But John was not Sherlock, and his talents laid in other areas, so he asked, ”And now he's using other Elves to kill humans in exceptionally strange ways?”

Sherlock mumbled something about a surprising degree of idiocy and answered, "Don't you know what human blood can be used for?"

John quirked an eyebrow. "Powering humans?"

"Honestly, John, aren't you supposed to be a doctor?"

"Sherlock. Usually I spend my time keeping blood inside people rather than experimenting with it when it gets out."

Sherlock grumbled about that being terribly dull, but he continued, "Human blood can be used for anything from a stabilizing agent in certain arts to a basis for seeking spells that will let you track a man even across the protected lands."

"I thought Elves didn't hold with that sort of darkness," Lestrade interrupted, his question too tense to be casual.

“Young Elves often have no desire to understand these arts, while those who witnessed darker days learned them out of need.” John had to respect Lestrade, because he had the strength to just stare at Elrond after his explanation like the human couldn’t believe the notion that Sherlock would ever study something for the sheer need of it. Elrond gave a slight nod of acquiescence and continued, “However, Sherlock has always been unique.”
Sherlock snorted, "By unique he means that I was never content to sit in Rivendell and sing. Unlike my brethren." Before either Lestrade or Elrond could properly reply, Sherlock lifted John from the table and swept for the exit.

"Hey!" Lestrade interrupted. "The killer is coming in for questioning; don't you want to be here?"

"I've already told you what happened, what more information could she offer?" Sherlock snapped.

"Maybe how your Moriarty fellow got in contact with her?"

"Immaterial. Whatever method he used will be useless to us."

"Useless? She's the last person to have dealt with your big, bad, insane Elf! She might know what he wanted the damn blood for!"

Sherlock scoffed, "All she will be able to tell you is that he was handsome, and that he paid attention to her in a way that no other Elf has done in decades. Moriarty attacks the weak members of any group, and anything he said or did he will have only been done to manipulate her."

Lestrade gaped at Sherlock open-mouthed, but from the doorway Gandalf replied, "Yes, he's always like this."

"Mithrandir!" Lestrade replied with a bright grin.

"Captain Lestrade, it's nice to see you alive."

Lestrade just snorted at what was obviously a conversation they'd had plenty of times before. Sherlock twisted around and started for the exit once again but Lestrade shouted, "Oye! Sherlock!" The Elf turned back with a look of vague surprise at being addressed in such a manner. "Are you really just going to let this go?"

"There's nothing to let go, Lestrade. This victim has yielded all the information he’s going to
provide. There's nothing more to learn from him."

"What do you mean?"

Sherlock grumbled under his breath and pointed to Dimmock's throat, "Look at the striations on this cut." He looked up to find everyone but John staring at him in confusion. "Just look at it! Honestly, that means that there were two cuts, not one!"

Lestrade furrowed. "But there's only one wound."

Before Sherlock could snap something unfortunate, John interrupted, "It means the knife was placed at the already open wound and the killer sliced across from there, then went back to the wound and cut the other direction, trying to make it look like the throat was slashed straight across in one stroke."

"Exactly, John. Goodness, you've all been outshone by a Halfling." Lestrade looked at John as though he was waiting for him to shout something back, but John just shrugged, having adjusted to Sherlock's fickle temper. "That means," Sherlock said, drawing attention back to himself, "That this was a calculated crime, not one of passion."

"But-"

Sherlock threw up a hand to silence the human and continued, "Your Dimmock was chosen, not because he fits a certain type of victim, but because he does not. The only trait shared by all the previous victims, your Dimmock included, is that they're human."

"Wait, so you've had a spree of dead humans here?"

Sherlock huffed, "Didn't I just say the only thing in common is their species? That means where they've been murdered is entirely different as well."

"So it's all completely random?"

Sherlock glowered at Lestrade and snapped, "What is like in your tiny, little brains! Absolutely
"Not!"

"But you just said—"

"I said that despite the repetition there is only one trait in common amongst all the bodies, that necessarily means that it was. not. random!"

Even John looked ready to snap back when Elrond held up a hand and silenced them both. "Sherlock, perhaps you could explain your logic?"

Sherlock huffed like the whole thing was beneath him but still replied, "Truly random occurrences have some measure of repetition to them. If all of us were to silently choose a number in our minds from one to ten, the odds are that at least one of the numbers chosen would be repeated. In a truly random sequence there is repetition."

"Always?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes, "Of course not always, but often enough that when it doesn't occur it's an anomaly. Each human victim was missing his blood and had no other significant similarities to the other victims. That makes them chosen for a purpose."

"But..." John was the one asking the question this time, which apparently made Sherlock much more willing to listen. "If they were chosen for a purpose, can't we look at the victims to figure out what that purpose is?"

"He doesn't know what he wants yet." Sherlock explained.

"What?"

"Moriarty is experimenting with the blood. Using it for whatever foul craft he's tampering with. But he hasn't yet determined what trait he needs to accomplish his goal."

"How will we know when he has?" Lestrade demanded.
Sherlock gave Lestrade a long look before he replied, "When he starts bleeding a whole village."

Lestrade nodded like he finally understood and stuffed his hands in his pockets. "So what do we plan on doing about this?"

"We?" Sherlock asked in disbelief.

"He's one of my men, I plan to help you catch his killer."

Sherlock snorted, "If you are the best the Kingdom of Gondor has to offer, I fear for your continued survival. You’re of no use to me."

"Yeah, well, most of the things I hunt don't run around deducing me, so I think we'll be alright."

John smirked at the announcement and Sherlock paused long enough to raise a questioning eyebrow at Lestrade that demanded he explain himself. Lestrade squared his shoulders and said, "Do you really plan on sitting on your hands until he kills again?"

"Would it really strike you as odd if I did? After all, you believe that my people couldn't care less about yours." Lestrade moved to snap back and Sherlock interrupted, "It's incredibly stupid to deny things that I know are true."

"Look, I've had less than good experiences with your kind, you can't fault me for being cautious."

John knew from the twist of Sherlock's lip that he was about to say something terrible, so instead he snapped, "Sherlock!"

With an eye roll the Elf declared, "Yes, that must be terrible for you. What's your point?"

Lestrade bit his tongue. "Dimmock was one of my people. He may not have been the best of chaps, but he was in my company, and he didn't deserve to die as part of some bloody experiment when he was supposed to be safe. My point is: whatever you're going to do about it, I want to help."
"What makes you so sure that I plan on doing anything about it?"

"Him." Lestrade nodded to John. "He wouldn't be wasting his time on you if there wasn't something about you that he thinks is worth his attention."

Sherlock looked ready to spout something about how that was pure conjecture, but John looked quite pleased that Lestrade thought he was a high quality sort of Hobbit, so Sherlock refrained. Instead, he sighed, "Fine, you can come along. But do attempt to be useful."

Lestrade smirked like he knew full well what thought process had run through Sherlock’s mind before he announced that Lestrade was in his favor. John knew as well, but at least he was subtler about his own silent pleasure at Sherlock’s announcement. Rather than open them both to what John expected to be no small amount of teasing, he asked for more information about Dimmock. Not that he didn’t trust Sherlock’s opinion that there was no connection between any of the victims, but having actually met Sherlock, John didn’t discount the thought that perhaps there might be some emotional component that Sherlock had ignored.

Sherlock rolled his eyes at the question, but Lestrade gave John a nod in gratitude for even asking, for treating the dead man like he was more than a statistic. "He was a good lad, young and impressionable, but he wanted to do right by his company."

"Was it a surprise when an Elf paid attention to him?"

"I think 'surprise' doesn't quite cover it. We were all shocked, and more than a few of the boys thought Dimmock was making the whole thing up."

"Not exactly a hit with the ladies, then?" John smiled.

"Not exactly a hit with anyone.” Some of the tension leaked out of Lestrade’s frame. “He was a good fellow, but he wanted to be more than he was. Not so different from most other lads, but this boy had a bit of the Númenor to him, and that went to his head."

"A bit of the what?"

"Númenor. The homeland of the kings, a bloodline all but wiped out now. He doesn't have a claim to the throne or any of that nonsense, but somewhere back there he's got a titch of Númenor to him
"Just enough to make him difficult?" John grinned.

"Not difficult, just... young."

"Númenor..." Sherlock muttered, his mind a million miles away while he left John to exchange pleasantries. Then his face cleared and he gave an awed whispered of "Númenor!" before leaping to one of the ladders ringing Elrond’s library and scurrying to the top. Sherlock immediately began flipping through books and then carelessly tossing them down to the floor behind him.

John watched one particularly thick tome flip from Sherlock’s hand and land with a resounding thud before he asked, "Sherlock, is there a reason you're destroying someone else's property?"

Sherlock didn't even bother turning around as he tossed a book so fervently that it flew to the other side of the room. "Númenor matters," John muttered to himself in a half question. Sherlock didn't tell him that was ridiculous, so John assumed he wasn't too terribly far off the mark. "For Númenor to matter, it has to mean that Moriarty has broken his pattern of supposedly random killings. It means that Númenor has come up before."

"The fourth victim," Sherlock muttered from his place on the ladder, still focused on the books but giving John something to go on.

"He was Númenorean?"

Lestrade made an effort to catch every book that Sherlock tossed down, tucking them onto the open lip of the shelf to keep them from getting damaged. Without looking away from Sherlock’s hands he explained, “Plenty of people have traces of Númenor in their bloodlines, barely enough to count. So I’d doubt that the other victim was a fully-fledged Nuemenorean.”

Sherlock didn’t argue, so they both assumed Lestrade’s explanation was correct. “And none of the other victims share that bloodline?" John asked.

Sherlock flipped through another book. "None. The first traces were so slight that it barely even mattered, and the victims since have had no claim to such ancestry."
Lestrade flicked his gaze over the stack of books, trying to decipher the common theme among those that Sherlock was casting aside. John questioned, "Then what are you looking for?"

"There has to be something that drew him to Númenor. Something from one of the other victims that pulled him back."

"And one of these books will tell you what that is?"

"Somewhere in here Elrond has a record of the genealogy of your species. There's got to be something linking the later victims with Dimmock. Something about their blood that wasn't quite as effective and made him think of Númenor." Sherlock's eyes lit and he darted down the ladder, a thin, leatherback sketchbook in hand. He thumbed through pages, coming to a stop on a branching chart full of names. John propped himself up against the table to read under Sherlock's shoulder and after a moment of watching Sherlock trace his long finger across the Elvish words he prodded, "So, what does it say?"

"There!" Sherlock pointed to a delicate line of script and declared, "They're all cousins."

John stared up at him, "You don't meant that in the traditional way, right?"

"No, because I would have missed that all the victims were related," Sherlock replied snottily. John just rolled his eyes and Sherlock continued, "The house of Númenor has interbred with almost all the sons of men. It's slight enough that it doesn't get recounted in their histories, but the houses that could claim such an alliance have all had victims. The blood wasn't enough to go down on the records, but it was enough that Moriarty wanted it for whatever he’s doing."

John stared at the tangled tree of names. "So he's been draining members of that family tree for the blood?"

"Yes."

"For some dark art that only their blood can fulfill?"

"It appears so."
"And we have no idea what it is he’s trying to do with it?"

Sherlock paused for a moment. “No.”

“Uh huh. And how exactly were we planning on figuring that out?”

Sherlock stared off into the middle distance, the wheels in his frenzied brain whirling while he decided on his next step. From one breath to the next Sherlock’s smile grew fierce and he bolted for the door. “We go to Gondor!”
It was difficult to be melancholy in Beorn’s house. Yes, the skinchanger slipped from one mood to the next as easily as he shed forms, one second laughing jovially and the next glowering at the them all like he wanted to pick them up by the scruff of their shirts and toss them out of his house. But the Dwarves had plenty of experience in keeping their heads down while the creature in charge threatened and raved. So when Beorn took a turn for the irritated, most of the Company just sighed, longsuffering the whims of those in power. Soon enough Beorn would distract himself with laughing at Ori’s mittens, or Nori’s hair, and tell them all about these strange creatures called starfish that he’d seen once in his travels to the south.

But while the rest of the Company took Beorn’s house as a slightly more dramatic state of their regular affairs, Thorin somehow managed to twist every last thing in Beorn’s house to its most melancholy end.

Though perhaps “melancholy” wasn’t the right description. Furious. Frustrated. Half a breath away from strapping Orcrist to his side and storming out without the rest of the Company to just kill Smaug himself. All of these were fairly accurate assessments of Thorin, though perhaps they didn’t quite capture the meanness that had settled over his temper.

He’d been peaceable while they were still on the Carrock. Quietly listening to Bilbo narrate the story of John and Sherlock while the Hobbit tried to press bandages to Thorin’s skin with shaking hands. Neither of them had spoken of the long moment that had passed between them before Thorin asked Bilbo for a story, but Thorin had been quiet for the days afterward. Kíli and Fíli had ambushed Bilbo to demand he tell them what had happened, but Dwalin smacked them both upside the head with progressively more force each time they tried, and the boys soon decided the knowledge wasn’t worth the headache.

Bilbo was grateful for Dwalin’s interference, though he could only imagine what the gruff Dwarf thought of him for inadvertently putting Thorin so out of sorts. Bilbo reasoned to himself that Thorin’s shift in temper couldn’t be quite that terrible (or quite that out of the ordinary) if Dwalin was still defending him from the machinations of the younger members of the Company. Though that might just be Dwalin wanting to keep Bilbo from causing even more ruckus than he had in Rivendell. Either way, Bilbo didn’t particularly mind. Kíli and Fíli off causing havoc on their own meant that Bilbo was left in peace.

Being naturally inclined to the darkness under mountains, the Dwarves woke with the sun on their first morning at Beorn’s. According to Ori, they all grumbled and lazed about during their breakfast, dragging the meal out into a proper feast the likes of which they hadn’t had since Bilbo’s kitchen. Bilbo couldn’t attest to this behavior for himself, because as a gentlehobbit he knew the value of sleeping in. Bilbo woke just as the Dwarves were sitting down to lunch. They teased him for being a layabout, but Bilbo just smiled as Beorn’s dogs handed him a plate of freshly baked
scones, made special for the Hobbit so he wouldn’t have to miss out on either meal.

Bilbo caught the devious looks Fíli and Kíli shared as the finished devouring their meal. Fool him once, shame on you, fool him twice, shame on Bilbo. He had learned the hard way what those looks meant, and when the boys pressed their heads together to finalize their plan to snatch Bilbo away from the table and see if perhaps they could ride Beorn’s bees like ponies, Bilbo took a quick look around the table to be sure that no one was paying him any attention, then slipped on his ring. Bilbo stayed long enough to be sure that the boys noticed he was gone and watched them dart off into the hallway to see if they could track their missing Hobbit. Bilbo was tempted to stay right where he was and later tease the boys about managing to lose a creature so plump as he while was at a luncheon table, but with Kíli’s archer’s eyes, that might raise questions. So Bilbo slipped away from the room and headed out the door just behind the boys. Bilbo Baggins: gentlehobbit, would’ve gone the opposite direction, but one of the first things Dori had taught him about fighting was that it was better to go where you knew the enemy had been, than go where they might end up being. (Most creatures were too silly to recheck a room they’d already cleared.)

(Bilbo hadn’t quite understood how that lesson applied to his sword fighting, but he nodded along and thought about how he might apply it to his burgaling. Later, when Dori insisted that the Dwarves in charge of making Erebor safe for the returning inhabitants check each room three times in a random pattern, he wondered again why Dori would go to the trouble of teaching him about maintaining proper security in a Mountain.)

On this day at Beorn’s house, Bilbo took the lesson to heart and followed the boys out one of the side doors, patiently waiting in the shadows until they dashed back into the building on the thought that Bilbo had gone to Beorn’s library. (Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure that the skinchanger had such a room since Bilbo suspected that when you lived quite so long as Beorn, books were probably unnecessary. Bilbo was fairly convinced that Lord Elrond only had so many because he was so enamored with the written word. If an Elf was ever allowed to be enamored of anything, that was.)

With the boys safely out of sight, Bilbo slipped into Beorn’s gardens, sticking to the slightly tamer paths of massive bushes rather than roaming through the wild trails that Bilbo suspected might contain creatures that would eat a Hobbit if given half the chance. While he strolled along Bilbo closed his eyes and tilted his face up to the warm summer sun. He was far enough from the house that he couldn’t hear the shouting of Dwarves, just the brush of a gentle breeze on his face, and somewhere nearby there was a lilac bush in bloom out of season. If he breathed deep, Bilbo could almost imagine he was back in the Shire, ambling along for his mid-afternoon walk.

Though, the thought of being home wasn’t quite so tempting as it had been a few days ago.

That realization was enough to stumble Bilbo out of his daydream, eyes snapping open to take in the long stretch of massive bushes that surrounded him. Even worse than not missing home, he didn’t feel threatened by the oversized plants. If anything, he was tempted to stare at the head-
sized leaves and try to figure out what these bushes were meant to be. This was all very disconcerting.

As perfect as home was, Bilbo found himself fascinated by this new place, and wondering what the inside of a mountain was really like. Were there windows? And if there weren’t, where did they get their light? Were the endless hallways snaking through the mountain’s insides just lined with torch after torch? Or had the Dwarves found some glowing rock that gave off strange light that did the task just as well? Bilbo was curious, wanting to see even an echo of Erebor as it had been, to know more about these Dwarves when in their home rather than camping in the wilds.

Bilbo didn’t have much time to mull on this new and terrifying development because something started stomping through the bushes, rattling them all like a strong wind was ripping them up by the roots. Bilbo ducked off the path, slipping behind one of the tree-like bushes and fingering the ring in his pocket until the last possible moment. (He didn’t want to pop out of nothing if the newly arrived creature was Beorn, and he didn’t actually think invisibility would do much good if the noise was coming from one of Beorn’s dogs.)

Bilbo crouched behind his bush, letting the foliage conceal him and held his breath as the storm drew closer. He slipped the ring out of his pocket and tensed, ready to put it on and run for his life, when Thorin forced his way out of the bushes. The dwarf had to wrench himself loose, tendrils from the plants clinging to him in punishment for not taking the path, and Thorin whipped around with Orcrist drawn, ready to hack off the offending limbs.

Considering it was Thorin’s own fault for invading the bush’s personal space, Bilbo couldn’t stand for that. He popped out from behind his own bush (which didn’t cling to him at all, thank you very much) and declared, “Thorin Oakenshield, what are you doing?”

Thorin hunched at Bilbo’s words, then straightened out his spine like there was nothing at all about this situation unbefitting a king. Thorin sheathed Orcrist and tried to turn to Bilbo with as much dignity as possible, which was unsurprisingly difficult considering the amount of branches still clinging to his jacket.

Bilbo bit his bottom lip to keep from giggling at him and stepped over to release the limbs that had gotten swallowed up in Thorin’s hair and the little seeds sticking to the fur lining his cloak. Thorin kept his eyes firmly in the middle distance, like Bilbo helping him was the expected behavior of any subject for their king. Bilbo had a moment’s irritation that Thorin couldn’t manage to stay civil from one day to the next, even to the Hobbit who’d saved his life. But like his incessant longing for home, Bilbo found that it didn’t bother him quite so much as it had. He supposed that is bothered him less because surviving an attack by Orcs tended to change your perspective on the little things. Or at least, your first Orc attack. At this point Thorin had probably long since stopped caring about threats to his life, hence how saving his life didn’t seem to count for more than a day.
Thorin fidgeted through Bilbo setting him free, and the moment the Hobbit finished he ripped away from the plants with a huff. “What are these things!” he snapped.

Years of devoutly not reacting when the Old Took had a bit too much to drink was enough to keep Bilbo from smiling, and instead he gave the plant a very serious look before he replied, “I do believe they’re raspberries.

Thorin just stared at Bilbo like the Hobbit had muttered something in Elvish. “Raspberries?”

“Raspberries. Or, at least, I believe they are. It’s difficult to tell these sorts of things when the bush is all out of proportion.” Thorin had that look he got when he didn’t understand what was going on but he didn’t want to admit it. Bilbo reached out and ran his fingers along one of the leaves, “You can tell because of the shape. And they’ve got that strange, scratchy fuzz. And the edges are jagged. And well, they’re green.” Bilbo just kept talking, because Thorin just kept staring at him, that same confused expression that Thorin donned when Bilbo started talking about second breakfast or Gaffer Gamgee’s seven children.

“Serrated.” Thorin interrupted the awkward silence.

“What?”

“The leaves. Their edges are serrated. Certain of our swords are designed like that to aid in hunting.”

“Aid in--” before Bilbo could properly ask the question Thorin plucked a dagger out from somewhere between his back and his cloak and flicked it across the bush’s trunk, cleanly severing the top half from the bottom. Bilbo squeaked and dashed forward, trying to catch the branches before they all went tumbling down. He pressed the exposed green insides back together, like he was Gandalf and capable of repairing a plant when it had been chopped in half. “What did you do that for! What did the plant ever do to you?”

Thorin furrowed his eyebrows like Bilbo couldn’t have forgotten the way he’d just had to struggle through bush branches like they were the clinging fingers of Goblins. “That’s no excuse for attacking a defenseless bush!”

“You were going to ask how we use them for hunting.”
“That doesn’t explain why you killed the bush!”

Thorin reached around Bilbo’s shoulder and gripped the branch above the break that Bilbo was trying to coax back together. “Imagine this as a boar’s neck.” He pulled up on the branch, the force up outweighing Bilbo’s desire to bring it back together. The branches came apart with a squick, the plant’s green lifeblood drawing out in one foul, bitter-smelling tendril, graphically close to what Bilbo now knew it looked like when a Dwarf blade took off the head of an Orc. Bilbo shoved back against Thorin, pushing him away and shouting, “That was still unnecessary! You could’ve just said!”

“You’re being particularly defensive of a plant.”

Bilbo sputtered for a moment, quite aware that he was defending the life of a plant, thank you very much. He forced himself to stop speaking, and instead put his hands on his hips and declared, “The bees here could serve as ponies, the dogs carry trays, and the horses have conversations with their master. It is not outside the realm of possibility for the raspberry bushes to have feelings.”

Thorin furrowed, mulling on the logic of that statement, then looked at the decapitated bush hanging from his hand. He murmured, “You have a point,” dropped the bush, grabbed Bilbo’s hand, and hauled him off down the trail.

It was difficult to summon up an appropriately affronted expression when your hand was wrapped up in the warm, safe palm of a Dwarf you trusted. Bilbo squeaked in something he could at least pretend was outrage, but was actually a bit closer to the noise he made when Bryony Grubb waltzed up and kissed him at the May Day celebration when he was ten. Rather than have the courtesy to pretend that Bilbo’s noise of shock was actually a demand that Thorin explain himself, the Dwarf just pulled.

They went down the long stretch of raspberry bushes, around the corner and into the strawberry patch. And now, thanks to Thorin’s rather graphic display of bush decapitation, Bilbo looked over the tangled vines and wondered what terrors might be lurking there. They stormed through the strawberries and straight off the trail. The pathway veered left into rows upon rows of blueberries, but it seemed that Thorin had more than his fill of impressively-sized fruits. “Didn’t this go poorly for you last time?” Bilbo interjected, hoping to divert Thorin before they both got swallowed up in the sticky limbs of the patch.

Thorin just grunted back, “We’ll be fine,” and strode along in his thick boots like that was that. Bilbo’s feet were not particularly sensitive, but that didn’t mean squishy things couldn’t get between his toes. He resigned himself to being quire irritated with Thorin before the day was done,
when just at that moment he pulled them through to the other side of the patch. There was a strip of stone separating the cultivated plants from the wild, easy for Beorn to step over, Thorin to hop, and Bilbo to have a rather undignified scramble.

Thorin seized Bilbo’s hand again and dragged him off into the tall grass. When they were clear of Beorn’s garden Thorin slowed his stride to something more suiting a Hobbit, still not the meander that Bilbo had been so enjoying before Thorin appeared, but at least he could keep up without trotting now. Despite his desire to be irritated with Thorin, it was difficult on such a lovely day. It was a bit harder to pretend now, but just as before, if Bilbo tilted his face to the sun he could pretend that all was right with the world. Thorin wasn’t pulling him through the wilds outside a bear-man’s house, and there was no chance at all that Thorin may or may not have been driven to the edge of his sanity and was dragging Bilbo off to a spot where he’d chosen to hide the body.

Instead, Bilbo thought about Sunday afternoon strolls, Hobbit lads and lasses walking arm and arm. The more demure of them sticking to the well-worn paths between houses, the playful slipping out into the fields, and the adventurous venturing all the way into the woods. Though Bilbo knew to an outside observer they were rapidly shifting downward on the Hobbit Scale of Courting Propriety, he couldn’t even begin to imagine where the carrying of daggers and the decapitating of bushes would fall on that scale. Or one of the courting parties being a Dwarf. Or, Thorin no so much courting Bilbo as saving him from the dangers of raspberry bushes.

Eventually Bilbo gave Thorin’s hand a gentle squeeze, enough to prod him out of his determined stride. He stumbled a little at the change in sensation, then looked back to Bilbo like he thought Bilbo was warning him about something coming up behind them. When nothing appeared to be giving chase, Thorin cocked an eyebrow and Bilbo mildly asked, “Where are we going?”

Thorin stuttered to a stop, like it hadn’t crossed his mind that perhaps Bilbo wouldn’t want to just come along. “Were you doing something?”

“I was just out for a walk.”

Thorin smirked. “Are we not walking?”

“Yes,” Bilbo tried not to huff, “but you seem like you’re going somewhere in particular.”

Thorin grunted something indistinct and just pulled Bilbo back on course. The Hobbit rolled his eyes but went along anyway. He let Thorin tug him along for a few more minutes before he started to chuckle. “Oh! You’re not walking to, you’re walking from!” Did the boys do something?”
“The boys always do something.”

Bilbo giggled, enjoying the thought of Thorin having spent decades trying to wrangle his nephews. “I snuck out this morning to avoid that something.”

“Probably a wise decision on your part.”

“Did the boys do anything in particular that made you want to storm away?”

“When I left they were planning on teaching the dogs to box.”

“Really?”

“Does that honestly surprise you?”

“A little.” Bilbo paused, “I’d thought they were going to try riding the bees.”

Thorin paused, like he was giving himself a moment to understand what Bilbo was saying, then he unleashed one deep, startled, laugh. Bilbo bit his lip, both he and Thorin startled into silence by the sound, then they met each other’s eyes and dissolved into smiles.
Elrond took a slow breath and reminded himself that he was the son of Eärendil\(^1\), the Captain of Gil-Galad\(^2\), the ruler of Imladris\(^3\), a leader among the Last Alliance of Elves and Men\(^4\), and Sherlock Naenwauva\(^5\) of all people was not allowed to irritate him.

Yes, Sherlock was his elder, and yes, he was one of Middle-earth’s greatest warriors against Morgoth\(^6\) and his darkness, and yes, there was the very real possibility that Sherlock’s sight was greater than even that of Lady Galadriel, even though neither he nor she would confirm either way. But for all those things made Sherlock an Elf that Elrond valued and respected for his contributions to the world, it didn’t make him any less frustrated when Sherlock managed to step out of his sightline and vanish into thin air despite being in the confines of Elrond’s own house. Elrond was reasonably certain that the other Elf had not left Imladris since John Watson and Gregory Lestrade were both still within the house’s bounds, but there was always the possibility that Sherlock had simply put aside his companions in favor of making the journey alone.

Moments after declaring that he would make for Gondor, Sherlock had pulled a pile of genealogically-related books off Elrond’s shelves and thrown them into his bag, ready to depart. Lestrade had sent John a pleading look, asking him to stall Sherlock for long enough that people who relied on food and clothing during their travels would have a chance to be ready as well. John gave Lestrade a nod, and before Sherlock had the chance to scoop up his Hobbit, put him on Faun’s back and ride away into the sunset, John pointed out that he needed something to eat. “And it probably wouldn’t hurt things to get a map. And I’ll need to write a letter home. All they know is that I was going to Rivendell, and I doubt they’ll try and check on me, but just in case they do they should know that I’m not here.”

Sherlock had heaved out a put upon sigh and grumbled, “Oh, if you must.”

“Must eat, you mean? Because everything must eat Sherlock, you included.”

Sherlock had just snorted, but before he could pick a fight with John about whether or not out of sheer force of will he would be able to make food unnecessary, something passed across his face. It was the look Sherlock got when a piece of the puzzle slotted itself into place. Sherlock turned on his heel and took off down the hall, ignoring John’s call to know where he was going.

Lestrade had been escorted back to his room to gather his things and relay orders to his Men, while Elrond took pains to keep an eye on the Hobbit himself. The small creature seemingly felt no need
for idle chatter, keeping pace with Elrond while they went to his room and re-packed the few items that had even made it out of John’s bag in the singular night that he’d been in Rivendell. The Hobbit was efficient in his motions, everything tucked neat and clean back into its place. “I do believe that if you requested it you could have a few more days of rest before Sherlock needs to press on,” Elrond pointed out.

John gave Elrond a polite smile, “As fond as I am of sleep, I think we both know that Sherlock pausing long enough to let me have a sandwich was about all the miracle I’m going to get.”

Elrond nodded. “That is likely. However, there is no need for you to accompany him to Gondor.”

John’s hands were small but sure as he tied closed the flap on his battered, leather satchel. Given the inclination of short-years to speak whenever there was a lull in the conversation, Elrond thought that perhaps the Hobbit was being defiant and refusing to answer. But after he’d checked the knot John looked up, wisdom in those eyes that Elrond had not expected of a creature so young. John cocked his head to the side and gave Elrond a look like he was trying to puzzle out the Elven lord. Like there was something here he didn’t quite understand but Sherlock’s teachings might be enough to help. “Why would I want to do that?”

“Because the road to Gondor is not an easy one. Because Sherlock is hunting one of the most dangerous creatures in Middle-earth. Because you are a Hobbit, and never before have I seen one of your people outside your own lands.”

“And why would that matter?”

Elrond paused at the core of steel lacing through John’s words. The Elf mentally laid out a list of things that any reasonable creature would want to know before venturing off into the unknown with Sherlock, but from the Hobbit’s expression Elrond suspected none of that would mean a thing. John Watson would follow Sherlock until he drew his last breath, then would probably wait for him in the Halls of Mandos where the two could wreak havoc until the end of the world. Then, at least, they would be someone else’s problem. Though, as John shouldered his pack and strode out of the room like he was not ignoring the concerns of the Lord of Rivendell, Elrond thought that even the great Mandos might not be enough to make them behave.

“It would be unfortunate,” Elrond said, before John had the chance to pass through the doorway, “to leave the safety of Rivendell and find yourself far from home with no desire to be there.”

The Hobbit paused and glanced over his shoulder with a look torn between pity and irritation. “For that, you’ve got to believe that there’s nothing worth finding outside.” John strode from the room,
unconcerned and unmoved by Elrond’s counsel. Like there was nothing to be worried about here, move along. Elrond trailed along after John, keeping the Hobbit in his sights to prevent any unexpected departures. John knew that Elrond was there, and save for one speaking smirk that very nearly asked if Elrond was really going to follow him the whole way there, John ignored him. Elrond was grateful for the moment of solitude. It gave him a chance to think.

Elrond would have preferred that not even Sherlock go after Moriarty. He was a foul creature even before Sauron had sunk in his twisted claws. He had been born wrong, lacking in the compassion that was meant to temper their Elven wisdom. He sought to know all, and when he believed that he had learned it, he grew bored with what he had gained and turned it all to dark ends that might keep him entertained. He willingly gave himself over to Sauron that he might gain from the experience, and that someday he might rise up and take Sauron’s place. Though he was centuries younger than either Sherlock or Elrond, too young to even be considered an influential member of their race, still he strove to be someone worth noticing. He carved for himself a niche of evil and discord, ensuring that he would be remembered so long as their people would last.

And now John Watson was riding off to meet him.

Moriarty had always had a twisted obsession with Sherlock, a dependency that only few could puzzle out, and Elrond was not one of them. But Elrond would not be surprised if the creature had been murdering simply to gain Sherlock’s attention and for no grander purpose. The two Elves revolved around one another, century after century, one horrible crime after the next. Sherlock had vanished once, a Human lifetime ago, gone to hunt Moriarty and then not to be heard from for another ten years. In the dark of his mind Elrond had wondered if perhaps Sherlock had finally met his death, but Galadriel had challenged the belief that death would be a mercy to him.

Her fear was not that Sherlock would die, but that his soul would meet its end and the rest of him would go on living. What little moral understanding Sherlock might possess would fade, leaving behind only his mind and the companionship of Moriarty. According to Galadriel Sherlock was always one particularly fascinating murder away from slipping into the dark. After all, for all that he was on the side of the Valar\(^8\), he would never be one.

Elrond felt no shame in admitting that he was terrified for John Watson. He was a child compared to Moriarty, and had barely even existed compared to Sherlock, and yet… he mattered. Sherlock was still vicious in his deductions, but when John prodded, now he took the time to explain. According to Arwen, over their few days of travel Sherlock had clung to John like he was some new and fascinating case that Sherlock couldn’t put aside until he was understood.

And that was where Elrond’s fear lay. They were off to a perilous situation, and what was going to happen when Sherlock puzzled out his curious little Hobbit along the way? Would the boy find himself abandoned on the banks of the Anduin? Or left with Lestrade in Gondor while Sherlock followed Moriarty on their mad hunt over Middle-earth? Too far from home to find his way back,
and possibly too hurt to try.

Lestrade was already in the main courtyard by the time they arrived, saddling his horse and trying to conceal the harsh breathing that implied he’d been running the whole time to keep Sherlock from being ready to depart before him. The Man twitched every time someone entered the courtyard, obviously checking for Sherlock. His two lieutenants, the sour-faced Anderson and wrathful Donovan, both sulked on the courtyard stairs and Elrond could only imagine the scolding necessary to keep them both silent while they watched their Captain fuss with his saddle. Lestrade looked up, not at the silent pad of John’s feet, but at the shush of Elrond’s robes against the stairs. The Human puffed out a relieved breath at the sight of John still present and graced the Hobbit with a bright smile. “Your lad hasn’t taken off then?”

Rather than have another fruitless argument about the use of the possessive in reference to John and Sherlock, the Hobbit replied, “As far as I know. Wouldn’t be surprised if he left us both, though.”

Lestrade gave a chuckle in understanding, only to be interrupted by Sherlock’s arrival. “You’re my assistant.”

“What a romantic you are,” Lestrade snorted. Sherlock just stared at Lestrade like he understood that a joke had been made, but he didn’t understand the humor involved. There was a moment where Elrond thought Sherlock might actually ask about why Lestrade was using the word “romantic” in reference to a case, but soon enough he rolled his eyes and let out a sharp whistle.

John popped up from the stairs, and a dark expression crossed the faces of Lestrade and his men, like he thought that Sherlock had just summoned the Hobbit as though he was a dog. John shouldered his pack and went to stand beside Sherlock with a bright grin, and that’s when the sound became clear. There was some vague shouting in Elvish, enough words that Elrond recognized the voices, and then the rapid clatter of hooves on stone. Faun burst into the courtyard, trailing several flustered grooms behind him. At the sight of Elrond the groomsmen dropped into bows and stammered out apologies for the shouting. Elrond waived them off because his attention was far more focused on Faun’s reaction to the Hobbit.

Like his rider, Faun had never been fond of any creature that wasn’t Sherlock, and yet, there was this. Faun burst onto the scene only to ignore Sherlock completely. The horse was massive, a barrel thick chest rather than the almost delicate lines found on Elven bred horses. This creature, a vicious war stallion that had been with Sherlock since he was nothing more than a colt that followed him home, instead went to John. The horse burrowed his nose into John’s chest, nuzzling into him like a dog would a Human. Only, the horse’s mass nuzzled John right off his feet. John went down with a laugh and Faun kept teasing him while Sherlock tossed both his and John’s supplies over the horse’s back.
Sherlock wasn’t furious with his horse, he wasn’t furious with his Hobbit, and worst of all, he was smiling at them both despite delaying their departure.

This very morning Elrond had stood beside Gandalf and watched Sherlock show off for the Hobbit, making ridiculous deductions just to hear this small creature tell him they were incredible. Elrond had ignored the warning signs, writing them off as nothing more than Sherlock enjoying the benefits of an audience. Even when Gandalf had pointed out the slowly growing echo of music that trailed Sherlock through the house, Elrond had ignored it.

But now, Sherlock was smiling, his horse was enamored, and without the magic of Gandalf guiding his hearing, Elrond could feel the slow and steady rhythm of the song. When he stretched his gifts to their fullest extent he could catch the melody of it, both low and high, neither string of music staying long on the note where they began. Both wrapping around one another with no respect for the way these things were supposed to be done. Just as you would expect Sherlock to be.

“Lle lakwenien?” The question slipped out before Elrond even realized that his mouth had opened to ask if Sherlock was serious about this. Sherlock barely glanced up from readying Faun, but the way his nose puckered in distaste was enough to answer the question. “Hon firthel.”

“Pân firlye.” Sherlock shrugged. “Til utunat’pen maenas fira an.”

Time with Sherlock meant that John was patient enough to ignore the conversation going on above his head, to treat it as something that had slipped past troublesome and gone on into amusing. Sherlock stuck out his foot to nudge Faun back, and though the creature snapped thick teeth at him, he went. Sherlock left John to find his own way to his feet, then handed the Hobbit a long, wooden case.

John went down on one knee, resting the case on the ground rather than balancing it in his hands. The woodwork was delicate, a long vine of lighter wood winding its way in a seemingly random pattern over the surface. John cracked open the lid, expecting it to be some poke at his size or intelligence. Instead, it was a bow.

The curve was simple, none of the strange dips that you saw on the bows of men. But despite the smooth line, the same vine pattern that meandered along the outside of the box was carved into the bow’s surface. The vines interwove and overlapped, only leaving bare only a space for his hand to grip. John’s breath caught at the detail of it, the work that must’ve gone into creating a piece this beautiful. And it was beautiful, in the Shire any Hobbit would’ve been happy to have this sitting
John looked up at Sherlock and took in the slight inward pinch to the Elf’s lips that gave away his nerves. Their gazes met, but before John could say a word Sherlock rambled out, “You’re a healer. But you have no qualms stopping someone who’s trying to hurt others. So, healer: you don’t like knives, or swords, or your fists. You’ve never had a weapon of your own that you haven’t picked up off the ground. Luckily there are enough trees on the road between Buckland and Bree that if the need ever arose, you just went for the nearest tree branch. We won’t have that option past the Misty Mountains. What trees there are get testy when you touch their leavings.”

John’s eyebrows rose steadily higher the more Sherlock spoke, finally leaping straight off his forehead at the mention of testy trees. “Thus, you needed a weapon of you own, but something that you won’t have to look your opponent in the eyes when you kill them, protecting your medical sensibilities.”

They both just stood there for a moment, John catching up with all the details that Sherlock had shared and Sherlock all but humming with concern that John might loathe the gift. John broke the stare first, looking back down to the bow still resting in its case. With gentle hands he slid the bow free, running his fingers along the smooth surface the same way he did when checking a Hobbitling for bone breaks. After acquainting himself with the shape and weight, he looked back up at Sherlock and grinned, “You know I have no idea what to do with this, right?”

The Elf smirked back, his features clearing of the pinch that had been there before. “I’m sure we’ll come up with something.”

Sherlock gathered up the Hobbit and his newfound bow, dropping them both on Faun’s back. Before Elrond had the chance to lodge another objection to Sherlock’s decision, could point out to him the danger inherent in this little game of his, Sherlock was already mounted behind John and the two of them were off at a gallop, Lestrade striving to catch up. On the wind there was John’s laugher, Lestrade’s complaints, and the echo of a song trailing after Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I have figured out where I think Sherlock fits in the Elven genealogy, and yes, in my mind both he and Mycroft are older than Elrond. I’m planning on avoiding a chapter on Sherlock’s actual birth story, just explaining that he’s bamf, even to elves, and leaving it at that. But I wanted to ask and find out if you all had an opinion on that. Do you want a chapter fully laying out Sherlock’s place in the LOTR universe? Or is the last thing you want another chapter keeping you away from the end of this?

FN 1: Eärendil was the first of the half-elven: a half-human, half-elf (pause for
obligatory “half-vampire, half-lycan, but stronger than both” joke). He married an Elf with whom he had Elrond and Elrond’s brother. Eärendil roamed Middle-earth on his ship, eventually making his way to Valinor (heaven, basically) and became the first mortal allowed to set foot there. He pled with the Valar (the angels) to help the Elves and Men fight Morgoth (see FN 6), and because he was so brave, they agreed. Also because of his bravery the Valar gave both Eärendil and his brother, and all the half-elven who would descend from them, the ability to choose whether they would be counted among the Men or the Elves and receive the gifts of those people. (I didn’t know this, but that’s why Arwen was able to choose to put aside her immortality and stay with Aragorn. Because she descends from Eärendil.)

FN 2: High King over all the Elves in Middle-Earth in the Second Age. He was such a powerful leader that he brought together the Men and Elves and led them against Sauron in the Last Alliance. (See FN 4.) He died fighting Sauron in that battle. (Also known as the battle in the prologue at the beginning of the LOTR movie trilogy.)

FN 3: Imladris – the Elven name for Rivendell.

FN 4: The Last Alliance of Elves and Men occurred at the end of the Second Age, and occurred when the free peoples of Middle-earth (Dwarves included) fought Sauron and dispersed him into the nothingness that would become both the Necromancer and the Eye. Also known as the battle in the prologue of the LOTR movies.

FN 5: Just a reminder, the rough translation of Naenwauva is “Far-Seer.”

FN 6: Morgoth is the ultimate big bad in the LOTR universe. Basically, he’s the devil. He spread terror and evil through Middle-earth until Eärendil (back in FN 1) pled with the Valar to stop him. He was defeated and cast into the void, where he still provides instructions to his right hand creature, Sauron.

FN 7: The Halls of Mandos are where the spirits of Elves and Men gather after they die. (Dwarves have their own special wing in the Halls, apparently separate from the Men and Elves.) They exist on as spirits until Dagor Dagorath (the end of the world), when everyone comes out Ragnarök style and battles against Morgoth. They are also known as the Halls of Waiting.

FN 8: Valar = Angels

FN 9: He will die.

FN 10: Everyone dies. The point is to find something worth dying for.
Together the Dwarf and Hobbit made their way through the grassy undergrowth and up to a nearby hill. As always, Bilbo had John’s journal tucked into his vest pocket, keeping it on hand for any moment when he wanted to know what happened next to his kinsman. After a few long minutes of quiet, sitting together in the clear sunshine streaming down to the hilltop, Thorin started to get twitchy. He was well rested, well fed, and more than ready to be on his way. But his company still ached with pains from the Misty Mountains. They were still tired in their hearts, and though they were all so close to home, there were still numerous perils to cross before they were done. It was hard to make yourself leave a place of peace, even when there wasn’t a dragon waiting for you on the other side.

Though Thorin was grateful for the counsel of Elrond, this had been his concern with stopping in Rivendell. He never wanted to seek the aid of an Elf, but more than that, Elrond still had his home. His kingdom was intact, his people were safe, and Thorin didn’t want his Dwarves to get so close to home and yet decide that that was good enough. And now it was the same problem all over again. Beorn’s house was safe and secure, close enough to Erebor that they could depart at some other time, some point in a century when they grey tired of safety.

Bilbo could see Thorin fidgeting in impatience, as though the rest of the Company was back at the house waiting for them to be ready to leave. Bilbo pulled out his book and started reading aloud before Thorin had the chance to argue. He didn’t need to look up to know that the Dwarf was rolling his eyes, but still Thorin settled himself comfortably on the grass and listened along. By the end of the entry Thorin was stretched out, his arms tucked behind his head and his face tilted towards the sun while he fought the urge to nap. He could feel Bilbo pause, debating with himself whether he should keep speaking and lure Thorin deeper into sleep, or close the journal and let him fall over the edge all on his own.

Whatever decision Bilbo might have made was drowned out by Beorn’s bellow of a laugh coming up the far side of the hill.

From one moment to the next Thorin was awake, springing to his feet with Orcrist extended and his body between Bilbo and the sound. He was furious that the gentle murmur of Bilbo’s voice had been enough to lull him into sleep when there was no one on the lookout.

Beorn didn’t even give Thorin the grace to at least pretend that he found the Dwarf and his sword concerning. Instead the skinchanger just chortled at him and clapped one meaty paw of a hand down on his shoulder in hello. “Aye, Sherlock taught him well. Though I long thought that John simply had his own talent for wielding that tiny bow.”

Both Bilbo and Thorin stiffened at the statement, though Bilbo had stilled at the possibilities and
Thorin clenched at the notion that here was a whole new reason for Bilbo to stay. Rather than roar and pick Bilbo up to run off with him and leave this accursed place far behind, Thorin grunted, “I was unaware that your people lived so long.”

“We do not,” Beorn grinned. “But our memories are long.”

“But… how can you share memories that aren’t your own?” Bilbo sounded fascinated, as he always did when there was some new information about this world that he might be given.

Beorn shrugged, and when Bilbo parted his lips to demand a better explanation than that, Thorin put a gentle hand on his shoulder, stilling him of all his possible questions. Beorn might take one or two questions well, but the rest would lead him to shout and shed his skin in a rage, and without the others to distract him from his temper Thorin didn’t look too kindly on their odds. Bilbo pursed his lips in irritation, but he accepted Thorin’s silent counsel and asked, “What do you know of them?”

Thorin trundled past, heading in the direction of his house. “The same story that anyone knows.”

“But no one talks about the story. Lady Arwen had to sneak it to us because no one would tell me anything about it.”

“Well they wouldn’t, would they? They’re Elves. Don’t like those kind of stories, like to pretend they don’t exist.”

Bilbo began to vibrate in the way that meant he was more affronted than his little Hobbit body could contain. To prevent Bilbo from attempting to murder a Man who was, quite literally, a bear, Thorin placed his hand on the back of Bilbo’s next and squeezed. The tension didn’t drain from the Hobbit, but he bottled it all back up which was dangerous in its own way. On Bilbo’s behalf Thorin asked, “Is there any particular reason that the Elves wouldn’t share this story?”

Beorn just stared at Thorin like he thought the Dwarf might be being deliberately obtuse just to disgrace the Elves in front of the Hobbit. After a long moment where Thorin thought that Beorn was about to lost his temper, the skinchanger replied, “They wouldn’t like the ending, now would they?”

Beorn turned and trundled down the hill, calling back something about not missing dinner. Bilbo just sighed, which surprised Thorin because he was ready to snatch Bilbo back and stop him from
darting after the skinchanger to scold him until he answered every question just to be allowed a 
moment of silence. Bilbo slumped down, dropping back to the grass that had been so peaceful a 
minute ago. Thorin bit back his inclination to snap at Bilbo and tell him to get to his feet rather 
than sulk. Instead, he dropped down beside Bilbo, sword still drawn just in case. Bilbo was not one 
for extended silences, and Thorin had expected that if he gave the Hobbit the opportunity he would 
ramble out precisely what had him so melancholy. When the Hobbit didn’t, Thorin stretched out 
his legs, then pulled them back again, then moved Orcist from his side to out front, and tried to 
figure out how he was supposed to be the one to begin a conversation with Bilbo. Eventually 
Thorin cleared his throat and asked, “Why don’t you just jump to the end?”

Bilbo’s response was a long and devastating sigh, and Thorin wanted to scream. He was making a 
concerted effort to give Bilbo what he needed, but no matter what he tried, nothing seemed to come 
out right. Bilbo was a member of the Company, and what’s more, Thorin now considered him 
among his friends. He wanted to do better by Bilbo, to make up for all the ways that he’d failed 
him already. And if, perhaps, Thorin’s better treatment led to more afternoons like this one, with 
Bilbo curled around a book and reading to Thorin (or perhaps curled around Thorin), then that 
would be worth it. But at this moment, it was difficult to make sense of things when he didn’t 
know what he’d done wrong.

Bilbo cradled the journal between his small hands, running his fingers over the book’s simple 
lines. It looked perfect for Bilbo, just the right size for a Hobbit. As he stroked the cover, thumbing 
along the rough-edged pages, it reminded Thorin of how his grandfather used to caress the 
Arkenstone. While his grandfather’s obsession still churned his stomach, Bilbo and this book 
looked right.

The library of Erebor was near the mountain’s peak, tucked safely within one of the uppermost 
halls behind a set of doors built to endure the mountain’s collapse. There was a spiral staircase at 
the back of the library that led up and up to a long office meant for the head librarian. The Dwarf 
whom the space had been crafted for had lived his whole life studying the written word in the 
kingsdoms of Men, and he was not overly fond of the dark. To make the Dwarf happy, the king 
burrowed long holes into the mountainside, carving them into a strange shape with points so 
narrow that no living thing would make it through, and coating the surface with silica to reflect the 
light down to his office. It was a beautiful space, completely secure, and one of the few places in 
the mountain exposed to sunlight.

It would perfect for Bilbo.

Thorin could see it clearly. Bilbo devouring every book in the library, Ori there to assist, and a few 
guards there to carry heavy loads and pretend they were there for something more than Bilbo’s 
defense. Bilbo could spend his days in the brightly lit office, maybe have a flower box or two to 
grow his beloved plants, and be safely tucked away in the one of the most secure parts of the castle 
until Thorin came to collect him at the end of the day and guide him back home. The whole thing 
would be perfect, were it not for the odds of Bilbo staying in Erebor after they reclaimed it. Or that 
they might not reclaim it at all.
Bilbo seemed not to notice Thorin’s imaginings and without a look to Thorin he began to explain, “I don’t want it to end.” Bilbo stopped there, and Thorin leaned forward slightly, tempted to prod Bilbo to continue, but he had not responded well to Thorin’s heavy hand at the beginning of the conversation, so he refrained. After a long moment of silence Bilbo added, “She warned me, you know. The Lady Arwen. She said that when I got to the end I would understand why the Elves didn’t talk about John, or even Sherlock.” Bilbo began to build up momentum, rambling off all his reasons with frantically fluttering hands. “And now Beorn says that even he thinks the ending is terrible. I suppose that I’m just trying to put it off as long as possible so that I can pretend that things are going to end the way I think they should.” With that Bilbo sagged like the pump below a forge, all the air drained out of him.

Bilbo turned to Thorin, his eyes wide and forlorn. “I don’t want the story to end because I don’t want to say goodbye to them. I don’t, I don’t want things to end the way I know they’re going to. I feel like if I keep reading then I’ll keep them both alive for that much longer.”

Whatever reaction Bilbo was hoping for, Thorin’s pensive furrow wasn’t it. He slumped a little more and turned back to gazing at the book, like the object itself would understand what he was trying to say. Thorin’s own relationship with the written word had been restrained to the basics. He read what he needed to because it was required of a king, not out of any sheer enjoyment of the subject. No, he endured books, but he was fond of Bilbo.

Thorin reached out, ready to smack his hand to Bilbo’s back like he would’ve done with one of his Dwarves, but he paused. He let his hand hover over the Hobbit for a moment, reminding himself that no, Bilbo probably wouldn’t appreciate being thunked about. Instead, he slowly rested his hand on Bilbo’s curls, settling in with a ruffle to pretend like this was a natural motion that didn’t make him hold his breath.

He had anticipated Bilbo enduring the touch for a moment then shaking it off while he pretended like the thought of a book hadn’t made him melancholy.

Of course, that anticipation did not take into account Bilbo being a Hobbit.

Instead of pushing off the touch, Bilbo gave a moan and in one swift motion buried his face in Thorin’s chest. With more instinct than sense, Thorin’s hand stayed on Bilbo’s head and held him close while the rest of his body panicked. He forced himself to relax into the hold before his surprise ruined the moment, wrapping his other arm around Bilbo’s back and pressing his cheek to Bilbo’s temple.

The Hobbit didn’t cry, thank Aulë, Thorin didn’t know what he would’ve done if he’d had to deal
with actual tears. Instead Bilbo just drew deep, steady breaths and Thorin did his best to match them. He was not naturally prone to the softness that Bilbo seemed to need, but he didn’t think that what little softness he’d learned from tending to his nephews would be appropriate here. (Fascinating though Bilbo would find it, Thorin didn’t think Dwarven lullabies were quite right.)

Instead Thorin waited until Bilbo’s breathing slowed to something closer to its normal pace (yes, waited, not floundered while he tried to think of something to say), then he pointed out, “Beorn didn’t say that he disliked the ending.”

Bilbo heaved a sigh at that one, then leaned back out of Thorin’s touch with a disappointed look like he shouldn’t have expected Thorin to handle the situation properly. Since he’d already been pushed to the limits of his emotional capability, Thorin decided that now was not the time to let Bilbo ramble something that would infuriate him and ruin what little ground he’d gained. “He said that the Elves don’t like the story, not that he doesn’t.”

“And that distinction matters, does it?”

“Your distinction between Baggins and Took matters, does it not?”

Bilbo gaped, though whether it was at Thorin’s point or he was simply surprised that Thorin had paid enough attention to remember Bilbo’s family names, Thorin wasn’t sure. Either way, he seized the moment and said, “Elves don’t like stories where they look like fools. That’s why their legends and our legends are so different. We tell the truth and they ignore the darker parts of their own history.”

Bilbo obviously had a retort for that, but he bit his lip and replied, “You think that’s it, then? That Sherlock just looks a fool?”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Bilbo mulled on that for a moment, his brow furrowed, and Thorin dared to hope that Bilbo would believe him and move on. Of course, as always, when Thorin dared to have hope he had to be punished for it. “But isn’t that just worse, then? What could Sherlock have done that was so terrible that his own people hated the story?” Bilbo paled, “Do you think he runs off with Moriarty and leaves John behind? Or do you think John dies and it’s Sherlock’s fault!”

Thorin just stared at Bilbo. A Dwarf would’ve been more than pacified by Thorin’s explanation,
but here was Bilbo, too frazzled to listen to good Dwarven logic about the fussiness of Elves. If anything, Sherlock making the fool mistake of abandoning *his* Hobbit should teach Bilbo that his trust should be placed in Dwarves rather than in Elves. Obviously Bilbo didn’t understand the moral of the story.

Thorin thought that perhaps he could point out that Gandalf wouldn’t have started the story in the first place if it was going to upset Bilbo. Or that Arwen seemed like the kind of girl who’d warn the sweet little Hobbit if someone was going to die at the end of the story. Or that, in all honesty, Thorin didn’t think Sherlock ending up dead would be that great a blight on the tale. Instead, Thorin dropped his shoulder and buried it in Bilbo’s stomach to toss him over his shoulder.

Bilbo squeaked in surprise and just hung there for a moment, no idea what to do. Soon enough Bilbo started to flail, demanding to know what on Middle-earth Thorin thought he was doing. “You won’t listen to me, so maybe you’ll listen to everyone else.”

“Listen to them about what!”

“About how the story ends.”

Bilbo had been struggling, not so much to fling himself off of Thorin’s shoulder and tumble to the ground, but to make sure Thorin knew that he objected to this method of transportation. But at that, Bilbo went still. “You’re not… you’re not just going to tell me to read the end of the story?”

Thorin paused, “You said that would ruin the story.”

“Well, it would.”

“Then why would you want to be forced to read the end?”

“I wouldn’t.”

Thorin was so befuddled that he was quite grateful that Bilbo couldn’t see his expression. “Then why are we talking about it?”
“No reason.” Thorin didn’t need to look at Bilbo’s face to know he was smiling, he could hear it bright and light in his voice.

“Well… alright then.”
In my defense, it's still the 10th where I am, so I managed to get it out within the every other day that I'm trying to stick to. Progress!

Their ride over the Misty Mountains was uncomplicated. Sherlock, John, and Lestrade followed the Bruinen river east out of Rivendell and over the High Pass. It seemed to be the nature of things when you were with Sherlock that everything was going to go wrong, so when it didn’t, John decided that rather than be nervous about that would eventually happen, he was going to be grateful instead. Unlike their journey to Rivendell, Sherlock didn’t take the time to flit about. Before, he had tangented to and fro to show John everything that he’d never known was outside his door. Now, Sherlock followed a straight line from A to B, occasionally stopping to growl at Lestrade to be on with it before Sherlock abandoned him in the mountains.

John was not a Hobbit prone to mope and groan. It was easy to be that sort of fellow when you’d spent most of your life with a leftover wound that kept you from keeping up, but John had never succumb. Even though he was fairly certain that Sherlock would’ve preferred to be done with both he and Lestrade because their incessant need to sleep and eat kept him from the pace he would’ve preferred. The tension of Sherlock’s impatience was beginning to wear on them both, and John did what little he could to keep this from turning into another homicide.

After the stretched, tense days of riding, they came out high on the far side of the mountains. Sherlock pulled Faun to a sharp halt on the final flat stretch before the trail began to descend. Sherlock didn’t notice things like sore legs from endless riding, and quickly dismounted, leaving Lestrade to help John down from Faun and steady the Hobbit when he stumbled. Lestrade snapped, "Is there a reason we're not riding the extra few hours so we can sleep someplace that’s not in clear view of the whole plain?"

Sherlock, of course, didn’t bother to explain. He tossed out his bedroll and flopped down on top of the covers. Rather than attempt to sleep, Sherlock pulled out his pipe and took several long draws while he stared up at nothing in the steadily darkening sky. While Lestrade started in on a shout about the dangers of sleeping out in the open like this, Faun gave a shake that dropped John’s pack and bedroll. The horse gave him a gentle nudge, almost apologizing for his rider’s behavior. John patted him on the nose, after all it wasn’t Faun’s fault that Sherlock was the way he was.

Since he’d kept one ear on Lestrade’s shouting, John knew that he shouldn’t light them a fire and get started on supper. Instead, he pulled some Elvish bread out of his pack, broke off a square for Faun, and then took a bite himself. Though the bread was filling, it wasn’t quite the same as sitting around a fire and sharing stories while you devoured a mediocre dinner that tasted better than
anything you’d ever had because you were so hungry. Faun seemed to agree since he swallowed his bread whole then humphed that no more was coming.

John scratched the horse behind his ears. “Sorry lad, but we’ve got to stretch it out just in case.” Lestrade’s shouting had dissolved into his sputtering while Sherlock lashed out deductions. John thought about intervening, but he didn’t have the energy to try and make the two of them get along.

John left them both at the mountain’s mouth and meandered over to the edge of the plateau. They had come out of the mountain pass onto a stretch of flat land suspended in a gap between the rolling hills that the mountains faded into. Rather than roam through the hills for the next day, the pass slipped into a switchback trail that led travelers down to the far valley in no time at all. Looking out from the cliff’s edge John could see where the trail eventually stretched out into a wide, straight road broken once by a thick strip of blue river, and all too soon swallowed up in an unending ocean of trees.

The Shire was green hill after rolling green hill, and before today the highest John had ever been was Weathertop. He’d sat there beside Sherlock and looked out at the flat plains bellow him stunned that the world looked so different when you got up high. But the view from the watchtower was nothing compared to this. He felt both enormous, the whole world stretched out at his feet, and miniscule, how could his life have any meaning when compared to this?

“What’s that?” John interrupted the argument going on behind him.

Sherlock was up and on his feet a heartbeat later, scanning over the stretch of land with his superior sight to see what John was talking about. Sherlock was tense, anticipating something terrible waiting for them now that they were clear of the mountains. When he didn’t see anything out of the ordinary he whipped around to look at John, trying to deduce what he’d seen rather than simply asking. John rolled his eyes, “The forest, Sherlock, what’s that forest?”

Sherlock went ethereally still, staring at John with the same expression he got when people did something that his observations told him they shouldn’t do. Rather than collapse in the face of Sherlock’s stare, John quirked an eyebrow and waited him out. Confused by John or not, Sherlock didn’t like to leave a conversation un-won, so he snapped, “Mirkwood.” John nodded politely and turned back to the view stretched out below him. The sun had sunk below the mountains behind them, the pale glow of leftover light staining everything red and making the tress appear almost on fire.

Out of the corner of his eye John could see Sherlock standing there, almost humming with impatience to know why John had asked. John ignored him while Sherlock, of course, didn’t move. John didn’t have to turn to know that Lestrade was looking back and forth between them trying to
understand what was going on. Since John was the grownup in this relationship he reached out to Sherlock before the Elf had the chance to vibrate out of his skin. He grabbed the front of Sherlock’s tunic and dragged the Elf down beside him.

Sherlock came with a grumble, dropping down beside John with as much disgruntlement as he could to make sure John knew he was doing this under protest.

John patted him on the knee and watched the shadow of the mountain creep towards the tree line, swallowing the plants in its darkness. Beyond the trees there was a wide stretch of nothing interrupted by one mountain off in the far distance. Amidst the red glow of the setting sun John had barely been able to see the mountain in the first place, but now that the light was almost gone it almost seemed like the mountain was illuminated from the inside. Before John had the chance to ask about that, Sherlock deduced his interest. “Erebor, commonly known as The Lonely Mountain.”

“But why—”

“Dwarves,” Sherlock replied before John had the chance to ask.

John waited for a moment, expecting something more to explain that since the only Dwarves John had met were those making their way through Bree. “And at night Dwarves start to glow?”

Sherlock snorted. “The fire. The interior of the mountain is never dark because the forge fires are always burning. The incessant ring of hammer against stone, the burning scent of smelting. When the sun goes down the fires stay lit and you can see the mountain glowing like a fallen star.”

The words were beautiful, but Sherlock sounded bored. That was enough to distract John from the view. Sherlock looked as though he would’ve rather been sleeping than staring out into the distance, but he would endure the monotony if it meant that John wasn’t going to end up irritated. “Is it a kingdom?”

“If the Dwarves had any sense it would be, but for now it’s nothing more than a mine.”

“Why should they be there instead of wherever they are?”

Sherlock popped up out of his disgruntled slouch, instead perching on his toes, forearms braced
against his knees and fingers steepled before his lips. “They dwell to the south in these mountains, nearly the whole of the people of Durin hoarded deep in one kingdom.”

John shrugged, “All the Hobbits live in the Shire.”

“Your people live in some semblance of harmony with the world around them, the Dwarves do not.”

“Is that because it’s not your kind of harmony?”

To John’s surprise, Sherlock didn’t snap off a response listing half a dozen reasons why the Dwarves were wrong. Instead he stared into the middle distance, eyes on nothing while he murmured, “They delve into the deep. No thought for what might live there, what might be waiting for them that’s older than they are.”

John reached out and put his hand to Sherlock’s shoulder. He didn’t sound right, like they were details that he didn’t mean to include, wasn’t sharing for the thrill of the case or the rush that came from having someone else understand how clever he was. He was simply speaking, like the words were coming out independent of his intent. When Sherlock didn’t respond to the touch, John prodded, “Sherlock?”

Sherlock shuddered at the sound and turned to John, the sheer blue of his eyes gone, blackened out into darkness.

John gripped Sherlock by the cheeks, tilting his head back to catch what little light was left in the sky. “Sherlock! What’s wrong?”

Lestrade came running at John’s shout, and the moment he caught sight of Sherlock’s eyes he ripped John away. John fought Lestrade’s grip, ignoring the Man’s warnings that something was wrong. One swift kick to Lestrade’s knee forced him away and gave John the chance to go straight to Sherlock. However, whatever John might’ve done to help him meant nothing when he turned back around to see Sherlock, sword drawn and somehow pressed to Lestrade’s throat in the half a moment it had taken John to get loose.

Sherlock’s eyes were no longer black, but somehow with color they were even more unyielding. John reached up and wrapped his hand around Sherlock’s, taking ahold of the still swordhand extended over his head. “Sherlock,” John murmured, “he was trying to protect me.”
“You don’t need protection from me,” Sherlock spat.

“I know that, and he knows that, but your eyes changed colors. He was nervous.”

There was a moment there where John thought Sherlock was about to declare that no, Lestrade didn’t trust John in Sherlock’s presence as far as he could throw him. John squeezed Sherlock’s hand, a reminder that no matter what else, John was there. Sherlock and Lestrade stared at one another for a long moment, the Man half ready to twitch his hand to his sword and fight back against the blade at this throat. Then something in him unclenched, some new understanding passed across his face and he breathed out, hands dropping to his side. “Naenwauva,” Lestrade murmured. “The Far See-er. He who knows what others do not. It’s not just your deductions, is it?”

“My deductions stretch further than the people in front of me,” Sherlock replied, not wholly answering the question, but not denying it either. Lestrade’s nod was abrupt, but he backed away and Sherlock let him. Though perhaps, Sherlock’s acceptance had less to do with forgiving Lestrade and more to do with John’s hand still touching his.

Careful to keep any judgment and any fear out of his voice John asked, “Is that what it’s like for you all the time? Seeing these things?”

“Of course.”

“Isn’t it exhausting?”

“I’ve never seen the world any other way,” Sherlock replied dryly.

John supposed that this was the moment other people would grill Sherlock to understand what he saw, so instead John smiled. Leaving it at that, John strode over to Faun, deciding that he’d earned something a little extra for dinner tonight.

Elvish bread, some fruit, and a long drink of water later, John found himself staring up at the stars, wrapped in a thin Elvish blanket that felt like a downy quilt. The blanket was far too big for John’s slight stature, so Sherlock had wrapped it around him several times, effectively swaddling the Hobbit. Too tightly bound to move on his own, Sherlock settled John down in between himself and the mountain’s wall, with Faun as an extra defense between John and the rest of the world. (And yes, tonight that rest of the world included Lestrade.)
John looked up at Sherlock with a raised eyebrow. "You do know you're fussing, don't you?"

"I am doing no such thing. You dislike the dark, and Lestrade’s complaining has made you nervous, which means you're less than comfortable in this situation and would prefer an added measure of safety."

"And the being wrapped up in a blanket is an added measure of safety is it?"

"Obviously."

Lestrade snickered, but John just snuggled into the exceptionally comfortable blanket and accepted the gesture for the kindness it was, devoutly ignoring the inner warmth the fussing brought him. They all settled in for the night, sinking into stillness, lulled away by the sound of far off crickets and quiet brushes of the evening breeze.

However, stillness had never been Sherlock's forte and eventually he whispered, "John, are you asleep?"

John grunted, "How can I with you flopping about over there?"

Sherlock quieted and stared motionless up at the sky, trying to give John enough silence so he could sleep properly. After a few minutes of Sherlock's unnatural tranquility John flopped over on his side and said, "Well now I'm awake."

"I was being quiet!"

"Yeah, yeah. What are you looking at?"

"The stars, John. The stars."

John looked over at Sherlock, watching him watch the stars and quietly asked, "Which one's your favorite?"
Sherlock quirked an eyebrow and turned to John, realizing that in all his twisting and turning he'd brought himself terribly close to the Hobbit, bringing his face only inches from Sherlock’s own. “What do you mean?”

"You know, your favorite. Star, constellation, thing to look at up there."

Sherlock furrowed his brow, "I've never thought about it in those terms."

"Elves don't have favorite constellations?"

"Not usually, no. They're there for direction and light in the sky, not for favorites." John turned back to look at the stars, and Sherlock knew he'd done something wrong. He waited a moment, staring at John's profile, taking in the strong lines of the small face and the softness of his eyes as they caught the stars. "Do you have a favorite?" Sherlock asked.

John tried to shrug it off, but Sherlock whispered, "Please."

John shimmied to get his arm out from the blanket and traced out a pattern in the stars. "The shoulders there, the belt, and the legs. We call him The Hunter."

"An odd choice for a Hobbit."

"I could see him straight out my window the spring I was laid up when I hurt my leg. I hated him a little bit, free up there like he was, but then I started having dreams that he'd come and run off with me, someplace where I got to have adventures."

Sherlock reached out and ran a soothing hand through John's hair and replied, "I'm sorry you were damaged."

"It's alright. Made me the Hobbit I am and all. Never would've thought about being a healer if it hadn't happened."
Sherlock paused, too unsure of himself to respond how he wanted to and say that he couldn't bring himself to be displeased since all those actions had brought John to him. "We call him *Menelmacar*, The Swordsman of the Sky."

"*Menelmacar*. I quite like that. Tell me about him."

Something in Sherlock clenched at the sound of Elvish words spilling from John's lips and Sherlock had to draw a few deep breaths before he could speak again. Sherlock told John the story of the Swordsman, and that's how the little Hobbit fell asleep, just close enough to feel Sherlock's warmth, listening to the musical tenor of his Elven voice weave stories just for John through the night.
I know, I missed the posting date, I'll try to get back on track tomorrow! Thanks for your patience! Also, I know this chapter is short, I did my best to thicken it up but it was difficult to not cross the line into just adding words for words sake rather than for what they brought to the story. I was tempted to leave the whole chapter out because it was so short, but I feel like this is a monumental scene in the book because of what it does for Bilbo and I *had* to include it.

There was a spider bearing down him.

To eat him. Or to trap him. Bilbo wasn’t quite sure which.

There was nothing else in the cursed emptiness of this never-ending forest. Nothing but the eight glowing eyes of a massive spider clawing after him through the dark. He couldn't see the beast’s claw-like legs lunging for him, but he could feel the prickling hairs scratch past his skin while the thing fought to wind binding threat around Bilbo’s legs.

The creature’s eyes lurched forward and Bilbo twisted out of the way, dragging along his bound legs to get away from the motion. Another strange dip of the spider and Bilbo realized the creature was thrusting at him, lunging for him. Like a garden spider after a fly it was trying to sting him, to force him back to sleep so it could finish its foul task. Bilbo pulled himself out of the way, trying to do what, he wasn’t entirely sure. Another thrust and another wrenching twist to get himself out of the line of a stinger he couldn’t see. Bilbo crashed to his side, landing, not on dirt or tree or rock… but on his sword.

Bilbo rolled over to his back and forced himself away from the spider, scrambling for his sword hilt as he went. The ring of Bilbo’s sword darting from it’s sheath shot through the dark, sending the spider skittering back at the unexpected sound. Bilbo took the chance to turn his sword on the tacky filament wrapped around his lower body. He hacked at the wrap, only to have it melt away at the touch of the small sword.

Bilbo scrambled to his feet, and for a moment the world seemed to pause.

Common sense and every Baggins instinct in his blood told him to get away. To run as fast as his little legs would carry him towards the moment he could put on the ring and be done with this
whole wretched affair. The Elves had no qualms against him, and if Bilbo stumbled his way upon
one of those fires he was sure that they would take him in. Even the Took portion of his soul was
anxiously making its opinion known that this was a frankly terrible idea and there really had to be
something they could do that didn’t involve spiders.

However, while all the Hobbit parts of Bilbo were in complete agreement that this was not a place
to be in, there was something else, something that was stretching out this moment into however
long Bilbo needed to understand.

This strangeness had started when they entered Mirkwood. Because of that, the last few days had
been more than long, they’d been horrible. They whole of the Company was trying to struggle their
way through the endless dark of Mirkwood, forcing themselves to press on, dragging Bombur’s
bulk behind them. On occasion, Fili or Kili’s boundless good humor would shine through, a
moment of unfettered light breaking out of the clouds. But like a spark you weren’t expecting, it
burned out almost the moment it was born and it filled you with more nerves than it did joy.

On their first night in the forest the lads had tried to talk Bilbo into telling them about John and
Sherlock, hoping that the two would be someplace in the sun, far from Mirkwood. It turned out to
not to any good to think of them sitting up on that Pass that the Company hadn’t gotten to see
because of Goblins, Sherlock prophesying about the fall of Moria and the rise of Erebor. After that
entry no one had spoken for the rest of the night, and no one had asked to hear from the book
again.

The whole Company was exhausted to the point where they couldn’t even remember what it felt
like to be simply tired anymore. In a rage Thorin had sent Bilbo up the nearest tree, he and Dwalin
foisting the Hobbit up to the lowest branches and bidding him climb until he saw the sun. Bilbo
had grumbled to himself the whole way, almost certain that when he got there it would turn out to
be night since they couldn’t tell the difference underneath the trees.

But when he broke through, it was to the harsh light of midday. Bilbo had been in the dark so long
that he flinched back from the force of it, stuck spending several long minutes forcing himself to
blink his way through the burning. After what felt like an hour, and judging by the shouting from
the Dwarves down below was actually a considerable amount of time, he made himself look out.
He knew what was going to happen, he was going to look out and the edge of the trees was going to
be a mile away, maybe less. Probably just out of sight from within the thickness of the trees. He’d
slip down the mountain and the whole Company would finally have a laugh about how fussy
they’d all been.

He repeated to himself over and over that that was exactly how this was going to go until he
believed it. Of course, then he opened his eyes and saw trees as far as the eye could see, and that
was a bit more than Bilbo could stand. He sat there for longer than he would like to admit, feeling
the sun on his face, the breeze through his hair, and just starting at all the trees in the hope that
maybe if he looked long enough then something would appear.

Of course, the fear that they might spend the rest of their limited days wandering through this forest was nothing compared to Thorin Oakenshield in a strop. They were all scared and apparently Thorin dealt with his fear by shouting. He threatened to leave each and every one of them at least once, spitting vitriol to each in turn that they were useless, and if they’d only done such and such then the rest of the Company wouldn’t be in this mess.

If this were a story book this would’ve been the moment where Bilbo either shouted at Thorin until he listened to common sense, or he took the Dwarf aside to tell him a story that would put Thorin back on track so that he might save them all. Of course, life was not a story and so everyone in the Company went to bed furious, which meant they woke furious, which meant the day after Bilbo climbed that tree was even less pleasant than the first.

He liked to think that if they hadn’t been quite so forlorn one of them would’ve had the common sense to stop the others from running of into the darkness after that strange little nothing of a light. Like the forest ending in just a few trees, it was probably a foolish thought. They’d been swallowed up in the complete dark, no road to guide them, and as Hobbits were prone to do when things seemed too terrible to face just then, Bilbo laid down to sleep.

Which was how he found himself standing alone in this long moment, sword drawn on a mammoth spider.

The Took and Baggins portions of his blood had taken the opportunity to make their opinions known, but some new force was rearing its ugly, unexpected head.

This journey had given birth to some new corner of Bilbo, some part of him that was neither Baggins nor Took nor any Hobbit clan that Bilbo knew of. There was a piece of him that was wholly Dwarf, and that piece roared that such a creature as this spider had dared attack him. It was simply not to be borne.

The spider came for him again. But rather than diving out of the way, Bilbo surged forward. He struck out with his little sword, thrusting the blade into its eyes, the only bit of the spider he could properly see. Bilbo kept his hand on the sword’s hilt, holding tight while the spider skittered back and tugged the sword free with its own struggles. There was a squeal that Bilbo could only assume was the spider howling in pain, and the rush of air that came from the creature’s flailing limbs. Bilbo charged again, not giving the thing time to recuperate after the last blow. He struck and struck and struck again, hacking away at the creature with all the might he could summon and once again the blade slipped through the spider’s flesh like it was nothing more than hot butter.
The spider jerked under the blows, hissing and shrieking every time Bilbo landed a blow. Until one last time Bilbo plunged his sword in between the creature’s eyes and it finally dropped to the ground with a massive smash. Dead.

The Hobbit in Bilbo chose that moment to reassert itself, stripping the strength from his knees. He sunk to the ground just like he had at the first mention of incineration, putting all his weight on his sword to keep himself from dropping face first to the dirt and never getting back up.

And had it been an hour ago, he never would have.

But tonight, tonight he was something new. Bilbo Baggins of Bag End, Bagshot Row, Hobbiton, Westfarthing, The Shire, was not who he had been this morning. He was certainly still a Hobbit, but now he’d accepted something a little extra in his person. There was something wild in him now, something fierce from ancient Hobbit descendants that made him bold enough to pick up his sword and run a spider through. He’d stood on his own, no Wizard, no Dwarves, no conveniently appearing Elves, just Bilbo Baggins.

He was a warrior Hobbit, one their people could be proud of, whose story would be told. Today he was a Baggins and a Took, a Dwarf and a Watson.

Bilbo pushed back on the sword, using it to bring himself back to his feet. He twisted the blade up towards the absent sun, and his eyes traced the black spider blood slicking down the edge. Bilbo raised his chin and to the silent night declared, “I will give you a name, and I shall call you Sting.”
Sherlock pulled up hard on Faun’s reigns, slamming the horse to a stop. John had quite adjusted to Sherlock’s haphazard riding, so he braced himself against the pommel to keep from toppling Hobbit over horse to land on the ground. Lestrade paused in his methodical trotting behind them, glancing around with an air of unconcern while he tried to find what Sherlock saw. Sherlock waited until Lestrade came up beside them, standing together for a better defense against whatever he’d found. After a long minute of silent waiting Lestrade turned to Sherlock and asked, “Are we just here to enjoy the view? Because I have to tell you, it’s not that lovely.”

Sherlock puffed out a gust of a sigh. “Has living in a city dulled what little sense your people possess?” Sherlock paused just long enough that Lestrade opened his mouth to respond, then Sherlock barreled on. “Look at ground.”

Lestrade instead, looked to the sky, counted to three and then looked down to the dirt. His eyes flicked over the short grass and the occasional bundle of rocks, at least putting forth an effort to see if he could figure it out. Whatever mulling he was doing about the dirt wasn’t fast enough to satisfy Sherlock, who snapped, “Tracks, Lestrade. Tracks!”

The grass wasn’t smooth, with some overturned clumps of foliage, but not enough that Lestrade would’ve realized there was anything amiss. He looked to John for confirmation, but the Hobbit just shrugged, tracking things wasn’t high on the list of Shire-approved activities. “Alright, and what are these tracks telling us?”

“They’re telling me that there are Éothéod watchers from those rocks.” Sherlock tilted his head towards the tallest of the nearby outcroppings, not bothering to lower his voice. “They’re encamped nearer to the mountains and these watchmen are waiting for us to move out of range.”

Lestrade seemed to know something John didn’t, because he leaned forward in his saddle, just casual enough to make John suspicious. “Well isn’t that strange. I’ve met with the Éothéod before, good lads down to a man. Usually if they like you they’re quite free with the drink and the tales. I can’t think why they’d be watching their borders.”

Sherlock hmmmed, the both of them staring at the rocks for any sign that the Men were going to admit they were hiding. “In my experience, it means something has gone wrong. Of course, the question becomes why they think they should be hiding from an Elf, a Hobbit, and a Captain of Gondor.”
Whatever result Sherlock had been hoping to inspire, a Man popped out from behind the rocks and shouted, “It was an Elf who did this to him!”

“Ah,” Sherlock murmured, “Moriarty has been here before us.”

Now that one of their companions had broken out of hiding, the rest of the group seemed to take that as a sign to join him, though the other two companions came out with their bows drawn. “Why are you here Elf?” the first Man spat.

“Because we are hunting the one who caused you this trouble.”

“And why would you do that?”

Sherlock raised one particularly demeaning eyebrow. “You can’t imagine that you are the first people he has wronged.”

The Man stopped at that, like it had honestly never before crossed his mind. “How do we know you’re not his affiliates?”

“Did he come travelling with a Man and a Hobbit when he came before?” Lestrade asked, stopping Sherlock from declaring that a ridiculous question.

The Man didn’t seem to realize that Lestrade was trying to save him and sneered, “People like him wouldn’t come the same way twice, would they?”

Sherlock was done with trying to handle this politely. “He wouldn’t come back a second time because he’s got what he wanted from the murder. Your people have no further use to him.”

“What makes you so sure of that?”

“If you were useful you’d be dead. Every last one of you drained of your pathetic, uninspired blood to fulfill his purposes.”
One of the Men dipped his bow, taken aback by Sherlock’s announcement. “How did you know he killed someone?”

“How do you know how to bridle a horse?” John asked. This bundle of Men seemed suspicious, making him think that, like the Shire, these weren’t a people accustomed to murder. Death maybe, but not murder. The Men of Gondor took it a little better because they had violence among their own nation, and probably couldn’t be that suspicious in the first place because they had so many people coming and going through their borders. If Sherlock wanted to have a chance to see the body, he needed to have a little tact before the Men started shooting arrows and Sherlock was left sneaking into their camp in the dead of night.

The Man glowered at John, then stared at him a little harder and furrowed his brow. “What do horses have to do with anything, strange little Dwarf?”

“First off, Hobbit, not Dwarf. Second, you know your horses because you’ve spent a lifetime studying them, this is the same.”

“Tell me this, Hobbit. If your Elf has been studying the creature, why is it still alive?”

“Because to kill something you have to catch it first.”

“And the little Elf is so terrible at hunting things? The killer was in our village and I ran him through with my sword. We have people out looking for the body right now.”

Sherlock snorted, “You damaged a puppet, not Moriarty.”

The Man puffed out his chest, “And now you’re certain of that too?”

“If you’d seen him,” Sherlock snapped, “I would know.”

“And how would you—”

“Did he look like an Elf?”
The Human hesitated for a moment, then with as much certainty as he could muster “Of course he —”

“Wrong! He’s Elfinoid\(^2\) but no one in their right mind would ever mistake him for an actual Elf!” The Man opened his mouth to snap back something else useless that would put him one step closer to meeting the sharp end of Sherlock’s sword, but one of the Man’s companions reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder.

It was enough to force him into quiet and the fellow Human asked, “How can we help you stop him?” The first Human looked like he desperately wanted to object, but the other Man clenched a little tighter around his neck.

“I’ll need to see the body.”

The other Man gave a sharp nod to their third companion, “He’ll take you back to the camp.” Implicit in the statement was that the second Man would stay there with the first, out of the way of Sherlock. The Elf didn’t bother to thank the Man for his cooperation, but John at least gave him a nod in gratitude.

Lestrade kept up polite conversation with the third Man throughout their ride, genial questions somehow managing to fish out basic information that Sherlock could probably deduce for himself but Lestrade liked to seek out the old fashioned way. According to the Man, the deceased had been one of their best riders. Moriarty’s Elf had claimed to be on his way over the Mountains and had stopped with their people for the night before pressing on. The Elf had been amiable, no one had any objections to his presence or concerns that he might have been less than genuine. So when the Elf wandered off with Henred, the murdered rider, no one was concerned.

At least, not concerned until Henred’s horse started to whinny and stamp, and the other Éothéod stormed over to find the Man’s throat slit. The other Humans gave chase and inflicted more than a few wounds of their own, but even injured, the Elf was too light on his feet for them to catch. Henred had been dead within minutes, orphaning his son, Henre. Sherlock seemed uninterested in the Man’s story, paying more attention to the landscape they were passing than the words, but John knew from the tilt to his head that Sherlock was taking in everything and slotting it into place in his theory of the murder.

Soon enough they reached the Éothéod encampment. There were tents arranged in loose repeating circles all situated around a stretch of land that had been scratched clear of all grass, leaving behind the bare dirt. Rather than the fire John expected, there was a structured pile of branches laid out almost like a table. Sherlock stiffened behind John, which told him enough about the nature of the
arrangement that John was able to puzzle it out on his own. Sherlock didn’t stiffen unless he anticipated a poor reaction on John’s part, which meant that whatever the wood was for, it wasn’t a particularly Hobbit-like purpose.

The meaning slammed into John: a pyre. The man who Moriarty had killed, his people were going to lay down his corpse and burn it to the night sky.

Sherlock hunched forward and whispered in John’s ear, “They’re nomads, John. They cannot stay in one place, so they have no reason to bury their dead. They burn them, believing that then they follow the wind, always staying with their people.” It struck John as a sensible choice for dealing with the dead. In fact, the more he saw of the world the more he believed that he would rather not spend the rest of time waiting about in the Shire.

There was a tent just off center of the pyre, where a man and a young boy were waiting for them, word having reached them about strangers on the way into camp. Their Human escort bowed low in his saddle, murmuring, “Horse Master” in greeting.

But before he could explain, Sherlock interrupted, “I need to see the body.”

The boy paled and stumbled out, “W-what?” Every man in hearing range reached for their weapons at the question. The Horse Master reached out and put his hand to the back of the orphaned boy’s neck, stilling whatever else he’d been about to say.

Their Human guide quickly rattled off, “The killer is in service to some darker power that these three are hunting.”

Before the conversation could devolve into the same sort of shouting match that had held them up with the guards, John interjected. “The creature’s master killed one of his men,” John tilted his head towards Lestrade, “and tried and failed to kill this one in the process,” he nodded to Sherlock behind him.

The Horse Master didn’t look convinced by John’s statement, but the boy did. “Can you catch him?”

“If anyone can, lad,” Lestrade replied, “it would be him.” He tilted his head towards Sherlock. “I’m trusting him to avenge my dead.”
The boy turned to his Horse Master, wide, guileless eyes pleading with him to let Sherlock and the others in to see his father’s body. With all attention on the boy, no one noticed the look of confusion that spread across Sherlock’s face when Lestrade declared him worthy of trust. John imagined that it had been years, if ever, since someone had said that Sherlock himself, not just his deductions, were something that deserved faith.

Soon enough the Horse Master granted his permission, hesitant and snide though it may have been. Sherlock left Faun outside with a fierce look to Lestrade that said he wanted the Man to stay out here and secure their exit rather than follow him into the tent.

The inside of the tent was cool, all the blankets and personal effect pushed out of the way to make room for a thick mat spread out in the center of the space. The body had been scrubbed, to remove the dirt and blood left behind from his death. Henred’s clothing was laid off to the side in ordered piles and John suspected that they’d interrupted the man and boy preparing the body to be burned.

Sherlock swept through the door and went straight for the victim, though along the way he looked to John then flicked his eyes over to the boy. John assumed that the body would show the same signs of being drained as Dimmock, so the death of this Man probably wouldn’t tell them more than they already knew. But the man’s son, he might know his heritage, which would be enough to tell Sherlock if they were on the right track.

However, the Horse Master had followed them into the tent and before John had the chance to ask anything the Man demanded to know what Sherlock was looking for. “He’s looking for the manner of death,” John interrupted.

The Human turned his fierce eyes on John, not at all taken aback by the sight of this new species. Through clenched teeth his hissed, “His throat was slit.”

“So was the other victim’s, but it was a rouse. The throat was cut after the man had already been drained of his blood.”

Henre squeaked at the graphic thought, but the Horse Master pressed on. “Why would this evil want Human blood?”

“He’s conducting experiments with it, looking for something that he can only find in the blood of Men. For some reason his servant thought that your Henred might have what he was looking for.”
“He- he was my father,” the Henre stumbled out. “Wouldn’t whatever he was looking for be in my blood as well?” The Horse Master put a stabilizing hand on the boy’s shoulder and gave him a proud look, like the boy had found some debilitating flaw in their reasoning.

John paused, trying to find a diplomatic way to explain things to the murdered man’s son, but Sherlock had no such compunction. “Not enough blood volume.”

“What?”

“The child is small, he doesn’t have as much blood as an adult for the purposes of experimenting.” Sherlock was crouched beside Henred’s head, the Elf’s nose pressed close to the gaping wound that had shredded the Man’s throat. His position and the statement made for a disturbing picture. As was becoming the norm for people who didn’t know how to deal with Sherlock, the Horse Master turned to John.

“We assume that whatever he’s using the blood for, Henre doesn’t have enough. Otherwise the killer wouldn’t have run the risk of attacking a warrior when they could attack a child instead.”

“Especially considering that the killer failed in his task,” Sherlock interrupted.

“What?” John left the two Humans in the entrance to examine the injury beside Sherlock.

“There are no puncture wounds indicating that any blood was drained.”

John peered over Sherlock’s shoulder. “You think he put up too much of a fight?”

“Or the horse drew too much attention and the victim had to be killed before the others arrived.”

“What are you saying!” the Horse Master interrupted. He didn’t seem to appreciate the way Sherlock and John having a conversation he wasn’t a part of.

Sherlock looked up from the body, and for the briefest of moments his eyes slipped from their nearly glowing blue to the harsh black of his sight. “I am saying that he failed in his first attempt to get the blood that his master demanded. If he went to the effort to acquire it in the first place then
it’s something that Moriarty wants, and if I were you I would recall the men you have lurking out on your borders and shore up your defenses against what he will send to get that blood.”

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: The Éothéod are the nomadic ancestors to the kingdom of Rohan. Because I know I’m going to get called on this I shall point out that eventually the Éothéod settled in the north before they moved down to what eventually became Rohan, but this story takes place before they settle. The farthest back we know is that they migrated to the north after the fall of Angmar, but since we’re before that as well, I’m making the assumption that a people known as the “Horse-people” would at some point in their history have been nomadic.

FN 2: We refer to things with a mostly human shape as Humanoid because we consider ourselves as the top of evolutionary chain. I would assume that since the Elves are the first children they would consider themselves the top and it would be Elfinoid instead
The Horse Master stared at Sherlock as though he was trying so suss out the Elf’s trustworthiness. Between Lestrade’s testimony and John’s honest face there seemed to be enough to make the Man listen. He gave Henre a whispered word of encouragement then stepped outside the tent to make sure his people were well protected from another murder.

Sherlock turned to the boy with the obvious intent of asking him a spree of questions about his genealogy, but John elbowed him (thankfully in the shoulder because Sherlock was crouched over the body while John was standing). Sherlock rolled his eyes, but with broad, unmistakable motions turned his attention back to the corpse. Henre didn’t seem to have noticed that he’d been at the center of Sherlock’s attention. John slipped into the boy’s sightline, jolting him out of staring at his dead father’s body. John took the boy gently by the shoulder and turned him to the side, the body still safely in his peripheral vision but no longer something to drown in. “I’m sorry about your father.”

The boy shuddered then shrugged. “He, he would’ve liked ruining his enemy’s plans with his death.”

John gave him a slight smile. “Then he would’ve been proud.” John paused, trying to think of a subtle way to transition into a question about whether or not the boy had someone to look after him now, and if that someone happened to have any Númenorean in their blood.

The boy took that pause as the opportunity to ask, “What are you?” The moment after the words spilled out the boy blushed and tried to make it sound less impolite.

John waived him off with a grin and replied, “I’m a Hobbit. My people live on the far side of the Misty Mountains in a place called The Shire.”

“I- I’ve never heard of a Hobbit before.”

John gave a smile, ready to list off the various names he’d heard the Elves of Rivendell use for his people, but Sherlock interrupted, “You should know them, they’re your kinsmen.”

John and Henre shared a startled look before John raised his eyebrows, “Sorry, what?”
Sherlock didn’t even bother looking up from the spyglass he had trained on the dead Man’s fingernails. “Hobbits and Éothéod share the same ancestors.” When neither male replied, Sherlock kept his position but tilted up his eyes. He hesitated for a moment, “Not good?”

“No, it’s fine. Just… new information.”

Sherlock looked down at the body, then up at John, torn between shrugging off his confusion or stopping his analysis. The reality that there was probably little useful they could learn from the body shifted the balance for him. He snapped up, flicking the spyglass closed and tucking it away in his pocket while he explained. “Mirkwood was once the Greenwood, with the Elves living inside and a clan of men living along the border. When the woods began to grow dark the men divided, some mounting their horses to stay one step ahead of the wood, and others instead going over the mountains.”

Sherlock watched them both for a moment, then when it seemed no questions would be following he leaned back over the body, only to be pulled back up by John demanding, “Wait, that doesn’t make any sense.”

Sherlock puffed out a short sigh through his nose. “Yes it does. Some of you went over the mountain and pressed on to the Shire and the rest of you stayed here and became the Éothéod.”

John put his hands in his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels, waiting for Sherlock to catch up to the practical flaw in his explanation. When Sherlock rolled his eyes and went back to examining the body, John started to giggle. “You don’t know, do you?”

“I have no idea what you’re referring to,” Sherlock snapped.

“Why the Éothéod are the size of men and why Hobbits are the size of Hobbits. You have no idea.”

Sherlock snapped back up, spine straight and affronted. “I have theories regarding the size of the people who crossed the mountains in the first place, and the harshness of the mountain crossing, and some element in the Shire’s soil, and—”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice how all of those were guesses and not one of them something certain.”
Sherlock snorted. He was unable to deny that John was right, so he retorted, “They’re your people, don’t you know where they came from?”

John laughed at Sherlock for trying to foist the responsibility for knowing off on him. “Hobbits just are, Sherlock. We don’t care much about the long history of Middle-earth, and we assume that if we don’t know a story, it’s not a story worth knowing.” Sherlock grumbled something foul, and John teased, “That doesn’t explain how you don’t know where Hobbits came from.”

“There are… stories.”

“Stories? What do they say?”

“Nothing worth mentioning.”

“I think I’ll be the judge of that.”

Sherlock snorted. “They’re ridiculous, impossible, stories.”

“What makes them ridiculous?”

“They’re from Dwarves.”

“Oh yes, of course.” John rolled his eyes. “The Dwarves are the flaw in the story.”

“Their story is ridiculous to begin with, and there’s no evidence to support their claims, making it unworthy of speculation.”

John crossed his arms and tapped his foot, a position he’d grown far too accustomed to assuming when dealing with Sherlock. The Elf rolled his eyes but explained, “According to the Dwarves you began as Men, which makes some amount of sense despite the ridiculous rest of their story.”
“Sherlock,” John threatened, and the Elf pressed on.

“You were Men, living here in the space between the Misty Mountains and what was once the Greenwood. When the forest turned dark, your people divided.”

“Yes, you explained this part already.”

“Because it’s the only part we actually know!”

“Alright, alright, explain away.”

“Part of your people went to the horse, thinking that if they stayed on the move they could outmaneuver the darkness of Mirkwood, while the rest went over the Mountains. It would seem that in that time you travelled you came across no other intelligent species that can speak as to your transformation from Human into Hobbit, but several years after your people left, the Elves and Men in that part of the world realized that a new species had peaceably established itself in The Shire. Somewhere in those few years, you became Hobbits. Presumably you encountered something in the mountains that caused this change.”

“Thank you for that information Sherlock, now how exactly do the Dwarves describe this change?”

Sherlock mumbled something under his breath, making John ask him to repeat it, and Sherlock to snap, “Aulë! The Dwarves think that their patron Valar interfered and saved you all!” John kept his expression even. If John pressed, Sherlock would shout some more derogatory things about Dwarves and storm out of the tent. But if John stayed still and quiet, then Sherlock would almost forget he was being watched and explain more to himself than to John. “The Dwarves think that your people ran into more trouble in the mountains than they were anticipating, and Aulë took pity upon them. Aulë would never presume to undo the creations of Ilúvatar, to turn the Father’s second born children, his Men, into creations of Aulë’s own. Rather than turn the Hobbits into Dwarves, he changed the Men ever so slightly, giving them the hardiness of Dwarves, instilling the strength that they might need to survive the mountain crossing.”

“So you’re telling me that as far as the Elves or anybody knows, we Hobbits are some kind of Dwarf?”

“If one takes as fact the Dwarves’s ridiculous penchant for making themselves the hero of any story, yes.”
“But, we don’t like mountains! We like the sun! And plants! And, and, alright I admit we drink a bit like Dwarves, but we’re Hobbits!”

Sherlock stared at John, with the rare look of wide-eyed confusion that John could imagine had bloomed across small Sherlock’s face when he was furious with how things didn’t make the sense that he thought they were supposed to. John reacting quite so strongly to Hobbits being something a little different than Hobbits was not something he had anticipated.

Henre looked back and forth between the two males, young though he was he knew enough to know that this was a grownup’s conversation. “I’ll just, um… wait outside, shall I?”

“You are angry?”

John humphed, “No, no, I’m not angry. I’m irritated. We’re Hobbits. We believe in the little things, in the little people. You Elves and Dwarves, you all seem to think that things don’t matter unless they’re one of you. We’re more than that, all of us are more that the little creatures you people seem to think we are.”

John could see Sherlock’s wheels turning while he maneuvered through his observations to find the response that John was looking for. Sherlock had spent his time surrounded by people who thought the same way about the insignificant creatures of Middle-earth, and while John liked to think that someday he’d understand, today was not that day. It wasn’t something to be pieced together from things that Sherlock had seen other people do, it was something that he needed to experience for himself. John waived off Sherlock’s mulling. “What did you learn about the victim?”

Sherlock started at John’s sudden change of subject, but he went with it rather than complain. “He’s not Númenorean.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Númenoreans are blessed with long life, more than double that of an ordinary Man. Even when their bloodline is diluted through marriage they still posses something of this gift.”

“And this chap doesn’t?”
“The guide who brought us in stated that the man had just recently turned forty, putting him about midlife for most of the species and just entering adulthood for a Númenorean. Based upon what you know of Men, does he appear to be just entering the prime of life?”

Henred’s brown hair was streaked with grey, and creases in the weathered skin around his eyes suggested he’d had laugh lines before his face had gone permanently still. “No, he looks like a Man in his forties. Which means he’s not Númenorean. Which means our pattern was wrong?”

“Unlikely.”

“So, Moriarty figured that we were on to him and tried to throw us off the trail?”

“No.”

John didn’t bother counting to ten. “Then what does it mean?”

Sherlock, however, paused. Then in the most deadened voice John had ever heard him use he replied, “It means that Moriarty killed him because he could.”

John looked down at the dead Man before them, heart stuck in his throat. “Why would he do that?”

“Perhaps to deceive the Men into believing that our little band posed a threat, perhaps to distract me with figuring out why, perhaps because once upon a time the Man offended him in some way. We will likely never know.”

Sherlock was up and halfway out of the tent before John had the chance to process any of those possibilities. A Man was dead, lying here in front of him with an orphaned son outside and it was for no reason at all. John stumbled after Sherlock, horrified by the violence that these people could mete out on one another. Even the death of Lestrade’s man didn’t seem quite so terrible as this. That man had died for a reason, as horrible as that reason probably was. This man had been butchered for no purpose.

Outside of the tent Sherlock shrugged off Lestrade’s questions and scarcely gave John enough time to tell Henre, “Thank you for allowing us a few moments, and we’re sorry for your loss,” before he hefted the Hobbit up to Faun’s back and mounted for himself.
The Horse Master demanded to know what Sherlock had learned, and cold as you please Sherlock snapped back, “You would rather not know.” Lestrade gave John the look that meant he wanted to know what had Sherlock so irritated, but he wasn’t going to ask with the Éothéod there to listen. Not that John would’ve been able to tell him anything anyway. Sherlock’s temper had turned after John scolded him, but not because of it. Or at least, John doubted it was because of it. Sherlock had grown testy when he realized that the Man was dead because Moriarty was capricious, but that didn’t seem like the sort of thing that would bother Sherlock. Maybe it was nothing more than he didn’t like going out of his way to examine a body that had nothing to do with the case at hand, but that didn’t sound right either.

If John didn’t know better he’d say that Sherlock wasn’t upset because Moriarty had killed a Man for the fun of it, but because he’d had to tell John about it. Like he didn’t want to know how John would react to that piece of information. But that didn’t make any sense. John knew Moriarty was a madman, there was no point in being skittish about pointing that out to John all over again.

John could feel his brow furrow while he tried to puzzle out something that he knew full well was never going to make sense, but he tried anyway. Lestrade didn’t ask any questions while they rode out of the Éothéod encampment, including why they were leaving the safety of other people when it was already so close to nightfall. He could see John’s furrow and knew better than to prod either of them when John wasn’t content. Sherlock got extra testy when he felt like John wasn’t on the same page, and while John was puzzling things out Sherlock was left uninhibited.

Soon enough the sun was setting, just dipped below the mountains crouched so closely to the west. John didn’t know what compelled him to look back, but he twisted around in his seat, trying to catch some sight of where the camp should’ve been behind them. He didn’t have to struggle to seek them out. Lit red by the light of the dying sun was a column of smoke steadily rising towards the sky.

Sherlock hadn’t unclenched since they left the tent, so John wasn’t entirely sure how he got even more tense at John looking back at the traces of the pyre. John looked to Sherlock, who was devoutly not looking back at him. “We’ve got to get him.”

Sherlock started at the statement, the shift enough to startle Faun into stumbling for a moment before he carried on. Sherlock just stared at John with no answer, straight back to that confused quirk of his eyebrows that meant John was not abiding by established norms. “Moriarty, we have to get him. To stop him from doing things like this ever again.” Something in Sherlock loosened at the declaration, and John didn’t know why. It was honestly like he’d thought that John was about to panic, to finally understand what was going on and somehow pin it all on Sherlock.

Rather than acknowledge the way the tension suddenly dropped from his shoulders, or answer the
eyebrow John had raised at his reaction, Sherlock replied, “My word, we’ll do what we have to, to see him stopped.”

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Ilúvatar is the Father of All, the supreme deity of Middle-earth. Ilúvatar promised that he would create children to populate Middle-earth, the Elves (the First Born), and the Dwarves (the Second Born). Aulë got tired of waiting for these children and created the Dwarves. Ilúvatar was displeased with him, because the Elves were meant to come first, so Aulë offered to destroy his children so that Ilúvatar’s plan wouldn’t be subverted. Instead, Ilúvatar took mercy on them and put the Dwarves to sleep, to come out of the mountains and into creation after the Elves and Men were created, making the Dwarves created by Aulë, but adopted by Ilúvatar.
Bilbo was beginning to notice a pattern.

Bilbo would do/say something that made Thorin furious for reasons that Bilbo couldn’t never quite understand. Then something unexpected and violent would befall the Company, and Thorin wouldn’t be in a state of mind to handle the problem with anything resembling common sense. (Yes, Bilbo liked to think that when Thorin wasn’t subjected to crippling frustration via Hobbit, he would actually be quite a good leader. He couldn’t not be with Dwarves like Balin and Glóin following him.)

All these steps would eventually lead to a miraculous save by Gandalf, and when the wizard was out of touch, by Bilbo.

However, this last minute saving grace grew closer and closer to complete catastrophe every time it was called upon, and Bilbo was nervous that by the time they actually made it to Smaug he would be unable to actually get the Dwarves out of their predicament.

Of course that assumed that he would first be able to get the Dwarves out of their current pickle.

Their Company had survived massive spiders only to be picked up by Elves. Bilbo had done his happy dance safely concealed by the magic of his ring, and eased by the thought that the Elves were going to be like Elrond. There would be snide remarks on both sides, enough vegetables that the Dwarves would pout, and then they’d press on, fed and rejuvenated after that whole nasty business with the spiders. Of course, because there was a pattern to uphold, this was not how things worked out.

The Dwarves entered the Elven hall already furious because Thorin had been taken from them, slipped away from their party while they fled the spiders in the dark. Bilbo crouched in a corner of Thranduil’s hall, watching as one by one the members of the Company were pulled before the Elven king and asked for their purpose in Mirkwood. Then one by one they all refused to speak. Furious didn’t begin to describe Bilbo’s response. From his spot tucked behind one of the massive wooden pillars ringing the hall he could see each Dwarf’s face and all of them, from stubborn Dwalin down to gentle Ori faced down the Elf king with no fear in their eyes and no compromise in their faces.

Bilbo bit his lip until it bled, keeping himself from popping to his feet and shouting at them all that this was not the time to be stoic. Were they under threat of death if they shared their secrets then Bilbo would’ve understood their silence, but that wasn’t it. They were refusing to speak because
they didn’t want to share the spoils of the mountain with Thranduil. They would rather be trapped in his dungeons than risk the Elves having any claim on their treasure.

Bilbo was tempted to storm out of the forest and leave every last one of them trapped until after their cursed Durin’s Day. And he stomped straight down to the holding cells to tell them so.

Bilbo was too irritated to pay as much attention to the shadows as he should have, instead stomping past Elves who had never entertained the notion of their woodland realm being invaded by anything, least of all an invisible Hobbit. That certainty in their own invulnerability meant that when they heard a quiet voice muttering polite obscenities and a saw a short shadow stomping by, they took it as nothing more than a figment derived from the distasteful stress of being forced to deal with Dwarves.

Judging by the muffled shouting that Bilbo could hear echoing down the dungeon halls, the Dwarves had the same poor opinion of their captors that the Elves had of them.

Although, as Bilbo drew closer and the echoes began to take shape, he accepted that things might be slightly more complicated than that.

Bilbo stomped his way past the thick wooden door closing off a long hallway of cells and heard Dwalin shouting, “Who had him last?”

“No brother,” Balin interrupted, still the calm voice of common sense despite being locked in a dungeon. “It was too dark in the forest for anyone to know who lost Mister Baggins, so there’s no point in looking for someone to blame.”

Dwalin grumbled something coarse about how he wasn’t looking to blame, he was looking to figure out which one of them Thorin was going to skewer when they broke out of here. But Bilbo was stuck on the thought that they were looking for him.

In their mad dash away from spiders Bilbo had lost his grip on a Dwarf he’d believed was Bofur. (There had been too much yelling to be sure, but the callouses on the Dwarf’s hands and that he’d reached for Bilbo at all, suggested Bofur.) Bilbo had been lost early in their escape, though eventually every last Dwarf suffered from the same problem. The rest of the Company had forcibly found their way back to one another when the Elves picked them up and carried them there. Which meant that, once again, Bilbo had been left behind. To be honest, he’d expected to hear the Dwarves furious over the presumption of the Elves, or the lack of Thorin, but it never crossed his mind that they might be wondering about him. The boys would miss him when he was gone, and probably Balin, Bofur and Bombur, and judging off some very gruff conversations that he didn’t
quite understand perhaps Bifur and Óin as well, while Dori, Nori, Dwalin and Glóin wouldn’t miss Bilbo per se, but they would miss having someone to teach their various skills.

And well… that was the whole company, wasn’t it?

He probably ought not have been as surprised by the Company’s concern as he was.

“Perhaps,” Nori said, interrupting both Dwalin’s grumblings and Bilbo’s musings, “we should be concerning ourselves with how to get out of this dungeon, and worry about the Hobbit when there’s actually something we can do to find him?”

There was enough sneer in Nori’s tone that Bilbo didn’t need to see him to know it was there. Nor did he need to move to know that the rumbling was Dwalin moving to bash the trickster Dwarf’s head against the wall. Since they’d done him the service of fretting about him, Bilbo thought he could spare the Dwarves the melee that would certainly commence when Dwalin struck the first blow. Bilbo slipped off the ring and leaned against the cell’s frame, watching the tableau. Dori stood between his brother and Dwalin, simultaneously scolding the former and placating the latter. The rest of the Company was either halfway to their feet so they wouldn’t be left out of the resultant scrum, of slouched back against the walls, tired of the infighting.

Bilbo went unnoticed until Ori started to giggle. The sound was so unexpected in the midst of the argument that each of them stilled, looking to Ori, then following his sightline to Bilbo. Something fierce unclenched in the Company, a relaxing of some ancient Dwarven impulse to protect what was theirs. Bofur laughed and clapped Ori on the back for noticing. “How do you keep doing that, lad?”

Bilbo thought that small amount of smugness was justified in this instance. He stuck his hands in his pockets and smirked back, “I’m a Hobbit.”

Though most of the group laughed at Bilbo’s teasing, Dwalin looked ready to tie up Bilbo and Nori and leave them both to the mercy of the Elves. Considering that Bilbo was not the one in a cage at this moment, he just grinned at the massive Dwarf and enjoyed himself while he could. Dwalin took that as justification to stride up to the bars and hiss in a voice that Bilbo wasn’t sure was fury or relief, “Someday Mister Baggins, you’re going to tell me how you do that.”

Bilbo shrugged, “I find that highly unlikely Mister Dwalin, but you’re welcome to try.”
“Yes, yes,” Balin interrupted before Dwalin could shoot his hand through the bars and snag Bilbo by the throat to shake him until the truth spilled out of his pockets. “Now that Master Baggins has been found he will be able to locate Thorin, and facilitate our escape.”

“Facilitate our escape?” Dwalin grumbled. “The lad should go find me my hammer and I’ll have us out of here.”

“Really?” Balin replied pleasantly, an expression on his face that Bilbo imagined he’d always used on his little brother when he was tempted to beat him upside the head. “And what direction is the exit? And if we should happen to find the exit, what weapons would we use when we got there? And where in this fabulous escape would we be coming across Thorin?” Dwalin tried to retort, but Balin spoke straight over the top of him. “Since you lack all those particular details, I think that perhaps we should let Master Baggins do some scouting? At the very least to tell us where our weapons and our King are being held?”

Rather than stay and listen to an argument that would end with Balin glowering his younger brother into submission, Bilbo gave Balin a sharp nod and stepped past the cage. He slipped on the ring when he hit the shadows, his presence dissolving into nothing. Kíli had followed him to the cage’s perimeter, and all but squeaked when Bilbo vanished. Bilbo didn’t pay any attention to the boy’s panicked declarations, just strode down the hall with the intent to first find Thorin.

Bilbo stepped back into the main space outside the cellblock and twisted in a circle, looking at all the various pathways he could take. He murmured, “Now, if I was hiding a Dwarven prisoner, where would I put him?” Off to the side Bilbo caught sight of a small fragment of a hall stretching down at a sharp angle and he hmmed, “Yes, I would put him there to.”

Bilbo tip-toed down the windowless hallway. There were no other halls branching off this one, and a sequence of three doors with intricate locks that Bilbo was relieved to find weren’t sealed. Between the thick doors and lack of alternate exits, Bilbo could tell that this place was designed to keep people from getting out. If they managed to escape their cell, they’d still have to fight their way through three locked doors and the guards that would be waiting between each layer. In The Shire, troublemakers were put in the spare room until they sobered enough to properly remember the scolding they were to receive from the matriarch of their family. Typically that was enough to keep any Hobbitlings from engaging in such scandalous behavior again. (Yes, Bilbo was intimately aware of this method of discipline, and no, he wasn’t going to talk about the numerous times in his youth that he’d been confined to Grandmother Baggins’ spare room to think about what he’d done.)

Bilbo froze outside the last door, a low sound from within stopping him cold. It wasn’t quite speaking, but it was enough to make Bilbo cautious while he slipped past the last blockade before entering the open space surrounding the singular cell trapped here in the depths of Mirkwood. The door was silent on its hinges, but Thorin had spent most of his life under threats of death. He was on his feet before Bilbo even managed to peek into the room. Bilbo swiftly shut the door behind
him before Thorin started to shout things about Elves sneaking around and inadvertently summoned the guard. There were torch stands ringing the cell, hulking wood structures just out of Thorin’s reach and keeping his cage in constant light while leaving the rim of the room in darkness.

Thorin crossed his arms over his broad chest, royal in his silent demand that whoever had snuck up on him properly announce their presence. Bilbo supposed that this was probably a moment where he should slip off the ring and approach Thorin from the front to avoid further yelling, but it seemed this was not a time when Bilbo was particularly gifted at doing what he was supposed to.

Bilbo stepped through the shadows to the back of the cage and slipped off his ring, silently waiting for Thorin to put his hands on his hips and start shouting Khuzdul obscenities. For several long minutes Thorin didn’t break eye contact with the door. Eventually he twisted around in a fury, too frustrated to properly rage against the nothing that was playing games with him. Bilbo had a moment to think that perhaps teasing Thorin was not the best of life decisions when he caught sight of the Hobbit and stumbled over his own two feet.

Thorin stared at Bilbo like he was an apparition, and Bilbo made his second bad decision of the encounter; he waived.

Thorin’s shock stiffened into fury, and he lashed out, “What are you doing here?”

There was something about the question that suggested Thorin didn’t want Bilbo to answer, he would much rather Bilbo hold his tongue and let him build up to a proper yelling fit. But Bilbo wasn’t in the mood. He and his magic ring had made their way into the Elven fortress to save Thorin and his Company, thank you very much. This meant that Thorin the high and mighty was in no position to shout.

Bilbo crossed his arms over his chest (which he was willing to admit was slightly less impressive than when Thorin did it) and gave the Dwarf king his best Baggins Glower.

Because life was a cruel and vicious mistress, Thorin seemed unmoved by Bilbo’s scolding. “What” Thorin over-enunciated, “are you doing here?”

Since deviousness was not working well for Bilbo this evening he went with the truth. “Balin sent me to find you.”
“Balin.”

“Mm-hmm.” Bilbo nodded. “Dwalin wanted to break out immediately, but Balin thought it would be best for me to track down you and the weapons before they did that. I assume by the time I make it back he’ll have persuaded Dwalin that they should also let me find the best escape route.”

“How are you not in a cage?” Thorin’s voice was… level. Even. Very nearly emotionless. Bilbo didn’t quite know what to do with that. Thorin may not have been a particularly talkative creature, but he was by no means quiet. For all his permanent state of melancholy, Thorin still managed to express every emotion flitting through his head. He would hum along with the boys with the slightest quirk to his lips when he was pleased, his whole face would furrow and condense with his scowl when he was in a temper, and his expression would smooth to the sort of calm that Bilbo had always imagined on kings in his story books when he was thinking of home.

But at this particular moment Thorin had no expression at all.

Rather than test his luck with delaying, thinking that perhaps this stone face might be a level of anger that Bilbo had not yet inspired in Thorin, he rambled on. “The same way I made it past the Goblins. I’m a Hobbit, and no one ever expects the Hobbit.”

Thorin didn’t seem to have an opinion about that turn of good fortune, and Bilbo suspected that he might have to return to Balin and declare, “So sorry, don’t think I’ll be able to help you escape for a few days, fairly certain your king wants me dead.”

Bilbo started to edge away, more than happy to give Thorin the necessary space to determine if he was feeling murderous or not. But after the first shuffle Thorin’s hand shot through the bars, reaching for the loose fabric of Bilbo’s jacket. Bilbo scuttled back, an autonomic reaction to be snapped for.

Bilbo thought to stammer out some sort of apology and explain this it wasn’t Thorin himself that had Bilbo pulling back, but the Dwarf didn’t seem offended. He lunged out again, then hissed, “Come here.” Bilbo hesitated, strangely enough, not in the mood to be throttled. “Come here,” Thorin croaked again, and there something desperate in his voice that made Bilbo step forward.

Thorin snatched up the loose fabric around Bilbo’s throat and hauled him straight into the bars. Bilbo went with a panicked squeak, and flinched back with his eyes closed, prepared for a blow. Only, the blow never came. Bilbo squeezed open his eyes and realized that he wasn’t being throttled, he was being hugged.
Thorin had Bilbo pulled tight against the bars, his own thick arms gently wrapped around Bilbo’s back, one hand buried in his curls and cradling his head as close as possible. Bilbo stood there unmoving, his one hug from Thorin not enough to teach him the appropriate response. Slowly, Bilbo raised his hands through the bars and lit them softly on Thorin’s broad back, doing his best not to startle the Dwarf. When Thorin didn’t relax, Bilbo started to stoke up and down his spine, steady, soft motions meant to calm him down.

“Uh, Thorin? Are you alright?”

“Am I alright!” Thorin pushed back on Bilbo, holding the Hobbit at arm’s length. “You’re skulking around amongst Elves with no protection!”

“I’m not the one in the cage.” Bilbo meant to say it with a little more venom than that, but it was difficult to maintain irritation when he was still warm from Thorin’s touch.

Thorin, of all the strange things, smiled at Bilbo’s retort. “You are well? And the others?”

“They all seem irritated, fine, but irritated. I think Dwalin’s trying to make a hammer out of the wood in his cell so he can bash Nori about, but I’m fairly certain most of them are just happy to be out of the dark and away from those infernal spiders.” Thorin continued to smile, soft and expressive after the hardness of his face upon seeing Bilbo with him in the dungeon. He wasn’t ranting about Bilbo running off on his own, and he wasn’t scolding him for failing to break the rest of the Company out with him, so Bilbo didn’t know what to say. Instead he bit his lip then murmured, “And, are you alright?”

Thorin smiled, then cradled Bilbo’s head and pulled him back in to the hug.
The journey from the Éothéod to Gondor was… uneventful. John couldn’t call it quiet, because Sherlock hadn't stopped chattering excitedly since they'd left the Human encampment. Sherlock recounted to John the whole history of the Elves, from Manwë right down to Arwen. John thought this might have been Sherlock’s attempt at an apology for simply spilling out the history of John’s people without a thought for telling John about it first. John was happy to hear the story, so he didn’t bother correcting Sherlock about the need to apologize.

Though, there was also a very real possibility that Sherlock wasn’t rambling little-known facts about Elven history to John to apologize, but instead was trying to keep himself entertained on the road to Gondor. This appeared likely considering that every time Faun let him get away with it, Sherlock pushed the horse on, faster and faster.

In the last few days the horse’s regular speed had ceased to be enough for Sherlock. When they stopped for the night, Sherlock pulled John from Faun’s back, wrapped him in the travelling blanket, then hefted the Hobbit back up onto the horse. While Lestrade objected that the four mortal creatures of this party (the Hobbit, the Man, and the horses) needed to rest, Sherlock wrapped the edges of his cloak around John so he, at least, could sleep, then spurred Faun on faster. John tried to protest, insisting that the Elf needed sleep too, but Sherlock just raised an eyebrow. Between Sherlock's warmth and the rocking of the horse, John fell asleep before he could persuade Sherlock to rest.

At the end of one of those short nights spend in the saddle, John woke to Faun’s sudden stop. John slipped from sleep to wakefulness with the rapid ease born of Sherlock’s company. John tilted back his head to ask Sherlock why he’d stopped, but the Elf wasn’t paying attention. He followed Sherlock’s sightline to land on something rising up from the far off valley floor. John shifted forward in his seat and stared, certain that his eyes had to be deceiving him before he sputtered, "Is that a city?"

"Minas Arnor." Sherlock replied, far too smug at John's disbelief than he had a right to be. "The White City of Gondor."

"It's cut into the mountain!"

"Of course it is," Sherlock huffed, "where else would they put it?"

John tried to be frustrated with Sherlock's self-satisfaction, but it was terribly hard to do when John was so stunned by what he saw. Though truthfully, the gently amused tone underlying Sherlock’s
declaration stopped any of the potential hurt. Sherlock was so proud of himself for showing all this to John that the Hobbit couldn't summon up the will to pretend to be unmoved so that he might undercut Sherlock’s ego.

Sherlock gave his horse a quick kick and suddenly they were belting down the hill again, with Sherlock telling John why they’d gone to all the trouble to build something that looked like a seven layer cake. Sherlock rambled about the Men the same way he had the Elves through the rest of their ride, all the way through the open city gates. The soldiers watching over the massive gate looked as though they probably had orders to stop everyone entering the city, but at Lestrade's nod they let the Elf through without questioning.

Lestrade pulled tight on his own horse’s reins, bringing the animal to stop. Various Human soldiers came scuttling out of the woodwork, but Lestrade ignored them all to pin Sherlock with the plea, “I don’t suppose you would be willing to come with me to the King and explain what’s going on?”

John supposed it was a mark of Sherlock’s respect for Lestrade that he actually waited long enough to roll his eyes before riding up the path. John hear vague strains of Lestrade shouting for the Guard to spread the word that the Elf was to go unmolested, but the words were caught by the sound of Faun’s hooves clattering over the stones. Sherlock leaned forward in their gallop, murmuring in John’s ear the purpose of each level of the city as they passed through each successively smaller gate.

When they reached the sixth level Sherlock pulled Faun into a hard left, cutting through the wide gardens that surrounded the outer edge of the level. He pulled the horse to a sharp stop just outside a wide metal door tucked into the darkest corner beside the mountain that served as the city’s base. Sherlock bounded from Faun and made it halfway to the building’s entrance before he turned on his heel to come back and lower John to the ground. The Hobbit had been practicing getting on and off Sherlock's horse, but he still wasn't to the point where he could easily follow a Sherlock in mid dash.

The room was small and squat, practically Hobbit-sized in its depth. There was a spindly desk uncomfortably close to the front door, and the young woman behind it didn’t look like she could guard much of anything, which was good because there wasn’t much of anything in the room. In fact, beyond the off-center desk the only thing there for her to protect was a double set of metal doors set into the back wall. The wall that wasn’t so much a wall as it was the mountain. The room was cool compared the warm spring sun outside. The rest of the space buried deep inside the mountain was probably frigid.

Sherlock bounded straight up to the front desk and demanded of the poor girl sorting paperwork, "Where are your corpses?"
She gaped at Sherlock, mouth moving, open and closed though no words were coming out. Sherlock rolled his eyes before stepping around the desk to go look at various dead bodies all on his own. John grabbed Sherlock by the back of his tunic before he could go off and disrupt whatever was going on on the other side of that door. Sherlock huffed in annoyance but still pushed a chair into the optimum position for John to stand on it and look over the counter at the secretary.

John had meant to soothe her with the thought of talking to anyone who wasn't Sherlock looming in his billowing cloak, but the sight of a Hobbit popping up over the counter was apparently too much for her. She started to sputter uncontrollably, looking back and forth between them like she had to be hallucinating. John stretched out one of his small hands and put it on top of hers, tamping down the fluttering. "What he means is, 'Hello, he's Sherlock, I'm John, and we need a list of the people who've died in the last few weeks and their causes of death'." Sherlock snorted but John simply kicked out his leg, catching the Elf in the knee and silencing him rather effectively. "Sherlock would also appreciate the chance to examine the corpses you have here presently, as part of our investigation."

"Into recent deaths?" She gaped. "Why?"

John was about to tell her the truth when Sherlock stepped in, all traces of intimidation gone as he answered, "I received word that a friend of mine was dead, but I've been unable to locate him thus far. I was hoping you could help."

Sherlock turned his smile innocent and pleading and John had to fight back his eye roll at the bright blush that flared across the girl's cheeks. "Of course, sir. Come right this way."

Sherlock gave John a smug smile but the Hobbit was more concerned with the pretty little Human who was tripping over herself to ask Sherlock about his fallen comrade. The Elf lied his way through a story of a generations-long friendship and a promise to the man's mother to find out what had happened to her son. The girl looked moved while John felt a little ill at how she was half in love with Sherlock already. Once they entered the morgue Sherlock ignored the girl completely as he went over the few bodies laid out on tables, leaving John to handle her questions.

"W-what's he doing?"

John was an advocate of lying when it had to be done, but had never been fond of lying for lying’s sake. He didn’t see the point in concocting an elaborate story to deceive the girl into helping. She was a sweet-faced little thing and John didn’t like the thought of writing her off as someone to be used.
John stretched out his hand. “I don’t think we were properly introduced, Miss. I’m John Watson.”

John had to give this to the girl, she calmed quickly. She had Sherlock riffling through her bodies and an unknown creature exchanging pleasantries and she treated it like an everyday occurrence. She smiled back at John, more than a little grateful to have the consistency of good manners to fall back on in the face of the foreign. “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Watson. I’m Molly Hooper.”

Sherlock paused mid-investigation and whirled around to stare at Molly. He cocked his head and murmured, “You would be the daughter.”

“Y-yes?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes but kept his tone less than interrogatory when John glowered at him. “Your father was not incompetent at his job. I had been expecting him here.”

“Not incompetent?” Molly shouted.

John reached out and touched her wrist. “For Sherlock that’s actually a compliment.”

Sherlock hummed something that sounded almost like an affirmative. “He never got in the way of my investigations, which was good considering the amount of time that I have spent in this morgue.”

“Do I want to know what he means by that?” Molly asked while Sherlock flicked the cover off one of the bodies, exposing the whole of the naked corpse to Sherlock’s gaze rather than just the face.

"Probably not, no,” John replied.

“Can I assume that if you have ‘investigations’ that you’re not really here looking for a friend?”

“We’re looking for a murderer,” John explained.

“To be specific we are looking for a murder victim. A male with scant traces of Númenor in his
bloodline. The victim will most likely appear to have had his throat slit, but in actuality the death will have been caused by draining all his blood and the cut done post-mortem in order to conceal the manner of death.”

Molly was wearing a thin, white overcoat, a little something to keep the blood off her clothes and keep her warm in the cold of the morgue. She buried her hands in her pockets and bit her bottom lip, debating with herself for a moment about the wisdom of speaking. Soon enough she stumbled out, “We don’t have anything like that.”

Sherlock looked up from his study of the gaping wound in the temple of one of the corpses. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. The only violent death we’ve had is the chap you’re looking at right now. He took an Orc sword to the head when he was on patrol.”

Sherlock pointed to the body that he’d just been examining. “That one.”

She pursed her lips, “What about—”

“How did he die.”

“Old age.”


“Well, he was ninety-five. He caught a cold this last winter and it settled into his lungs. The healers saw him through it and he was nearly better. I suppose it might have been a relapse into the illness, but there’s not enough wrong with his lungs to actually kill him. The report will say that he died from complications because of his illness, but to be completely honest I think he was just tired. He didn’t want to keep on as he had been, so he stopped fighting.”

“That is a romanticized view on death.”

“Not all death, just his in particular. What did you think it was?”
Sherlock didn’t answer the question, which meant he agreed with her diagnosis, if not the emotion behind it. He whirled around to the only other body in the room. “And that one?”

“He slipped and fell from a roof. He was repairing the holes in the thatch because of all the snow we had this winter, but he didn’t think he needed to tie himself in to avoid falling. He rested his weight on a rotten patch of the roof and fell. He hit his head on the way down and was dead before he hit the ground.”

“Evidence?”

Sherlock had yet to examine this body for himself, so Molly stepped over to the corpse to give Sherlock the details. Unlike Sherlock, whose respect for the dead had little to do with the person they had been before and more for the evidence that might be contained on their person, Molly gently drew back the sheet to show only the man’s face rather than whipping off the fabric to expose him entirely. “According to his fellow workers he denied the need for a securing rope. Most of the workers conduct repairs without them, so they weren’t worried. His partner was on the ground beside the house, smoking his pipe when the accident happened. He said he heard the deceased shout, then he landed on the ground flat on his back. The man shouted for help, but the deceased had already stopped breathing.”

Molly pulled back the sheet exposing the man’s side. “You can see the bruising along his wrist and forearm, and up and down his shin. The roof gave way under him and he tried to catch himself. There are various scrapes and bruises along his back and the other side of his body, indicating that after he tried to catch himself he went into a roll. The roof he was working on was surrounded by small spires, one of which was covered in blood. Based off that blood, and the state of his skull,” which John was trying very hard not to look at, “I believe he had the misfortune to catch his head on one of those spires before he fell from the roof. Entirely an accident.”

John could see Sherlock’s eyes zipping over the details as Molly pointed them out, and probably picking up half a dozen more that supported her theory. Whatever Sherlock picked up, he seemed to think it wasn’t worth pointing out. Instead, he asked about deaths that had occurred within the last few months.

“I can bring out the records if you’d like, but no one has been missing any blood. We lost several lads to Orcs, and a few elderly to winter ailments, nothing suspicious or blood-draining about any of them.” She waited a moment for Sherlock to respond, then muttered, “But of course, you’d like to check them for yourself.”

Molly gave them both an amused smile before heading back out the main door to retrieve the
records from the Houses of Healing that took up the rest of this level of the city. The moment Molly stepped out the door, John turned to Sherlock and demanded, “Is there a reason you couldn’t just ask her that in the first place?”

“Ask her what?”

John rolled his eyes. “Ask her if they had any dead that met your description instead of lying to her.”

This time Sherlock was the one who rolled his eyes. “Everyone lies.”

“And that gives you an excuse to lie and be just the same as everyone else?”

Sherlock reared back in affront at such an accusation of normalcy. “You assume that we should ask her for critical information to the case when we had no idea about her true allegiance.”

“True allegiance? She’s a woman of Gondor!”

“And the creature who murdered Dimmock was an Elf of Imladris. Moriarty’s web surpasses the demands of kingdom and kin.”

John took a stuttered step forward. “You thought Molly was working for Moriarty?”

“She was not the examiner I was expecting, not an examiner I trust.”

“But you trust her now?”

Sherlock paused, and very deliberately chose his next words. “I do not believe she would intentionally cause harm to another person.”

“So that means she might do it unintentionally, then?”
Molly chose that moment to reenter the room, a stack of scrolls in her arms. “Here you are, gentlemen.” Sherlock turned to John with a pointed raise of an eyebrow, and John had to admit that Sherlock just might have a point about Molly’s good nature.
Thorin had grumbled when Bilbo finished reading the latest entry. Bilbo had spent his nights searching for a way to break out the Company, and spent his days trying not to get caught by the increasingly suspicious Elves. Avoiding said Elves mostly involved choosing one of the darkest corners of the empty cells near the rest of the Dwarves and curling up for the day. When the Elves were busy with lunch, Bilbo would make his way to Thorin to tell the Dwarf what he’d found the night before and what plan Balin and Dwalin were fighting over now. However, on that particular day Bilbo had had no progress to report.

Instead, Bilbo took in the tense line of Thorin’s shoulders and pulled out John’s journal. Bilbo vaguely recalled a tale of some human queen reading stories to her a tyrant of a husband to distract him from his murdering ways. Not that Thorin was a tyrant—just rather foul tempered—but Bilbo still felt very much like that queen. Every time Bilbo stepped into Thorin’s cell there was this look of breathless hope on his face, like Bilbo was going to announce that everything was finally ready for their escape. When Bilbo had no such news for him, Thorin’s temper would slide down to sour. The first night Bilbo had tried to make polite conversation before he was driven out by the thick presence of Thorin’s distemper, but Bilbo had learned better.

Despite Thorin’s put upon sighs at anything having to do with Elves (which Bilbo could more than understand while Thorin was in an Elven prison), on that night he hadn’t once interrupted the story. When Bilbo didn’t have to stop to listen to a complaint about the horror of the Elves, he knew that Thorin was engrossed. However, now that the story was over for the moment, Thorin felt the need to pretend to be put out. When he had the others around him to mediate, Bilbo would let his mind wander off while Thorin ranted, but he could do no such thing when Thorin was locked in a cage and Bilbo was his only company.

Bilbo tucked the thin journal back into the inner pocket of his vest to keep from losing it on his next unanticipated mad dash. He leaned up against the bars of Thorin’s cage, tilting his head back to look up at the Dwarf facing him through the thin blockade of metal.

At the first sight of Bilbo in the dungeon Thorin had grabbed the Hobbit and pulled him close for a hug that lasted far longer than any contact Bilbo had seen Thorin impart to anyone. The comfort of Thorin’s arms around him had been enough to soothe the panic that had begun to seethe under Bilbo’s skin the moment the rest of the Company refused to make nice with the Elves. Bilbo had frozen at the touch, then when he realized it wasn’t going to be immediately retracted, he sunk into the embrace. He and Thorin stayed like that until Thorin thought he heard an Elf coming down the hallway and he shoved Bilbo back into the dark for his own protection. Since then, Thorin had ceased to embrace Bilbo, but he kept a hand on the Hobbit as often as he could. Even now, Thorin had one arm stretched through the bars and a hand resting gently on the fabric just above Bilbo’s knee. (And no, Bilbo’s voice had not cracked when he realized that Thorin’s hand was high enough
to technically be considered *thigh*.)

“Is Gondor as John described it?”

Thorin paused. “A layer cake, you mean?” Bilbo hummed his assent and Thorin grumbled, “I was more concerned with their fortifications.”

Bilbo thunked his head back against the bars. “Of course you were. I bet you even concocted a plan break them all down.”

“It’s only common sense to accept that someday your allies might not be your allies,” Thorin grumbled.

“Well that’s just—you’ve got to trust somebody, Thorin.”

“I trust plenty of Dwarves.” Bilbo tried to scold him more, but Thorin snapped back, “At this moment I am in an Elven prison. It is not a good time to lecture me about making nice with the other species of Middle-earth.”

Bilbo supposed Thorin had a point. “Putting the Elves aside, what was Minas Arnor like?”

“I suppose that for a city of Men, it wasn’t terrible.” Bilbo gave a quiet huff, his traditional warning before devolving into disgruntlement. “They respected the mountain,” Thorin interrupted before Bilbo could work himself into a lather. “Men build their cities on plains, away from the safety that the mountains can provide. Minas Arnor, called Minas Tirith now, is not perfectly in the mountain as it should have been, but it tried.”

Bilbo rested his head against the bars and looked up at Thorin with wide eyes. The Dwarf puffed out a put upon breath, but he continued. In his low voice Thorin murmured to Bilbo about the white city of Gondor, the soft stonework, and the first time he’d gone to the city as a young Dwarf, an emissary of Thrór. Bilbo had fallen asleep to the sound of Thorin’s voice, to the thought that perhaps someday he might get to see even more of Middle-earth.

Of course, that was the last pleasant conversation Bilbo had with Thorin.
The night after that story-filled day, Bilbo had discovered a way to sneak the whole Company out of the dungeon, and soon enough they were all honored guests at Lake-town. Honored guests meant that Thorin was once again the long lost King Under the Mountain, and Bilbo was nothing more than the hired help. Quiet stories about Elves that were told by Hobbits and Thorin’s soft touches were all shunted off to the side, like an embarrassing mistake of youth that he would no longer acknowledge. The Master of Lake-town liked to giggle at the very sight of Bilbo, and no matter how many times one of the other Dwarves answered the question, the Man kept turning to Thorin to ask what such a strange creature was doing in their midst.

And no, Thorin never spoke out for Bilbo.

They spent several days in Lake-town. Thorin claimed it was because they all needed to rest and recover from their treatment by the Elves. Logic that somehow seemed to ignore how well they’d been fed, safe from the dark and the spiders that roamed the forest. It also ignored that they’d been hopelessly lost in the Mirkwood, and if they hadn’t been captured then the whole Company probably would’ve starved. (Bilbo didn’t like to think that Thorin was so keen on staying because here he was King, but the thought had crossed his mind.)

The rest of the Company had been far more accommodating to Bilbo than their leader. After the first night of seeing Bilbo verbally poked and prodded by the Master of Lake-town, most of the Company had wanted to decline their second dinner invitation. It was a regretful Balin who pointed out that they needed supplies, and to be thrust out of Lake-town before they were prepared was not in their best interests. Bilbo had put on his brightest smile and least torn pair of trousers and told them all there was little a Hobbit wouldn’t endure on behalf of a good meal.

Most of the Dwarves had laughed, but Nori, Bofur, and Bombur all had a look in their eyes that suggested they knew that if left to his own devices, this was not something their Hobbit would have endured.

The second night in Lake-town was better than the first thanks to the presence of Bard. The young Man was polite, and what he lacked in conviviality he made up for in sheer presence. He had the same look about him as Thorin, like his back was tired from carrying the whole weight of his people. Bard didn’t know quite what to do with Bilbo, but he made a valiant effort to seem like he found the Hobbit as something more than an oddity.

Every time he left their lodgings, Bilbo found himself nestled between two Dwarves. Bilbo was fairly certain that they were on a constant rotation to guard him, whether he was shopping, going for a stroll, or even walking to dinner with the rest of the Company. He’d tried to be irritated about it, but after the fourth time a Man nearly stepped on him and couldn’t be bothered to apologize (which just happened to correspond to the third time the Master declared what a “strange little creature” Bilbo was), he couldn’t find the willpower to complain.
As dreadful as Bilbo found the nightly dinners with the Master of Lake-town and his people, there was one redeeming factor. And no, it wasn’t the food. It seemed the people of Lake-town had a fondness for stories. There was no real pattern for who was called upon to share, just whoever the Master felt like hearing from that particular night.

The first night the Master had declared that it had been far too long since he’d heard the sound of Dwarven singing. The whole Company—save Bilbo—rose to their feet and sang the Song of the Lonely Mountain. Since then, most of the performers had been Men, with the occasional Woman called to the front to share their talents, and Balin once called upon to share a tale. With a Dwarf at his side and a song in his ear, Bilbo didn’t feel quite so terribly alone in this place.

Of course, as seemed to the pattern for Bilbo’s life outside the Shire, just when he began to think that something was going right, it took a sharp turn for awful.

“Come Master Halfing!” The Master called down the length of the table, loud enough that it was impossible for Bilbo to pretend he hadn’t heard. “Sing us a Halfing song!”

“Hobbit,” Bilbo hissed through gritted teeth.

Dori was to one side of Bilbo for this particular dinner, with his youngest brother to the Hobbit’s opposite. Dori gripped Bilbo’s thigh before he could respond, and Bilbo bit his bottom lip to stop himself from snapping something unpleasant. Instead he gave the Master the same graceful smile he gave the Sackville-Bagginses and replied, “I don’t think any of my songs are suitable for your halls.”

The Master leaned forward in his chair, and donned a cutting sort of smile. “Too refined for my halls, are they?”

The whole table went silent for a moment before Bard laughed, like the Master had been making a joke about the fussiness of Hobbits. Bilbo should have kept his mouth shut. The master was content, because in the grand scheme of things he felt like he’d just won the conversation with Bilbo. His strange thirst to demean the Hobbit was temporarily sated. If Bilbo had kept his mouth shut, then they would have been able to move on to more forced conversation and forget their current awkwardness.

Since biting his tongue was what he should do, Bilbo did precisely the opposite.
There was the briefest of lulls after the laughter that had been spurred on by Bard. It was a breath before conversation began to flow once again, and Bilbo seized the silence. “It’s not a matter of refinery, Sir. I simply find myself in the mood for a melancholy tune.”

The Master gave Thorin a conspiratorial smirk, like he couldn’t imagine what a Hobbit could have to be melancholy about. Thorin’s returning smile was stiff with the knowledge that Bilbo was not a creature to be underestimated. “Come now, Master Halfing. My people have no objections to a little melancholy.”

“Hobbit,” Bilbo repeated.

“Dreadfully sorry young man.” The Master smirked. “A melancholy Hobbit song, then.”

Thorin gave him that terrible look that declared, “Hobbit, you will comply or I will make you comply,” which only made Bilbo want to refuse all the more. Balin, however, looked at him with pleading eyes, and Bilbo gave a polite nod to the Master.

Bilbo slipped from the bench to simply stand beside the table, but the Master called out, “Come now, Master Hobbit, no one will be able to hear you from there! You’re far too short.” Despite the Man’s bulk, his steps down the table were swift, and before Bilbo could kick the man in the shins, he was dropped atop the table. “There you are, young man, sing us your melancholy song from there.”

Tabletop singing was for drinking songs, not for songs of sadness, and the Master knew it. His opinion of Bilbo’s song was already so low that he treated it like nothing. Bilbo raised an eyebrow at Balin to declare that he’d done his best, and the Master had brought this upon himself. Thorin caught the look and rose halfway out of his seat, expecting Bilbo to turn to violence like any other member of the Company would. He didn’t seem to understand that this was not a moment for a Dwarf, this was a moment for a Hobbit.

Bilbo closed his eyes and drew in a slow breath, letting the warm and heavy air fill his lungs, then let it slip away. With his eyes still closed, Bilbo began to sing.

“Home is behind, the world ahead,

And there are many paths to tread.

Through shadow to the edge of night,
Until the stars all alight.

Mist and shadow, cloud and shade,

All shall fade. All shall fade.”¹

His eyes fluttered open. He’d written the song after the death of his mother, and it wasn’t a song he often sang for folk, usually only at funerals for those who died particularly young. To sing it here, surrounded by Men happily drinking their tankards wasn’t something he wanted to acknowledge. But now the song was done, and he had to confront what they would do with a piece so precious to him.

Bilbo opened his eyes to find the Master of Lake-town still standing before him, never having made it back to his chair. The Master was gaping, dumbfounded at the song that had come from such a small creature. It was only then that Bilbo noticed the room was silent. He peeked over his shoulder and saw that the whole length of the table was staring at him with wide eyes. Bilbo fidgeted at the obvious shock, and blushed crimson at a few of the sterner men pointedly looking away to wipe their eyes.

Dori might have been a grumbler, but he was no fool. He cast a bright grin around the room like Bilbo’s unfeigned honesty hadn’t just overturned every scrap of mockery the Master had indulged in concerning the Hobbit. “That was lovely Mister Bilbo, just lovely.” The Dwarf held out a hand to help Bilbo down from the tabletop, aimlessly chattering about how much he’d enjoyed Bilbo’s song. He also managed to set aside his napkin and scoot away from the table like he’d always been intending to finish dinner the moment Bilbo stopped singing.

Despite usually using his observational skills towards a different purpose, Nori understood his brother’s plan, and from his own place down the table stood as well. Ori stumbled to his feet with far less subtlety, but the actions of the brothers ’ri was enough to signal to most of the Company that it was time to be done for the evening. Balin stayed, as was his duty, and Thorin stayed because Bilbo was uncertain he could overcome his own shock to move at this moment.

Bilbo ignored the Tookish impulse to glower at Thorin for forcing him into such a situation and then doubting that he could carry it off. Instead he stuck out his chin, high enough that any Shireling with common sense would know he was a Baggins, and a Baggins never lost.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Yes, that is totally the song Billy Boyd sings in Return of the King. I consider it fair play for Bilbo because, technically, he wrote it. (The lyrics for the movie were derived from The Walking Song, which was written by Bilbo.) You can listen to the
song on YouTube, though I confess, I prefer listening to the version on the soundtrack when thinking of Bilbo singing it, because it lacks the sounds of arrows and chewing that were so part of the rendition in the movie. It’s about 2:34 in The Sacrifice of Faramir track.
Sherlock lingered in the morgue just long enough to give John the chance to tell Molly thank you before the Elf stormed out the room. Sherlock’s long legs ate up the length of the gardens outside the morgue, and John did his best to look like he wasn’t scampering along behind Sherlock when they headed through the gate and back into the city proper. “You know,” John asked, interrupting whatever had Sherlock furrowed this time. “You could’ve told Molly thank you.”

Sherlock huffed, "Why would I do that? She offered nothing useful to the case."

"She told you that Moriarty hasn't killed here yet, which means we might be able to save the next fellow's life." When Sherlock didn't answer John asked, "What's wrong? You should be excited, there's more data to help you solve the case."

"The next step in the process is determining who is the next probable victim, and that will be… difficult."

"Why?"

A voice rang out from behind them, "The record keeper of Gondor is less than pleased with my brother. Which will make it difficult to research the Númenorean bloodline." Sherlock slammed to a stop and turned with his most fearsome sneer in place. John was more surprised than fierce when he took in the golden Elf who had appeared behind them. The male was tall, with white-blond hair sheered even shorter than Sherlock’s own curls. Between the hair and the seemingly aesthetic cane, John might’ve ignored the pointy ears completely and mistaken him for a Man.

"What are you doing here, Mycroft?" Sherlock spat.

"Our Lady of the Golden Wood had a vision that you required my help.” The Elf replied placidly. “Rather than leave you to struggle on your own as you would no doubt leave me to do, I thought I might come to your aid."

"I don't need your help!"

"And yet here I am, because as talented as you are, her visions are never wrong. So here I shall stay, that I might be in place when you find yourself in need of my assistance."
Sherlock stormed down the hall, leaving John to awkwardly stretch out his hand and say, "Hello, I'm-"

"Doctor Watson, former resident of Buckland, The Shire."

That was… unexpected. John cocked his head to the side and asked, "Sorry, how did you know that?"

"I make it my business to know all things that involve my brother, Master Hobbit."

“You’re his brother?”

"Of course.” Mycroft let the statement hang there, like it was obvious. “You seem surprised."

John blamed Sherlock that his instinctual first response was nothing polite like, “He just hasn’t mentioned you,” but was instead, “It seems like he hates you.” Thankfully, John said neither, and instead stammered out, "Well, I mean, you look nothing alike."

"Sherlock and I share a mother but not our fathers. I was fully grown and away from her when she decided to bed Sherlock's sire."

"Bed him?" John squeaked.

The Elf raised one angular eyebrow. "Ahh, no one has told you Sherlock's sordid history then?"

John stiffened, "Most people probably thought it was impolite."

Mycroft gave him the sort of indulgent smile you'd give a dog and replied, "Elves don't generally care for polite or not. If you were left unwarned it was because Elrond indulges my brother's whims terribly. Sherlock is a favorite of Elrond's only daughter, and as such he's practically allowed to get away with murder."
John snorted, "If you're trying to be subtle about implying something you'd be better off being less heavy handed about it."

"I wasn't implying a thing, I was simply stating a fact. Most Elves give Sherlock a wide berth. Even among our people he is considered brilliant, and the lengths to which our mother went to create his brilliance make most Elves uncomfortable."

Despite all the trouble it got him into, John was naturally inquisitive, and he couldn't stop the flicker of interest in his eyes, or the smug expression Mycroft adopted when he did. "If you are going to spend any significant amount of time with my brother Dr. Watson, then you ought to know his faults. That is the only way you can make a fully informed decision about your association with him."

John puffed out his chest. "I don't need to know a single thing you've got to say about your brother."

"That is a very bold assertion for a Hobbit who had never been further than Bree when my brother swept in and carried him off."

"He didn't carry me anywhere. I rode off of my own free will and choice."

Mycroft smirked, "Of course you did. Sherlock does have a gift for making people think his choices are their own."

"And what do you mean by that?"

"You thought it was your decision, just like that lovely young woman at the morgue thought it was her own decision to let Sherlock desecrate the dead."

"He wasn't desecrating anybody!"

Mycroft cocked his head to the side and stared at John the way Sherlock did when he was using the expression on John’s face to deduce what he'd had for breakfast. John found he didn't like anyone looking at him that way who wasn't Sherlock. Then Mycroft furrowed his brow, like something was being misinterpreted. "You know next to nothing about Gondor or their practices and yet you're positive that Sherlock was doing no wrong. You seem quite smitten with him."
John knew that Mycroft was just glibly tossing off the word, but he couldn't stop the blush that rushed to his cheeks. He turned to walk away, but the Elf had already bit back on a gasp that let John know the blush hadn't gone unnoticed. Fate was a cruel mistress, because it wasn't enough that John had just accidentally declared that his affection for Sherlock was more than brotherly, there had to be more Elves. A whole bushel of them in fact, with a sour-faced Sherlock stuck in their midst. John froze in panic, but it seemed the whole company was too wrapped up in fussing over Sherlock to have wasted any time paying attention to a Hobbit.

That is, all but one of them didn’t have the time.

The Elves were clustered around Sherlock in a flock, though he expected that every last one of them would’ve been mortally offended if he told them they reminded him of sheep. But as Mycroft was alone out in front of the group, so was a solitary female Elf behind. She trailed after them, silently demanding all the attention in the room. While the rest of her companions were in flowing gowns made from rich fabrics, with even the males streamlined and vibrant, this Elf was in structure, stark white dress. It drew attention to her curves and pulled focus up to her blood red lips and unearthly green eyes. Eyes that were focused straight on John and his blushing face.

She pursed her lips in a sarcastically sweet sort of smile, like she didn’t need to have heard what John was saying to know what he was thinking. Whatever embarrassment John might’ve felt was shuffled to the side at the desperate way Sherlock lit up at John’s presence still in the hall. In a smooth roll, Sherlock slid through the bundle of Elves, ready to make his way to John and scoop up the Hobbit for a mad dash away.

Mycroft, however proved himself to be Sherlock’s brother and stuck out his cane to stop Sherlock’s progress. John wouldn’t have been surprised if Sherlock had dropped into a roll to evade his own brother, but the delay was enough that the rest of the Elves caught up to him. Sherlock whipped around to hiss something foul at Mycroft, and the moment he turned his back the woman slipped around out of sight. Her smile was a mocking sort of smirk, and John didn’t need to speak with her to know that she considered him a temporary entertainment. John clenched his jaw and stuck out his chin like he was waiting for a fight.

“Mister Watson,” she crooned. “Have you appreciated your journey?”

John fought the urge to furrow his brow at such a strangely phrased question. “It’s not done yet.”

“Are you certain?”
“Of course I’m certain. We’ve got things to do and we haven’t finished them yet.”

“My dear Hobbit, *Sherlock* has things to do.” The beautiful Elf reached out to ruffle her fingers in John’s hair, and he reared back. He would’ve smacked her hand away if his mother hadn’t taught him never to hit a woman.

“Sherlock’s an adult, and he can do whatever he likes with whomever he likes.”

“He always has, little Hobbit. With whomever might interest him for the moment.” The Shire did not make him stupid, and John knew full well what the female Elf was implying.

“I supposed it’s a good thing then that Sherlock’s moments last longer than most people’s lives.”

She gave him a grin, not one that said she liked John, but that said at least he had spirit. “I suppose it must be a comfort to know that he will at least stay with you for the whole length of your life. After all, there is no need to wonder about what he might have done before you came into the picture. Or what he will go back to when you’re gone.”

The comment sent the briefest of knife wounds to his heart, but just because John wasn’t the great Sherlock Holmes, that didn’t mean he wasn’t impressive in his own right. Rather than wilting like the Elf so obviously hoped he would, John put his hands in his pockets and grinned. “That’s the benefit of being short lived. You care more about the moment you’re in than what might happen when you’re gone.” Before the Elf had the chance to try and needle John any more, he twisted on his heel and strode down the hall, ignoring the eyes he could feel piercing the back of his head.

Mycroft had done something to John. That was the only reason Sherlock could determine for John to claim he was tired and retreat to the room Lestrade laid out for him rather than go with Sherlock to the archives. (Sherlock devoutly ignored the part of his mind that pointed out John was a rather small Hobbit who was probably quite exhausted from their mad dash to Gondor.) John had pursed his lips and shut the door in Sherlock’s face, frustrated with Sherlock’s declaration that *of course* John would rather be with him than sleeping. Despite John’s denial, Sherlock knew he was right, and went straight to Mycroft to demand an explanation.

Sherlock tossed open the delicately carved doors that held apart the series of rooms where visiting Elves always stayed when they came to the White City. He stormed into the main sitting room and could see Mycroft stifle a sigh that almost pleaded with him to hold off on this conversation until
there were no witnesses. But Sherlock gave a glower in reply that meant if Mycroft wanted this conversation to stay private then he should've been waiting somewhere else.

"What did you do to him!"

Every Elf in the room froze, staring at Sherlock like they couldn't believe he had the gall to shout at Mycroft. Sherlock, however, didn't care about what they thought and stood alone in the center of the room as he stared down his brother. "He and I had a conversation about your propensity to defy the rules." Mycroft responded delicately.

Sherlock stared through Mycroft, piecing together the whole of the conversation from nothing more than the rumpled line of Mycroft’s tunic. "You didn't get what you wanted."

Irene slipped into the room, cutting through the gawking Elves. Her presence alone enough to remind the others that they were immortal creatures meant to be better than badly eavesdropping on one of their own. She stepped around Sherlock, running her fingers across the small of his back while she teased, "How can you be sure?"

"Because he doesn't look satisfied. He discovered something, but it raised more questions than it answered."

Mycroft narrowed his eyes at Sherlock, silently demanding that he leave it alone but Sherlock rolled his eyes like the suggestion was ridiculous and stared at his brother, running through all the options to decide what had him surprised. It had to be John, something unexpected about John, but *everything* about John was unexpected, so that didn't narrow it down. All the unexpected things that Sherlock had found thus far were wonderful, so it had to be something Sherlock didn't know. Sherlock panicked and asked in all sincerity, "Is something wrong?"

Mycroft paused, turning Sherlock's stare back on him. He narrowed his eyes, stripping away the layers of concealment that Sherlock kept wrapped around himself. After a long moment Mycroft leapt into Sherlock's space and demanded, "Are you out of your mind!"

Both of Sherlock’s eyebrows went up in the kind of confusion that he rarely let himself express. Mycroft grabbed Sherlock by the shirt front and hauled him from the room in a fit of violence neither one had indulged in since they were children. Mycroft slammed the door shut behind them and ignored Irene’s smirk like the boys had just figured out something she’d known all along. The moment the door closed behind them Sherlock smacked away Mycroft’s hand and demanded, "What are you talking about?"
"This is absurd, even for you!"

"Mycroft, I can't tell you you're an idiot if you don't tell me what you're talking about!"

Mycroft calmed himself with a long breath and tried to reassemble some of his standing calm. When he did, he hissed out, "You want the Hobbit."

Sherlock had enough control over himself to stare at Mycroft like he wasn't making sense, but Mycroft knew his brother better than anyone alive, even though the Hobbit might quickly be encroaching on that claim. Mycroft stayed between Sherlock and the door, watching as his brother paced with frantic energy, torn between wanting to tell Mycroft he was wrong and knowing that Mycroft had never been wrong before.

Mycroft gave him a moment and then started listing the facts. "You insisted that he travel with you to Rivendell."

"He was interesting!" Sherlock snapped.

"That you find him interesting at all should have been a sign to you, Sherlock. You barely parted company with him on the journey, then you practically fled Elrond's house with him."

"There was a case!"

"Which you brought him on!"

Sherlock stopped and snapped, "How do you know all this?"

"Captain Lestrade has been very forthcoming."

Sherlock snorted, "Forthcoming? You mean a gossiping wench."
"The Captain and I have had dealings in the past and he was concerned about you."

"How you can you even pretend to say that with a straight face?"

"He was."

“Oh yes, you’re all concerned. Lestrade is concerned that I won’t find the killer for him, and Elrond is concerned that I’m going to ruin interspecies relations in the process, and you’re concerned that I’m going to dishonor the family by getting myself killed, and Irene is circling like a vulture, waiting for you to back me into a corner and trick me into a wedding."

"Marriage wouldn't hurt you, you know. You could do with some stability." Sherlock flushed and Mycroft tossed his hands into the air, "Oh, of course! You've refused every Elven maiden of age only to elope with a male Halfling."

Sherlock sprawled on a chair and muttered, "There are worse things."

"There are—no Sherlock, there are few things in this world that could possibly be worse. You're an Elf, an elder of the species, and it's bad enough that you've been frittering away your time on these little cases, now you've taken up with a Hobbit!"

"Taken up with? Mycroft you sound like one of these stuffy humans."

"Perhaps it is time I take a page out of their book and attempt to incite some responsible behavior from you." Sherlock snorted at the very notion and didn't bother to reply. "I know you find him interesting now—"

"Always, Mycroft. I will always find him interesting."

Mycroft dropped into a chair of his own. "In goodness name, why? He's just a Hobbit."

Sherlock threw a pillow at Mycroft's head and shouted, "He's John! That's all that matters!"
Mycroft slouched in a terribly human gesture and sighed, "You dote on him."

"Must you choose such effeminate descriptions?"

"They are apt. Effeminate or not." The two brothers sat in silence, calming themselves. Mycroft muttered, "You want to keep him."

Sherlock shuffled in his seat. "Forever, actually."

Mycroft groaned and massaged his temples. "Yes, that's what I thought you'd say. You do recall, however, that Hobbits do not live forever?"

Sherlock fixed his brother with a look that held none of their usual enmity and Mycroft closed his eyes in pain. "You mean to stay with him. To trade your immortality to follow him into the human heaven."

"I mean to try."

"You must be aware that I intend to stop you from making such a ridiculous decision."

Sherlock smirked, "You won't stop me, brother."

Mycroft sighed, "Perhaps, but at the very least my attempts should protect me from Mummy."
The boys had gone straight back to the Company’s rooms and ordered everyone to pack. There were a few raised eyebrows, but when the boys started shoving Thorin’s spare clothes and loose weapons into a bag, they bowed their heads to the princes of Erebor and took it for the royal command it was. Whatever disagreement Thorin and Balin might’ve had with the young Dwarves’s choice was kept behind closed doors and both of them were waiting for the Company when morning came.

Thorin stayed silent for the whole day away from Lake-town, his stride long and sure, no trace that not a day before his nephews had usurped his power. Only a fool would expect Thorin to pour out his heart to the Company and apologize for whatever his nephews had scolded him for, but they all had expected the small gestures of reconciliation that Thorin was known for. Most of the time Thorin did nothing more than bump shoulders with the Dwarf who was having a bad day, and when he was feeling particularly demonstrative he would actually smile. (As far as Bilbo understood it, that hug on the Carrock was the sort of thing Thorin only did when you saved his life.)

But today Thorin was unmoved by whatever it was the boys had used against him to make him move. Or perhaps, it wasn’t so much that he was unmoved as he wasn’t granted the opportunity. Despite having left the lurking dangers of Lake-town behind, the Company hadn’t dissolved their rotating guard around Bilbo. Every step he took was echoed by two Dwarves, one to either side of him. Bilbo thought the lot of them were just being sensitive about the treatment their Hobbit had endured, so he rolled his eyes and suffered through the fussing because it was better than the alternative.

That assumption starting crumbling when Dori got distracted by the ale Bombur had stowed in his bag and Thorin swooped in to take the spot beside Bilbo before another Dwarf could fill the gap. Dwalin was on duty at Bilbo’s other side, and he raised one expectant eyebrow at Thorin, but didn’t glower him away. Thorin kept up his stare at Dwalin, but rather than give the other Dwarf the space he was obviously asking for, Dwalin leaned back against the rock behind him and turned his gaze on the rest of the group. Kíli looked ready to vibrate out of his skin and Bofur had the most irritated look Bilbo had ever seen grace the Dwarf’s face, but they both stayed in place.

Just like Bilbo.

He could feel Thorin staring at him, blue gaze fixed unabashedly on the Hobbit’s temple. But Bilbo wasn’t going to give in. If Thorin wanted to speak to him then he could ask, like any other civilized being. Bilbo was not his subject, to smile and simper when Thorin deigned to pay him
attention.

At least, not any more.

Both the Baggins and the Took in his blood were mortified that Bilbo had allowed Thorin to get away with his bad behavior for so long. Beladonna Took would’ve seized Thorin by the ear and thrown him out of her house the moment the Dwarf first called her a grocer, and Bilbo was ashamed that he hadn’t done the same.

He’d gotten himself a better than not adventure out of this whole mess, and he’d have some lovely, lively correspondence with more than one of his companions, but if Thorin Oakenshield had been a Hobbit, Bilbo would’ve taken a switch to him. King or not, Bilbo had reached the end of his rope with Thorin. He was weary of one day being among Thorin’s closest confidants, and the next being nothing but a burden. He’d signed his name to the contract, but that didn’t mean he had to endure Thorin’s feckless heart any more. He would do his duty, help drive out the dragon, and then go home and never think on Thorin again.

These Dwarves liked to pride themselves on their stubbornness, as unchanging as the rock, but they were nothing compared to Hobbits. Rocks may be long-lasting, but they were nothing to the earth, and no one could hold a memory like a Hobbit.

The Company had stilled when Thorin sat down, all of them silently waiting to hear what explanation Thorin would offer, but he didn’t speak. He waited, silent and still, for Bilbo to acknowledge him. When Bilbo didn’t, Thorin began to fidget with the steady clenching and unclenching of his hands that meant he wanted to reach for his weapon. Out of the corner of his eye Bilbo could see Dwalin fix Thorin with the same glare he must’ve employed when they were in training. Thorin puffed out an irritated breath but stilled, and Bilbo couldn’t hold his giggle back at that one. He tilted his head to Dwalin and murmured, “Now I see where Kili gets it from.”

Thorin… did not take that well. He snorted something ready to spill over into shouting, but Dwalin chortled. “Kili is nothing compared to what Thorin was like when we were lads. The boys’ mother likes to complain that it was Thorin who was supposed to have Dwarrows as naughty as he was, not her.” Bilbo all but giggled at the image of young Thorin sweeping through Erebor, his fine coat trailing behind him and Kili’s maniacal laugh echoing down the halls. Thorin gave a dramatic example of that sweeping away just then, too furious with both Bilbo and Dwalin to even articulate his irritation and unwilling to endure the teasing, no matter what his nephews wanted him to do.

Thorin had been goaded into several attempts to apologize since then, none of them willing and none at all successful. The Hobbit was not blind, and he knew when he was being placated and he would have none of it. And to be honest, none of the Company couldn’t really blame him.
Despite the whole mess being unanimously declared Thorin’s fault, they still wanted him to mend mail with Bilbo. The lads wanted things patched up because Bilbo had the talent for making Thorin smile (but they had to speak to one another for that to happen), and Balin was missing the tale of John and Sherlock (which Bilbo had refused to even mention since before Lake-town), while the rest of the Company spent each day growing more and more concerned about Thorin’s mental state.

Thorin was touchy on the best of days, but he was still a good leader, more than willing to stow his pride when it meant keeping his people fed and giving them a mountain for shelter. He was prone to fits of temper, but they burnt out as quickly as they came. He was not one to let his temper lead him, not let himself be led by anything else for that matter. But this, this was Thrór.

The last King Under the Mountain had been relentless in his displeasure. He was fiercely wrathful in a way that had resigned no small number of their people into leaving Erebor to escape him. This unending anger, it wasn’t like Thorin.

The Company began to whisper amongst themselves about the gold madness that had claimed Thorin’s forefathers. That perhaps it might’ve done the same to Thorin though they had yet to enter the mountain.

That concern didn’t fade over the next days of their journey as they came to Erebor and traversed the crags and caves outside of it to find the mountain’s secret entrance. They split into small groups to facilitate the searching. On the first day the Dwarves shifted from group to group until Thorin, Bilbo, and Dori were together. It was done in the hope that Thorin would swallow whatever pride was twisting him and make him apologize, then Bilbo would accept it completely and restore Thorin to what little good humor he’d had before. (And if none of that worked, Dori had the temperament to keep Bilbo from shouting at Thorin and the sword arm to keep Thorin from killing Bilbo.)

Needless to say, that plan hadn’t gone particularly well.

Since then Bilbo had taken to slipping away from the Company to look for the door on his own. No one was quite sure how Bilbo could be gone in a blink, safely surrounded by Dwarves one moment and the next moment calling out from someplace no one could find that he’d be back in a few hours. Thorin made no more attempts to appeal to Bilbo, too consumed by the thought of slaying that damn dragon. Where once his thoughts had been of reclaiming his homeland, now they were of gold. Piles and piles of gold.

The nights had begun to grow cold and the days short, cutting back on the time that they were able
to search. They rose early and moved slowly through the brisk air, shaking out stiff muscles for another day of searching for a door that none of them would actually be able to see. Until, of course, Bilbo did.

The whole Company had come together for the night, settled into a loose circle around the point where a fire would’ve been if they hadn’t been trying to stay unnoticed. What little joy they’d managed to summon at actually being outside Erebor once again trickled away at their inability to get inside and face the dragon. Balin had nearly championed the need for a fire just so that they could draw some comfort from the blaze. Instead, they spent another night sitting around nothing, saying nothing, having found nothing.

Bilbo was beside Ori, watching the young Dwarf scratch melancholy words about their travels into his little book. The Dwarf was still trying to catch up on the events of Lake-town, torn between a historian’s need to write the story exactly as it had happened, and a subject’s need to conceal Thorin’s bad behavior. Bilbo knew his own desire would’ve been to tell the tale in whatever way made for a better story, but he couldn’t help the thought that perhaps someday there might be another Hobbit who would read Ori’s words and take from them the same strength that Bilbo took from John.

Ori paused in his writing, mulling on how to proceed next. Bilbo dropped his head to the side, resting it on Ori’s shoulder and offering his silent support to the Dwarf and his artistic crisis. Bilbo rolled his head ever so slightly to settle his temple in that empty spot between shoulder and collar bone, which just happened to twist his gaze at just the right angle that he saw a thin line of silver creeping down on an outcropping above them.

Bilbo popped to his feet like oil on a hot pan and scrambled up the rocks. He could hear Ori thump to the ground, overturned by Bilbo’s movement, and the rest of the Company calling out to know what Bilbo was doing. Bilbo was faster than the rest of the Company had any hope of being while they still wore their armor, but he could hear the thunderous steps of Dwalin trying to catch up to him. Bilbo reached the small plateau and skidded to a stop, only to have Dwalin crash into him and demand, “What do you think you’re doing!”

Bilbo ignored Dwalin’s words and his attempts to grab Bilbo’s shoulders and twist him around to make him pay attention. Instead the Hobbit kept his eyes forward, focused on the pale silver glow before him. It was a door frame, short and stout like the race it was designed for. There were no runes covering the entrance, just a finger-thin line demarcating where they might find their way into the mountain. Dwalin’s hands slipped away from Bilbo as he took in the door with a dumbfounded gawk.

The first of the Company scrambled up behind them just in time for Dwalin to murmur something in Khuzdul that Bilbo didn’t need a translation to know meant, “Holy shit.”
Soon enough the Company had moved their bags and bedrolls to the space beside the door and Balin suggested that they should wait to send Bilbo into the mountain until after the sun had set, just in case. Thorin had argued that the light wouldn’t make it’s way to the dragon, but every Dwarf had objected, piling on concern after concern that they didn’t know where the dragon was in relation to the door, and they didn’t even know where the door opened to in the mountain, and it was better to be safe than sorry. With no grace at all, Thorin had eventually conceded.

Bilbo ignored the argument going on behind him, instead taking slow puffs of inferior tobacco on the pipe he’d bought in Lake-town. Bilbo was ashamed to admit that he devoted no more than a few moments of relatively serious contemplation to the possibility that he might just slip on his ring and leave the Dwarves to fend for themselves. Running away was a far more practical option than staying to face down a dragon, but he supposed that he’d been this far, he might as well see it through to the end. (And there was something to be said for being one of the few creatures in Middle-earth to actually see a dragon, up close and personal.)

Bofur dropped down beside Bilbo, dragging him out of his contemplation. “The lads have decided to wait until it’s full dark to send you in, to give you as much cover as they can.” Bilbo supposed that he ought to have known that at least some of the Dwarves would’ve noticed that he wasn’t paying attention. Thankfully he didn’t bother asking if Bilbo was nervous, fully aware that there was only one answer to that question and acknowledging his nervousness wouldn’t make it go away. Instead, Bofur pulled out his own square pipe and let Bilbo mull.

Before long Fíli dropped down on Bilbo’s other side and Kíli crowded him from behind. Bilbo devoutly ignored them both until Kíli settled his chin on to Bilbo’s shoulder and said, “I think you should tell us a story.”

Bilbo snorted. “I think that today of all days you should be telling me one.”

“But your stories are better, Mr. Bilbo.”

“Then perhaps you should get more practice, young Dwarf.”

“You can’t want to spend today listening to me tell bad stories.”

“No, I’d like some peace,” Bilbo snapped.
Kíli drew back at the sudden shift in Bilbo’s tone, and the Hobbit reached out and wrapped his fingers through the dark scraggle of hair and pulled the boy forward. “I’m sorry, my lad. I’m just not quite as ready for this dragon as I thought I was. I find that I’m not quite in the mood to run the risk of dying.”

“Despite what they might say to the contrary,” Fíli whispered. “I don’t think anyone ever is.”

“And if it’s any consolation,” Kíli added, “we’d prefer if you didn’t.”

“I’ve found that it’s much easier to face death when you think you’ve got something worth dying for,” Dwalin interrupted. Bilbo turned to give him a glower, and realized that the whole of the Company had settled around them, all clustered about Bilbo like he was their fire.

“I don’t know if ‘easier’ is quite the term for it,” Balin objected. “Perhaps having a purpose simply gives you a reason to be brave when all other reasons fail you.”

“And what’s your purpose?” Bilbo asked.

The Company went dead silent for a moment, and Bilbo regretted asking. He tried to take it back, but Ori of all people rested a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and replied, “To have someplace to put my books.”

Dori ruffled his younger brother’s hair. “To have someplace to put my younger brothers.”

Bifur rumbled something inarticulate and Bombur nodded. “Aye, it’ll be nice to create something beautiful again.”

Bofur laughed, “I agree with Dori about family.”

“Aye,” Glóin grunted out, staring off into the distance with the same far-away look he donned whenever he thought about his wife and child.

Óin gripped his younger brother’s shoulder and continued, “To rest for a while.”
There was a long moment of silence where Bilbo thought the boys wouldn’t speak, but soon enough Fíli croaked, “To give Mum a home.”

Kíli didn’t look to the rest of the Company, but instead looked at Thorin, who was still on his feet with his back to them all while he stared at the waiting door. Under his breath he murmured, “To be done looking for a home.”

Heavy silence settled on them all at this confirmation that the princes weren’t quite so unaware of their uncle as they seemed to be. Before the whole thing could descend to a depression that none of them needed when they were planning on confronting a dragon, Nori interjected, “And do you know what you’re going to be fighting for, Mr. Baggins?”

Nori asked the question with a teasing lilt that made Bilbo think he already knew the answer. Bilbo quirked an eyebrow and asked, “No, what?”

Nori’s grin turned positively wicked as he pulled John Watson’s journal out of his pocket. Bilbo’s hand went straight for the inner pocket of his vest where he’d been keeping the journal this whole time, and found that somehow Nori had stolen it from him. Bilbo started to scold him but Nori shook his head. “No Mr. Baggins, I’ll be holding on to this. You know that paper doesn’t do well with fire, and even if it did, this’ll give you a reason to come back to us.”

“Excellent! You can tell us all about John and Sherlock tomorrow when we’re in Erebor and the dragon is dead.” Kíli’s enthusiasm was so genuine that Bilbo almost believed that things would work out just as smoothly as he hoped.

Thorin, who had been silent for the whole of the conversation, chose that moment to snort. Displaying his unwavering opinion that they would have stories of Elves in Erebor over his dead body. All the tension that had faded away as he sat with the Company came roaring back to Bilbo in the now familiar form of rage. “Some things it’s better not to know Kíli,” he said. “They’ll only disappoint you.”

Chapter End Notes

**FN1: Mend mail = mending chainmail. The Dwarvish equivalent of ‘mending fences’.”**
John pushed off Sherlock’s demands for an audience and retreated to his room for a little peace and quiet. John acknowledged that he wasn’t so much seeking a chance to be by himself as he was seeking the solace of a moment not wrapped around Sherlock Holmes. He pulled a book off of one of the well-stocked shelves and settled in to an oversized chair. He was left to himself just long enough that he actually began to focus on the words before him rather than what he was avoiding. But that meant it was perfect timing to be interrupted by furious knocking on his bedroom door. From across the room John shouted, "I told you I was taking the night off, Sherlock."

"Not Sherlock." Lestrade retorted from the other side.

John scrambled out of his chair and threw off the lock, tossing the door back to find the exhausted Lestrade waiting for him. "You know, I thought Sherlock was joking when he said he had a list of things to do before he'd deign to see me again." Lestrade sighed.

"I'm pretty sure Sherlock doesn't quite know how to joke."

"Doesn't make me feel better about getting ignored in my own city."

John smirked. "You get used to it."

Lestrade grinned in solidarity and stepped in the room, securing the door behind him while he muttered, "That doesn't surprise me."

John climbed up to the overstuffed chair he'd been on before, leaving room for Lestrade to sit down on the end of the bed that John was fairly sure he'd have to scale like a mountain when it came time to sleep. Rather than sit, Lestrade gave John a long look before asking, "You want to tell me what's happened?"
John raised an innocent eyebrow. "We found out that Moriarty hasn't killed his next victim yet, and unlike some people, I require sleep, so I turned in for the night."

Lestrade gave a pointed look to the untouched sheets atop the bed and replied, "Yeah, it looks to be a restful night."

"I consider any point where I'm not dashing like a madman after Sherlock to be restful."

"I suppose it would get to be that way. But that still doesn't mean you're not hiding in here."

John slouched, tilting his head to look up at the ceiling rather than Lestrade’s unsurprisingly observant eyes. "And what is it you think happened?"

"One of the Elves got huffy with you, of course."

John snorted, "Are you still on that? You ought to get over your Elvish prejudice, Captain."

Lestrade grinned at John's playful tone but didn't let the topic slide. "You’re upset about something."

"Had a bit of a row with Sherlock's brother, if you must know."

Lestrade chortled in the shared misery of a Holmes survivor. "That madman went after you did he?"

"Of course he did. The two of them look nothing alike but it makes sense that the half-mad, obscenely clever Holmes boys would have to stick their noses into one another’s business."

"And he turned that cleverness on you I take it?"

"Something like that, yeah. What made you think I'd been dealing with an Elf?"
"Just 'cause Sherlock is Sherlock, mate."

"So you were using 'Elf' as a euphemism for Sherlock?"

"No, the whole lot are just... territorial over him."

"What do you mean?"

"From what I understand, Sherlock's mum was something fancy, even for an Elf. They're touchy over that sort of thing."

"And as her kid Sherlock is something fancy too."

"Exactly. Only, apparently Sherlock is getting on in years, for an Elf anyway, and he's a bit famous among all the peoples of Middle-earth, what with the running about with Gandalf and the solving murders. I've heard gossip that says he's basically the most eligible bachelor Elvish kind has. Apparently more than a few of them want the honor of being his mate. And having all that cleverness in their own children."

"So, basically you're telling me that half the race fancies the arrogant sod."

Lestrade smirked. " Might be why he's so arrogant, now that I think about it."

John gave a pained chuckle and sunk deep into his chair. "So you thought one of them gave me a lecture on how I'm busy wasting the attention of one of their best minds?"

"Or telling you that there's no point in making friends with him when he's just going to spend the rest of his life in one of the Elvish kingdoms and you're going to die like every other mortal."

Lestrade chuckled like it was a conversation he'd had with Elves before, but stopped when John didn't join in. "What's wrong?"

"It's the truth though, isn't it?"
Warning lights started to go off in Lestrade's mind. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's an Elf."

"Yeah, but you knew that when you started running about with him."

"But he's an Elf. He's important, and infamous, and he's going to live for bloody ever while I... I get forgotten. He's changed my whole life, Lestrade, and I won't even be a blip in his."

"Now, John, I didn't mean that, and you know it!"

"But it's the truth, Lestrade! He's Sherlock. Apparently everyone knows his name, and I'm just a Shire Hobbit."

"So? I never took you for too scared to try anyway, John."

"It's not that I'm not willing to try, Lestrade. It's... he deserves so much Lestrade. He deserves to be brilliant."

"And you don't?"

"I'm a Hobbit! We don't do things like..."

"Like fall in love with an Elf?" Lestrade asked gently.

"Oh, sod off."

"Can't mate, a lad should always have a friend to drink with when he's pining uselessly about the bloke he wants."
John gave a small grin. "Yeah, I could do with some drinking right now."

Lestrade laughed and gave the Hobbit a pat on the shoulder. "Give me a moment to track down a bottle of the good stuff and I'll be right back."

John woke to pounding in his head and Sherlock shouting through the door. John burrowed under his pillow, trying to drown own Sherlock’s demands that John answer. There was the slightest break in sound, enough that John let out a sigh of relief, but then he could hear Sherlock's picks scraping along the lock. John rolled out of bed and flung open the door to insist Sherlock go back to bed and let him have a hangover in peace. Sherlock swept in and pulled John off his feet and into a hug. John got lost for a moment in all the angles and planes that made up the Elf before John realized what he was sighing. "You're alright. You're alright."

John patted Sherlock's back. "Sherlock, what are you talking about? Of course I'm alright."

That was enough to bring the Elf back to himself and he awkwardly set John back down on the floor. Sherlock straightened his sleeves and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, that's good."

"What made you think I wasn't?"

Sherlock tensed now that he remembered what he'd come here for and John was nervous at the sight of Sherlock uncomfortable about anything. "You spent the night with Lestrade."

"Getting drunk, yes. Which is why I've got a bugger of a headache this morning, so unless you've actually got something to tell—"

"Lestrade is dead."

"That's not— he can't— how?"

"One of the guards found him in his bed this morning."
"But, we talked to him about the connection to Númenor! Why didn't he tell us?"

"Because he has none."

"... none?" John stumbled back against his bed before giving it up and slipping down to the ground.

"Not a drop anywhere in his ancestry as far as he knew, as far as anyone knew."

"So why in the bloody hell would Moriarty go after him!"

Sherlock looked at the floor and muttered, "While I have no evidence to support my theory..."

"Lestrade was killed to tell you to piss off."

"That would be my—"

"Where is he?" John demanded, interrupting whatever deductions Sherlock was trying to make.

Sherlock’s expression shut down. "He's in the morgue."

John shouldered past Sherlock and out the door, going as fast as his small legs would let him. John was too preoccupied with getting to Lestrade to bother looking behind him to see the pained expression on Sherlock's face.

The people of Gondor leapt out of John's way and left him unimpeded on his path to the morgue where he and Sherlock had been looking at bodies just yesterday. One of the guardsmen tried to stop John at the door, but the Hobbit was too small for the Man to get a proper grip and John slipped past into the dark, cold room.

Lestrade was laid out for examination on one of the stone tables, still close enough to life that John would've thought he was only sleeping. Molly started at the interruption, then waived away the guard when he came after John to drag him outside. She was beside Lestrade’s head, running her thin fingers through Lestrade’s short, graying hair and didn’t bother pulling away. “You shouldn’t
"No, sorry, I just… he was with me most of last night. We were getting drunk. Did that…"

Molly’s face softened. “I don’t know much about his manner of death yet. But I’ve seen Greg still fight with his sword arm broken and a knife in his side. I doubt alcohol would’ve made much of a difference.”

"Right, of course." John stared at the body of his friend and stepped slowly towards the table to look at him properly. Molly couldn’t quite manage a smile at him, but she did nudge over a stool so John could take a place beside her. They had a moment of solace and quiet before Sherlock swept through the door looking like he owned the place.

"Doctor, you will—" whatever demand Sherlock was about to make stuttered to a stop at the sight of the woman. “Ah, Molly.”

Her sigh made John’s heart hurt, and she slowly withdrew her fingers Lestrade’s skin. “They’ve sent you to conduct the autopsy, then?”

Sherlock physically bit his lip, forcing himself to think for a moment before he spoke. “I haven’t asked.”

Molly almost snapped a demand to know what he was doing there then, but she stopped at the hesitant look on Sherlock’s face. She turned to take in the grief etched over John’s gentle features, and took the whole thing for sorrow. John, however, kept his eyes on the body before him, ignoring Sherlock’s entrance and Molly’s knowing eyes. He was careful to keep his gaze off Lestrade’s face, only examining the wounds. Sherlock stood quietly off to the side of the table, letting John do his work uninterrupted. "There aren't any signs of defensive wounds, so his attacker probably put him unconscious first, like with the others."

John ran a small and gentle hand over the wound in Lestrade’s elbow, the only wound marring his otherwise healthy flesh. "The bastard bled him dry."

"He slept through it," Sherlock interrupted, "It would've been painless."

"Small mercy I suppose."
Sherlock took John's response for a good sign and continued, "The question becomes, then, who would Lestrade let get close enough to him to render him unconscious."

"He was a Captain of Gondor," Molly interrupted. "He took his oath to serve and protect very seriously. He'd let anyone get close to him if they came asking for help."

"But he wasn't in his uniform last night," John interjected.

Sherlock tilted his head and began to ramble off the details that only he could see. "Most people aren't the sort to ask a random stranger for help, meaning that whoever stopped him for aid would've know he was a Captain before they asked, meaning they were from Gondor."

"Or they had someone point Lestrade out to them," John added.

"Statistically unlikely, though I can inquire if anyone has been asking questions if I'm wrong. But..." Sherlock dashed for the door, some new evidence just making itself clear to him and demanding that he follow it.

"What? What have you figured out Sherlock?" John demanded.

The Elf turned on his heel and said, "Don't you see, John? It's someone in the city, it's got to be. And they're still here!"

"Sorry, what?"

"For the killer not to rouse suspicion it had to be both someone who knew Lestrade well enough to get away without asking questions about him, and for Lestrade not to be on his guard. Lestrade is vigilant everywhere, even more so in the city he's sworn to protect. But it's their city too! Do you see?"

"No, what should I be seeing?"
Sherlock huffed out an impatient breath. "The killer is still here! Lestrade's body was discovered too quickly, the whole guard is already on alert and they're out for the blood of whoever did this! The killer is hiding out in the city until they can safely make their way to Moriarty and deliver the blood. They're still here! We can find them!"

Sherlock bounded for the door, and it looked to John like he didn't feel the death at all. The Hobbit turned back to the body, willing himself to finally look up at Lestrade's face and give him the respect he was due, when Sherlock's hand rested on his shoulder. John flinched at the unexpected contact but prided himself on not jumping off the stool. "Will you be here when I get back?"
Sherlock asked hesitantly.

John furrowed his brow in confusion, "I didn't plan on spending the day in the morgue, no."

"I mean, will you still be in the city, speaking to me?"

Suddenly Sherlock's concern clicked. "You daft idiot." John smacked him in the arm. "You did not kill him. I came running to see him because he's my friend, not because you did anything wrong."

Sherlock gave him a brief smile before turning for the door. He stopped for a moment and replied in certain tones, "You didn't kill him either."

John snorted, "He might've been able to fight back if he hadn't been drinking with me."

"John," Sherlock insisted, "Moriarty has seen to the deaths of men better trained than Lestrade. There was nothing you could have changed about your behavior to fix it, and I of all people would tell you if it could." Sherlock hesitated a moment before he darted silently out the door.
The Arkenstone (B)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Old Took liked to tell a ghost story to young Hobbits when he thought they were being too rambunctious. It was one of the oldest of Hobbit legends. Like the Elves never forgot the kinslaying \(^1\) and the Men never forgot the Oathbreakers of Dunharrow \(^2\), Hobbits never forgot The First Murder.

It was a rare thing among their people, an obscenity that was almost unheard of. Death by anything other than old age was unusual enough that Hobbits would talk about it for years to come. As far as Bilbo was aware there had been five murders in the whole of Hobbit history, but none seemed quite so gruesome as the first.

Once upon a time there had been a Hobbit who killed his brother. Whatever reason he gave for the action had long been lost to history, but the manner of death was the stuff of nightmares for every boy and girl. The Hobbit had strangled his brother, choked the life out of him and then dropped him in the river and gone home like nothing happened.

Of course, the Old Took wouldn’t tell that part first. He’d tell how the Hobbit had come home alone from fishing, telling their Grandmother that his brother had roamed off to the next village. Times were peaceful and the boys were fully-grown, so there was no reason for her to doubt his word. Three days after his brother had gone visiting, fisherhobbits were out in their boat, casting nets into the river.

On their last cast of the day the net caught on something and nearly overturning the tiny ship. The hobbits tugged and tugged, pulling the net with all the strength in their arms. The young fisherhobbit was overjoyed, thinking they had caught the father of all fish, but the old fisherhobbit knew better. There was something in the water that shouldn’t be. Nets didn’t get caught like this in rocks, and they didn’t stay stuck in weeds.

After a long time pulling (hours and hours according to the Old Took) they gave one final heave and pulled the net up and over the side of the boat… and inside was the younger brother.

The young fisherhobbit screamed and nearly capsized them all with his flailing. (The Hobbitlings — and more than one of their parents—would gasp at this. The horror of a dead body now meshed together with every Hobbit’s inborn fear of drowning.) The old fisherhobbit grabbed his young companion by the scruff of his shirt and forced him to calm down, putting himself between the boy and the body while they rowed back to shore. He sent the young Hobbit on to the village to find help while he unwrapped the dead brother from the net.
Soon enough the sturdiest of the Hobbit-folk arrived and together they carried the body back to the village in the boat. Every Hobbit came streaming out of their houses, weeping and wailing at the thought that the boy had drowned. (The Old Took liked to lengthen or shorten this part of the story based on how well his audience was reacting. If the Hobbits were sniffling and heartbroken he would speed along, but if they had doubt in their eyes he would drag out their mourning until every listener believed it was an accident.)

Of course, since the Old Took was a fan of drama, that would be moment when everything changed.

The Grandmother hobbled out of her house, every step slow and painful. The villagers tried to hold her back, but she refused to leave her grandson in the street to be tended to by another. She staggered to her grandson’s feet and took a long look at his battered body before ripping her eyes up to the old fisherhobbit standing beside the dead boy’s head. While the others were moaning about what a tragedy it was to lose one so young to the river, she knew better.

Along with the strange, bloated discoloration that came with a waterlogged body and the bruises that came from three days washed about amongst the rocks, there was something strange. The old fisherhobbit gave the grandmother a slow nod, confirming that the ring of bruises around the dead Hobbit’s throat were not something he could’ve gotten from the water.

The Old Took liked to say he kept telling this story so he would know how clever his grandchildren were. The adroit ones would gasp at the bruises, the knowledge that the Hobbit had been strangled by his brother and dumped in the river crashing over them in one moment. The others would keep staring at him with wide eyes, wanting him to explain to them what had happened, what it meant. Not until he spoke of the Grandmother exiling her last grandson did most of the Hobbits understand what the Old Took never could quite say. The Hobbit had been murdered by his brother.

No matter what reasons the Old Took gave to pacify upset parents about why he told this story, Bilbo knew better. This Old Took, and every Old Took before him, told the story again and again so that they would never forget. Like the Elves and the Men, they needed to remember it so that they would never repeat it. So that they would know that somewhere deep in their hearts they held the capacity to do something so terrible. Because if you believed it was beyond you, then you would be unable to defend against it.

Bilbo thought about this story because he didn’t know if the Dwarves had a tale that was meant to remind them of all the terrible things they could be. He’d heard tell of Dwarves getting betrayed by Elves more times than he cared to count, but the folly of Dwarves went unacknowledged. He didn’t know if becoming a glutton for gold was simply part of the growing up process for
Dwarves, like a thirty-third birthday party for Hobbits and shaving for Men. Or if, perhaps, it was something they were meant to be ashamed of, a weakness of their species that they were meant to conquer and Bilbo’s companions just happened to fail.

Smaug the Terrible was slain, his corpse rotting the bottom of the Long Lake, like that first murdered Hobbit. This was the moment that they’d all waited for, that they’d scare hoped would actually come to pass. And yet, there was no joy to be found.

There were Men and Elves outside, demanding some compensation for the horror of the dragon that Thrór’s greed had brought to their door and their part in taking him down. Rather than making peace after so many years of fighting, Thorin and the whole Company were sifting through mountains of gold to find the damn Arkenstone. They hadn’t been much better before friends turned to enemies appeared at their door, with each member of the Company steadily succumbing to the call of the gold.

The First Murder taught each Hobbit child that there was nothing worse then a Hobbit who betrayed his family. The murderer’s purpose had long been lost to time because there was nothing in the whole of Middle-earth worth the death of a family member. The thought that you might turn on your family was anathema to every Hobbit who drew breath, and he wondered what the Dwarves might consider so foul since the death of every last one of them in the name of a rock wasn’t enough.

Bilbo had tried to lure the Dwarves out with promises of stories and the temptation of a home-cooked meal, but they would have none of it. They were dead to the world, swimming in the rivers of gold that Thorin had been so consumed with returning to. With each passing day Bilbo found himself alone on the battlements, soaking up what little sun he could with a pile of books by his side.

He had tried to read of John and Sherlock, but he couldn’t stomach the thought that he was so pathetically alone while they at least had each other. Instead, Bilbo had rifled through the surprisingly well-stocked Westron section of the Great Library in his own private quest for any book that might explain this cursed obsession with the Arkenstone. He’d tried the traditional Hobbit remedies meant to distract anyone from their silliness, and just as they hadn’t worked on Bilbo, they didn’t work on the Company. Thus far the books he had found never spoke of this species-wide fixation on gems as a flaw, and he was running out of time.

Bilbo peered out over the crumbling battlements to observe the wide plain surrounding the mountain. It could be such a beautiful place. The soil was now enriched with ash, and a determined hand with plenty of seeds was all this place needed to be as green as the Shire. Why, if he gave Hamfast Gamgee the run of a spring market, that Hobbit alone would be enough to change the whole landscape. There could be rows upon rows of vegetables, corn and pumpkins and tomatoes, and even fields of grass for the cows that the Dwarves would no doubt want. And even Dwarves
could handle tossing handfuls of wildflower seeds along the sides of the mountain. By spring there
could be sunflowers and poppies and the bright blue of forget-me-nots that Thorin couldn’t
possibly object to because they matched his eyes.

But there weren’t flowers growing down there, neither were there vegetables, nor grass. There were
fires surrounding the Lonely Mountain.

The Men and Elves were in separate camps, a thick line of blackened dirt splitting them into two.
Even their fury against Thorin wasn’t enough to truly bring them together. The sun was sinking in
the far off west of the Misty Mountains and the armies below were lighting their fires to hold back
the night. Lighting their fires to have furious chats with one another so that they might attack when
the dawn came. So that all Bilbo had worked for on this trek across the whole of Middle-earth
might be killed to salve the pride of Dwarves who should be making peace, should be making their
new lives, should be striving for all those things they said were worth dying for. Never, not one of
them, said that the Arkenstone was worth their life. Glóín might never see his family again, Ori
might never read another book, Bombur never cook another meal, Fíli be nothing more than a
corpse for his mother to bury in the mountain that was meant to be their home.

No, this rock wasn’t worth it.

Thrór had clung to the Arkenstone and brought down a dragon’s lust on their head, killing more of
his people than Bilbo could number. Then his pride had dragged them all to Moria so that he could
be king under another mountain. He had died for his folly, but he’d taken his son’s mind and
untold more Dwarves with him. And now Thorin, the great hope of his people, the King who had
led them through exile, was falling under the same curse.

Hobbits learned from their mistakes, and Bilbo would not have it.

He reached inside his vest, to the pocket where he had so long kept the journal of John Watson.
That story was now tucked safely away in Bilbo’s pile of books, and the Arkenstone had taken its
place.

Bilbo slid out the stone to stare at it one last time. Such a little thing that had wreaked so much
havoc on them all. The soulless, lifeless thing that would bring down the end of the line of Durin.
The moon caught the hewed edges of the stone, glinting in his hands like a star. A cursed star that
would guide them all to ruin. He would not stand for this nonsense.

Bilbo tucked the Arkenstone back into his pocket and slipped on his ring. He’d found a long rope
and a sturdy piece of wall to tie it to, and that would have to be enough.
FN 1: There were, tragically enough, three kinslayings in Elvish history. Rather than explain each of them in turn, I will explain that anytime the Elves refer to a kinslaying they refer to when one clan of Elves turns in violence against another. In particular, Bilbo is thinking of the Kinslaying at Alqualondë, which was the first slaying of Elf by Elf. Many of the Elves were living in Valinor (the land to West where the Valar live and the characters sail to at the end of the The Lord of the Rings). However, a certain clan of Elves (lead by Fëanor) wanted to leave Valinor and return to the rest of Middle-earth, but they had no boats. He stole boats from another clan, and when that clan tried to stop him because the Valar (the angels) didn’t want them to return to Middle-earth, Fëanor and his people turned to bloodshed. Because of this violence they were exiled from Valinor and forbidden from returning for thousands of years.

FN 2: The Oathbreakers of Dunharrow are also know as that fabulous Army of the Dead from Return of the King. They swore to Isildur (also known as the idiot who didn’t destroy the Ring) that they would join him in battle against Sauron. When they did not, Isildur cursed them to be bound to Middle-earth until they fulfilled their oath.
Sherlock spent hours dashing over the whole of the White City, checking every nook and inspecting every cranny to find a place suitable for the storage or disposal of Lestrade's blood. Eventually he made his way to a small study on the sixth level of the city that he always appropriated when he came to town. Sherlock was not at all surprised to see Mycroft there, but for some reason he had been expecting someone to show John the way.

Mycroft looked up from an ancient manuscript spread over half the table and raised his eyebrow at Sherlock's glance around the room. "He's not here."

"Of course he's not. He's off doing… things."

"My, how wonderfully descriptive." Sherlock huffed and Mycroft just sighed. "You left the Hobbit to fend for himself while you chased down your supposed lead, didn't you?"

"He's not a child, Mycroft! And he was with Molly!"

Mycroft didn't even deign to address the human female as adequate protection. "No, of course he’s not a child. He's merely a stranger in a new land where everything is too big for him to properly use. I can't imagine why I might be concerned for him."

"Do be quiet Mycroft. What are you doing here?"

Mycroft raised an eyebrow that begged to say, 'do you wish me to be quiet or to answer the question?' but he refrained and replied, "I was fully informed of your situation and I thought I might be of service."

"You mean you might follow me around and make sure I didn't run off and marry John in a fit of human sentimentality."

"Given that neither of you are human I fail to see how that could be a concern."
"Mycroft..." Sherlock hissed and his brother scolded, "Do stop growling at me Sherlock, I'm here to help you."

"How?"

"Lestrade seems an odd choice to me, Sherlock, if Moriarty truly intended to send a message to you. Wouldn't John be a more appropriate victim?" Sherlock rolled his eyes and Mycroft continued, "Don't look at me like that, everyone in the city knows of your attachment to him, even the humans are gossiping about it."

"So why make his point with Lestrade?" Sherlock hummed. He paced across the short length of the room before throwing himself down on a divan. "I'm missing something, and until I get it straightened out John is still a potential target."

"I shall see to it that Irene keeps him company."

Sherlock puckered his nose. "Irene?" He couldn’t quite object to the notion that John needed protection, but the thought of genuine John and devious Irene forced to spend time with one another seemed to be asking for trouble.

"Yes Sherlock. Aggravating though you may find her, Irene can be positively feral when she feels she's defending something worth her effort. And, the only person better to have in your debt than you is me, which will ensure her belief that John is entirely worth her effort."

John had never been the indoor sort of Hobbit, and now, finding himself not only stuck indoors but also locked in with quite possibly the slimiest Elf he’d ever meet, John found that it strained on his nerves. John had been irritated when Irene turned up at his door and announced that Mycroft had insisted she keep John company and look after him until Sherlock could contain the situation. John had handled the news badly, trying to storm past her and get out the door, but she'd been a little too excited to follow Mycroft's orders and maneuvered herself into his way. John had never been one to hit females, no matter how annoying, so her efforts kept him inside the room. Since then they'd been wrapped in a tense quiet, only broken by Irene’s occasional inane comments about how wonderfully Sherlock seemed to be doing. She was trying to get a rise out of him, John knew that, but it was still difficult to bite his tongue and smile graciously whenever she implied that John was keeping Sherlock from bigger and better things.
The conversation might have gotten to him a day earlier, but now, all John could think about was Lestrade's teasing smile as he told John that love was always worth it, no matter how uncomfortable. John found Irene brash and aggressive, though he supposed that she had to be cleverer than she seemed or Sherlock wouldn't have even made a pretense of accepting her presence.

"So, what is it like to work a case with Sherlock?"

It was a direct question, so John couldn't just ignore her, and though she sounded uninterested, John knew there was point to it. "I'm never bored."

Irene gave him a small smile, as though she was in on the true meaning of those words and John would really never know. "I was under the impression that you were his new partner in crime?"

"I was under the impression that I was his first partner in crime."

"I wouldn't go quite that far, after all, Sherlock has been alive considerably longer than you have. Perhaps he's had partners he's never told you about."

Irene put just the slightest emphasis on 'partner' to make John's spine stiffen at the thought but he replied, "That's life."

"No little one, that's life for an Elf."

John was about to raise his fists against a woman for the first time in his life (Harry didn't count) when Sherlock slammed through the door and interrupted them. He looked back and forth between the two and automatically knew they'd been fighting. Sherlock stuck out his hand to hold open the door before it even had the chance to swing shut and insisted to Irene, "Leave. Now."

She rolled her eyes at him like he was being completely ridiculous and draped herself over one of the chairs in defiance. Sherlock didn't even wait a beat and grabbed John's hand, pulling the Hobbit out the door behind him. Irene glowered as Sherlock slammed shut the door, but Sherlock kept his long stride down the hall and Irene didn't follow. John knew that he probably ought to scold Sherlock for being rude, but he couldn't get the giddy grin off his face.

Sherlock looked as irritated as John had ever seen him. "You'll sleep in my rooms tonight where
none of them and their stupidity can bother us."

John ignored the way his heart skipped a beat at the announcement he’d be in Sherlock’s rooms. A proper sort of Hobbit would object to that arrangement, but between the tension of sleeping in the same room as Sherlock and being trapped in his room with Irene, John would choose the impropriety any day. "Us? You actually plan to sleep then?"

Sherlock muttered something under his breath. John grinned and asked him to repeat it, which made Sherlock snap, "Mycroft sent me to my room! He says that if I’m missing things then I need to sleep."

"Good." Sherlock stiffened at the thought that John was about to pronounce Mycroft right. Instead John said, "He's finally behaving like an elder brother ought to."

Sherlock looked smug. "He does have an unnatural fascination with interfering in my life."

"Harry has the same problem." John confided, soothing the last of Sherlock's stiffness. "Am I sleeping on your sofa then?"

"Nonsense John, you'll be in the bed."

"W-what?" John croaked, hoping that Sherlock didn't notice the way his voice cracked.

Sherlock did, obviously, and quirked an eyebrow but didn't ask any questions. "I said Mycroft sent me to my room, not to bed. He knows perfectly well that I cannot sleep during a case, he merely intends to force me to quiet my mind for several hours by putting you in my care while you sleep."

"That's absurd Sherlock, I don't need looking after. You can go and chase criminals all you want, no one has to be there to take care of me."

"That was precisely the argument I made to Mycroft, however, he made an observation that I had missed, which led to Irene being inflicted upon you and me getting sent to my room."

John smirked at Sherlock's petulant tone and couldn't help but ask, "And what was that?"
"If Moriarty had truly intended to send me a message he would've done damage to you." John stopped, which Sherlock misinterpreted this as concern and explained, "He won't actually, I'll stop him first, but no matter how decent a human Lestrade was, it doesn't make sense that Moriarty would completely ignore my connection to you."

"Maybe he didn't know about it?" John forced himself to ask.

"That's highly unlikely. Mycroft informs me that I've been so obvious that even the humans know how fond I am of you."

"Fond?" John stuttered to himself while Sherlock ushered John into his room. The space was, obviously, larger than John's own rooms, and rather far away from the place where John had been told that Elves usually made camp within the White City. John took in the clean white lines of the space and the high-set, fluffy bed and didn't even notice that Sherlock was stripping off his outer cloak.

"S-Sherlock, what are you doing?"

Sherlock didn't bother stopping as he toed off his shoes and started rolling up his sleeves. "I had assumed that you've already eaten, despite Irene's unappetizing presence."

"Well, yeah, but-"

"And given the behavioral patterns I've observed you have no set nightly absolutions that you must see to before sleeping."

"No, but-"

"Then why aren't you getting in bed?"

John looked up at Sherlock, all lean lines and black curls tumbling into grey eyes and he stumbled out, "I can't... think... of a reason."
"Excellent." Sherlock plucked John off the ground and set him on the edge of the bed, easily plucking off John's vest, stripping down his braces, and starting on the Hobbit's shirt buttons before he could react. John clutched the edges of his shirt and pulled them back together with a yelp, "Sherlock, what are you doing!"

Sherlock rolled his eyes at him like John was being difficult on purpose and declared, "I'm undressing you, obviously."

"Yeah, got that, but why?" John pleaded, as though Sherlock was taunting the Hobbit with his obtuseness.

"Because you prefer to sleep in as little clothing as you can get away with. If you weren't a doctor who might be called upon in the middle of the night you probably would sleep in the nude."

"Sherlock!" John hissed as though he was saying a dirty word.

"That damn human influence on your species." Sherlock scoffed. "It's fine, John. Elves have no such compunctions."

"Excuse me, but I don't think I've ever seen an Elf running around starkers."

"Of course not. But there's a difference between being 'starkers' and going without your shirt and trousers under the covers of your own bed."

The rebellious part of John wanted to declare, 'But it's your bed, and that makes all the difference,' but he refrained. He kept his shirt clutched closed and hedged, "I just don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight, Sherlock."

"Because you're upset over Lestrade, I understand. And I've taken precautions."

"You've what?"

"Please John, just get into bed." Sherlock had such a look of pleading that John couldn't stop himself from sliding under the covers. Sherlock gave him a pointed look and from the safety of the
sheets John shucked off his shirt and tossed it to the side of the bed. Sherlock gave a pleased nod and stepped to a black case he had resting on the table and pulled out a violin.

He gave it a brisk tune while he explained, "My own instrument is in Lothlórien and, as it was made by Elves, is superior in craftsmanship. However, these humans make an acceptable alternative."

John smirked at the strange times that Sherlock decided to declare his cultural superiority. Sherlock gave a flick of his bow and then started in on a long, low note. John leaned back into the pile of pillows behind him and watched as Sherlock played. The Elf swayed with the song, twisting with the notes to the rhythm he was bowing. Before he sunk too deep in the music to properly think, John decided that he'd ask Sherlock to play something fast for him tomorrow, because John had the suspicion that if the tune was right, Sherlock would dance while he played.

The city had fallen silent to the echoes of Sherlock playing the violin. The lifeblood in the tune was strong enough that it carried farther than it should have been able to out his open window, filling the city with his pain and his sudden springing of hope. The humans all stopped their work and stared into nothingness, while those who were asleep had beautiful dreams. The men were all creatures of never-ending faith so they could sense the song's meaning, even without understanding it.

The Elves, however, were having a much more difficult time.

Mycroft sat out on a balcony, listening to the sound of his brother's song resonate through the White City and fill them all with the tender spirit he so diligently kept hidden. Most of the Elves were too shocked at the sound of one of their people playing so freely outside their own sacred halls to truly appreciate the beauty, but those that did were crying with strength of Sherlock's song and what he was asking for.

But of course, there were those who didn't grasp the true beauty of what they were being shown. Irene floated through the room, moving with enough grace to at least avoid stomping, and came to Mycroft in a fury. "You cannot let him do this!" she spat.

Mycroft didn’t bother looking at her, instead keeping his half-lidded gaze spread out over the city while he listened to Sherlock’s lilting strains. "I think you'll find that it's been centuries since anyone let Sherlock do anything."
"You are his brother and the eldest of us here, it is your responsibility to stop him from doing things that are insane!"

One of the younger Elves standing beside the door looked as though he wished to ask Mycroft what Irene was talking about, but he couldn't bring himself to interrupt the music. Mycroft was feeling genial at being allowed to listen to his brother play for the first time in several decades and explained, "Sherlock abhors singing." The Elf looked so startled he nearly spoke again, but Mycroft went on. "Not in others, just in himself. He has a perfectly lovely voice, but he longs to do things with it that a voice is just not capable of, and so he prefers instruments." Sherlock chose that moment to play out a string of complicated notes and then leap to one high, clear note that rose above the clouds and made the heart ache. Mycroft let the sound hang there, proving his point before he finished, "Of course, he prefers the violin."

Through clenched teeth Irene hissed, "If you don't stop him, I will."

She whirled around to storm off the balcony and Mycroft chuckled, "You cannot stop what has already begun." Irene froze at the implications of that, and Mycroft twisted the verbal knife. "Gandalf informed me that he's been hearing this song trail around Sherlock since the moment John crossed his path. With every breath he’s taken since they met, Sherlock has been praying to be allowed to keep the Hobbit."

The young Elf raised an eyebrow and Mycroft shuddered at what they were teaching young people these days if he couldn’t tell what was going on. "My dear boy, we were all born out of the song of Eru Illúvatar. He, with his Valar, sang us into being. It is why we Elves sing and play, we are praying to him, sharing with him the gift of the song he has given us. Tonight’s playing is merely Sherlock begging the same thing his soul has been asking for for days.

"He's..." the young Elf gasped in awe.

"Yes, Sherlock is asking to keep John, in whatever way Illúvatar chooses to keep them together."

"But he might become mortal. Illúvatar might give Sherlock his Hobbit by making him human."

Sherlock wound the notes higher and tighter, lost and alone as they sought for something to make them whole and Mycroft replied, "I do not think Sherlock would mind."
John woke the next morning to Sherlock looking down at him with an amused smile. Time had slipped away while Sherlock was playing, and at some point John had fallen into a serene sleep, nightmares chased away by Sherlock’s song. Soul-deep comfort apparently meant that John was prone to kick aside his blankets, leaving him sprawled on his back with nothing but pants between him and Sherlock’s gaze. John caught himself in mid-stretch before deciding that there was no way to casually pull the blanket back up for cover. Instead he pushed back his blush and grinned at Sherlock when the Elf tugged straight his shirt to pretend like he wasn’t staring. With his gaze firmly fixed someplace that wasn’t a mostly naked Hobbit, Sherlock asked, "Slept well, then?"

"How could I not?" John teased, and a grin split across Sherlock's face in reply while he tossed on his cloak.

John leaned up from the warmth of the bed. "You'll play for me again, won't you?"

Sherlock paused and smirked at John like he wanted to call him a silly Hobbit, but instead dropped a kiss to John's forehead and headed for the door as he said over his shoulder, "Always."

He had played for John, and John had adored it. That would have been enough to put Sherlock in a brilliant mood, but it got better. He'd felt the stirring in the air, the promise in the prayer of his music, and Sherlock knew that he and John belonged together in every way they could find, now Sherlock just had to wait for Illúvatar to carry it out. And not even the presence of Mycroft in his favorite library could dampen Sherlock's mood.

Mycroft gave him a long look. "I am unsure whether to be pleased for you or to curse that you have accomplished this endeavor."

"Why would you be upset?"

"We may not speak for decades at a time, but I do take comfort from the fact that you're still breathing."
"You are the one who said there is no point in living forever if I intended to spend it alone."

"At that point I had hoped to prod you in Irene's general direction." Sherlock scoffed and Mycroft added, "Though now that I see you with John I find myself grateful that all my attempts failed. I would've hated to be complicit in helping you get a divorce." Sherlock actually smirked at that and Mycroft reveled in the simple joy behind the motion.

Sherlock obviously realized that he was showing something other than irritation to his brother and brought himself back to the norm by asking, "Did you laze about while I was seeing to John or did you actually do something useful?"

Mycroft just smirked at Sherlock and a moment later there was a knock on the door. Sherlock rolled his eyes at Mycroft for the dramatic move he would've done himself. Sherlock swung the door open and sighed at Molly standing on the other side. The girl looked exhausted, the kind of bone deep weary that came from reminding yourself that you were alive for a reason. Sherlock flicked his eyes over her uncombed hair and the wrinkles around the cuffs of her dress that came from rubbing away the tears in her eyes. Those alone, even without the barest of limps that meant she’d collapsed to her knees at least once in the last forty-eight hours, would’ve told Sherlock that Molly had been in love with Lestrade.

John’s voice perked up in the back of Sherlock’s mind, reminding him that to Molly that love would still be present, whether or not Lestrade was dead. That still present love meant that Molly should not be dragged into this, shouldn’t be answering questions about her lover. (No, not lover, they never consummated their relationship. Knowing Lestrade, probability suggested that neither of them ever spoke of it.) She should be someplace private, free to indulge her grief in the quiet way she would’ve preferred.

Sherlock seized Molly by the wrist and pulled her into the room, free from the gaze of the gossiping biddies who had no doubt haunted her steps all day. “You shouldn’t have made her come, Mycroft!”

Molly reached out and rested one soft, sturdy hand on Sherlock’s forearm, in a move so perfectly like John that Sherlock supposed she’d watched them in the morgue. “I know… knew Greg better than anyone. If there’s something he shared with the bloodlines of the other victims, I’m the one who’ll know about it.”

“Mycroft told you about the other murder victims then. How Humans with a specific background are being hunted and drained so that their blood might be used for some as yet unknown purpose?”
Molly paled at having it laid out quite so grotesquely, but at her core she was still a healer. She bit her thin bottom lip and gave Sherlock a sharp nod. “He gave some background information so that I could think for a while and make sure I didn’t miss anything.” Sherlock took a long look at the woman before deciding that she wasn’t going to collapse in a heartbroken pile on the floor (and John wouldn’t scold him for letting that happen). When he was certain of her, Sherlock waived Molly over to the table where Mycroft had the genealogies of the dead men spread out. Mycroft shifted away from the table to give Molly the central space, best for examining the web of information and Elvish notes both brothers had scratched into the margins.

“At this moment we do not know the killer’s motivations, but Sherlock and I thought he was hunting down men who carry various incarnations of this specific bloodline. However, Lestrade’s death deviated from that pattern.”

Molly ran her fingertips over the family trees, her eyes trained in picking up the details of corpses immediately lighting upon the shared ancestry between them. Her hand paused over Lestrade’s own history. Sherlock listened to the voice of John in the back of his head and went to stand beside her. He put two fingers to her wrist, nudging her focus away. He leaned forward, as though he was imparting a secret and whispered, "I respected Lestrade. Almost everyone in this world is a useless fool, and Lestrade was not. He was worth more than the end he met."

Molly drew in a long, shuddering breath. “What do you need to know?”

Sherlock stepped away from her and returned to his corner leaving Mycroft to ask, "Did Lestrade have any Númenorean ancestry that you were aware of?"

“No, none at all. It was quite the scandal when the King appointed him to be Captain. Tradition and the Lords prefer that the Captain of Gondor be someone with a claim to Númenorean blood, and they were furious that Lestrade didn’t have any. They didn’t care that he was the best man for the job, and that he was the only one the rest of the guard would follow.”

Mycroft slouched for half a beat before he inanely asked, “Are you sure?”

“I’m positive. His family came to Gondor from Rhovanion after the Great Plague. His people never would’ve had the chance to come in contact with Númenor, and even if they had, no one would’ve known that about him to drain the blood.”

The two Elves shared an empty look. They had both known that Moriarty wasn’t above killing for the sheer fun of it, but if he’d wanted to hurt Sherlock it made more sense to go after John. That implied that there was something to be gained from Lestrade’s blood. Molly ignored the speaking
glance the brothers were sharing and asked, “Why are you looking at Númenor anyway?”

Mycroft quirked an eyebrow at her for missing the detail in the documents. “It’s the only trait the men all share beyond being Men.”

“No it’s not.” Sherlock would’ve snorted at her if she hadn’t sounded so sincerely confident.

Sherlock had to give Molly some credit for not rearing back when he stepped into her space. “What do you mean?”

“All your victims are from this side of the Misty Mountains. In fact, if I’m reading your death dates right then the victims have descended from places getting closer and closer to the Mountains.”

Sherlock internally ran through the victims in chronological order, beginning with a boatman from the Sea of Rhûn in the deep southwest and culminating in the man of Rohan who spent his days in the shadow of the Misty Mountains and Lestrade, whose blood had come solely from the lands surrounding Mirkwood. Now that Molly had pointed it out, the connection seemed painfully clear. “Molly, you are beautiful,” Sherlock whispered. It spoke to the depth of her grief that she didn’t even blush. “But why would he care about Men from that part of the world?”

Mycroft stiffened in sudden understanding. “Blood that is deeply rooted in a place can be used to manipulate that land to your needs.”

“What?” Molly asked, too human and too innocent to have ever dabbled in magics such as these.

“If you used the blood of the King of Gondor in conjunction with a powerful enough ritual, then you would be able to rip apart the city walls.”

The blood drained from Molly’s face. “If that’s possible why don’t more people do that?”

“The amount of magic it would require to complete such a ritual would be almost impossible. I can think of perhaps four creatures in the whole of Middle-earth who might be capable of it. However, none of them would risk the price the spell would demand. Yet, blood magic can still give the right caster a unique insight into the land. The closer the blood is to the place that you wish to search, the more powerful the search will be.”
Sherlock’s features settled into something silent. Only when the Elf stopped moving did one
realize the subtle expressions that were always there. “The Gladden Fields.”

Mycroft gave a brusque nod. “With the right blood the Fields would yield up all their secrets.”

“But Lestrade’s blood won’t be good enough. The closest his people got to the Fields was southern
Mirkwood. If it has been lost to the Fields for this long then nothing but someone who’s lived for
centuries in those marshes will do.” Sherlock made to bound out of the door, off to hunt down a
book of the peoples who might have ever called the Gladden Fields home. But Mycroft grabbed
him by the back of his shirt and pulled him close. Sherlock stopped at the sickly pale pallor to his
brother’s face.

"Sherlock, John is a Hobbit."

"So?"

"Before they crossed the Misty Mountains, Hobbits lived in the Vales of Anduin.”

"The valleys scattered along the Great River,” Sherlock breathed out in disbelief.

“One of which houses the Gladden Fields.” Sherlock ran out the door before Mycroft could suggest
that they call backup to help with the situation.

Molly latched on to Mycroft and insisted that he explain since not all of them were capable of
Sherlock’s leaps in logic. “Hobbits once lived upon the Anduin River that flows through the
Gladden Fields. They lived up and down the whole length of the river for longer than anyone is
sure. When the Greenwood turned to Mirkwood they left, crossing the Misty Mountains. There are
rumors that some Hobbits still reside in the area, but no one has seen them since the migration.
Rather than search for them, the killer might be able to get what he needs from John.”

“Why didn’t this killer just go for Hobbits in the first place then?”

“Hobbits are small and simple, our murderer would think them too plain to be able to assist him in
such a grand endeavor. If Sherlock hadn’t happened across John, I have no doubt Moriarty
would’ve gone centuries without Hobbits ever crossing his mind.”

Molly released her grip on him instantly. "I'll rally the guards, you go after Sherlock."

Mycroft went tearing down the hallway behind his brother, hoping that their luck would hold. He ignored the stares the humans were giving him as he sprinted. He could hear the call go up behind him, the city’s guard gathering together to come to their aid. Mycroft rounded the final corner and shot through Sherlock’s bedroom door. Sherlock stood alone in the middle of the untouched space. "Perhaps—"

"No," Sherlock replied in a monotone. “He promised he'd stay here today. He wouldn't break his word."

Mycroft's presence triggered something in Sherlock and he stopped staring at the nothingness to survey the room and look for clues. Mycroft stepped past Sherlock and went into the small bathroom where he found the guard he’d left at the door unconscious on the floor. It was the young Elf from last night, the one who had been so enthralled by Sherlock's behavior that he insisted on protecting the little Hobbit who was the object of such devotion. Mycroft checked that the boy was still breathing and turned to find Sherlock standing behind him.

"There are marks where the guard’s feet were dragged across the floor. They dispensed of him first and probably played on John's healing sensibilities to get him to open the door and help his protection."

"The boy could only be ambushed by another Elf." Mycroft added.

"Not ambush. John would've heard the sounds of fighting and come to check. They wanted in and the boy refused. That's when they rendered him unconscious, probably with a blow to the back of the head, and they knocked on the door pretending that the boy had fainted." Sherlock pointed to the slightest of depressions in the carpet and explained, "They laid him there and John knelt beside the boy to check him, leaving himself exposed to attack."

Mycroft took in the tracks Sherlock was seeing on the carpet and interjected, "There are no other footprints, how did she get John out of here?"

"John is small and lean, it wouldn't be too difficult to carry him from the room."
"She couldn't have taken him far."

Sherlock paused at Mycroft's switch from 'they' to 'she' and asked, "You believe it was Irene?"

"As do you, little brother."

Agony flitted across Sherlock's features. "She did it because—"

"Her motivations are irrelevant, Sherlock. When we find John you'll have a lifetime to make it up to him."

Sherlock was only paying Mycroft half an ear of attention, his gaze too focused on the rumpled sheets of his bed to pay him any actual mind. Molly arrived at the door with a group of guardsman at her back and Mycroft left Sherlock in peace and issued orders to spread out and search the city for John, starting from this point and moving out in a grid pattern.

The guardsmen went out in a fury, each of them fighting to stop the one who'd murdered their beloved Captain and had now taken the little Hobbit who had so gently tended to his body.

Mycroft stepped back to Sherlock and rested a hand on his shoulder, lending his brother strength to shore him up. "A lifetime?"

"Or as long as he can stand you." Mycroft smirked.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: Rhovanion is an area of Middle-earth directly to the east of the Greenwood (aka: Mirkwood) and extending all the way down to the south below the trees. Eventually the people there settled under a king and formed a strong alliance with Gondor. Hundreds of years later the people were devastated by a plague that killed over half their population. If that wasn’t bad enough, the remainder were then attacked by other tribes of evil men and taken into slavery until they were freed by Gondor. Most of the people of Rhovanion then moved to Gondor rather than stay in that part of the world.

FN 2: The Gladden Fields are a small, marshy area in between the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood. They are most infamously known for being the place where Isildur (aka: the guy who didn’t destroy the Ring when he had the chance) was murdered and the One Ring was lost. The Ring stayed in the Gladden Fields for over a thousand
years until it was picked up by Gollum’s cousin, who was then murdered by Gollum so he could take the Ring. Just fyi, Sherlock and Mycroft don’t discuss this, because the Disaster of the Gladden Fields is really the only thing the land is known for so to them it’s implied.
Gandalf the Grey was going to kill Thorin Oakenshield. He was going to take that Dwarf by the scruff of his beard and toss him over the battlements like he’d threatened to do with Bilbo.

The Wizard had all but flown to the Lonely Mountain after the threat of Dol Guldur had been dispatched, desperate to get to them before the Dark Lord’s minions besieged thirteen Dwarves and one Hobbit who were sorely unprepared for the fight. He had about five minutes to be eminently grateful that the Men of Dale and the Elves of Mirkwood were outside the city with Dáin’s Dwarves. Perhaps together the lot of them would be able to push back against Azog and the oncoming army of Orcs and Goblins.

Of course, that gratitude died a sharp and painful death when he saw that the Free Folk of Middle-earth were preparing to turn on one another. The Dwarves of the Iron Hills were camped outside Erebor’s shattered front gate, tents erected in a pattern that meant they were not housing Dwarven soldiers, but were instead housing Dwarven traps. Dáin’s army was prepared for a sudden onslaught of Men and Elves. They would hold their ground long enough to ensure the retreat back into Erebor, then suddenly the gate would spring shut behind them. (Gandalf would wager his staff that the first things the Company had done was repair the gate just enough to close when they wanted it to but still appear ruined.)

The Men of Lake-town and the Elves of Mirkwood were split into two distinct armies, enough space between them as between the Dwarves. The moment the gate closed behind the Dwarves the Elves and Men would turn on one another in their frustration, and even in death the curse of Smaug would destroy them all.

Gandalf rode his horse hard, aiming straight for the blank space sitting empty between the three encampments. His thunderous arrival would be enough to draw most of the attention, and the light he was summoning to burst from his sword would do the rest. However, before Gandalf could reach his designated position, his horse slammed to a stop. Were Gandalf a lesser horseman he would’ve been thrown from his mount, but as it was, the sight of a battered Bilbo Baggins standing before him was nearly enough to do the task anyway.

Nine hundred sixty-four years Gandalf had walked the realms of Mortals. In that time he had seen the worst Men, Dwarves, Elves, Goblins, Wargs, Orcs, Trolls, and Maiar were capable of. But few things had ever disturbed him quite so much as the Crest of Durin bludgeoned into Bilbo’s cheek.
One creature in Middle-earth bore that seal. One creature had the temper that meant he would turn on one of the gentlest of Middle-earth’s children.

Gandalf had been incensed before; furious that Thorin’s pride had led them all to this place. But now, now Gandalf had slipped in to a soul-deep rage that he had not experienced since he took up the guise of humanity and descended to Middle-earth. In that moment he would’ve laid aside the rules he was meant to abide by and used the whole of his strength to level the Lonely Mountain down to dust. To bury Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór in the rock that he deemed more important than a life that had saved his own.

But in a display of the fortuitous timing that would forever define his legend, Bilbo Baggins dashed up to Gandalf’s horse with no concern for his own safety and started shouting, “Gandalf, you’ve got to make them see sense!”

The Hobbit’s voice cut through the havoc Gandalf was planning out in his head. Bilbo sounded… terrified. Like the whole affair had slipped through his fingers and he didn’t understand how good Hobbit sense wasn’t ruling the day. Gandalf slipped from the back of his horse and dropped down beside Bilbo. He cradled the Hobbit’s cheek in his palm, slowly running the pad of his thumb across the purpling bruise that stretched underneath Bilbo’s eye. “What happened here, my dear boy?”

“The Arkenstone,” Bilbo spat. “Thorin’s gone mad with it and everyone has followed after him.”

“What has Thorin done?”

“Not just Thorin, everyone. He and the Dwarves wasted their time looking for the stone rather than doing anything else in the city. Then when the Men and the Elves turned up demanding compensation he shouted at them rather than trying to talk things out.”

“The Dwarf has been most disagreeable, Mithrandir,” Thranduil interrupted. The Elven king had swept out of his encampment to join the Wizard while he was busy with Bilbo. Legolas and Tauriel followed on his heels, both with slightly pinched expressions that told Gandalf there was more to the story than Thranduil might have him believe. While Legolas might have found a quiet moment to whisper hints into Gandalf’s ear, Bilbo Baggins had no such compunction to protect Thranduil’s pride.

Bilbo whipped out of Gandalf’s hold and bristled at Thranduil like an offended cat. Before he could pull the Hobbit back into the safety of his sphere, Bilbo strode over to the King of the Woodland Realm and poked him in the stomach like he was a naughty Hobbit. “Don’t go
pretending like you’re innocent in this! Those Dwarves just got their home back and you turned up outside their gate demanding restitution for something that wasn’t their fault! Say what you like about Thrór and his penchant for gold, but none of those Dwarves are him. None of them had a thing to do with Smaug’s presence and you shouldn’t be blaming them for it! Especially not when it was a hundred years ago!”

“A hundred and seventy-one years.” Legolas added, hiding behind his most innocent of expressions.

Thranduil was not amused, but a Hobbit in a lather was not an easy thing to stop. “One hundred and seventy-one years, thank you. And you turn up demanding compensation! Honestly, not a single one of you thought that perhaps there might be a better way?”

Bilbo ranting did more to assure Gandalf of the Hobbit’s good health then any healer might’ve done. He rested his hand on the back of Bilbo’s curls and twisted the Hobbit around to face him, pulling the small creature into an embrace. Gandalf felt Bilbo sink into his arms, desperate for a little of the affectionate touching that Hobbits were so fond of. All too soon Bilbo cleared his throat and pulled back, pretending like he hadn’t needed it at all. He straightened out his tattered vest and grumbled, “Yes, well. What are you going to do about this?”

Gandalf reached out and flicked his fingers across the bruising on Bilbo’s cheek, wiping it away with a brush of his power. “To fix things, I would need to know what happened.”

“I told you what happened! Smaug attacked Lake-town, Bard shot him down, the Men and Elves turned up demanding compensation, I gave them the Arkenstone so Thorin would have to listen to them, and now they’re demanding my share of the treasure in exchange, but Thorin refuses to listen to a word they say, and everyone wants to go to war in the morning over a rock and some gold!”

A few rapid blinks were the only sign Gandalf gave that he was still conscious, listening to Bilbo’s thorough rant about the situation. “You gave the people threatening to attack Erebor the Arkenstone?”

Bilbo could hear the incredulity in Gandalf’s tone and he stuck out his chin, unwilling to admit that perhaps he might’ve found a better plan himself. “Thorin wouldn’t listen to me.”

“And he hit you for using the Arkenstone as a bargaining chip.”
“Among other things,” Thranduil interrupted.

A moment of pain seized across Bilbo’s face before he glowered at Thranduil for commenting. Gandalf did not live to be his age without being able to notice the unsubtle expressions of Hobbits. He also knew full well that Bilbo would never give up Thorin’s secret unless a life was on the line, so Gandalf turned to Thranduil for the ruthless truth.

“The Dwarf seized Master Baggins by the throat and dangled him over the mountain’s battlements. From the shouting I believe several members of their band were forced out of their gold madness by the thought of cold-blooded murder, and they persuaded Thorin back from tossing the only sane creature of his acquaintance to his death. Instead he was declared a traitor to the whole Dwarven race and banished on pain of death.”

For all that Gandalf liked to believe he could see what others could not, he had not noticed the scarf wrapped around Bilbo’s neck. It was a strip of grey-green that matched Legolas’s tunic, the edges unevenly tied by shaking hands. No other species in Middle-earth would take the time to smarten up a bandage, but to Bilbo it must have been a way to keep his hands busy and his mind quiet while letting him pretend that the abuse had never happened.

Gandalf reached for the scarf artfully tucked around Bilbo’s neck, and the Hobbit smacked away his hand. “You know what’s there, there’s no point in prying.”

“Bilbo Baggins,” the Wizard thundered, far too close to his breaking point to use the gentle tone that he should have. “You will show me your injuries this moment or I will—”

“You’ll what, Gandalf? Beat me? Banish me? Abandon me?” Bilbo choked back his voice, fighting the urge to keep shouting. “There’s nothing you would do that hasn’t already been done, so stop trying to pretend that you can do worse. The worst is done. These Big Folk are about to go to war for no good reason that I can see and my friends are going to get caught up in it because they’ve forgotten that gold is what started this whole mess.” Bilbo held his hands helplessly out to his sides. “What more could you do?”

Gandalf accepted the broken-hearted Hobbit before him for the truth he was. He pressed a quick kiss to Bilbo’s matted curls and strode away from the representatives of Men and Elves who had gathered to watch a Wizard be shouted down by a Hobbit. As he went Gandalf called out to the encampments. “Arm yourselves! There is an army of Orcs on its way! Not an hour behind me!” A frantic hiss went through the ranks that just moments before had been prepared to turn on one another. They paused, glancing between themselves and their leaders before they would move. Gandalf slammed the butt of his staff to the ground, carrying the rumble of his voice to the furthest reaches of every camp and deep into the heart of the mountain when he called, “To arms!”
He ignored the mad scramble of Men and the swiftness of Elves while he strode through the Dwarven camp. The Dwarves had already been prepared for war, each of them with an axe in hand and never straying far from their defensive formations. Dáin was no fool, and rather than force Gandalf to repeat himself he ordered his Dwarves to assume their positions and stay thoroughly out of Gandalf’s way.

Gandalf marched through the gates of Erebor, calling out, “Dori, son of Glori, you will let me pass.”

The Dwarf popped out from behind the crumpled blocks of stone where he’d been keeping watch and matched the Wizard’s stride. “He’s not himself, Master Gandalf.”

“I should certainly hope not, Dori.”

“It’s the gold madness. It took us all for a time, but now, now it’s just Thorin.”

Gandalf grumbled. “The rest of you took back your minds when Thorin tried to kill Bilbo, I heard.”

“Yes, well,” Dori flushed in mortification. “Some of us have been thinking that perhaps Thorin hasn’t come out quite yet so he…”

“So the damn fool Dwarf doesn’t have to face what he’s done,” Gandalf spat. Together the Wizard and Dwarf came to the door outside the throne room of Erebor, where the entire Company was waiting. Each of them was wrapped in armor retrieved from the lower halls that had survived Smaug’s occupation, there to stare at Gandalf with hollow eyes. “Have no fear Dori,” Gandalf continued, in reality speaking to them all. “I will remind Thorin Oakenshield of what he has forgot.”

Gandalf strode forward, hesitating only half a moment while Fíli and Kíli gave him a long look, taking his measure before they pushed on the doors behind them and opened up the path to the long walkway leading to the throne.

The Dwarves had come to Erebor in droves after the fall of Moria to the Balrog. Thráin the First had been desperate to make this new kingdom grander than the one he had lost to forces beyond his might. The path to the throne was long, suspended by thick pillars and stretching towards the seat
that was carved from a piece of stone still connected to the mountain itself, the chair’s back reaching up and expanding out until it became the very center of the mountain. The path was lined with empty space, drawing the eye down to the nearly endless intersecting walkways below and the statues of the twelve kings of Dwarves who had come before.² Had Gandalf been less than he was it might’ve taken his breath away. Of course, having his breath stolen was entirely dependent on not wanting to punt Thorin Oakenshield right off that platform and simply be done with it.

Thorin stood before his grandfather’s throne, staring at the hole where the Arkenstone had once rested. He didn’t bother turning as he called out, “Tell me Gandalf, have you come to save us from ourselves? Come to impart your Elven wisdom from on high and tell me I am wrong to protect my home? That Thranduil is only here to help me?”

Gandalf ignored the attempt to bait him. “Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, a Dwarf who betrays his friends does not deserve a home.”

Orcrist in hand, Thorin whipped around, pointing the blade at Gandalf still half the room away. “He stole the Arkenstone and gave it to my enemies! He is no friend of mine!”

Gandalf stopped dead, too horrified to take another step forward. Some shade of the darkness that he had just banished from Dol Guldur had taken root in Thorin’s eyes. The pale blue of his eyes had faded to sickly white, nothing left of the stalwart, vibrant Dwarf who had been there from Thorin’s first breath. Gandalf had left the boy to make a safer world for them all, only to find that in his absence he had resigned Thorin to the same darkness that had destroyed his line.

“He betrayed me, Gandalf! He betrayed me.” Thorin repeated the words to himself over and over, sometimes shouting them like Gandalf wasn’t paying attention, other times murmuring them under his breath like he was the one that needed convincing. Gandalf took the remaining steps to the dais slowly, careful not to draw Thorin’s attention. He paced the length and breadth surrounding the throne before he came to a stop at the place carved out for the Arkenstone. The sight of where the jewel should have been was enough that Thorin began to come back to himself, silencing the urge to reassure his own conscience that he was right.

This, Gandalf could not allow to happen. With the butt of his staff Gandalf prodded Thorin in the back of the knee, quickly withdrawing before Thorin could bury Orcrist in the wood. Before Thorin could devolve into mutterings, Gandalf poked him again. “Yes, the great Thorin Oakshield, King Under the Mountain, you should consider the Hobbit a threat. After all, he only stood between you and Azog, and judging by the gossip in Mirkwood he only managed to kill several giant spiders to save your Company, and to free you from Thranduil’s dungeon, and delay you long enough that none of your people are dead or exhausted for the Orc army that is coming for you.”
Thorin slashed at Gandalf, too furious to land the blow. Gandalf caught the flat of Orcrist with the edge of his staff and spun, forcing the blade away. Thorin thrust and Gandalf rolled, smacking Thorin upside the head before he whirled off to safety. “All that fuss over John being fool enough to keep company with Sherlock,” Gandalf tutted, “and you’re no better than an Elf in the end.”

“I am no Elf!” Thorin lunged, fury making his grip shake enough that one swift downstroke, Gandalf forced the sword from his hand.

“No, you are no Elf. At least Sherlock lost John accidentally rather than sent him away.”

Thorin grunted something that made Gandalf actually quite grateful his understanding of spoken Khuzdul was perfunctory at best. “If Hobbits were less fragile, deceitful creatures then such things wouldn’t happen to them!”

Thorin threw a fist at Gandalf and the Wizard lost his temper. He sucked away what little light there was in the cavernous throne room, in his fury swelling up to a size greater than his mortal body could contain. “He died Thorin!”

The Dwarf tried to pull out of his swing and stumbled in shock. On Bilbo’s behalf Gandalf took the smallest vicious pleasure in watching the blood drain from Thorin’s face as the Dwarf fought to keep his feet under him. He gave Thorin that horrible moment where he believed that Bilbo had been struck down by Elves or Men just outside the gates of his city. Then Gandalf continued, adding that detail to put Thorin back to rights. “Sherlock left John to his own devices and the Hobbit died for it.”

Thorin sneered, “I don’t believe you.”

What little light there was gathered at the head of Gandalf’s staff, winding up his power to cast a spell. “You will understand Thorin Oakenshield, before I send you out there to command your people and likely to be slaughtered by Orcs, you will understand.” Gandalf raised up his staff and slammed it down to the stone with a mighty knell. The light echoed out, swallowing Thorin’s vision and carrying him away in a memory that Gandalf had once borrowed.

Chapter End Notes

FN 1: The Balrog would be the fire demon that the Fellowship encounters in The Fellowship of the Ring. The Dwarves lived in Moria before the Balrog drove them out and they moved to Erebor which had been nothing but a colony before then.
FN 2: There are only seven kings that we know about before Thráin I who founded Erebor and six of them are Durin and his various reincarnations (the seventh is Thráin’s father). Considering that the first Durin was the very first Dwarf and Erebor was founded in 1999 in the Third Age, that’s a lot more than seven Dwarves. Break out your calculators.

We believe that Durin was made from stone sometime in the Years of the Trees, but we have no definite years for those. The Years of the Trees were six ages in length, so roughly 20,000 years, and for convenience sake I’m going to say that Durin came about halfway through since that’s about when the Elves came and all the Dwarves needed was to wait for the Elves to be born first. So, half of 20,000 years from the Years of the Trees is 10,000 years, plus 590 years from the First Age, 3441 years from the Second Age, and 1934 years to when Thráin I was born gives us 15,965 years of Dwarven existence and kings. Dwarves live around 250 years, so assuming that as the maximum lifespan for every King of the Dwarves (which is inaccurate, but go with me) we get 64 Dwarven kings. Since we can see 11 statues of Dwarves within the Ereborean throne room at the beginning of the Hobbit, I just decided to assume that they were widely regarded as the best of the Dwarven kings and pretend that there are more statues someplace else.
John woke to a pounding headache and a spinning world. The floor underneath his belly and cheek was cold rock. He pushed himself awkwardly to his hands and knees and felt the work worn smoothness beneath him. There was none of the tile work or the finished slabs that made up almost all the indoors he had seen of Gondor. That texture gave John pause and he reached out to the side and found an edge that opened into air. It was a table then, and John traced around the frame to decide that the table was large enough for one of the Men to lay out on it without any trouble.

John slid off the edge to drop down the floor and started walking in what he hoped was a straight line. With hands stretched out in a vague circle, he crossed the open space until he ran into another table. John started to piece together where he might be when torchlight ripped through the darkness.

He flinched back but tried to keep his eyes open, focusing on the specter who had appeared at the door. The creature was shorter than Sherlock, with the fine features of his Elven brethren twisted over on themselves in unnatural ways. His skin was a sickly green, with a nose bloated and bulbous to the point it looked broken and swollen, and a hash of scars running down his nose and across his cheeks. The cartilage of his gently pointed ears had been beaten flat and now rippled over in a clotted mess.

He was ghastly.

John gathered his courage and quipped, "So you'd be Moriarty, then?"

The creature swept into a deep bow and mocked, "I would indeed, Doctor Watson. And we're going to have so much fun."

John snorted. "What did you offer Irene?"

"Just getting you out of the way. She's always thought that she'd get Sherlock eventually, you just
happened to throw a wrench in her dripping water approach to him."

John raised an eyebrow and Moriarty giggled, "Oh come on John, surely even you can figure out what it means. The steady drip, drip, drip, of water on rock will win out eventually, no matter how stubborn the rock."

John actually laughed at that one. "He'll hunt you down for this, and there won't be any time for Irene."

"True. Or maybe," Moriarty did a little side shuffle, dancing heel to toe. "Maybe we're made for each other, Sherlock and I."

"He's nothing like you," John spat.

"Oh, we're wonderfully close, John. And you know it. We could spend forever spreading chaos wherever we go, and there wouldn't be a person alive who could stop us. The only problem, little Hobbit… is you. Not that you'd ever be able to really stop me," Moriarty scoffed, "but you do put the plan off schedule."

"Oh really? And what was the plan?"

"How melodramatic Johnny boy. You want me to sit here and ramble my grand plan for you so Sherlock will have time to save you. But he won't though. He'll try and he'll try, but he won't get here in time to stop me."

"He will find me."

Moriarty giggled. "Such a fine distinction that, between save you and find you. And he will find you, just when I want him to. I know him, John. Better than you ever could. And I know the precise moment he'll walk through those doors, just in time to share your dying breaths. And they'll drive him insane."

"Like you, then?"
"Precisely. Really, I should thank you Johnny boy, I thought I'd have to wait a few hundred years more before Sherlock got bored enough with life to start listening to me. If I let you run free, spending the next few decades beside Sherlock he might never have forgotten you, never gotten as bored as I needed him to be. But now, now he's got a heart." Moriarty shuddered. "He's all human, and squishy, and grotesque. And if I take you away from him, I'll break something that can't be fixed."

Moriarty bounced on the balls of his feet, very nearly clapping his hands in glee at thought of what John's demise would do to Sherlock. "He'll hate me, and he'll chase me, and all his lovely attention will be on me like it should be."

"You are warped."

"Yes, my dear. And you are dead."

Mycroft had rolled out a detailed map of the city and stepped back to stand with Sherlock. Together they were trying to figure out where they would have stashed John if they planned to kill him while still avoiding the hunt going on for them. Both Elves were absolutely silent as they studied the map, minds too clever for either the guards or the other Elves to truly understand how they were debating.

The pattern began with Mycroft nodding towards a place on the map and Sherlock cutting down the logic of the location with a snort. Then Sherlock would point to a spot and Mycroft would reject it with a raise of his eyebrow. Then they'd repeat.

They went on this way, overhearing guards officially reporting to their new Captain, but really listing off to Molly all the places that they'd checked while she crossed them off on the map. There had been a brief scuffle when Irene demanded to see the brothers, only to have Molly storm over to the door and smack the Elven woman with a rolled up pile of parchment. Irene puckered her crimson lips in preparation to play her games with Molly so she might be allowed to tangle with the supposedly superior brothers, but Molly snapped, "You helped this creature kill Lestrade. No one here is going to listen to you, me least of all." Molly barked at the guards to bind Irene, gag her, and remember that she killed their Captain. (The man who had taken over for Lestrade nodded along like his men were actually paying attention to him.)

Before they got the gag in place Irene tried to shout that she could help Sherlock save him, but the younger Elf didn’t bother looking up from the map.
The two Elves slowly wound their way through the whole of image, silently and steadily bouncing ideas off one another until Sherlock started vibrating. "That's it! It's too elegant not to be!"

Sherlock thrust out his finger to the morgue and Mycroft sighed, "Yes, that's it. No one would notice him conducting an experiment and everyone would write off the appearance of another body." The Elves were off at a run, with Molly scrambling behind them and shouting to send more of the Guard along to help.

Moriarty had tackled John and with several dozen lifetime's worth of being a sneaky bastard he maneuvered John back up onto the table and strapped him down. He strolled around the table licking his lips while the Hobbit did his best not to flinch every time Moriarty sniffed him or trailed his fingers along John's skin. "It's such a pity that Sherlock is so frightfully clever. I'd love the chance to play with you properly."

Moriarty pulled a knife from his sheath and ran the tip along John's arm, nicking over and over again at the point where he would insert the draining tube. "It's just so boring to have to kill you so quickly, but I suppose I'll find some pleasure in bleeding all your little Hobbit companions."

John stiffened, and suddenly the cold reality of it crashed down on him. Moriarty wasn't going to take the time to siphon off his blood like he'd done to all the others. Sherlock would be relying on that extra time, basing all his calculations off how long it would take John to slowly bleed to death, and it would all be wrong. Moriarty was going to make a waste of John's life, just because he could. John started to thrash, fighting against the ropes that were binding him to the table and shouting at Moriarty through the gag.

"Tut tut, John." Moriarty scolded. "You really shouldn't do that, you might cut-" Moriarty ripped the knife through the bend at John's elbow, "yourself." John keened at the pain and Moriarty ran a pseudo-soothing hand through John's sweaty hair and leaned down to whisper in his ear. "You know how I like my toys pretty. And Sherlock, Johnny boy, he'll be so pretty. So pretty when I break him, when I drive him insane. When I use all that pretty Hobbit blood of yours to make him just. like. me."

John pulled back and used the give in the ropes to bash his head forward, crashing into Moriarty's nose and making him bleed. Moriarty stumbled back in shock, then started to giggle at the sight of his own green blood dripping down his fingers. To keep such a thing from happening again, Moriarty shifted the knife to John's throat then leaned over and licked the rim of John's delicately pointed ear. "Sometimes I wish Sherlock wasn't quite so clever, but I suppose that's just the way life goes. You have to trade tasty things," he paused to lick across John's cheek. "For delicious
Moriarty started to dig in the knifepoint, blood dribbling off his face to splash onto John's cheek, staining him. "It'll be a clean slice, John, straight through your common carotid artery. Well," he giggled, "not straight. You'd go too quickly. I'd like to just nick it, give you some time to die, perhaps have your eyes still open when Sherlock comes for you. But with all that delightful pressure from your heart, it's just so difficult to tell how long it will take when you're panicking like this."

John dearly would've loved to be able to say that he wasn't flinching away from knife, with his eyes locked on the door as he silently begged for Sherlock to come. Moriarty sighed and dropped a puckered kiss to John's forehead. "You've been an absolute treat John." He leaned forward and hissed in the Hobbit's ear, "I'll be sure to think of you when I lie with him, when I take everything you might have been together and I make him mine."

The movement was swift and simple, with Sherlock too close to finding them for Moriarty to drag out the torture. The deranged former Elf whipped the knife across John's throat, spilling out his blood in one sharp red spurt, then licking his fingers while he walked away.

All the while John's eyes never moved from the door.

Sherlock stopped his mad dash in the doorway to the morgue, and Mycroft knew then that everything had gone wrong.

He slumped back against the wall, smelling the blood from there. Every drop of John had to have been spilled out in that room, wasted, to make such an overpowering scent. With great care, Sherlock stepped over the threshold and stretched out his hand to run his fingertips along John's still warm face, brushing over lips that Sherlock had thought he'd soon get to touch.

Mycroft forced himself into the room, to follow his brother wherever this terrible moment might take him. They stood there for long minutes, staring at the small, broken body laid out before them. Mycroft, who always fixed things for his baby brother stuttered out, "You might still be together..."

It was a sign of how far gone Sherlock was that he didn't even bother to snort at the suggestion. "You mean after the end of the world I might see him again. Is that really all I have to look forward
"You felt it in the music, Sherlock. We all did. Every creature in this city felt Illúvatar answer your prayer and promise you'd be with him."

Sherlock crawled up onto the stone table beside John, gathering the Hobbit into his arms and running a shaking hand through the dirty blonde hair. "I promised you I'd play for you again, John. You can't leave me before I've played for you. I won't break my promise."

Mycroft tried to edge forward, to pull Sherlock away from the body, to stop this half-mad ramble before it spiraled too far to control. Sherlock shrugged off his brother's touch, keeping himself wrapped around the too still body, pleading with John's corpse to wake.

Mycroft thought that the situation couldn't possibly get any worse, when he looked up to see the foul thing that Moriarty had become standing at the other side of the room, giggling. "Dear Sherlock, you know death can't be undone. And his death was done very thoroughly, I made sure of it. Just for you."

Sherlock didn't look up from John so Moriarty prodded, "He waited for you, darling. Kept telling me you'd save him. You should've been here for when he realized that you wouldn't make it, that moment when I cut him open. Mmmm, it was delicious."

"He's not gone." Sherlock replied, his eyes still focused on John.

Moriarty mocked, "Really? Is he all around us and you'll keep him forever in your heart?"

"How dreadfully boring." Sherlock replied. "I played for him."

Moriarty snorted, "You must have been terrible at it if he died anyway."

"You're too clever to miss the facts right in front of you." Sherlock smiled, still looking to John.

Enraged that Sherlock wasn't paying him the attention he wanted, Moriarty snapped, "The facts are that he's dead and I killed him!"
"No." Sherlock unsheathed his own dagger and his two observers tensed at the motion. "You made the pathway clear for me to keep him, and you can't even see it."

Light glinted off the blade as Sherlock brought it down, both Moriarty and Mycroft bolting forward to stop Sherlock before the knife struck true and Sherlock followed after John into death. Sherlock grunted as the blade made contact and Moriarty reached him first. Mycroft saw red and twisted over the table to rip the abomination away from his brother. Mycroft lashed out with the cane he always carried and broke it across Moriarty's skull, sending him to the ground dazed. He didn’t even pause before he drove the splintered shard into Moriarty’s exposed neck, bleeding him out just the way his victims had died.

Mycroft turned back to try and still Sherlock's wounds in the desperate hope that at least he'd be able to say goodbye, but he stopped at Sherlock's smile. And then, John was breathing.

"H-how...?"

"I made a trade."

Mycroft lurched forward and took in John's undamaged throat and realized that John was no longer a Hobbit. In the moments Mycroft had his back turned, John had become Human. In a rush, Mycroft understood. "You gave up your immortality. You traded a thousand lifetimes to give him one more."

Sherlock nodded and ran his hand through the same dirty blonde hair as before. "Precisely."

"But, that should be impossible."

"Illúvatar promised I could keep him. Moriarty took away what time we would've had if we’d been left to ourselves, so it had to be rectified. I'm mortal now, practically human, and John, lovely obliging John, met me in the middle."
John stretched out on the bed’s downy sheets and burrowed his face into the warm chest below him. He breathed in the sharp scent of sweat, ink, solitude, and Sherlock that he'd grown so used to over these last weeks. Sherlock ran his thin fingers gently through John's hair in response to the cuddling. Strangely enough, that was what gave John pause.

He popped up and took in the sight of Sherlock stretched out underneath him, one arm tucked up and behind his head, ruffling his black halo of curls and defining the muscles in his pale chest. John stared for several moments longer than he should have, but jumped back when it finally processed that the hand in his hair couldn't palm his entire head, and the body below him was now much closer to his own size—still taller and leaner, but smaller than it should’ve been. John twisted to look at the room around them and discovered that it was his size that was different, not Sherlock’s.

"Sorry, wait, I— Moriarty— *what happened?*

Sherlock just smirked at him, looking warm and rumpled in the sheets where John had left him, and John couldn't help his blush. "Moriarty killed you. Mycroft killed him. I brought you back. As a Human though, I hope you don't mind."

"H-Human? How?"

"Terribly complicated bit of *deus ex machina.*" John just stared at him until Sherlock gave him more and the Elf huffed out, "The deities of this world aren't particularly fond of interfering in our lives until we've done everything that we can to help ourselves. I played for you, and then offered up my own life in exchange. They made a compromise."

John pressed a now human-sized hand to his temple and muttered, "Compromise. They, they made me Human—"

"And me mortal."

"And you..." John shoulders softened. "You're mortal?"

Sherlock reached out and tugged the unresisting Human back against his chest, pulling the blankets back around them in a cocoon and tutting about how dying made John need body heat. John glared at Sherlock until he replied. "Mortal. To live and die and never be parted from you."
John looked up at him with gentle eyes and very slowly leaned forward to press his lips against Sherlock's. It was a slow, soft kiss. John pulled back just a hair and murmured, "I love you, you know."

Sherlock smirked, "I should certainly hope so. I don't die for just anyone." John pulled back to snark something and Sherlock seized the opportunity to roll them. Sherlock gave John a fierce and demanding kiss, licking his way past John's lips and into his mouth, pressing up against his Hobbit's new body. Sherlock pulled back when John's Human lungs demanded breath and whispered, "Only for the one I love."

John giggled, the same honest laugh that he'd had before and Sherlock gave an impish grin while he dropped back down to show John the perks of being Human.
The Dream of Thorin Oakenshield

Chapter Notes

This is it, ladies and gentlemen. The last chapter was the end of John and Sherlock's story, while this is the end of Bilbo and Thorin's. I have a few requests for add ons to this universe after the close of the main story, and I'll see what I can do. I just wanted to say thank you. You've all been such *spectacular* readers, and I've adored almost every minute of sharing this story with you. Thank you!

“Uncle, please! You have to rest!”

“I’m reading Fili! It's no different than if I was sitting in my tent staring at the ceiling!”

“Yes it is!” Fili demanded. “Staring at your ceiling means you’d be on your back, not aggravating the hole you’ve still got in your chest!”

Despite the thick bandages wrapped around Thorin’s ribs to impede his movement and keep his insides from becoming his outsides, he darted out one hand and snatched Fili by the scruff of his shirt and dragged him close. Fili squeaked at the motion and Thorin hissed, “You’re going to wake him up.”

Fili held his hands up to make sure that Thorin remembered he was unarmed, while Kili—who was contentedly on the other side of the tent—asked, “I thought you wanted Bilbo to wake up so you could apologize to him?” Fili keened under his breath, begging his brother to keep his mouth shut. “What? Why else would Uncle be reading?”

Thorin had been more than fond of books when he was young, preferring to read the great stories of his ancestors and then pretending to be them. The boys too, had loved to listen to their uncle read them to sleep at night. Now that Thorin was in the same place as all the books he once loved, he might’ve been able to say that he honestly just felt like reading, and was too battered to do anything else so he might as well. However, that would be a bald-faced lie, so he kept his mouth shut on that subject. “While I would want Mr. Baggins to wake up, I don’t want his return to consciousness to come during a shouting match.”

“If anything, Uncle, that would probably make him come back faster. What with wanting us to behave and all. In fact, we probably ought to buy some fine dishes from the Men and start tossing them around and he’ll wake up that instant.”
“Kíli,” Fíli croaked, his uncle’s hands clenching tighter on the fabric and constricting it around Fíli’s throat.

“Ooh! We should tell him that Bombur is making him scones! Which is true since Bombur has been making a batch of scones every day since he dug out the kitchens.”

Fíli managed to kick out his legs and force himself from Thorin’s grip, hitting the ground with a thud. Kíli didn’t even bother stopping his ramble at the sudden noise. Though, he did start to sputter in confusion when Fíli grabbed him by the back of his tunic and hauled him towards the door.

Thorin ignored the boys, trusting that Fíli would mock his brother until he came to some understanding about why it was a bad idea to ramble around Thorin at this present moment. Kíli would stare in confusion, like he always did, until one moment realization slammed into him like a hammer into an anvil and he would understand everything that Fíli had slowly and steadily been coming to see. Kíli would still be unbearable, but at least he would be working towards Thorin’s benefit this time rather than inadvertently striving to get himself killed.

“I should be disciplining them,” Thorin murmured to the unconscious Bilbo. “But every time I think to scold them, all I can see is the way they stood between Azog and I. Fíli there with his broken sword and Kíli with nothing but an arrow. I can’t be upset with them when I’m just glad they’re alive.”

Bilbo, of course, didn’t reply. But that hadn’t stopped Thorin trying.

The Hobbit had been unconscious since the Battle of the Five Armies. Gandalf had found him face down in the mud of the battlefield, bleeding from a wound to the head. Gandalf’s shouts had brought Elven healers running, and for two days the Hobbit had been tucked away in Elven tents, Thranduil’s vicious nature and Gandalf’s newfound distrust keeping any Dwarves away from him.

It wasn’t until young Orí stumbled his way across John Watson’s journal in the reading nook where Bilbo had been hiding when Thorin took a turn for the dark, that Thorin was able to convince them. (And if Thorin declared that he was willing to let any member of the Company take the book to Bilbo and read to him, all that mattered was that Bilbo had the journal, then no one needed to know that. In fact, he didn’t even mind that it was more than likely that Thranduil would bring it up at the most inconvenient time possible.)
“I suppose I understand why the Elves can’t stand the story of John and Sherlock. They probably can’t stomach the thought of one of their own giving up immortality for anyone, let alone a Hobbit. Not that Hobbits aren’t wonderful creatures, patient, brave, and hopefully very forgiving. But even when Elves fall in love with kings, their people tend to be disappointed. Considering that your people don’t live so long as kings, or quite so loud, I imagine they don’t much like the thought of one of their own falling in love with a short year at all, let alone giving up his immortality for him.”

Thranduil himself had patched Bilbo up, waiting until he was sure the Hobbit would live before he returned him to the Dwarves. According to the Elven king, the only thing left to be done was wait. Bilbo would wake or he would not, and there was nothing that any of them could do about it. His mind was tucked safely someplace where none of them could reach it and only Bilbo could decide to walk out. Every member of the Company had done their best to lure him out of course, with Glóin rambling about his wife and son being on their way, and Dori waxing about the undisturbed casks of ale they’d found in one of the storage rooms, and Bifur rambling in Khuzdul in the hope Bilbo would just start nodding politely to make him stop.

“That’s not to say that I don’t think the sacrifice was worth it. I mean, there’s little I wouldn’t do for you, so I suppose I couldn’t expect anything less from Sherlock. That’s not a compliment to him, mind you. Or a compliment to me. But it is a statement about the loyalty inspired by Hobbits.”

There was always a member of the Company with Bilbo, just in case. After all, none of them wanted him to wake alone. Thorin liked to take the early afternoon shift, spending his mornings being fussed over by healers, then entertaining various lords and their demands while there was no blood anywhere to be seen. He preferred to take his lunch in Bilbo’s tent so that the smell of food might tempt the Hobbit back to wakefulness, but more and more often Thorin felt the need to take lunch in the great hall with the Men and Dwarves (and the more daring of the Elves) just so everyone could see he was still up and breathing.

Thorin’s afternoons he kept clear, retreating to the healing tent where Bilbo slumbered. He would ramble to Bilbo about the events of the day, his concerns with the lords, and the temptation to pretend his wounds were infected and leave Balin to deal with it all. On a good day, the healers and the Company would leave Thorin be until he fell asleep mid-sentence, his head slumped down on Bilbo’s bed. On bad days, something would crop up, dragging Thorin from Bilbo’s side and Mahal help whoever needed him them.

“Gandalf says it’s likely that you can hear me, wherever your heart may be wandering at the moment. Which is why I’m been reading to you.” Thorin ran his blunt fingers through Bilbo’s soft curls, grateful to whomever had taken it upon themselves to tend to Bilbo while Thorin could barely raise his arms. “I did read ahead—while the Elves weren’t letting me see you—to make sure that the ending would be something to draw you out. If John had died completely you probably would’ve taken that to mean that all Hobbits who wander away from home are meant to die for the trouble, and I couldn’t have you thinking that. You’d probably resign yourself to death just to prove
In his heart of hearts Thorin had known that there was a price to be paid for returning to Erebor. Something that Mahal would require him to pay in order to take back his homeland. He had thought it would be *him* to pay, and with his life. Dáin was an honorable king, and would make a good regent until Fíli was ready to assume the throne, and Thorin would pay back the debt his line owed their people for bringing the dragon down on them in the first place. Their line would be purified, his penance enough to protect his nephews from the gold lust that had so long haunted their steps.

Thorin leaned forward, ignoring the ache in the gut that came with bending. He rested his forehead against Bilbo’s and murmured, “It wasn’t supposed to be you.” The life on the line was meant to be Thorín’s. Not Bilbo, never Bilbo. “You’re the most innocent of us. The one who saved us all time and again, you shouldn’t be the one paying.”

Thorin rested his hand on Bilbo’s chest, feeling the soft rise and fall of Bilbo’s ribs while he drew breath and the steady beat of his heart under Thorin’s palm. It was Thorin’s favorite place to be and his favorite place to doze, secure in the knowledge that Bilbo was still alive beside him.

Ruling a kingdom was a difficult task in the first place, made more complicated by shattered ribs and lacerated limbs. Soon enough Thorin slipped into sleep, letting Bilbo’s constancy guide him to a place free of nightmares and full of dreams. Full of thoughts of what might be if the Hobbit ever managed to wake, and Thorin ever managed to make him believe he was wanted. It would be a good dream tonight, Thorin could tell. He would imagine finally showing Bilbo the Great Library (as he should have done first off), and installing Bilbo with his own station in Bombur’s kitchen, and beginning excavations so that there were dozens of pathways outside the mountain, with gardens outside every door. (And one garden in particular to be built on a balcony outside the Consort’s rooms.)

But first, Thorin imagined he could feel small, fingers stroking through the mess of his hair. He’d never though to imagine that before, the gentle way they worked out tangles and stroked along his temple.

Yes, it would be a good dream.

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