An Unexpected Addition

by karategal

Summary

All of the dwarves survive the Battle of the Five Armies, but Bilbo must return to the Shire to sort out his old life and make way for a new one in Erebor. Over one year later, Bilbo comes back to the Lonely Mountain with a recently orphaned Frodo. King Thorin isn't quite sure what to make of this new, tiny addition to his Company.

Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own any of the characters or actors from The Hobbit. Everything belongs to the great and powerful J.R.R. Tolkien.

This story takes place about a year and a half after the Battle of the Five Armies in the Peter Jackson movie-verse. Now, I'm usually not a fan of writing romance in any way whatsoever, but the idea behind this story popped into my head during the film and just wouldn't leave. So, I wrote it down. As a side-note, Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli all survived the battle in this universe and I'm playing with ages a little bit. Other than that, I'll try to keep it as canon as possible.
Arrival

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The journey back to the Lonely Mountain was long and exhausting. Rain had been pounding the ground for several days now, making the footpaths and wooded roads quite difficult to traverse even on ponyback. Bilbo had toppled over several times this morning, his bum covered in mud. The wet, itchy feeling had begun to irritate him more and more as the day progressed, but Bilbo refused to slow down or stop when they were so close to their goal. It'd been well over a year since he'd seen the Lonely Mountain and the tired hobbit was going to arrive there by nightfall, no ifs, ands, or buts about it.

"Uncle," said a small voice next to him, "I'm cold."

Bilbo looked up at the pony beside him, hands automatically reaching out for the small hobbit that sat atop Molly. "We're not too far now, my boy. Only a few miles east and we'll be in the warm halls of Erebor." He patted the young boy on the back. "Come here, darling, lil' bit of carrying will warm you up. Tuck your hands into my collar, yes, that's it. Golly, you're about froze up!"

Frodo buried his tiny face into Bilbo's neck, soft curls dripping with water despite the hood pulled overtop of them. They were all by themselves now, the other part of their travel group having already headed off to Lake-town. Bilbo wasn't too concerned about a few miles journey alone, mostly because the areas directly around Erebor and Dale were now well-protected by both dwarven and human patrols. The roads had been empty due to the terrible weather, but a number of small farms were now present along the stretch, which had been restored in the eighteen or so months since Bilbo had left for the Shire.

"We'll be giving the dwarves quite the surprise, my boy," said Bilbo, tucking the small child into his own thicker cloak. "They've probably figured I'd not be coming back at this point. Long journey, this has been."

"I just wanna bed," mumbled Frodo. He hadn't been very fond of sleeping on the ground, the poor little hobbit. "Nice and warm, like back home."

"You'll have that and more," assured Bilbo. "I have a feeling that the dwarves will make quite the fuss over you."

"Hungry, too."

Bilbo chuckled, amused by his nephew's simple, child-like desires. The poor boy had had a rough last couple of months, what with his parents' deaths, having to live with the Brandybucks, and now traveling hundreds of miles to a strange dwarvish city that had just recently been restored. Frodo had every right to be a bit tetchy and demanding, as any small child would be in his situation. They'd been moving at a pretty fast clip with nearly all of their travel groups, anxious to leave the dangerous and uncharted regions that led to the eastern reaches of Middle-Earth. The Quest to Erebor three years prior had been rough, but Bilbo would be the first hobbit to admit that traveling with a small child amplified all of those problems ten-fold. Even a sweet-tempered faunt like Frodo could only take so much in a single day's travel before petulance started to set in. Bilbo would be very, very glad to have a warm, safe place to sleep, too.

"We should be close enough to..." Bilbo paused to squint through the rain. "Ah ha! There it is, my
dear Frodo! The mist makes it quite difficult to see, but there it is, just as high and strong as I remember. The Lonely Mountain."

Frodo shifted in his uncle's arms, big blue eyes widening when he finally caught his first glimpse of the majesty that was Erebor. Bilbo couldn't stop the huge smile that crossed his face, chuckling in delight after placing a quick kiss on his nephew's downy-soft head. They'd finally made it.

"Welcome to Erebor, Frodo. Your new home."

The little hobbit didn't turn around even when Bilbo started to walk again. He'd always been a quiet child, from what Primula's friends had told him, but Bilbo was a little surprised that Frodo's reaction had been this sedate. He may have been quiet, but Frodo was also very curious, as Bilbo had learned from the red mushroom incident last month. Frodo usually had a small comment for any—

"It's really big," stated Frodo. "'Specially for dwarves. I thought they weren't too much bigger than us? Does anything else live there? Are those statues?"

Bilbo let out a hardy laugh at his nephew's questions. It looked like he'd taken the boy's curiosity for
granted yet again. "Well, some of them are pretty big, but not as tall as those men in our last travel party. Or the elves. Now, Dwalin is quite large compared to…"

The older hobbit explained everything age-appropriate he knew about dwarves as they continued to walk towards the grand city, Molly trailing right beside them with their cart of essentials from the Shire. Bilbo had tried to pack as light as possible for their long journey, but there were just some things he couldn't leave behind, no matter how much it caused their travel speed to lag. He wanted Frodo to inherit these heirlooms one day, and wasn't willing to compromise on the matter.

"See those statues," said Bilbo as they started downwards along the River Running. "Those are of great dwarven warriors from the earliest days of Erebor. The left statue used to have a face, but then, well, dragons and battles don't tend to be kind to historical treasures."

"How'd they build it?"

Bilbo blew hot air on his nephew's frigid fingers. "Dwarves are the best engineers in all of Arda, my boy. When I left last spring, Thorin and Dáin had decided that repairing either statue would have to wait until the gates and interior were finished, so perhaps you'll be able to see the statues' future repairs for yourself."

"Wow," gasped Frodo when they finally arrived at the mountain city's front gates, his small arms tightening around Bilbo's neck. "It's huge."

"That it is, my boy," said Bilbo. "And this will be your—"

"Bilbo!"

Looking to their right side, Bilbo was surprised to see a familiar tri-lobed bouffant of red-brown hair. He'd recognize that absurd hairstyle anywhere.

"Nori!"

He wasted no time in walking over to the trickster dwarf, smiling wide when Nori gave him a strong pat on the back. Nori immediately signaled for the dwarven gate guards to come down and assist him, taking Molly by the reins and leading her into the enormous fortress and out of the pouring rain. It was only after the hobbits were safe inside the giant entrance hall that Nori started to speak with him.

"Our hobbit burglar has finally returned," grinned Nori. "You see, I told the other Company members that you'd be back. Long journey from the Shire to here, as they should remember."

"That's a bit of an understatement," sighed Bilbo. "I've literally spent the last year on the road, with only three weeks in the Shire. I don't think I've touched a single doily in as many months, either."

Nori laughed at the inside-joke, clearly still remembering how fussy Bilbo had been when they first arrived in his hobbit-hole. "Well, I don't think you'll have any luck finding those frilly things here, but…Ah! And who's this little fella?"

"This," said Bilbo, hefting Frodo up higher on his hip, "Is my nephew, Frodo. He will be under my care for the remainder of his youth. Frodo, this is one of the dwarves in the Company I was telling you about. His name's Nori. Say hello."

Frodo peeked out from where he'd been hiding in the crook of Bilbo's neck, small hands still shoved deep in his uncle's collar. "Hello."
Nori held out a hand, patiently waiting for the little hobbit to shake it. Once Frodo built up enough courage to grab the much larger hand, Nori gave a deep bow. "Very well-met, young hobbit. My name is Nori. At your service."

His nephew gave a shy smile. "He has funny hair."

"Dwarves are a very funny bunch," agreed Bilbo. "They'll eat you all out of house and home, and then they'll sing and dance and toss the dishes around as they clean up. All very strange business."

Nori slapped him hard on the back. "Your uncle's correct, little one. We're a mighty funny bunch, us dwarves, but I think you'll grow to like us. And we've a pretty good track record with hobbits, after all."

"I'm the only hobbit you know," corrected Bilbo. "Not a very impressive record, if you ask me."

Nori looked scandalized. "I'm friends with young Mister Frodo here, and he's the finest hobbit of them all. I think that's a pretty impressive track record, considering what a fine young hobbit this boy is."

Bilbo gave his former companion a thankful smile. He'd been worried that Frodo would not take too well to the dwarves because of their gruff brashness, but it seemed he had been very wrong about them yet again. Nori's joking manner had relaxed his nephew a great deal, Frodo's anxious posture now loose in his uncle's arms. The little boy didn't seem frightened at all, big eyes surveying the entire hall with a Tookish curiosity of troubling proportions. He even gave a small hand wave to a particularly boisterous group of miners as they walked by them.

"Are Dáin and his people still here?"

Nori shrugged his shoulders and said, "Most have returned to the Iron Hills. Dáin visited last month to iron out some treaties with Thorin and Bard, but he took at least half of his host back with him."

"And how many have stayed?"

"I'd say about two hundred, give or take." Nori flipped a throwing knife over his head and between his hands, winking at Frodo in that crafty manner of his. "The majority of them come from families that once lived in the Lonely Mountain. Before good ol' Smaug decided to come flying in."

"Can I see the mines?" Frodo suddenly asked. "Or the great hall?"

"In due time, little one," assured Nori. "But I think there's some other people that you and your uncle need to meet with first. Like the King."

Frodo's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open. "We get to meet the King? A real king? Like in the fairytales?"

Smiling down at his nephew, Bilbo said, "Yes, we do, Frodo. A real king."

"Wow," murmured the little boy in awe, "When?"

Nori grinned at the now-bouncy child. "Well, I'm pretty sure the gate guards have already sent word to Thorin, so it shouldn't be too—"

"BILBO!"

The hobbit barely had time to brace himself before two pairs of arms lifted him up and off the
ground, voices cheering and shouting as they jostled Bilbo from side to side in their excitement. Frodo just clutched at his uncle's neck, startled by the craziness that was dwarvish greeting customs. Thankfully, Nori didn't waste any time in removing either of his fellows from their hug-assault, smacking both of them on the head with his giant mace and then scolding them for frightening a small child.

"What was that for?!" whined Kíli. He'd let go of Bilbo to clutch at the new lump atop his pretty head. "It's Bilbo! He loves it when we tackle him. And what're you talking about? All the children are up on the third floor this time of day."

"In case neither of you two idiots have noticed," said Nori, "Bilbo's arms are a bit full at the moment."

Both nursing an aching head, Fíli and Kíli turned around to stare at the hobbit that they'd missed so dearly over the past year or two. It took a few seconds for either of them to realize that Bilbo was holding a small child—a young hobbit!—in his arms. It was Fíli who reacted first…

"It's a hobbit babe!"

"Well, he's actually a few years past the babe stage," corrected Bilbo. "Frodo, this is Fíli and Kíli. They're the King's nephews. And very silly fellows. Boys, this here is my own nephew, Frodo." He forced the young hobbit to stop squeezing his throat. "Say hello to the silly dwarves, Frodo."

The dwarf brothers were practically bouncing in their boots while they waited for the young hobbit to acknowledge them. Apparently, the idea of meeting a hobbit child in person was very exciting. It took about a minute, but Frodo eventually decided to emerge from his hiding place in Bilbo's neck and say, "Hello."

"I'm Fíli…"

"And I'm Kíli…" Both dwarves gave a deep bow. "At your service."

That last part seemed to greatly amuse Frodo, who fully emerged from his uncle's neck and started to look around the big chamber again. The little boy stared at the pair of dwarves, blue eyes unblinking as he dissected them.

Frodo pointed at Kíli. "You don't look like a dwarf."

The brown-haired prince just stared at the faunt while his brother and Nori cackled in astonishment. "Excuse me?"

"Your nose is kinda small. And you just don't look like the others," Frodo replied, his hands gesturing to the room around him. "Less hairy. Do you gotta sword? Or a battle hammer? Isn't that what dwarves use, Uncle Bilbo?"

"Sometimes, Frodo, but Kíli here is more an archer than anything. Wargs and orcs don't stand a chance against him." The young dwarf was smiling now, chest puffing with pride from the compliments. "But you can see their weapons later. For now, it'd be best if we got into some dry clothes."

The brothers gestured for Bilbo to follow them, but not before ordering several of the other dwarves to take care of Molly and move their possessions to a room in the royal wing of the castle.

"Right this way, my hobbit-y friends. Dry clothes and good food awaits."
Chapter End Notes

And the amazing picture above was done by the lovely Mensuramjr:
Introductions

Chapter Notes

I personally picture Frodo as being about the equivalent of a four or five-year-old human child in this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The halls of Erebor were just as large and grand as Bilbo remembered them, every little nook and cranny decorated with a craftsmanship that was unlike any other on Middle-Earth. Frodo was equally enchanted, blue eyes flitting all over the place as Fíli and Kíli tried to answer every question that flew out of his mouth. The brothers' friendly nature had won the little hobbit over, his excitement fuelling their own excitement with every hall or chamber they passed. Frodo still wasn't quite comfortable enough to walk on his own in a very strange place, but the child was reacting much better than Bilbo had anticipated upon their arrival.

"What's a sapphire?" asked Frodo when Fíli started to list all of the different gems and stones that could be found in the mountain. "And a lapis…"

"A lapis lazuli," corrected Fíli. "And they're two types of gems that come in more shades of blue and green than you can ever hope to count. Erebor's mines have the finest lapis and sapphires in all of Middle-Earth."

"We can take you down to see them once you've—"

"Uhhhhh, no," snapped Bilbo. "There will no mines for this little hobbit. Maybe a very safe and protected view from above, but no authentic mines. None. At all. And don't you even dare try to argue with me, Kíli."

"But Uncle Bilbo—"

"No, I won't have it," stated Bilbo. "And that's final. Now, what were you saying about the new tunnels, Fíli?"

Wary of the parental fury that Bilbo might unleash upon them, Fíli wisely changed to a more benign subject. "What's your favorite food, little one?"

"Mince pies!" answered Frodo immediately. "My mama always made…"

At the desperate look Bilbo threw his way, Fíli quickly said, "Oh, yes, that's a fine choice, Frodo! Erebor's got some of the tastiest mince pies around!"

"And cheeses!" added Kíli, hands gesturing in the shape of a cheese wheel. "We'll stuff you so full that your poor Uncle Bilbo will be able to smell you for a week. Easiest way to track a child, we dwarves say."

That got a few giggles out of Frodo. "That's silly. I don't wanna smell like cheese. It's stinky."

"We dwarves happen to pride ourselves on our stinkiness," said Fíli with a pout. "And I'll have you know that I won the Stinkiest Stinker to Ever Stink Contest as a wee lad, young hobbit. And it was
by a landslide, too."

"Or a stink-slide," added Kíli with a smirk. "Our poor mother wouldn't hug him, he was so stinky. Smelled like blue cheese."


"You didn't have to share a bedroom with him," said Kíli. "My poor sniffer didn't work right for months. Cows smelled like daises, washroom mold like apple pies. It was a very trying time."

"You're hilarious, Kíli, you really are."

Bilbo watched the brothers speak and flail about, both of them seeming to be enchanted with the small child their burglar had brought with him. In contrast, Bilbo was subtly eyeing the oldest prince's legs, already having noticed the slight limp Fíli still had on his right side. It had become less pronounced since Bilbo's departure last year, but the hobbit couldn't help worrying about the lad's recovery, both physical and emotional. He suspected that Fíli was still wearing a brace until his trousers to support it, something the prince had been quite embarrassed by when Bilbo last saw him.

For a few moments, Bilbo was disappointed that Azog hadn't died a more horrible death. The white orc certainly deserved it.

"And see these murals right here," said Fíli as they walked down a long hallway. "They're all made from little pieces of marble. They show Mahâl creating the first dwarves, and all of the hardships and achievements that our people made in the First Age."

Kíli pointed at several images as they turned a corner. "Some folks have been calling for the removal of these elven depictions, but Ori just about had a hernia when he caught wind of it."

"And I don't blame him!"

"But Uncle agreed not to do it," Fíli assured. "I think he didn't want to face your wrath, either."

"How very wise of him."

"Well, he has been behaving himself lately," assured the prince. "Hasn't insulted an elf in over a month. At least not where they can hear him, that is."

Kíli nodded in a sagely manner. "And that's what matters. Diplomacy at its finest."

They arrived at the royal rooms just as Fíli and Kíli were starting to regale Frodo with a story about how they'd gotten lost in an underground mine shaft. Considering the location of Erebor, Bilbo wasn't too pleased with that particular subject. However, it ended before it even started thanks to the sudden appearance of the rooms and the potential for dry clothes and a warm bath. Several dwarves appeared behind them a moment later, an enormous array of boxes in their arms.

"What are those?" asked Bilbo.

"Just some essentials we thought you'd be needing," said Fíli with a smirk. "And that'd be some of your own luggage there, I'd reckon." He gestured to the last three dwarves in the baggage line. "A bath's already been drawn, so get cleaned up and then we can get you two hobbits stuffed full of some good dwarf cooking. We'll be waiting just down the hall, so shout once you're ready."

The brothers pushed Bilbo into the room and shut the door behind him. Snorting at the pushiness of dwarves, he took a minute to scan the room around him, mouth open in shock when he realized just
where they'd be staying. Although it wasn't quite as posh or elaborate as his previous accommodations in Rivendell, the room was still very large and very, very well-furnished. Everything was done in dark oaks, blue cloth, and a black granite that Bilbo had never seen before. It was, in simple terms, a room fit for a king. Or at least a royal of some degree; not a pair of water-logged hobbits who'd been born in the simple fields of the Shire.

His previous accommodations had been meager compared to this one, although the Royal Wing had still been blocked off when Bilbo departed. It appeared that Smaug had done little damage to this part of the mountain.

"Whoa..."

Bilbo had scarcely felt so out of place and unimportant in his life. The canopy bed alone must have cost more than all of Bag End combined. And the dressers had such intricate carvings in them, far more artful than anything he'd ever seen in the Shire. And was that a ruby atop the mirror on the far wall?! It was all far too grand and lavish for a simple hobbit like himself.

"Look, Uncle Bilbo!" crowed Frodo, scrambling out of the older male's arms and across the room to point at the wall. "It's a map of Middle-Earth! Look, it's even got part of the Shire, right here." Frodo pointed to a small, hand-drawn picture directly beside the map. "It's Bag End. Inside and outside."

"So it is," murmured Bilbo as he stepped closer and scooped Frodo up. "We can take a closer look later. For now, let's get you bathed, darling."

The bath went much easier than usual. Frodo was entranced by the in-ground pool that occupied the washroom, his little feet kicking at the bubbles that covered the surface of the water. Bilbo got in first and was very relieved to see that there were steps for safety and easy access at two corners of the bath. His nephew was eager to join him, small arms held out for assistance as usual.

"It's so big," grinned Frodo from where he was safely tucked in the corner of his uncle's arms. The boy was very leery of rivers due to parents' deaths, but it seemed that bathwater wasn't a new fear. Bilbo couldn't help but breathe a sigh of relief at this very welcome revelation. "Can we keep it?"

"For the moment," replied Bilbo. He'd be talking to Thorin about the ridiculous grandiose of their rooms before the night was through. A hobbit really didn't need such extravagant housing, especially a simple one like Bilbo Baggins. "Now lift up your arms so that I can get underneath them. Yes, both of them. Only the Valar knows what's been growing down there."

"Mushrooms!"

"Don't you even dare bring up the topic of mushrooms, little one," warned Bilbo with a harsh stare. "I've had quite enough of those horrid things for a lifetime. No uncle should have to go through such a travesty."

"But they looked like the ones that Reginard Took was always picking," reasoned Frodo with an exaggerated pout. "And those always tasted so good."

"And as a Baggins, you should know better than to follow the blind example of a Took, my boy," said Bilbo. He picked up the bottle of shampoo that had been left beside the bath and squirted some into his hand. It smelled like lavender. "They rarely ever give much thought to their actions. Foolish Tooks."

"But I..." Frodo sputtered when his uncle started to lather his curly hair. "Owww, my eyes! It stings! And stinks!"
Bilbo sighed. It seemed that despite Frodo's fondness for bathwater, the actual act of bathing was much loathed by the young hobbit. Without a shred of hesitation, he gave his nephew a thorough suds-ing and didn't stop until the boy was covered in bubbles from head to toe. If Bilbo had his way, then Frodo was going to be the cleanest little hobbit the dwarves would ever see. Of course, due to hobbit nature and Erebor's isolated location, it was pretty likely that Frodo would be the cleanest, littlest halfling they'd ever see in their lifetimes.

He smiled at his handy work. "Now that wasn't so bad, now was it?"

Frodo's glare said otherwise.

"Okay, be a good faunt and get dressed in the clothes I've laid out for you while I finish bathing," instructed Bilbo as he boosted his nephew out of the tub. "It'd be very rude to keep our hosts waiting any longer than necessary."

Frodo didn't argue, instead drying off and going about his business without much fuss at all. He really was a good boy, thought Bilbo with a smile. For everything he'd had to go through in the last year and a half, Frodo had been astoundingly agreeable, especially on the journey to Erebor. There had been some days where he'd been fussy or bad-tempered, of course, but that was a given for his young age. However, when it was all said and done, the boy was very well-behaved and an avid reader; give Frodo a good fairytale and the hobbit child could be still and quiet for hours. Drogo and Primula would've been so proud.

"Make sure to dry behind those ears," said Bilbo as he got out of the tub. "I'll not have you looking like a dwarf, even if we live among them." He made sure to dry off Frodo's hair more thoroughly once he was done dressing, ever wary of the small faunt catching a chill-induced sickness. "Now dry between your toes. 'Atta boy."

Once they were dried and dressed, Bilbo made sure his nephew was ready to face a dining hall full of rambunctious dwarves. Although a bit nervous, Frodo also seemed to be genuinely excited about meeting yet another race of people; the fact that their dwarf hosts were good friends of his uncle just made things even better. He was all but jumping with anticipation by the time Bilbo was ready to leave, fingers twisting at the frayed ends of his simple hobbit clothes.

"C'mon, Uncle Bilbo, hurry up," urged Frodo. "I'm hungry."

"For some reason," drawled Bilbo, "I think the dwarves are more responsible for this high energy of yours than the prospect of food." Bilbo strode over and picked up his bouncing nephew, cuddling him close and breathing in deep the sweet toddler scent that was always present after a bit of cleaning. They'd had several close-calls on their journey, so it was a huge relief to finally have Frodo safe and sound in Erebor. He gestured to the bed and asked, "Would you like to bring Rupert along?"

Frodo thought it over. "Nah, he can guard the room while we're gone. Keep trolls and goblins out."

"A wise choice." Bilbo walked over and situated the Beorn-like comfort toy so that it would be facing the doorway. Primula had made the stuffed bear for Frodo shortly after his birth, so it was one of his nephew's most prized possessions. "There we go, now Rupert can see all around the room for intruders. Good?"

"Yes." A bang came from outside in the hallway, causing Frodo to bounce up and down again. "Can we go now? Please!"
"Okay, okay," chuckled Bilbo, "So demanding."

When they walked out the door, the two hobbits were greeted by several familiar faces and rowdy shouts of excitement. Bilbo barely had time to take a step back before a pair of thick arms were enveloping him.

"It's good to see you, laddie," said Dwalin. "And this must be the little hobbit that Fíli and Kíli were bragging about." The largest of the Company gave Frodo a toothy smile and deep bow. "I'm Dwalin, little one. And standing right behind me here are our resident miners: Bofur, Bifur, and Bombur." All of them gave the amused faunt a cheery wave. "At your service."

Frodo waved back. "Hello."

"You must be a hungry lil' hobbit," said Bombur. He patted his large stomach. "A long journey from the Shire, I'd imagine." He handed out several biscuits for the child to munch on. "Ready for some dwarven cooking?"

His nephew nodded as he broke a biscuit in half and shoved it into his mouth. The other half ended up in Bilbo's mouth. Chewing thoughtfully, he soon recognized the taste of walnuts and gave Bombur a thumbs up. It was going to be so nice to finally have some home cooked food again. Frodo and himself had been living on paltry rations for the past several months, with Rivendell being their only short respite. Not having to worry about food would take some getting used to now.

Bilbo cleared his throat when Frodo tried to shove another biscuit into his mouth. "Now, what do we say, Frodo?"

It took several moments for the hungry faunt to catch on. "Oh, ugh, thank you, Mister Bombur. They're really good."

The jolly dwarf looked ridiculously pleased.

"Manners are essential to raising a good hobbit," said Bilbo when Fíli, Kíli, and Bofur started to snicker. "Not that dwarves would know anything about manners, so my efforts will have to be doubled, it seems."

"What'd he say?" asked Frodo when Bifur started speaking rapidly to his cousins in a strange language. "Uncle?"

"Bifur's speaking Khuzdul, which is one of the dwarven languages," he explained to his ever-curious nephew. "I think that chunk of axe in his head there has caused a few, ugh, problems over the years. With speaking other languages, that is."

Frodo nodded, his brows furrowed. "Can I learn it, too, then?"

The question made Bilbo wince. He knew how fiercely dwarves guarded their native language, none besides a tiny handful of worthy individuals having learned it over the centuries. Any requests that Bilbo had made to learn it after Erebor's reclamation had been denied without hesitation, Ori and Balin looking more than a little uncomfortable when he'd asked after it.

"Well, Frodo, I don't think that'd actually be—"

"Oh, oh, oh! I can teach him!" shouted Kíli, shoving his brother out of the way as he tried to win
privileges to teach the child. Fíli grabbed a hold of his long hair and drug Kíli down to the ground with him. "My Khuzdul's perfect. Hey, what're you doing? Get... off...of...me!"

Well, *that* definitely wasn't the answer or response that Bilbo had been expecting from them.

"You nearly failed Khuzdul, you idiot!" argued Fíli. "I've got much better—"

"No, you don't! Get your own hobbit!"

Bilbo just sighed, following the others down the hallway as the brothers tried to put a choke-hold on each other. "I don't know why I expected any more from either of them. Very foolish of me, that."

"I think you should leave the teaching to Balin," said Dwalin. "He taught Thorin everything he knows, so he'd be an excellent choice for our lil' hobbit here. And he's a natural with small children."

That response nearly caused Bilbo's eyes to bug out of his head. Of all dwarves, he'd have expected Dwalin to vehemently deny the hobbits such an opportunity, claiming that a non-dwarf had no business learning Khuzdul or even Iglishmêk. It shocked Bilbo that he'd agree to such a thing. Had something changed while he'd been gone?

Bilbo gave a slow nod. "If he's willing, I'd love for Balin to teach Frodo. Although if it's a problem I'd under—"

"I'll speak with him about it later after he returns from the mine inspections with Thorin," assured Dwalin. "He's been working too hard lately, so it'd be a nice break from Erebor's politics for him."

A warmth spread through Bilbo at the kind gesture. "Thank you, Dwalin. It means a lot. All of you taking to Frodo so well, that is."

"Anytime."

Chapter End Notes

I love playing with the dwarves here. They all have such unique personalities.
The dwarves were just as rowdy and messy at meals as Bilbo remembered; apples, scones, and buttered rolls flying from one direction to the next as they fought over who'd get the best slices of glazed ham. Bilbo just sat back and watched the show, his own plate a safe distance from the dwarves at the head of the table. Frodo was seated on his lap, two small pieces of ham and several healthy vegetables on his plate as well. The dwarves had protested at first, not wishing to cook anything green, but Bilbo had put his foot down and wasn't going to budge on the matter.

"Why would you want to eat leaves?" said Kíli. "They're bland and get stuck in your teeth."

Ori shuddered. "Taste terrible if you ask me."

"Meat's always preferrable," said Glóin. "My lad Gimli has grown right stout on it. Helps build muscles and hones your reflexes."

"Aye, aye!"

"Well, I don't know about you dwarves, but a young hobbit needs his greens if he wants to grow up nice and strong," Bilbo had explained. "Now, do you want Frodo to have poor nutrition and an unhealthy diet, Bombur?"

"Wait, he won't grow without it?"

Kíli looked absolutely horrified. "That's terrible!"

"What does it do?"

"His bones will become brittle and start to splinter or bend in some places," said Bilbo. "We hobbits are one with the earth and need its bounty to survive. Greens are a large part of our diet."

"By Mahâl, get him some greens, Bombur!"

"Lots and lots of them! Especially the ones that look like little trees," ordered Fíli. "Those are supposed to be very good for the children of men. I've heard it in the markets."

"Well, don't doddle! Get them!"

The rotund dwarf had a bowl of assorted vegetables on the table five minutes later and the grand feast was then underway, various foods soaring through the air whenever there was a request for something in particular. Fíli and Kíli eventually started a game of catch-the-flying-food, scones and small cheese blocks being tossed into the air as every dwarf at the table tried to prove their worth. Frodo cheered every time one of them managed to get a piece of food into their mouths, his hairy little feet kicking in time with the banging and clapping of their raucous companions.

Meanwhile, Ori tried to persuade the faunt to eat another piece of broccoli.

"Bombur!" shouted Fíli when the large dwarf returned with several more trays of food. A block of cheddar cheese came flying toward him. "Incoming!"

"Got it!"
The cheese flew right into his mouth and everyone in the room gave a loud cheer, Bombur giving a quick bow before depositing the trays on the table. He situated a smaller tray right beside the two hobbits.

"And some homemade mince pies for the tiny one," said Bombur with a flourish, his trusty soup ladle smacking any hands that tried to get close to the pies. "I'd give them a good minute or so to cool off, though."

Frodo hungrily eyed the flaky pies. "Thank you."

Bombur gave the small child a pat on the head before returning to his own seat at the far end of the table. "Any time, lil' one. You can be my taste-tester in the future. Few people around here appreciate good food."

"Why don't I get one, Bombur?" whined Fíli. "I appreciate good food. I love good food. By Mahâl, I've let you poison me before!"

"Because you're neither tiny nor a hobbit. That's why."

Fíli crossed his arms with a pout. "So hobbits get special treatment around here."

"Of course."

Bilbo smiled at the dwarves surrounding him. Kíli and Nori were bickering over a slice of apple pie while Bombur somehow managed to stuff an entire third of said pie into his mouth. Fili threw a small chunk of meat high into the air, Bofur catching it in his mouth with a boisterous cheer. Bifur and Dwalin appeared to be having a drinking contest, heads thrown back as they chugged down their tankards with gusto. Dori seemed to be keeping tally on who was winning, pieces of meat, cheese, and berry tarts apparently being the prize for the victor.

"I missed this."

Frodo dug into the mince pies as soon as Bilbo gave him permission, small fingers covered in paste and crumbs within seconds. His uncle tried to keep up with the mess, but it was increasingly difficult since Frodo seemed to already be emulating the dwarven style of stuffing their faces. Sticky fingers were even bold enough to smack Fíli's hand away, a wicked smirk gracing Frodo's face when the blond dwarf gasped in faux-pain. Bilbo gave him a light swat on the thigh for such naughty behavior; the last thing he needed was for a dwarf like Fíli to have too much influence over the young hobbit.

"Now, Frodo, you know I don't approve of you eating like that."

"But Uncle—"

"No, I won't have it. Eat your meal like a well-mannered faunt."

Frodo pouted in return.

It was about an hour later when the Company was giving them a quick tour of Erebor's upper levels, moving along the Gallery of Kings before making their way up towards the battlements. So much of the city had been repaired during Bilbo's absence that he almost didn't recognize it. There was still a great deal of work that needed to be done—reconstruction would take decades, Bofur had said—but the dwarves had made an astounding amount of progress in a short period of time.

"The tales of your engineering genius are certainly true," said Bilbo as they neared the battlements.
"I've never seen such swift repairs in all my life. We hobbits only move half so fast when it comes to birthdays and dinner parties."

"We've been working right quick on Dale, too." Kíli smiled with great pride. "You'll be able to see the bridge from atop Erebor's gates. It's an amazing sight."

"If it's anything like this, then I'm sure that it's quite—"

The boom of a loud horn cut him off. Every dwarf around them was suddenly at attention, a weapon appearing in each of their hands as they rushed down the nearest staircase. Bilbo just looked around, Frodo clutched tight against his chest and tour completely forgotten as Bofur and Dori grabbed him by the arms. The hobbit was going to demand an answer about what the horn meant when a voice boomed through the hallways.

"ORCS!"

Bilbo felt his nephew's arms tighten around his neck, the shouting of the dwarven sentries frightening the faunt. And Frodo wasn't naïve, he knew very well what an orc was and the destruction that they could cause to a settlement. They'd seen plenty of it during their journey to Erebor.

"INCOMING FROM THE WESTERN HILLS!"

A second and third horn blared, each of them seeming to have a specific purpose that the dwarves knew exactly how to follow. It didn't surprise Bilbo as much as it should have; Thorin's people had lived harsh lives and were more accustomed to battle than Bilbo could ever hope to be. An attack on their home, most especially Dale and Erebor, was likely expected and well-planned for, as Bilbo himself had seen in the months following Erebor's reclamation.

"KING BARD SIGNALS FOR AID! PREPARE THE ARCHERS AND ASSEMBLE AT THE GATES!"

Strong hands guided Bilbo along the walkways, numerous fully-armed dwarves running past them and towards the entrance of the mountain. The horns continued to sound, loud and raucous in the once peaceful air. Dwarves yelled to each other in Khuzdul, their orders clipped and to the point, even to a foreign listener like himself. Bofur stayed right behind them the entire time, Dori leading them across the high walkways of Erebor's central hall, directly left of the main causeway out of the fortress. A familiar full-armored figure stood at the front of the path, shouting orders to the gathered soldiers and directing them towards several different balconies and entrances.

"Is that Thorin?"

Bofur glanced to the side and gave a quick nod. "Aye, that'd be him. In all of his royal gruffness. He always leads the orc counterattacks with King Bard. Ugly bastards just keep coming back for more, no matter how many times we crush them."

The hobbit looked on with concern. "Won't he…I mean, is he healthy enough to engage in combat? Last time I saw him…"

"He's healed well," Bofur assured. "Enough scars to match an old pack mule, but as strong and fit as any dwarf could ever desire to be. Slicing through orcs like butter has become his favorite pastime as of late."

"I thought the orcs were gone from these parts," said Bilbo. He could see Fíli and Kíli running towards their uncle now. "After the battle, that is."
"Not entirely. They've still got a few strongholds in the foothills to the northwest, a couple along the northern reaches of Mirkwood. Thorin's been sending scouts out on an almost monthly basis for recon, but our numbers are still too few," sighed Bofur. "It'll be at least six months before the next caravan from the Blue Mountains arrives, so we'll just have to make due until then."

Bilbo watched the dwarves as they readied themselves for the skirmish. Fíli stood beside his uncle, obviously speaking with him about something important. Unfortunately, because of Bilbo's small size compared to the average dwarf, he was barely able to see or even glance over the sides of the walkway. However, he was tall enough to see through some of the lower, decorative portions, which was when Bilbo spotted Fíli pointing up towards his current location. At the feel of Thorin's intense gaze turning his way, Bilbo gave a sloppy wave before Bofur pulled him further into the mountain fortress.

"We've got a series of safe rooms where we place the children during an attack," explained Bofur. "The walls are thicker than any other place in the mountain. Frodo and yourself will be perfectly safe down here."

Dori broke off and went in another direction a moment later.

"Wait! Where's he—"

"To help with guarding the gates," said Bofur. "There's still some sections that need repairs. But don't worry, I'll be staying with you, just in case."

The hobbit nodded, following Bofur down several flights of narrow steps, Frodo a constant warmth against his front. They eventually arrived in a spacious room, a dozen or so young children already sitting along the back wall with their dwarf mothers. Bilbo was surprised to see so many females, mostly because of the various stories he'd heard during the Quest to Erebor. Many of them were fairly pretty, in a decorative side-burns and stout stature kind of way. And, of course, they were all carrying their own weapons, faces grim as the horn continued to sound from above them.

"Do you still have that glowy letter-opener with you?" asked Bofur as he signaled for Bilbo to sit down on a nearby crate. "The one from the cave?"

"Oh, umm, yes," said Bilbo, carding his fingers through Frodo's soft curls. "But I left it on the bedside table in our rooms. I didn't think I'd be needing it in the city. It doesn't have a chance of getting stolen, does it?"

"The orcs have never come close to getting into the city, so there's no reason to fret," the floppy-hatted dwarf assured. "But it might be wise to keep it at your side in the future, especially if you plan to venture anywhere near the perimeter. That glowing... thing it does whenever an orc's nearby could come in handy. At least until the next caravan arrives and we've got a few hundred more guards in the city."

"I'll do that," said Bilbo with a jerky nod. "Would you like to hear some stories, Frodo? Maybe the one about the brown wizard?"

Frodo, who was seated on his uncle's lap, gave a sharp nod. His hairy feet were nervously kicking back and forth, a clear sign that Frodo was uncomfortable with their current situation.

"Aye, I know that one," chuckled Bofur with a knowing smile. "Strange fellow, Radagast sure was, even for a wizard." He leaned down to Frodo's level and patted the small hobbit on the arm. "Hey, did you know that Radagast outpaced a whole, big pack of wargs on nothing more than a sled of rabbits?"
Frodo looked a little curious at that. "Rabbits?"

"Rhosgobel rabbits!" said Bofur with a grand flourish. "Fastest lil' buggers you'll ever see in your life. The wargs didn't stand a half-chance against those furballs. And the brown wizard flashed right under their snouts while we…"

As it turned out, Bofur was a master storyteller when it came to children, with all of the little dwarves and hobbits sitting at his feet in the center of the room. Bilbo looked on with a big smile, amused by the embellishments that Bofur had funneled into some of the Quest for Erebor stories. If listeners believed Bofur's stories, then Thorin would have to be the strongest, toughest, and most majestic king in all of Middle-Earth's history. Not to mention the many misdeeds of the elves, who were portrayed as arrogant tree-huggers, especially those from Mirkwood. Bilbo tried to interject with a few corrections on how the Rivendell elves gave them some much needed assistance, but the matter proved futile when Frodo kept shushing him at every turn.

"Well, I see where I stand."

"What happened next?" demanded a little blond dwarf next to Frodo. "Did the elf keep His Majesty imprisoned?"

"Ahh, well, it looked like that would be the—"

The door slammed open a moment later, an unfamiliar dwarf peeking his head through the doorway to inform everyone that the skirmish was won and over now. Cursing all of the time they'd lost on their work, the dwarf mothers gathered up their children and went about thanking Bofur for entertaining the little ones for so many hours. Apparently, good stories and spirited tales were one of the few things that could keep a dwarf child amused for long periods of time, and Bofur's storytelling had been an excellent reprieve for the mothers. Listening to their words of thanks from his crate, Bilbo was very thankful that Frodo was not such an energetic terror on a daily basis.

"Looks like the walls held quite nicely," said Bofur with a proud smile. "I'd swear the orcs have no brains, trying to sneak into Erebor like they do. But alas, our home is just too irresistible for them." He gave the stone floor a loving pat. "No one'll be taking Erebor from dwarven hands ever again. Not with a Durin on the throne."

"Aye, aye!" echoed the female dwarves.

"C'mon, my good Baggins hobbits," said Bofur. He dragged them out of the room and into the hallway, walking up the stairs at a fast clip. "Let's see how Thorin and the rest fared against those nasty orcs on this rainy evening."

Frodo's pointy ears perked up at the familiar name. "Uncle! Uncle? Are we going to meet the King now?"

"I do believe so."

The three of them took more turns than Bilbo could count, but they eventually came to a small chamber that was connected to the throne room. Bofur said it was officially referred to as the Royal War Room, but most of the Company instead liked to call it Thorin's Thinking Room. A scoff escaped from Bilbo's throat at that explanation. The thought of Thorin, a self-professed dwarf of action, sitting in a dusty old room with legal documents scattered all around him was pretty difficult to imagine. Of course, Bilbo had only known the King during times of adventure and combat, so maybe there was an intellectual side underneath all that rugged and prideful masculinity.
"We've arrived," declared Bofur loudly. Every head in the room turned to stare at them, both familiar and strange alike. The King and his nephews stood at the head of the center table. "And our favorite burglar has returned."

"So my eyes and ears didn't deceive me," whispered the King. "Bilbo Baggins…"

Chapter End Notes

I love playing with the 'less handsome' dwarves and their personalities, so expect to see a lot more of them than in most other stories.
That'd be me.

Bilbo glanced around him, eyes skimming over the other ten or so dwarves in the room aside from the royals. He immediately recognized Balin and Ori, who were both at their king's side with several pieces of paper in their hands. Óin, Glóin, and Dwalin were closest to Bilbo, along with five other dwarves he did not recognize. All of them except for Balin and Ori were covered in blood and gore, the coppery stench strong even from a distance. The hobbit really could've done without smelling such an unpleasant thing ever again.

"So, it looks like the battle, or, ah… skirmish, went well."

Receiving the blank stare of so many dwarves made Bilbo more than a little uncomfortable. He may not have been a warrior like the rest of them, but even a gentlehobbit like himself could see that most of that blood didn't belong to them. By Yavanna, encouragement was supposed to be a good thing, although the dwarves seems to disagree.

"Ah, yes, well, nice to know that someone's giving the orcs a good push back."

"That we are, laddie." Bless Balin for saving him from any future babbling. "Lots of stories from the west say that they've overrun whole towns. But I imagine you'd know the truth behind those rumors better than us, now wouldn't you?"

"Our travel groups ran into some ambushes in the mountains," admitted Bilbo. "Right nasty business, it is." Without thinking, Bilbo's hand instinctively itched at the still-healing graze along his left thigh. He felt Frodo, who he'd placed down before entering the room, lean into him from behind. The poor boy was still shook up about the incident and didn't hesitate in clinging to the only parental-figure left in his life.

"They seem to be sticking to the countryside in most cases, though. Attacking farms and whatnot."

Thorin nodded, eyes intense as he scrutinized the hobbit. In Bilbo's opinion, the dwarf looked like he'd swallowed a lemon, face scrunched up and grumpy. Of course, that also tended to be Thorin's default expression a good deal of the time, so Bilbo didn't think too much on it.

Goodness, he certainly needed a full night's sleep, if only to stop these rambling thoughts.

"There's little more we can do against the orcs while our numbers are still so few. Haum, place three dozen or more extra sentries along the walls and entrances tonight. Don't leave any area unguarded or unwatched. And send a raven to Bard and his captains about tomorrow's patrols. We'll break for night now."

"Of course, Your Majesty."

The other dwarves shuffled out of the chamber, obviously exhausted from a long day in the mines and an even longer one defending Erebor and Dale from the orcs. A few of them gave the hobbits a curious glance, but they mostly just hobbled on by towards a warm bath and some good food. Bilbo nodded to each of them, not quite sure what else to do with dwarf warriors outside the Company. He was familiar with Dáin and his soldiers, but Bilbo wasn't sure if these particular dwarves were from
the Iron Hills or not.

"So, the hobbit has finally returned," drawled Thorin, walking around the tables to where Bofur and Bilbo were standing near the doorway. "For a while, many of us thought such a return would never happen."

"I always said he'd be coming back," argued Kíli indignantly. He cowed down slightly at his uncle's glare. "Well, I did."

"What took you so long?" asked Thorin. He now stood directly beside the hobbit, posture just as strong and imposing as ever. Bilbo could literally feel the blazing warmth of the man, his thick armor and furs drenched in blood from their earlier battle with the orcs. He looked every inch a warrior king. "There should've been—"

"Ewww," whispered a tiny voice. "He stinks."

Thorin made a face that was an odd cross between puzzled and annoyed. It kind of made him look constipated. "What is that…thing?"

"It's a hobbit babe!" said Kíli. "Isn't he tiny?"

"For the umpteenth time, you two, he's not a babe," sighed Bilbo. "And that thing is my nephew. His name's Frodo, and I'll be taking care of him from now on."

He tried to coax the shy child out from behind him.

"C'mon, Frodo, everyone here is a good friend of mine. Do you remember the stories I told you about the King? Thorin Oakenshield? Well, this is him, darling."

Frodo peeked around his uncle's thighs. "Are you sure? He doesn't have a crown. I thought all kings were supposed to have crowns?"

The older hobbit didn't even attempt to hold in his laughter. "Thorin has a crown, dear, but he just doesn't like to wear it. Dreadfully heavy, crowns are. Besides, you don't like to wear your underpants, now do you?"

Frodo scrunched up his nose. "They itch."

"Well, maybe Thorin feels the same way about his crown," Bilbo reasoned. "Just because Thorin doesn't wear it, doesn't make him an un-King. Just like not wearing your underpants doesn't make you an un-hobbit."

Bilbo could hear the other dwarves laughing themselves silly, especially Fíli, Kíli, and Bofur. He didn't even want to imagine what Thorin's face looked like right now. The hobbit wouldn't be surprised if the stoic dwarf tried to throw him out of Erebor for being so blasé about the royal crown. If there still was a royal crown; Bilbo still wasn't quite sure about that particular matter.

"Frodo?"

"I guess so," his nephew conceded. He stepped out a little bit more and waved up at the King Under the Mountain. "Hello."

And then he disappeared right back behind his uncle again. Oh goodness...

"He's got blood on him."
Bilbo sighed. "I'm working on the shyness issue, but stuff like this takes a good bit of time to overcome."

He actually tried to pull Frodo out this time, but the faunt was having none of it. With a cranky whine, Frodo buried his head in the back of Bilbo’s thigh and refused to come out, fingers digging into his uncle's trousers when the older hobbit tried to dislodge them.

"Now, Frodo, it's alright. No one in this hall will hurt you, I promise. Thorin's not nearly as frightening as he appears." Bilbo leaned down to whisper to his nephew. "He's really a big softie inside, just like Hamson's gaffer back in the Shire. And look, Fíli and Kíli are right over there."

Both dwarves gave the faunt reassuring waves. This seemed to perk Frodo up a little bit, his arms gesturing for Bilbo to pick him up. Arms aching from long hours of previous use, the older hobbit still managed to balance the tiny hobbit on his right hip, hugging the youngster close for reassurance.

Frodo had been dreadfully shy in their first few weeks together, but he'd been opening up a lot more since Rivendell, something that Bilbo hoped would continue in Erebor.

"Now, give Thorin a proper greeting, Frodo."

The young boy seemed to ponder this for a moment before finally holding out his hand with a determined expression. "Nice to meet you, Mister King."

Thorin looked completely baffled.

"Umm, Uncle," stage-whispered Kíli. "Not to be impolite or anything, but I think you're supposed to shake the babe's hand."

The other dwarves didn't even attempt to hide their mirth, Fíli all but snorting when Dwalin said something in Khuzdul. Bilbo didn't doubt that whatever it was was terribly rude and likely directed at Thorin's bemused reaction. The King pointedly ignored all of them.

Kíli looked confused for a moment and then said, "Unless hobbits do it differently, of course."

"No, we don't," said Bilbo with a smirk. "C'mon, Thorin, are you really going to deny this small child a simple handshake."

The Dwarf-King rolled his eyes. "Hobbits…"

Reaching out with utmost gentleness, Thorin's large, calloused, and bloody right hand easily engulfed the tiny one beneath it. Frodo's milky white skin contrasted starkly with Thorin's weathered tones, all baby softness and little fingers where the Dwarf-King was scarred and hairy. More cautious than he'd been with any person since his nephews' births, Thorin cradled the small hobbit hand within his own and gave it a few delicate shakes. He glanced up after a moment, watching as Bilbo gave the two of them a satisfied smile.

"That wasn't so bad, now was it?" Bilbo asked his nephew. "You were all worried over nothing."

Frodo nodded in return, tucking back into his uncle's side now with a natural shyness instead of the fear-induced one of earlier. Considering the little boy's demeanor, Bilbo wasn't about to complain. He was just relieved that Frodo hadn't started crying again.

"Well, that went much better than the meeting with the elves, that's for sure."

Thorin smirked arrogantly at this. Insulting elven tree-shaggers was very familiar territory for him. "The child appears to possess quite a good judge of character. Not very shocking for a hobbit, of
course."

Bilbo just gave him a knowing smile. "Be nice to the elves, Thorin. I'd prefer that Frodo not grow up speaking those awful words you like to use for them."

"Weed-eater's a good name," defended Glóin. "And tree-shagger."

"I should've known you'd all work against me on this," said Bilbo. He bounced an exhausted Frodo higher onto his hip, arms burning from carrying the child since early that morning. "Ugh, could I sit down, maybe? It's kinda been a long day and this lil' boy's not getting any lighter."

Thorin seemed to catch himself for a moment, and then gestured to a pair of oaken chairs in front of the chamber fireplace. For a moment, Bilbo almost thought he looked nervous, but that was likely a trick of the light.

"You arrived earlier this day?"

"In the late afternoon," said Bilbo, giving a great sigh of relief when he finally got to rest his feet and arms. "We probably would've arrived late last week if it wasn't for the constant downpours. I feared Frodo catching cold too much to travel through many of the storms."

Bilbo ran his fingers through his nephew's unruly curls, ever thankful that the child had not been harmed on the journey. If anything had happened to the lad, Bilbo never would've been able to forgive himself.

"The orcs were a problem at several points, but only the ones near Mirkwood proved too difficult."

Thorin was suddenly beside them. "What do you mean?"

Instead of saying anything, Bilbo simply pulled the upper right portion of his coat to the side, revealing an angry looking bruise beneath it. He touched his left thigh where another arrow had grazed through his skin. It still ached from time to time, especially when it was damp and rainy like today.

"We ran into an ambush on the plains east of Mirkwood. The arrows came too many and too fast to totally evade. I had to protect Frodo." The last part was said with absolute finality. "An elven patrol arrived five or so minutes later, but there were only twelve of us left by then. We'd have arrived at Erebor one month earlier if that attack had never happened."

He didn't mention the mithril shirt that was hidden beneath his nephew's shirts, overcoat, and pants. A small hand touched the hidden wound, Frodo's blue eyes looking right up at his uncle; and not a second later, a larger hand covered his nephew's tiny one, Thorin looking down at the two hobbits. Fíli and Kíli stood not too far behind their uncle, both muttering about how they should have slain the orcs from earlier more slowly, as if that would somehow help mend the hobbit's arrow wounds. Even Óin and Glóin were angered at the sight of their burglar's still-healing injuries, a reaction that Bilbo had not been expecting at all.

"But you arrived," said Thorin, his dark blue eyes fixed on Bilbo's tired face. The dwarf's expression was thunderous, but also carefully restrained for the sake of the small child in Bilbo's lap. "And that's all that matters."

"Aye, aye," echoed the other dwarves.

"It is certainly nice to sit down on something other than the ground or a pony, that I can tell you,"
Bilbo said, situating Frodo into a more comfortable position once Thorin had taken a few steps back. "And your nephews have been exceptional hosts so far. You should be very proud of them."

Fíli and Kíli puffed up with pride at this compliment. Bilbo had always had a soft spot for the King's nephews, their boisterous personalities a welcome reminder of all the good things left in the world. Both of them looked up to and admired their kingly uncle, who, in Bilbo's opinion, did not give either of the two youngsters enough praise or credit for their heroic actions. So, in the spirit of solidarity and plain old fondness for both the boys, Bilbo wasn't above fishing for compliments for them.

"We gave them the Blue Room," said Kíli with a devious smirk. "Thought it'd be best to keep our favorite hobbits close by, just in case."

"So you did," mumbled Thorin, his eyes narrowed in suspicion. Or, at least, that's what it looked like to Bilbo, but who ever really knew with Thorin. The Dwarf-King was very difficult to read even on his most expressive of days. "Then, I suppose it'd be best to return the hobbits to their rooms for some much needed rest. It sounds like they have had quite the arduous journey."

"Umm, about those rooms..."

Thorin turned away to speak with Balin before Bilbo could even get his grievance out. The hobbit was going to try again, but then the royal nephews were standing right in front of him.

"I can carry Frodo for you," said Kíli with a hopeful smile. "Well, if the lil' one's okay with it, that is. Your poor arms must feel like stone at this point."

"Ugh, maybe next time, Kíli," stated Bilbo, his stomach twisting at the crestfallen look on the brunet's face. "When you're not covered in blood. I did just give him a bath, after all."

"Oh!" gasped Kíli when he looked down at himself. "I suppose I am quite a mess at the moment. Orc guts and all."

"You can carry him all you want when you're clean," promised Bilbo. "He seems to be fond of you already."

Kíli all but beamed with pride.

"Well, umm, would someone be so kind as to lead me back to our rooms?" Bilbo asked. "I'd try on my own, but I'm afraid I'd just get terribly lost." He patted his yawning nephew on the head. "Erebor's enormous and this little boy's on the verge of falling asleep any moment now."

Thorin was the first to respond. "I'll be heading in the same direction, so you can follow me if you wish."

Bilbo gave him a smile. "Lead away."

"Uncle," murmured Frodo, his droopy eyes watching Thorin with great curiosity. "I thought kings weren't supposed to stink."

The older hobbit cringed when he saw Thorin's back stiffen. They were both going to get thrown out of Erebor at this rate. And then eaten by orcs.

"Just hush and go to sleep."

"But..."
"No. No buts. Sleep."

Chapter End Notes

I hope Thorin's first appearance wasn't out of character or anything. He's a pretty stoic guy, so I'm trying to keep him very serious and kingly when he's in the vicinity of his subjects or non-family/Company members.
Bilbo followed the King Under the Mountain through the many twisting passages and walkways that apparently led back to the royal wing. The hobbit glanced behind them a few times, more than a little suspicious of the snickering blurs that kept disappearing around every corner. Bilbo just shook his head in amusement; he really needed to have a good talk with those boys about discretion, because they weren't doing it right. Honestly, the whole shoving and snickering part was a dead giveaway.

"Erebor looks a lot better since the last time I was here," said Bilbo, trying to start a conversation of some sorts to break the silence. "It's less…burnt. And you actually have some carpeting. I'm impressed."

The Dwarf-King chuckled. "Despite common belief, we dwarves are not complete barbarians. A good deal of our woman-folk know their way around a needle, although the sword is just as important in this era as well."

A hand patted Bilbo on the head, his nephew leaning outwards to look out over a walkway. "What's that?"

"Excuse me," said Bilbo, "Why aren't you sleeping?"

Frodo gestured around him at the towering hall. "Too interesting."

"Those are the statues of my forefathers," explained Thorin patiently. "They each support one of the ten entrances to Erebor's mines. They were constructed by the greatest sculptors and smiths of their time. You can see some of the gold mines on the left side; at least half of our current production comes from that particular shaft. And the ruby mine is just over there."

"How'd you build them without falling?"

"We have a series of rope and pulley systems that allow us to transport dwarves up and down the walls," said Thorin. "They are very secure and are watched and adjusted at all times. Only a handful of accidents have happened in all of Erebor's years."

"I wouldn't want to use them. Mama always said that hobbits and high places don't mix well together."

"You mother sounds like a wise woman."

"She said that after I fell off the top kitchen shelf," Frodo confessed. "That's where she kept the cookie jar. I still managed to eat two, though."

"A worthy reason, I must admit."

The faunt nodded and then pointed to their left. "What's that? The giant stone thing-y."

"Over there? That's the King's Throne, which was built by my long and distant great-grandfather Thráin I to symbolize our connection to the mountain itself. He thought that it would be..."

Bilbo had to pause a few times so that Frodo could look down the mines, his small face enraptured.
by the multi-colored gems that marked many of the stone caverns. Thorin barely answered one question before another was fired away, Frodo's near constant yawns not slowing down his curiosity in the slightest. Thankfully, the Dwarf-King didn't appear to mind all of the questions, answering each one like he would with a visiting dignitary or any other adult. Bilbo had learned quickly that his nephew was a very intelligent child, so Thorin's complex explanations were welcomed with an encouraging smile from the older hobbit.

"What about the ravens? How do they get into—"

"Okay, that's enough for now," said Bilbo. They were in the royal wing at this point, its lavish hallways set apart from the rest of the underground city. "Thorin needs his sleep as much as we do, so no more questions."

Frodo pouted, but didn't bother to argue with his uncle. And although it was only one hallway over, Frodo was fast asleep by the time they arrived at the hobbits' bedroom, his face buried in the crook of Bilbo's neck. He gave Thorin a thankful smile when he stepped to the side of the door, opening it with one large hand as Bilbo tried to balance Frodo into a more secure position.

"Thank you, Thorin," said Bilbo. "You really didn't need to do all of this for us. I truly am thankful. And the rooms are magnificent, they really are, but it's far beyond anything that a simple hobbit like myself would need. And Frodo doesn't—"

"You deserve this and everything else you could ever desire," interrupted Thorin, his expression almost as serious as Bilbo had ever seen it. "If it wasn't for you, we would never have retaken Erebor or survived the battle. You, Bilbo Baggins, are the sole reason my people have a home once again. Anything I can give you that will make your life, and Frodo's life, more comfortable, will be given. And this will remain your room for as long as you choose to live in Erebor, and I will not take no for an answer."

Thorin looked a bit lost for a moment.

"If you need anything, do not hesitate to ask. My rooms are directly to the right of yours. I'll leave you to your sleep now."

Bilbo was barely able to get out another, "Thank you," before Thorin disappeared into his own rooms just down the hallway. The hobbit sighed, feeling a bit like a fool for bringing the subject up at all. Thorin's words had been kind, but he'd run off so quick that Bilbo couldn't help wondering if he'd insulted him. Bilbo didn't want Thorin to feel obligated to help Frodo and himself just because of the older hobbit's part in taking back Erebor two years ago.

"Dwarves are a strange lot," Bilbo murmured to his slumbering nephew once they were inside their rooms. "Very changeable. You'd think from all the common stories that they'd be quite obstinate in their ways; but no, they're an erratic lot."

He walked over to the enormous bed and laid Frodo down, easily changing him into his nightclothes with the skill of a newly-capable parent. Bilbo tucked the little boy under the thick blankets and slid Rupert into his arms, easily situating Frodo's small head atop a plush pillow. It only took Bilbo a few minutes to change into his favorite set of pajamas, an obnoxious piece of green and blue that he'd received on his 30th birthday from his Aunt Myrtle. The nightclothes may have been uglier than Azog himself, but they were also the comfiest clothes Bilbo had ever owned, which was really saying something since hobbits absolutely loved cozy clothes.

"A bed has never looked more beautiful," murmured Bilbo as he crawled into the bed and curled up around his slumbering nephew. The little boy turned into Bilbo's arms, Frodo's downy head directly
until his chin. "Good night, sweetheart."

The hours passed in silence, Bilbo deep within dreamland when he awakened to the feel of something repeatedly hitting his right shoulder. Shocked out of sleep by a sudden whack to his face, the older hobbit was barely able to sit upright before Frodo released an ear-piercing scream. Bilbo immediately started to speak to the little boy, stroking his face and gently shaking him in an effort to chase away the nightmare that plagued his nephew's slumber. His heart twisted when Frodo pulled away from him, fearful screams and whimpers escaping the boy's mouth. But it wasn't Bilbo who woke the hobbit; no, it was the bedroom door slamming open as the Dwarf-King and his nephews charged in with their swords raised and ready for battle.

"The guards summoned us," said Thorin. "What's happened?"

"C'mon, Frodo, it's just a bad dream, darling," repeated Bilbo over and over again to his trembling nephew. "He's just had a bad dream. Frodo, sweetie, Uncle Bilbo's right here, it's alright. Yes, that's it, look at me. See, it was just a bad, bad dream, nothing's going to hurt you."

Although he gave the tiny boy some breathing room, Bilbo didn't dare move more than a foot away in case Frodo needed to see him. He could hear the light footsteps of the dwarven royals as they approached, all three of them staying a decent distance away so as not to startle the frightened hobbit child. Bilbo hushed and soothed his nephew, encouraging the faunt to release his tears and let out all of the bad emotions. It took a few minutes, but Frodo eventually stopped crying and just cuddled into Bilbo's chest, small arms wrapped tightly around his uncle's throat.

"There, there, that's it," Bilbo murmured soothingly. "I'm right here. And see over there? That's Thorin. And Fíli and Kíli. They're here, too. And absolutely nothing can get to you with them here. Right?"

Frodo's tear-stained face glanced at the dwarves who stood several feet away from the bed, their trusty swords hanging limply in each of their hands. Thorin stepped forward after a few long moments, slowly sheathing Orcrist before taking a seat right beside the two hobbits. A pair of chairs were drawn up from a nearby table, Fíli and Kíli sitting a half-pace away from the other side of the bed.

"He dreams about his parents, sometimes," whispered Bilbo, his voice hoarse and tired from the emotional overhaul that always came with Frodo's night terrors. "Of rivers, or deep ponds. Like the one that took them away." He wrapped a blanket offered by Thorin around Frodo, desperate to stop the shivering that seemed to consume his nephew after each nightmare. "Other times, he dreams of me. Of the arrows cutting deeper than an elf could hope to heal. It scares him."

"Don't wanna be alone," whimpered Frodo.

A pair of large hands settled on Bilbo's shoulder and the arm that he had wrapped around Frodo's lower back. Thorin was dressed in a simple sleep tunic and trousers, heat pouring off of him and into the smaller hobbits. And oddly enough, the protective presence of the King Under the Mountain seemed to calm his nephew's frayed nerves, muscles and limbs relaxing as the dwarf cautiously rubbed his fingers on Frodo's back. Bilbo just kept hugging the little boy to him, reassuring Frodo that no one was going to take him away or hurt him again.

"We wouldn't let them," piped in Kíli. "You're a hobbit of Erebor now, mizimith, and that means they'd have to get through an entire city of dwarves to get to you. And if you think they'd get past Uncle Thorin with their heads still attached, then you're on the same level as a mountain troll."

"You see our uncle's sword," said Fíli, pulling Thorin's weapon partially out of its sheath. "It's called
Orcrist because of its ability to cleave straight through a whole band of orcs without need of a second stroke. No orc, goblin, or man would stand a chance against Uncle Thorin's blade, including any who'd try to harm you."

Frodo sniffled. "Really?"

"Truly," said Thorin.

He reached out and took the faunt's small hand, pulling it towards the recently polished blade. Ever careful of the sharp edge, Thorin allowed Frodo to run his fingers over the flat surface of the elven sword, his calloused right hand guiding the tiny one beneath it. Bilbo still felt nervous whenever they neared the edges, not even realizing that his arms had tightened around the child.

"This blade was forged by the elves of ancient times and its nickname, the Goblin Cleaver, strikes fear into the hearts of our enemies."

Thorin reached over and picked up Sting from the bedside table, the blade appearing to be tiny in Thorin's hand. The size difference reminded Bilbo of the time Balin had referred to it as a letter-opener, something that still caused the hobbit to scoff. Not everyone could wield giant swords and axes, thank you very much.

"And like your uncle's letter-opener here, my blade glows whenever orcs are near. Is it glowing now?"

"No."

"And that means no orcs or goblins are nearby," explained Thorin. "While you are here in Erebor, the first thing I will do whenever Orcrist glows is find you. That way, if an ugly orc or goblin ever finds its way into these nigh-impenetrable walls, then I can protect you and your uncle from harm. Understand?"

Frodo nodded, fingers still tracing the engravings along the blade. Thorin kept his own thick fingers directly around the hobbit's, steering the boy away from the sharpened edge whenever he wandered too close. His other arm was on Bilbo's shoulder, both of his nephews eyeing it with tiny smirks. Satisfied that the faunt was no longer too upset, the young dwarves walked over to the large, plush chairs in front of the bedroom fireplace and decided to make themselves at home.

Bilbo looked over at the brothers, asking their uncle, "What're they doing?"

"We're guarding Frodo," said Fíli, as if the answer was obvious. The dwarf pulled a thick blanket over himself and laid down in the large chair, fluffing a pillow underneath his blond head. "We can't let any of those vile nightmares get near our favorite lil' hobbit babe."

"Yeah, we'll be over here guarding the doors while Uncle Thorin guards the bed," Kíli stated, shuffling around in the chair to get comfortable. "Don't worry, Frodo, we're a skilled bunch at this kinda stuff."

Bilbo looked over at Thorin, surprised to find him less than five inches away from the older hobbit. The Dwarf-King almost seemed to stutter, dark blue eyes glaring at both of his grinning nephews, fingers twitching as if he wanted to strangle them. Frodo didn't seem to notice the sudden tension, huge yawns shuddering through his body as he leaned into his uncle's warmth.

"He gonna stay?" Frodo whispered.

The question seemed to take Thorin even more off guard, his eyes widening in an almost comical
manner when the little hobbit just stared expectantly up at him. Bilbo gave a shrug, immensely pleased by the fact that Frodo already seemed to trust Thorin enough to let him sleep in their rooms. Maybe the two most important people in Bilbo's life would be able to get along after all.

"I, ugh…"

Thorin continued to stutter, his nephews cackling in the background at the very uncharacteristic way in which their stoic uncle was responding. The Dwarf-King glanced over at Bilbo, mouth opening and closing in confusion. Bilbo just gave him an understanding smile. Thorin scooted down to the bottom of the bed where neither of the hobbits could come close to bodily touching him in their sleep.

"Well, I'll just…be right down here. In case of nightmares or a sudden horde of…orcs."

"Oh, Mahâl," giggled Kíli from across the room. "I think I busted a lung…or, or my liver, oh, my liver!"

"Shut up, you two brats!" snapped Thorin. He grabbed a nearby… something and hurled it at his snickering nephews. Fíli yelped and fell to the floor with a loud thud. "No respect at all."

Bilbo just pulled Frodo and himself back under the covers, holding the child close as Thorin grabbed a blanket and situated himself along the bottom of the bed. Frodo peeked his head up and glanced around, obviously checking to make sure that Thorin and the royal brothers were still there. Once satisfied, Frodo burrowed back into the quilt with Rupert, tiny body cuddling into Bilbo's warmth. Everything was quiet after that, the only sound in the room coming from the crackling of the fireplace.

"You didn't have to do this, Thorin," Bilbo said several minutes later. "I could've gotten Frodo back to sleep on my own. I've done it lots of times before."

Thorin didn't answer for a few seconds. "It's my obligation as the King of Erebor to ensure that all of my subjects are protected from malevolent forces."

"For some reason," whispered Bilbo, "I don't think that applies to the nightmares of a young—"

"Just shut up and go back to sleep, burglar."

Bilbo smiled. "As you wish, Your Gruffness."

"Humph."

Chapter End Notes

I personally view Thorin's relationship with Frodo as being the most pivotal since Bilbo would never, ever enter into a relationship with someone who didn't accept/love Frodo. I mean, it's pretty clear in the books/movies that Bilbo adores his nephew; so, realistically, it makes sense that Thorin would have to prove himself to parent-Bilbo first before anything could happen.
"Absolutely not."

Bilbo sat at the royal dining hall table, his fork stabbing at a big potato while he glared at the Dwarf-King directly to his right side. His nephew sat upon his lap, happily nibbling on a strip of bacon that Bombur had insisted was the finest meat Erebor had to offer a growing hobbit like Frodo. The rest of the Dwarf Company was gathered around them as well, each of them stuffing their faces before a long day of work in the mines or negotiating reconstruction plans. Bilbo had personally planned to spend his day down in Erebor's old library, which was currently under Ori's jurisdiction to restore. The thought of so many ancient books and tomes was far too tempting for Bilbo to pass up, especially since Thorin had already given him permission to assist as much as he wanted with Ori's new cataloging system.

"The matter has been settled," said the King, fingers picking apart a large piece of meat in his hands. Much to Bilbo's annoyance, it seemed that not even dwarven royals used forks at mealtime. "Many parts of Erebor still remain hazardous and unstable due to Smaug's rampage. It will take at least another year to clean up and rebuild the most basic junctions of the middle city."

"Not to mention all the poo piles we had to wash up," Fíli grumbled. "Some were as high as the bloody ceilings."

"Still smelled awful, too," added Nori.

Bilbo remembered seeing those dragon poo piles. It seemed that going back to the Shire to sort things out with Bag End and his auction-hungry family had saved Bilbo from participation in that messy affair.

"That doesn't answer my question, Thorin," said Bilbo, a touch of annoyance starting to color his usually unruffled voice. "I can understand perfectly why Frodo would need a protector when one of the Company or myself are not present, but I see no logic or reason behind her having to guard me as well."

A stocky, red-haired dwarf stood behind the King. Her resemblance to Glóin was uncanny, especially in the face and her overall coloring; she'd even headbutted the other dwarf when she'd entered the room. Bilbo would not have had a problem with her watching Frodo in his absence, but an adult hobbit like Bilbo himself?

No.

"The rebuilding of Erebor is going to be a long and arduous process," said Thorin, impatience clear in the tone of his voice. "However, dwarves are accustomed to living in such perilous conditions, especially those born in Erebor prior to the dragon attack. But a hobbit like yourself, who has neither lived underground nor in unsafe settings before, will be in a great deal more danger than my other subjects. Glóril will be able to ensure safety to both Frodo and yourself in our absence."

Bilbo could feel his own temper flaring, but the blond hobbit did his best to force it down. Dwarves always took shouting as a challenge and Bilbo knew that Thorin was perhaps the worst of them all.

"Perhaps you have forgotten, but it was a puny hobbit who snuck into a perilous, unpopulated
Erebor and lured the dragon from its hoard of gold. I had no need of a bodyguard then, so why would I have need of one now?"

"That was under different circumstances and you were almost—"

"And who was it that snuck into the Elvenking's halls, hid for weeks on end in plain sight, pilfered food from the royal kitchens, and then shoved thirteen dwarves into the smelliest barrels this side of Arda?" asked Bilbo with a scowl. "Oh yes, that would be me. The hobbit who outwitted the most paranoid elf since Fëanor himself."

"I would not endanger a hobbit like—"

"Since when has my being a hobbit affected my ability to defend myself? This was never a concern three years ago."

"Times have changed."

"Not so much that I can't take care of myself."

The hobbit was less than amused by Thorin's obstinacy on the subject. He had saved the Dwarf-King's life more times than he could count and Thorin had rarely shown concern for his safety then. All anyone ever did was dismiss and underestimate him.

"Crossing the Misty Mountains and Mirkwood three times in as many years is no mean feat, I might add."

"You had a troop of dwarves with you then."

"Not when I faced down a crazed lunatic in the goblin tunnels, no, I didn't," said Bilbo. "And I escaped with my cunning and wits. I'm not just a useless grocer anymore."

The other dwarves seemed to sink deeper into their chairs, all of them leery of what results this argument could bring from the hobbit or Dwarf-King. Even Frodo had noticed the tension, his blue eyes flitting back and forth between the two glowering adults. It was very, very odd for his uncle to grind his teeth like that.

"I understand and would never underestimate your abilities, my friend," said the King Under the Mountain. "However, Erebor is a dangerous place even for us dwarves at the moment. And there are many within these walls who I do not trust, namely those from communities outside my people's line of kin. They would gladly use Frodo, yourself, and any member of this Company against me."

"Then why do none of them have personal guards?" Bilbo demanded, gesturing to the rest of the table. "Neither Fíli nor Kíli have appointed bodyguards, unless I've missed a vital bit of information since my arrival. They are your kin and the heirs to the kingdom. If they do not need personal guards, then why do I?"

"Don't bring us into this!" cried Kíli through a mouthful of eggs and bacon. "This is a domestic, and this dwarf doesn't want no part of it."

Fíli sighed. "I fear that these will be happening quite often, brother. You might as well get accustomed to them now."

"I prefer not to think about it."

"Everyone in the Company is well aware of the current danger and have agreed to travel in
designated pairs at all times," Thorin ground out. He glared at his nephews, who were grumbling to each other about headaches and closets. Neither paid him any mind or even bothered to cower beneath his glower. "Glóril will serve as an ideal counterpart to—"

"I do not need nor want a bodyguard," argued Bilbo. His nephew was attempting to slip under the table. "Despite what you dwarves may think, hobbits are not completely helpless creatures."

"I am well aware of that."

"Then allow me to pair off with a friend like other members of the Company," said Bilbo. "I have no doubts that Glóril will make an excellent bodyguard for Frodo, but I myself will not be treated like a half-witted Bracegirdle. If the rest of the Company are competent enough to oversee their own safety, then so am I."

"Would anybody like some more tea?" asked Balin in a desperate attempt to break the rising tension. "Or perhaps another pancake for the lil' one?"

Bofur and Ori decided to take Frodo's cue and sneak beneath the table while the sneaking was still good. Neither of them were eager to see a blow-up between their King and the strong-willed hobbit. Everyone else just slumped down further in their chairs, all of them wary of their King's stubborn temper. Unfortunately for Frodo, there appeared to be no escape from his uncle's tight grip or the argument that was taking place right over-top of his head.

"You are trying my patience, halfling," huffed Thorin. "You reside in my kingdom now and that means that you are under my protection, both by duty and personal choice."

"Oh, so now I'm just the halfling again."

Everyone around the table winced at that statement. After the battle, Bilbo had informed them in no uncertain terms that referring to hobbits as halflings was very insulting and he'd kick the next dwarf to do it in the shin. If Thorin hadn't been so far away, Bilbo would've done just that.

"I am perfectly capable of protecting myself," sniffed Bilbo, patience worn thin at the lack of faith Thorin was showing in his abilities. "Or did you also forget about the goblins, orcs, elves, wargs, and all manner of dangerous creatures I've had to face down in the last three years." He paused for a moment, not at all cowed by Thorin's thunderous glare. "Oh, and the dragon. Don't forget about the dragon."

Thorin gnawed on a tough piece of bacon. "I am offering you the greatest, surest form of protection I can, Bilbo. Glóril's loyalty to her King and her brothers is absolute; thus, making her loyalty the same to Frodo and yourself."

Glóin and Óin both nodded at this statement.

"I could not offer you a finer kinswoman of mine to guard Frodo from an unexpected attack or danger in Erebor."

"I appreciate your concern, Thorin, I truly do. But I'm a simple hobbit and this is far too much, in so many ways. Frodo and I do not need all of this," Bilbo gestured at the fancy setup of the chamber and the various pieces of jewelry that had been shoved at him this morning. "It's all lovely, but gold, jewels, and massive halls matter little to hobbits. I don't need these things to be happy or protected. And I don't want Frodo to grow up believing that he needs countless bodyguards and gold to be content and safe."

"The underground tunnels of Erebor are not designed for hobbits, especially ones who have never
lived outside the Shire before."

"Would you prefer Frodo and I reside in Dale, then?"

Thorin's eyes widened and he sputtered, "Of course not! Don't be absurd. A city of men is no place for a hobbit. They'd not hesitate to—"

"But apparently a dwarf city isn't, either," interrupted Bilbo. "According to you, I am not capable of living safely anywhere on my own despite having traveled twice across the continent."

"You were shot by orcs!" argued Thorin.

Everyone in the room glanced between the Dwarf-King and the hobbit, eyes wide as they waited to see what would happen next. And none of them envied Frodo, who was stuck in Bilbo's lap between the two of them.

"You will accept Glóril's protection. The matter is already settled," said the King. He went back to eating and didn't notice the redness that was spreading over Bilbo's face. "The reconstruction on the western bridge will be—"

Bilbo stood up from the table, Frodo balanced on his right hip. He completely and utterly ignored Thorin, walking towards the entrance of the hall as everyone else stared at him in stunned silence.

"Where are you going?" demanded Thorin.

"Away from you, Thorin Oakenshield, and everyone else who can't respect even the most basic of privacy rights," Bilbo fumed. He was infuriated over the complete lack of respect that Thorin was showing him. "And don't you dare send someone after me or try to follow me yourself. I swear, if you do, I'll disappear for a month!"

Bilbo stomped out of the dining hall, Frodo silent and still in his arms. If possible, steam would have been coming out of Bilbo's pointed ears, whistling like the pumps he'd seen in the smithies back home. The sheer audacity and nerve of Thorin infuriated him! It was downright insulting, what Thorin had done. If the Dwarf-King had simply consulted him beforehand, Bilbo would not have been quite so mad; but no, that arrogant dwarf did not even bother to speak to him about it.

For Yavanna's sake, he'd taken on a dragon for that pig-headed lump of rock!

"I don't care if that dwarf's the king of the whole eastern reaches," Bilbo growled, "He has no right to make decisions like that about my life. No one has that right! And he thought I'd just take such a decision belly-down? Oh, Thorin Oakenshield has been quite misinformed about hobbits, then!"

"Uncle Bilbo," whispered Frodo, "People are staring."

"Let them stare," said the older hobbit. And four dwarves who were working on a large hole in the wall did just that, watching the ranting halfling as if he were a rabid dog. "Let them know what an angry hobbit looks like. I refuse to change my personality just to please them and their King."

"You're acting very Tookish, Uncle."

"Ugh, I know."

Bilbo wandered the hallways for quite a while, the difficulty of telling time when underground was something that he'd eventually have to get used to. Well, so long as Thorin didn't kick him out of Erebor for that little spectacle back there. Then Frodo and himself would just become orc food. The
thought of Thorin turning his back on them was enough to make Bilbo's stomach ache and his eyes
prick, his anger slowly fading into a deluge of trepidation.

If Thorin did force them to leave, Bilbo wasn't quite sure where they'd go to live. The Shire was an
option, of course, since Bag End was still in Bilbo's name with Frodo as the primary inheritor.
However, that was a very long journey back the same way they'd came and Bilbo didn't know if he'd
make it back alive a third time. His other options were the local human cities, none of which Bilbo
would be particularly happy to reside in with a young child. Bard and his family were a possibility,
but Bilbo didn't wish to impose on the archer any more than he already had in past years. Overall, his
options were limited, both because of them being hobbits and Frodo being little more than a toddler.

And then, suddenly, Frodo started to squirm. "I see books. Over there."

The older hobbit stopped and looked to his left side. A set of large, granite double doors were open,
revealing a massive room full of bookshelves, tables, and softly glowing lanterns.

"This must be the library that Ori was telling us about, Frodo. Would you like to go inside and take a
look around?"

His nephew gave an eager nod.

"Okay, let's see if we can find any of those old elvish fairytales and poems that you liked so much."

Chapter End Notes

I simply can't picture Bilbo not clashing with Thorin and some of the other dwarves at
times, especially if they try to invade his privacy or act overprotective of him. Bilbo's
always seemed like a pretty independent, intelligent, and headstrong hobbit to me, so I
hope I didn't screw that up here. I've read far too many stories where a strong, stubborn
character suddenly becomes weak when romance is involved and I hate it when that
happens.
"Look at this, Uncle Bilbo. It's a book on stone giants."

"Well, I do believe it is," said the older hobbit. He leaned over to look at the book his nephew was reading, eyes skimming over the faded picture drawings. "They certainly seemed quite a bit larger in person, though."

Frodo pursed his lips. "I wonder what they eat. Stone?"

"I don't know," said Bilbo. He was currently looking through a big pile of books on ancient elvish cartography, none of which Bilbo could read or decipher with a limited knowledge of archaic elven scripts. "Why don't you read some more and find out? I'd be curious to know the answer."

The two hobbits had been in the library for quite a while now, their only company three elderly dwarves at the front who were cataloguing several dozen huge piles of dusty dwarvish tomes. The lone female dwarf, Dhola she'd said her name was, had immediately recognized the pair and ushered them inside. She was a maternal great-aunt of Dori, Nori, and Ori, the last of whom had already told her about the hobbits' arrival and Bilbo's keen interest in ancient texts.

"Why am I not surprised that all of the elvish books are hidden in the back," stated Bilbo with a sardonic smile. "Thorin's head would almost certainly explode if he knew so many pieces of elvish literature were buried within his home."

"It doesn't say what they eat," pouted Frodo.

"Oh, looky here, an old journal about the first elvish kings," crowed Bilbo, fingers dusting off the ancient text. It didn't look like it'd been touched in centuries. "These were supposed to have been lost ages ago."

Frodo had a deep frown on his face. "Don't they have brains?"

"I'm sorely tempted to hoard all of these tomes for the rest of my life," said Bilbo, excitedly flipping through pages upon pages of archaic notes. "Thorin and the dwarves of Erebor can keep their gold. I want these books. Papery gold."

"How do they think?" pondered Frodo. "Stone brain…"

Bilbo was practically cackling as he sifted through the bookshelves. "Oh, what the wood elves wouldn't give for some of these texts. Thorin would probably love to dangle a tome or two in front of Thranduil's face and taunt him with it."

"Uncle Bilbo," said Frodo, "Why are these people wrestling?"

"Oh, and here's another…" Bilbo trailed off and his brow furrowed. "Wrestling? I don't think athletics are in this section."

The older hobbit leaned over to take a closer look and nearly tripped over his own feet when he realized that Frodo was looking at a text on elven sexual positions. How did the dwarves even get a hold of that?!
"Yes, yes, that's wrestling! That's what it is!" stuttered Bilbo, snatching the book out of his nephew's hands. "But this is very poorly drawn wrestling, my boy. Just terrible, terrible renditions of various... positions. I don't even know why this text was ever chosen for storage down here. Just...terrible..."

Bilbo threw the book into a far corner. His arms swung from side to side while he tried to find another, more interesting book for his nephew to read. Something that didn't depict two very flexible elves humping each other in a closet. Honestly, why the dwarves needed or wanted a text like that was beyond him.

"Umm, well, let's see...ah! Here's a nice book on ents!"

His nephew picked it up and started to flip through it. "Walking trees?"

"And talking," said Bilbo, dabbing at the sweat on his forehead. Being a parent to an eight-year-old hobbit was hard work. "And look! Here's a whole section on ents! Very safe for little hobbits and my future heart conditions."

Frodo gave him an odd look. "Grown ups are mad."

"And I completely agree with you on that, darling." Bilbo glared at the corner, disgruntled by the nerve-wracking twists and turns his day had taken so far. "The big folks and grown ups of the world are all quite mad."

"I knew it."

Bilbo went back to browsing through his pile again, but kept a careful eye on what Frodo was reading this time around. He was nowhere near ready to have that talk with his little nephew yet. Another decade or so would be very much appreciated on that particular subject. Thankfully, that train of thought was soon interrupted by the sound of footsteps, a brief pause in the aisle across from theirs setting Bilbo's nerves on edge. He gave Frodo a light push behind a giant stack of books.

"Stay there, sweetheart," whispered Bilbo. His fingers ran over the hilt of Sting, a nervous knot forming in his stomach. This just wasn't his day, apparently. "I'll be back in a short moment. Can you be quiet for Uncle Bilbo?"

Frodo nodded, always the good little hobbit.

"That's my boy," murmured Bilbo.

He dropped a quick kiss onto Frodo's curly head and slowly slunk down the aisle, right hand on Sting the entire time. Pushing several books to the side and peeking out between them, Bilbo spotted the light grey tunic and dark brown hair of a dwarf. And the latter had a very peculiar shape...

"...Nori?"

"Ah ha! You caught on a good bit quicker than I'd reckoned, Bilbo," laughed the Company's trickster. Nori poked his face into the makeshift peek hole. "I assume the lil' one's over there with you."

"Of course."

"You might want to guard him more closely in the future. I suspect my Aunt Dhola is making dastardly plans to steal him from you. She's quite taken with the lil' one's curls and big blue eyes. And the chubby cheeks. There was a good bit of emphasis placed on those chubby cheeks in particular."
"I'll add it to my List of Eccentric Dwarven Habits to Worry About, then."

Nori sauntered around to their aisle, a smile appearing on his face when he caught sight of the piles upon piles of old books. A tiny head peeked out from behind the largest of them, straightening up immediately when he saw the familiar face. Despite his blowup with Thorin, Bilbo had made it very clear to Frodo that every dwarf in the Company was fully trustworthy and would never hurt him.

"Looks like someone's been mighty busy," said Nori, picking up one of the books on Frodo's lap. "Ents…hmm, aren't those talking trees?"

"How did you find me, Nori?"

The tri-haired dwarf gave him a mysterious smirk. "I have my ways."

"Oh, I've heard plenty about your ways, Nori," chuckled Bilbo. "And according to your brothers, a lot of those ways are quite dodgy and illegal."

Nori shrugged. "Yet my information is sound. Useful, too."

"I don't doubt that," Bilbo conceded, picking up an elvish tome and fingering the waxy binding. "I assume Thorin sent you?"

"Not this time," assured Nori. "I came of my own accord."

The spymaster was now sitting on the floor, looking at the various pictures of ents and chipmunks that Frodo was showing him. Bilbo gave a huff and sat down, too. He really wished his life wasn't so complicated.

"How angry is he?"

Nori shrugged again. "As much as can be expected. Our dearest King isn't used to having his orders questioned or disregarded. I dare say that it was a rather rude awakening for him."

"He's become even more pigheaded," sighed Bilbo. "I didn't think that was even possible."

"Oh, it's possible," said Nori with a smirk. "You should've witnessed our annual conference with the wood elves. I'm certain that our grand King would've mooned Thranduil if he'd been able to avoid becoming a dwarven pin-cushion. An impressive number of impolite hand gestures were implemented, though."

Bilbo just squinted at the ones that Nori was kind enough to demonstrate, his face flushing bright red when he realized what some of those gestures meant. They were quite scandalous, even by dwarven standards.

"He did not use that last one," argued Bilbo. "He couldn't have! Thranduil would've had him shot full of arrows on the spot."

"But he did," assured the dwarf. He made another gesture overtop of Frodo's head and finished it off with an inward poke. "And that was the hand that ended the conference in a spray of multilingual curses."

"You would find that amusing."

Nori didn't even bother to deny it. "What can I say, it's quite nice to finally see an emotional reaction out of the tree-shaggers."
"Must you call them that in front of Frodo?"

"He'll be hearing far worse in the corridors and Thorin's throne room," said Nori. "Not much has changed since you departed in that respect. True, all of us are thankful for the aid they provided to our injured after the battle, but that came at your begging and all-around behest. And Thorin wasn't exactly pleased with their treatment of you during that course, either."

"Someone had to retrieve supplies from the other camps and it certainly wasn't a job any dwarf was lining up for at the time," Bilbo reasoned. "But Erebor's King and his heirs are alive, aren't they?"

Nori nodded.

"And that's all that matters," said Bilbo with finality. "Umm, you don't think that our…confrontation will affect our welcome, will it?"

"Never," replied Nori without a second thought. "Thorin would sooner destroy the Arkenstone with his bare hands than exile you from Erebor. I'd like to say that I know my King quite well after so many years at his side, and that I have witnessed many aspects of his personality throughout our quest. However, the genuinely upset, perhaps even fearful, Thorin that I witnessed after your…sudden departure was one that I have neither seen nor served before."

"I never intended to leave Erebor," argued Bilbo.

"But our King doesn't know that," said Nori. He calmly removed Frodo's curious fingers from his intricately braided beard. "The habits of a hobbit are still quite odd to all of us, but especially Thorin. He's accustomed to being obeyed without question, even by dwarves outside of our community and Durin's line. And I believe that due to the cultural differences between our peoples, Thorin may have also believed that you would make good on your threat to permanently depart from Erebor."

"None of this would have happened if Thorin had just spoken with me first about needing a bodyguard," Bilbo sighed. "I refuse to let him make decisions about Frodo's or my own life without at least respecting our wishes and right to privacy."

Nori gave a sympathetic nod. "I understand your grievances, Bilbo, I truly do. I'll be the first dwarf to admit that this whole traveling in pairs arrangement is quite…stifling and downright annoying. It just plain doesn't suit my lifestyle. However, Thorin has very good reasons for it. There is a rather significant minority residing in Erebor at the moment who would love nothing more than to see Thorin's line destroyed."

"I thought the last caravan was from the Blue Mountains. Haven't they been living under Thorin's rule for six decades now?"

"Most, but not all," explained Nori. "A small number have arrived from numerous other regions, none of them proven loyal yet to Thorin. They did not fight for him like our kinsmen from the Iron Hills. At the moment, we can only assume that they arrived here to either create a better life for themselves, or they are here to spy on Thorin's performance for their own leaders back home."

"I knew there was a reason why I didn't like politics. Everyone's always trying to kill one another. It's depressing."

"My network sees all and hears all," said Nori with an enigmatic grin. "If there's a plot to assassinate our Royal Gruffness or his charming heirs, then I'll know about it. And the same applies to you and Frodo as well."

"You're a very sneaky dwarf, Nori."
"I know."

Frodo was leaning back in Nori's lap now, a large picture book about ents spread across his tummy for easy reading. The dwarf was absently braiding his nephew's curls, a pensive expression on his bearded face. Bilbo preferred not to think about all the manner of illegal things that regularly went through Nori's mind. If there was an award for being elusive, then Nori would be the member of the Company to win it.

"You're going to have to speak with him, master hobbit."

Bilbo played with Frodo's wriggling toes, an ancient tome about rings and charms laying forgotten in his lap. "I know."

"Preferably today."

"I will."

Chapter End Notes

Everyone seems to neglect the 'less handsome' dwarves in their stories, something I will definitely remedy in some of the chapters. All of them have very interesting personalities and if I can portray that, then I will certainly give it a good try.
Sickness

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"My tummy hurts."

As it turned out, Bilbo's day really could get even worse. He'd spent a few more hours in the library with Nori, discussing the political climate and reconstruction of both Erebor and the nearby human city, Dale. Speaking with Thorin had been the next article on Bilbo's list of things to-do when Frodo suddenly started to whine about a tummy ache and sniffly nose. The little boy had been quiet all day, but Bilbo had simply chalked it up to Frodo being nervous after this morning's argument. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case at all.

"Oh dear," sighed Bilbo. His hands were pressed up against his nephew's cheeks and forehead, feeling the rising heat that was radiating from them. "It looks like that rain and cold wasn't as harmless as I'd hoped. He's feverish."

"We'd best get him to Óin, then," Nori suggested. "From what I've heard, he has a fair amount of experience in treating young children."

Bilbo nodded. "Of course, right away. C'mon, Frodo, up into your uncle's arms, that's a good boy. We'll get you feeling better soon."

"Do you still want some of these books, Frodo?"

The small hobbit looked over his uncle's shoulder and at the small pile of books in Nori's arms. Several of the fairytales and bestiary drawings had piqued Frodo's ever-curious mind, so Bilbo had thought about asking Dhola if they could catalogue and then check them out for a couple days.

"Yes, please."

Nori patted the halfling on the head. "You just have a seat with him over there, Bilbo, and I'll get these sorted out with Aunt Dhola."

"Thanks, Nori."

It only took the dwarf a few minutes to return, his great-aunt bustling behind him with a small stack of books on medicinal herbs, salves, and tonics. All of them were old, dusty, and written by famous elven healers.

"I'll be sending these along with you, too," said Dhola. She shoved the books into a rucksack and handed them to her great-nephew. "Just found them in some of those new stacks over there. Sound treatments, from what I can see."

Dhola paused before tying up the sack, hand diving back inside to retrieve a thick book from the bottom corner. She then pulled a small piece of torn paper out of her back pocket and placed it between two pages. Fingering her braided sideburns for a moment, a second and third batch of pages were soon bookmarked as well. Anxious to get Frodo up to Óin for treatment, Bilbo glanced at Nori with narrowed eyes, but all he got in response was a baffled shrug.

"All of these marked pages," said Dhola as she held up the thick book for them to see, "Are sections that pertain to small children. Specifically, those who are undersized, a category your nephew falls
"How do you know they'll work?" Bilbo asked.

"The elves might be a bunch of arrogant weed-eaters, but their healing techniques and treatments are second to none in Middle-Earth," explained Dhola. "If there's any text in this library that is medically useful, it's that one. And the thick red one on the left there is a book of plain liquid recipes. For the babe's stomach. Dehydration claims the lives of far too many children in this world."

"Thank you so much, Lady Dhola."

"Oh, did you hear that, Nori, dear? He called me a lady," chortled the grey-haired dwarf. "I truly do enjoy this hobbit friend of yours. He's very charming. And the lil' one has such a delightful demeanor."

Bilbo frowned, not quite sure if he should take that as a compliment or not. It was hard to tell with dwarves at times.

"Now off with you," ordered Dhola. "That sweet babe needs to be in a bed with a warm hearth and a good healer close by. Shoo, shoo!"

The companions didn't waste any time in returning to the royal wing after that, an uncomfortable Frodo whimpering and coughing the entire way in his uncle's arms. Nori spotted a youth on one of the walkways and ordered him to locate Óin, emphasizing that the healer was to come to the Blue Room as soon as possible. The dark-haired miner gave an affirmative and ran off, not daring to refuse a request from one of King Thorin's personal Company of dwarves.

"I'll fetch a bucket, just in case," said Nori when they entered the hobbits' rooms. He threw the books on a nearby table and disappeared under the bed. "There's got to be a bucket or pail or something down here."

"Here we are, Frodo," murmured Bilbo, gently shifting the little boy onto the bed. "Nice soft quilt for you, darling. And look, here's Rupert."

Frodo reached out for the worn teddy bear and hugged it close to him. Every little movement seemed to upset the halfling at this point, so Bilbo just fetched a damp cloth from the washroom and dabbed at the beady sweat on Frodo's forehead.

"Ah ha! I found it!" crowed Nori from beneath the bed. "Bloody thing was hiding in the back corner. Ugh, might wanna clean it first, though."

Bilbo scrunched his nose up at the dead bugs in it. "Yes, please do."

"I'm pretty sure that this thing hasn't been washed since before the sacking," said Nori when he disappeared into the washroom. "Hello there, lil' spiders. Looks like we'll have to find a new home for you."

"I thought I heard voices in here."

Bilbo glanced up and spotted Ori in the doorway. The young dwarf was carrying a high stacks of papers, ink smears on his face and a quill behind his ear. It only took a short moment, but once Ori heard his brother's irritated curses and noticed a whimpering Frodo on the bed, he instantly dropped the papers on a bench and hurried over to see who'd been injured.

"What has happened?" demanded Ori, fingers twisting in his knitted gloves. "Was someone hurt?
"Frodo?"

"No one's hurt," assured Bilbo. He reached out and patted the young dwarf's arm, well aware of the anxiety that afflicted Ori when he was in a panic. "But, Frodo has fallen ill. I suspect it's from the chill and stress of our recent travels. We've already sent a messenger to retrieve Óin for him."

Ori nodded, big brown eyes still fixed on Frodo. "What's Nori doing?"

"Readying a bucket for Frodo," sighed Bilbo. He was dabbing at his nephew's forehead again, the sweat persistently returning every half-minute. "I think we'll be needing it quite soon."

"And here we go," cheered Nori upon his return. "A nice, clean bucket."

"Ori? Could you be a dear and start to look through the medical books your Aunt Dhola gave us?" Bilbo requested. "She bookmarked several sections that could be quite a bit of help to Óin once he arrives."

"Of course, of course. Did she specify what each was about?"

The older hobbit and Nori explained what Dhola had told them about each section she'd marked, most specifically those that focused on infant and adolescent medicine. An excellent researcher and study on even the worst day, Ori had no problem finding each of the medicinal recipes his aunt had thought useful. So, by the time the Company's resident healer arrived, Ori already had a long list of treatments and other helpful sections checked off for Óin to read over.

"Okay, who bashed their head into a rock wall this time?" demanded Óin upon his arrival. He looked around the room. "By Mahâl, did Nori pickpocket another foreign miner again? I refuse to treat him if he did."

"Frodo's fallen ill!" said Ori, voice pitched loud so the partially deaf dwarf could hear him. "He's running a fever and has complained of stomach pains! And he's gotten a right nasty cough in the last few hours! Severe chills, congestion, very sore throat, and a fair bit of diarrhea, too!"

Óin nodded, a grave look on his face. "How many times has he vomited?"

"None yet," said Bilbo. He was lying in bed with Frodo at the moment, hesitant to leave his shivering nephew and deprive him of another's body heat. "We've had a couple close-calls in the last hour, though."

"The diarrhea?"

"Once so far," answered Nori when he returned from the washroom with a freshly dampened cloth. "Thank Mahâl for indoor plumbing. We'll probably be wanting to hug a plumber by the time this week's over."

Bilbo took the cloth with a weak smile. "He had a slight cough this morning, but I didn't think nothing of it since we were in the library and it's quite dusty down there. But, then it got worse a few hours ago and, well, here we are…"

"These symptoms are usually indicative of the human flu," said Óin as he perused Ori's list of Frodo's complaints. "We dwarves don't contract the same types as men, but I don't know about hobbits."

"I've never had the flu myself," said Bilbo, "But several of my cousins and young children of my neighbors have suffered from it before. Hobbits are quite hardy, but close contact with men and
stressful or cold conditions have been known to cause outbreaks in the Shire every few decades."

"You were traveling with a group of men recently, correct?"

Bilbo nodded. "For several weeks, yes. We split with them shortly before coming to Lake-town. A few more took a side route to Dale. And the weather was terrible for all of our travels together. Many of the men fell ill on the paths."

Óin gave him a nod that he'd heard, large fingers gently feeling along Frodo's raw throat and swollen glands. The little boy whimpered and tried to pull away, but the healer kept a firm hand during his inspection and took careful note of every spot on Frodo's body that hurt at the touch.

"You do realize that there's a very good chance that you'll contract the illness as well," warned Óin. "Close proximity tends to spread it."

"I'll take my chances."

The older dwarf gave Bilbo a thin smile, not at all pleased with the loud, wheezy coughs that Frodo kept producing. "I had a feeling you'd say that. Now, open your mouth big and wide, lil' one. I need to get a good look at that throat of yours."

Frodo wasn't happy about it, but he did open up after some nudging from Óin and his uncle. A grimace and shake of Óin's head was a clear indication that the little hobbit's throat was not a pretty place right now.

"Very red and irritated," sighed Óin. "He'll be lucky to keep liquids down at all by tomorrow morning. But I think I've got a few tonics that should ease the pain a bit. I don't want him to become dehydrated."

"I've got a few recipes here that Aunt Dhola recommended," piped in Ori. "Most of the books focus on children's medicine. They were in the library." He showed several of the most helpful sections to Óin. "I know they were written by elves, but I thought elf medicine might be somewhat suited to hobbits, too."

"Perhaps," muttered Óin, his eyes skimming over the pages and lists. "We'll have to be creative if the illness demands it."

Bilbo tried to get some water into Frodo while the healer was reading, frustrated at the helplessness of the situation. The older hobbit was so focused on getting liquids into a fussy halfling that he didn't even notice several more figures enter the room. Frodo's loud coughs and wheezing drowned out the sound of hurried footsteps and clanging armor.

"The halfling?" demanded Thorin.

"Sick with the flu," answered Nori. He was coming out of the washroom with yet another dampened cloth, hopping right up on the bed to sit beside the two hobbits. "Got a nasty cough this afternoon and it all went downhill from there."

"He feels warmer, Óin."

The healer leaned forward and ran a practiced hand over Frodo's forehead. "We'll have to keep his temperature under control. Brother, could you please bank the fireplace? It's preferable if we can maintain a constant warmth in the rooms. Body heat shouldn't be a problem since we dwarves aren't susceptible to human types of the flu. But it's very likely that our burglar will come down with it as well."
Thorin was at their bedside straight away, his hands twitching as he looked down at the two hobbits. Frodo was wrapped up in several blankets, nestled in his uncle's warm lap while Óin inspected his throat for a second time. Fighting orcs and wargs and goblins was straightforward and simple; fighting an invisible enemy like the flu was insulting and frustrating to a trained soldier like himself.

"What does he need?" demanded the King.

Óin handed the royal dwarf a list of ingredients. "I need all of those, just in case a secondary illness crops up or Bilbo contracts it as well. The human flu can easily last a week, so it's best if we're prepared for all possibilities."

Thorin nodded, taking the list and handing it to Balin, Dwalin, and Dori with very specific orders to collect everything on it as quickly as possible. His hobbits would have the best medical treatment that Erebor could offer, and then some. Anything less than the finest was completely unacceptable.

"Go to Dale if you must, but don't dawdle," warned Thorin.

Of course, the warning was unnecessary since all three of them were already out the door and on their way to the marketplace. Ori was right behind them, the list implanted in his head through memorization.

"Nori!" called Óin. "I need your assistance over here."

Mostly alone now, Thorin took a seat on the bed and reached out to run his fingers through Frodo's sweaty curls. The little boy squirmed at first, but after a few moments he opened glassy-blue eyes to stare up at the Dwarf-King. Thorin gave the pale child a small smile, calloused fingers resting on a feverish brow before he too looked up and locked gazes with another set of familiar, hobbit-blue eyes.

"He'll be okay," promised Thorin. "We'll make sure of it."

Chapter End Notes

The doctor-to-be in me always throws a hissy fit whenever someone butchers an illness or injury in their stories. At least look up the basics & try to make it semi-realistic! But aside from that, I'm really enjoying the 'less handsome' dwarves, they've all got such unique personalities. And hobbits and several other places in Middle-Earth apparently have effective indoor plumbing. Who'd have thought?
Frodo was absolutely miserable.

The first night of his illness had not passed by well, especially since Bilbo started to show signs of the flu only a few hours later. Thankfully, the older hobbit only appeared to suffer from extreme fatigue, chills, fever, and a constant aching in his joints, which had not made his bout with the flu too terrible so far. Poor Frodo, on the other hand, had been experiencing every unpleasant symptom that a young child could suffer with the flu, bout after bout of diarrhea plaguing the little boy's sleep.

"Gotta go," whined Frodo, "Now."

Releasing a deep sigh, Glóin simply stood up from the bed and marched off to the washroom for the umpteenth time that morning. All of them had taken shifts in caring for the sickly hobbits, but those with actual child-care experience had offered their services a bit more often. The rest of them went about their work as usual, Erebor's reconstruction a constant source of labor for them.

"I'm feeling a whole new level of respect for my wife at this point," said Glóin on his return. A coughing Frodo was tucked up against his soft beard. "Gimli rarely fell ill, but she always made tending to him appear so simple."

"Tending to the ill," said Óin, "Especially children, is rarely simple, brother. Now, let's take a listen to his breathing again."

The dwarven healer leaned forward with his ear trumpet to inspect Frodo's croupy breathing, something that had developed in the early morning hours. It seemed that travel, and horrid weather, had not been kind to the little boy and he'd caught a pair of very nasty illnesses from their human companions. But Óin had seen a few similar cases throughout his years and had been prepared for such an occurrence. And with all of the other dwarves as volunteers, supplies had been easy to gather from the markets and local wilderness.

"Still very wheezy," Óin sighed. "I'll have to mix-up some more chest rub for the lil' one's congestion. And tonic for the sore throat." He grimaced when Frodo coughed in his face. "Did he keep down any of the soup?"

"Well, it didn't come out the top, if that's what you're asking," said Glóin. "But a lot came out the back about ten minutes ago. He did drink some water, though."

"Bombur will be quite upset."

The rotund dwarf had been toiling in the royal kitchen all morning, determined to create a liquid food of some type that Frodo could keep down. Bilbo had managed to eat a half-bowl without vomiting, but the younger hobbit hadn't been so lucky. He'd thrown up a good portion of it last night on Thorin. And then the diarrhea had set in, something their usually stoic King had been quite upset by, especially after Óin had explained how deadly dehydration could be to young children.

"I've got snot all over my beard," sighed Glóin. The faunt had a habit of putting his face into Glóin's fluffy facial hair whenever his head started to ache too much. And an untold amount of snot had settled in it now. "Dala would be laughing herself hoarse if she was here to see it."
"Glóril can do all the laughing for her," said Óin with a smirk. "And she'll be here in a few short months. Gimli must be driving her mad by now."

Glóin smiled fondly. "Aye, the laddie was nearly up to my chin when I last—" And then Frodo sneezed right into his beard. "By Mahâl, lil' one!"

"Well, that's quite gross."

"So," drawled Thorin when he walked into the room, "It would seem that the snot, vomit, and other fluids are indiscriminately doled out, then."

"When a child has to vomit, they just vomit," explained Óin while he mashed two handfuls of elderberries into a paste for his tonics. "It all comes down to being in the very wrong place at the very wrong time. Just like Glóin's beard."

"I can take him now," said Thorin.

Eager to give his snotty beard a thorough washing, Glóin handed the faunt over to his King and retreated into the washroom for a quick rinse-down. Thorin grimaced into the child's head, wary of another bout of vomit in his hair or on his lap. That had been an unpleasant experience, to say the least.

"How is the southern gate in the ruby mine coming?" asked Glóin.

Thorin sighed. "The dragon's rampage appears to have destabilized much of the structural integrity of the upper pillars. We'll have to rebuild most of them before it will be safe to begin mining down there again."

"I thought it looked quite dodgy," Glóin admitted. "The left-central tunnel of the diamond mines seems to be in a similar state as well."

Thorin just grunted in reply.

"Here," said Óin, shoving a small container towards the King. "This will provide a good counter-balance to his fever. Two teaspoons every hour."

Thorin just stared at the green liquid. "Is this of elvish make?"

"No, it's of my make," snapped Óin. "And would it matter if it was? It serves only one purpose and that's to reduce the lad's fever."

"I suppose not," agreed Thorin. "I'll give it to him now."

The King Under the Mountain had not been especially pleased to see Óin using an assortment of elven books, his hatred for elves an ever-present obstacle to his approach of rule and even medical treatments. Bilbo had told Thorin off right quick for it, demanding that Óin use every resource available to treat Frodo's illness. The Dwarf-King had been a quiet presence ever since, not commenting on the various medications that Óin utilized to combat Frodo's symptoms.

"How's his fever?" asked Bilbo when Thorin sat down on the bed. Fíli was sitting with the older hobbit at the moment. "Still high?"

Thorin ran his fingers over the faunt's heated brow. "Aye, but Óin has created a tonic that should help in bringing it down."

The speed in which Thorin sprinted to the washroom nearly had his eldest nephew laughing on the floor. Even the slightest chance of Frodo vomiting was enough to send an admittedly hard-ass Dwarf-King running, desperate to place the snotty boy on the toilet to save him from another attack of bodily fluids. For Fíli and Kíli, their uncle's behavior did not come as that much of a surprise considering he'd frequently helped their mother when they were ill as young children.

"Uncle's never been fond of vomiting children," snickered Fíli.

Bilbo sniffled. "I can't imagine anyone is."

"No, what I mean is, Uncle has plenty of experience with sick children," said Fíli. "He often took care of Kíli and myself when we were small and ill, in an effort to give a helping hand to our mother. And if my memory and my mother's words serve me well, as they always do, then Uncle has always been unsettled by vomit. Thankfully, dwarves are not prone to vomiting or...other bodily expulsions, even when very ill. Only the youngest children have such problems."

"Well, unfortunately for all of you, hobbits can be quite...liquidy when we're sick or eat something that truly doesn't agree with us," said Bilbo, his nose bright red from all of the sniffling and snuffling he'd been doing since last night. "And from what I've heard over the years, Frodo's reaction is fairly typical for a hobbit child."

"Not again," groaned Thorin in the washroom.

"After this week, I do believe that Uncle Thorin will forever forego children," said Fíli with a smirk. "Between Kíli, Frodo, and myself, I think he'll have had enough of lil' creatures that poop and cry for the rest of his life."

Bilbo blew his nose into a handkerchief. "But doesn't he need an heir?"

"We are his heirs," said Fíli, giving the hobbit a sidelong look. "Sister-sons have just as much right to the throne in dwarven society as the King's own children. It's not at all unheard of for the most capable child of a dwarf royal family to take the throne over a direct or older heir."

"That," said Bilbo around a sneeze, "Actually makes quite a bit of sense."

"And it keeps unqualified dunderheads off the throne," Fíli added. "The nations of men would do well to adopt such a system. Erebor would be doomed if our dear Kíli was allowed free reign. It'd be dreadful."

"Who's been ruling the Blue Mountains in Thorin's absence?"

Fíli smiled with great pride. "Our mother, Dís. She'll be arriving in Erebor on the next caravan in six months. Not even Uncle Thorin will argue with her. Toughest dwarf woman in all of Middle-Earth."

"That's an understatement."

Thorin returned with a red-faced Frodo, the little boy complaining about how the lights were hurting his eyes and that the medicine tasted terrible. The King just hummed and hemmed in agreement, a suspiciously wet spot on his tunic showing that they didn't quite make it to the toilet in time again.

"Don't let him fool you," snickered Fíli. "Our mother's the true power behind the throne of Erebor. Uncle Thorin fears her."
"And with good reason," laughed Balin. He had just returned from surveying the outer walls with his brother. "Dís was not at all pleased with Thorin for bringing either of her sons on the Quest for Erebor. The moment she sees their battle scars, it'll be a new dawn for Erebor."

Dwalin snorted. "Yeah, we'll have our first Queen on the throne."

The Dwarf-King didn't even bother with a response, instead keeping his attention on Frodo and getting some more medicine down his throat. Unfortunately, a miserable halfling was a force to be reckoned with and Thorin's status as King Under the Mountain mattered little to an ill Frodo Baggins.

"No, it tastes icky."

Thorin grimaced, but didn't stop trying to wiggle the teaspoon into Frodo's mouth while the rest of the room snickered at them. He was the King of Erebor and he would get the hobbit to take his medicine. If Glóin and Bofur could persuade Frodo to swallow most of the nasty stuff, then Thorin Oakenshield certainly could, too.

"And you will feel even…ickier if you do not take it, little one," said Thorin with a great deal more patience than he was feeling. "Now open up and swallow. Or I'll make Dwalin do it instead. I don't think you'd want that, now would you?"

"What?" The huge dwarf's head popped up from behind a fireplace chair. "Don't make me into the bad guy here."

"It's because of the inkings," said Fíli. He was giving Bilbo his latest batch of icky, green medicine. "They terrify hobbit children. Didn't you know that?"

"No."

Bilbo sighed at the blond dwarf's juvenile antics. "Fíli's just playing around with your head, Dwalin. Frodo thought your inkings were interesting. Of course, I didn't really explain how you got them, either."

"I don't think you wanna know," sighed Balin. "And he's gotten a few new ones in the last year as well."

"Ewwwwww!" squealed Frodo. "Blah, blah, blah!"

"Now that wasn't so terrible, now was it?" said Thorin with a triumphant smile. "All that whining and complaining about nothing."

Frodo's stink-face was an epic sight to behold. "I don't like you anymore."

The tiny boy scrambled out of Thorin's lap and into an unsuspecting Balin's arms, burying his face into the older dwarf's beard with a hacking cough. Not quite sure what to make of the whole situation, Balin let loose a huge sigh of exasperation and sent his King an apologetic smile.

"It would seem the lad's a tad miserable at the moment." He patted the disgruntled dwarf on the shoulder. "It'll pass."

And it did pass several hours later. Bilbo had fallen asleep at about mid-day, joints and head aching like someone had taken a sledgehammer to them. His dreams were foggy and restless, the fever making them unmemorable when he finally awoke shortly after sunset in the late evening. Turning his head along the pillow, Bilbo spied Thorin sleeping directly to his left side, Frodo tucked between
the two of them.

"Feeling any better?"

Bilbo looked to his right side and realized that Kíli was pressed up against him, an array of wooden blocks scattered across his covered legs on the bed. The young dwarf had a small, carved bear in his lap, its resemblance to Beorn uncanny and obvious to any member of the Company.

"Not really," admitted Bilbo. "My head still feels like Glóin took his hammer to it. Has Frodo been alright?"

"His fever spiked for a little while earlier," said Kíli. "That's why Uncle Thorin's got him wrapped up next to him. But he did manage to keep down some of Bombur's soup without having to go to the washroom. Óin says that's a good sign. Oh, and try to be careful with your legs. Fíli's sleeping down there."

Bilbo gently probed at the slumbering dwarf near his feet, a tired smile spreading across his face when Fíli snuffled and rolled a little bit closer to them. Even if Bilbo still felt like troll poop, it was nice to have all four of his favorite people so close to him. And with a quick glance around the room, the hobbit soon spotted Óin, Bifur, Bofur, and Dori speaking in front of the fireplace. The shuffling of papers and books just out of view alerted him to Ori's presence as well.

He added five more people to the list.

"What do you think?" asked Kíli. He held up the wooden bear for inspection, face strangely shy in comparison to his usual devious grins. "Fíli was working on a small eagle earlier, like the giant ones Gandalf called to save us. I think I whittled the area right around his snout a lil' too much, but…"

"It looks amazing, Kíli," assured Bilbo, a hand coming up to pat the young dwarf on the head. "Finest bear I've ever seen. Frodo will love it."

The brunette gave him a wide smile, cuddling back down into the little spot he'd made for himself next to Bilbo. A thick scar ran down the side of his throat, a testament to how close the youngest prince had come to dying on that fateful day. A rush of paternal protectiveness for the happy-go-lucky dwarf surged through Bilbo. With a clammy hand, he reached out and ran his fingers through the brunette's hair, a calming ritual he'd developed during the days when Kíli's fate had seemed far too dim. It was at times like these when Bilbo was reminded that Kíli was still little more than a child in dwarven years.

"You should try some honey bees next," suggested Bilbo. "The giant ones Beorn kept in his gardens. Biggest bees I've ever seen in my life."

"Or the rabbits," said Kíli, handing Bilbo some more medicine for his cough and a fresh dab of chest rub for congestion. "The ones that the crazy wizard used for his sled. Fast lil' buggers outran those wargs without much difficulty at all."

"And the cows, those were quite…"

Neither of them noticed the Dwarf-King to their left, who was looking at all four of the bed's other occupants with a fond smile. His kingly duties could wait for a few short hours tonight.
I'm using the Victorian Age as a rough medical basis for this. I doubt the elves or the dwarves would be much further back in medical history than that, considering Bifur's still alive and hasn't died of infection from that nasty axe-head-wound of his yet. I've definitely seen patients die at work from less severe injuries, so the elves and dwarves must be doing something modern-esque with their medicine. And yes, I went there with the diarrhea, the ultimate plague of illnesses and the E.R. that no one wants to talk about.
Dinner Party

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"You're spoiling them."

The hobbits' illness had passed after two weeks, Bilbo recovering much quicker than his young nephew. Frodo's croupy cough and wheezing had persisted long after the other symptoms were gone, a constant annoyance for the curious little hobbit. In order to guarantee a full recovery, Óin had advised Bilbo to restrict Frodo to their bedrooms and the royal wing, with only occasional excursions to the outer walls for some fresh air. An ever resourceful hobbit, Bilbo had decided to use the time in between excursions to read through the books he'd taken from the library and freshen up on his favorite cooking and baking recipes.

"They deserve a bit of spoiling," reasoned Bilbo, "After everything they've been through and fought for over the last few years. And they're good boys. Now, are you still going to help me or should I find another volunteer?"

"Fine," grumbled Thorin. He reached over and took a bite of the cherry tarts Bilbo had spent his afternoon working on. "It tastes…delicious."

"Excellent," crowed Bilbo. "And I'm almost done with the vanilla cupcakes, I just need to ice them and we'll be ready for a hall full of hungry dwarves."

"Fili's always been quite fond of icing," said Thorin.

Bilbo chuckled. "He practically inhaled those iced cookies I made the other day. So, lots and lots of icing for these cupcakes."

"And the carrot cake?"

"Oh, that's for me," said Bilbo with an unashamed smile. "I've always had a great love for carrots. And if nobody else likes it, then more for me."

Thorin's eyes wandered over the tables, which were covered in warm foods and a variety of baked goods. "How did you even find all of these ingredients? Our markets are well-stocked, but they're certainly not this diverse yet."

"Bombur knows a human trader in Dale," explained Bilbo, "He apparently travels to the south on a regular basis. If you catch him early enough in his arrivals, he still has a lot of these ingredients in stock. I caught him on the first day."

Thorin helped Bilbo arrange everything on the table, from banana muffins to shire pies to stuffed pumpkin and strawberry cheesecake. The cherry tarts and vanilla cupcakes went to the far left once they were iced, Bilbo's personal concoction of orange marmalade and tea cakes right beside them. A few loaves of apple bread were still toasting inside the ovens, an old recipe that Bilbo had inherited from Belladonna Took. Steaming plates and bowls of roasted potatoes and onions were next, followed by a carrot cake, warm pot pie, and a market salad for those who weren't scared to touch green food. And atop the stove rested two large pots of creamy mushroom and cheddar soups.

"There we go," said Bilbo with a sigh of relief. "All done and ready for dwarvish consumption. Forks and spoons?"
Thorin rolled his eyes and pointed to the corner of the table. "I can't guarantee their effective use, but they're there to satisfy your hobbit-y habits."

"You got that from Kíli, didn't you?" teased Bilbo. "Like uncle, like nephew. I'll have to keep an eye out for any more…dwarvish habits from him."

The hobbit was standing at the stove, carefully inspecting his mushroom soup for inconsistencies in texture or overall taste. He barely noticed the Dwarf-King's approach, mind firmly focused on making the yummiest feast imaginable for his friends and little family member. So the sudden feel of Thorin's large hand on his lower back was quite startling for Bilbo, a pathetic squeak escaping his throat when Thorin chuckled in amusement and did not bother to move an inch. A blush worked its way up Bilbo's entire body, the tips of his pointed ears burning bright red in embarrassment and something else the hobbit preferred not to name or dwell on.

It was unwise to allow such ridiculous fantasies to cloud his daily life, after all.

"I could've smacked you with the ladle," warned Bilbo. "Death by cheddar soup and wooden spoon isn't the most dignified way for a king to meet his end. Especially if hobbit hands are behind that end as well."

"I can think of far worse ways to go," rumbled Thorin. His behavior was thoroughly baffling Bilbo, who was attempting to busy himself with the soups. It wasn't working at all. "The patrols should be well over by now. This place will be chaos once my nephews catch a whiff of your cooking. Do you need any more help?"

Bilbo tried valiantly not to stutter or make a complete fool of himself. "Well, this soup will need some—"

"What's that smell?!"

The sound of Kíli's excited voice pulled Bilbo out of his blushing stupor, eagerly turning to watch the reception his feast would receive at first sight. The King's nephews were easy for Bilbo to deal with, their faces open and their actions straightforward in the eyes of a hobbit. Thorin, on the other hand, was a perplexing enigma who could shift on a whim from hot to cold with any given subject. Most of the time, Bilbo did not mind it, an easy acceptance existing within himself for the Dwarf-King's stoic personality. But on a day like this, when Thorin was in close proximity for long periods of time, it became very hard to keep certain...feelings under tight lock and key. Focusing his attention and nervous energy on Fíli and Kíli was an ideal escape for the hobbit.

"Sweet Mahâl, we're dead!"

The royal nephews stood in the dining hall doorway, shocked expressions and twitchy fingers a testament to Bilbo's delicious-looking feast. Extremely pleased with their reaction, Bilbo glanced to his right side and was equally shocked to see Thorin with a small, happy smile on his face.

"Well, don't just stand there," scolded Thorin. "Come inside and thank Bilbo for the feast. And stop catching flies, your mother would be appalled."

Both youths were across the room and hugging Bilbo before their uncle was done reprimanding them, whooping and hollering and praising the hobbit for being their most-favorite person in the whole world. Bilbo just hung on for dear life, nearly choking on a blob of blond hair that had found its way into his mouth.

"I smell cheese," said Kíli.
"Ahh, yes, that would be the cheddar soup," stated Bilbo from where he was still dangling in Fíli's arms. "And possibly the pot pie over there as well. There's quite a bit of cheese in that dish, too."

"This is amazing," exclaimed Fíli, rushing over to the table to snatch up a cupcake and stuff it in his mouth. "I can't believe you—"

"Ah, ah, ah," said Bilbo. He grabbed the iced cupcake and set it back on the table. "No desserts until you've at least eaten some of the main course. And that would be all of the dishes over there."

Kíli poked at one of them. "It's a stuffed pumpkin."

"He's very observant, isn't he?" Bilbo said to Thorin. "Must run in the family."

"You have no idea."

"Well, if there's anything that you desperately want to eat, you'd better grab it up now," warned Bilbo. "The others should be arriving soon and once Bombur sees all of this, well, I think you boys can imagine the result."

"He made banana muffins!"

"Oh, and roasted potatoes! The others will just have to…"

Bilbo smiled, delighted to see the two young dwarves so excited by the feast that he'd toiled away at and laid out for them. He dished them up some hardy bowls of soups while they told Thorin about their patrols, setting each bowl down with a soft pat to their unruly heads of hair. Yes, Bilbo was not a warrior or a blacksmith or a miner like so many of the dwarves in Erebor, but the hobbit could use his own special skills and talents in other ways to help out with the reconstruction efforts. And if feeding the Company or unearthing an old batch of blueprints was the surest way, then Bilbo would do it.

"And the spiced beef should be just about ready now," said Bilbo. He went over to the oven and pulled the meats out, Fíli's excited whooping a musical song to his ears. "I've saved the best for last, my dear boys."

"What is that delightful aroma?"

Balin walked into the dining hall with Frodo beside him, the boy holding another stack of books and fairytales in his small arms. The elderly dwarf had been taking Frodo every other afternoon for lessons, teaching him about the long history of Erebor, how the mines worked, and even a few words in Khuzdul. That final part had genuinely shocked Bilbo, who had always heard that the dwarves jealously guarded their secret language, a well-known fact across the whole of Middle-earth. When he'd asked Thorin about it, the King Under the Mountain had simply replied that very few outsiders ever lived in dwarf cities, so very few outsiders were ever trusted enough to learn it.

Apparently, Frodo and himself were a very rare exception.

"Bilbo's made us a feast!" said Kíli. "It's delicious! Hey, get your own taters and cider, that's mine!"

Balin chuckled and took a seat. "You truly do spoil us, master hobbit. And is that spiced beef that I see over there?"

"Indeed it is," said Bilbo. He gave Thorin a smug glance. "I heard it's one of your favorites. And I've made Dwalin some pumpkin cupcakes."
"Oh, he'll be mighty pleased, indeed," smiled Balin. "Our mother used to make a huge batch of them every month for him as a child. I'd say that it's been eight years or so since he last had any of them."

"Well, he'll certainly be getting them more often than that with me here," said Bilbo as he dished up some soup for Balin. "I've gotta make myself useful somehow. And I've had a knack for cooking my whole life, so why not?"

A hand landed on his shoulder. "You're plenty useful without all of this. We're all just happy to have our burglar back."

Bilbo looked up at Thorin, more than little tongue-tied about what to—

"Stuffed pumpkin!"

His nephew was standing on the table benches, leaning forward to grab at a big slice of carrot that had dribbled out of the pumpkin itself. The Baggins side of Bilbo reared up at the sight and charged past the dwarves.

"Frodo Baggins, you step down from that bench this instant!" admonished Bilbo. "You know better than to behave so crudely at the supper table. And look at your hands! I haven't seen them this filthy since…"

The two younger dwarves just watched as Bilbo ranted about the dreadful mixing of dirt and food, scrubbing Frodo's face and limbs while reminding him that good hobbit boys did not dive into their dinner like untamed wild dogs. Kili glanced down at his right hand, observing all of the dirt and blood that was caked under his fingernails. He chanced another glance up at Bilbo, who was now staring at his brother and himself with a crossed-arms posture that reminded them a whole lot of their mother, Dís.

"Ugh…"

Bilbo pointed to the sink. "Get over here and wash up. I'll not have Frodo running around like one of Farmer Maggot's prize hogs just because he's trying to emulate one of you dirt-covered dwarves. And that includes you, Dwalin."

The huge warrior dwarf had just arrived, barely making his way through the doors before Bilbo was shuffling him towards the sink. Wide-eyed and puzzled, he didn't put up an ounce of resistance, too focused on getting to the food to care about it.

"Wash up and you can eat," ordered Bilbo, dragging Thorin over as well. "I've got a tray of pumpkin cupcakes on the counter for you, Dwalin."

"Truly?"

"They're all yours," said Bilbo. "But leave the blueberry tarts next to them alone. I'll be giving those to Bifur once he arrives."

Frodo tugged on his uncle's trousers and held out his arms for an inspection. "All clean?"

"All clean." He pushed the little hobbit towards the table. "Now sit next to Thorin and he'll help you with your food." The Dwarf-King looked quite bewildered, but Bilbo had faith in him. "Here's a napkin. Have fun."

The rest of the Company filed in pretty quickly after that, all of them entering with their noses in the air like a pack of dogs. Bifur and Bombur were the most enthusiastic of them, the former giving
Bilbo a giant bear-hug when he brought the blueberry tarts out to him. Bombur, of course, was very pleased to have someone else make a meal after he had spent all day toiling in Erebor's main kitchens.

"Can I have dessert now?" asked Kíli after his third bowl of food. He'd already been smacked with a dish cloth for snatching tarts, so the young dwarf was more than a little wary of the hobbit at this point. "See, no stealing."

"Of course. But use your fork."

The young dwarf gave him a wide smile, dark eyes roving over the table to locate what he wanted to put into his stomach next. Everyone was seated now, including Bilbo himself, so it was extremely crowded, loud, and boisterous with all the dwarves partaking in their very favorite pastime: feasting. Even Thorin seemed to be relaxing, quietly eating a big bowl of mushroom soup while Frodo munched on a cherry tart in his lap. For one of the first times ever, the King Under the Mountain looked genuinely content and happy, an occurrence that Bilbo hoped he'd be seeing more often in the future.

"Pass the strawberry cheesecake! Over here!"

"Mmmm, pumpkin…"

And it was, in Gandalf's own words from Bag End, a very merry gathering.

Chapter End Notes

And this, my friends, is what I like to call literary food porn. Apparently, looking up recipes for a party results in me writing about everything that looked delicious on a cooking website. Especially those pumpkin cupcakes. I really, really wanted those pumpkin cupcakes. I've also got some extra space in the next chapter, so is there any dwarf in particular that you guys would like to see more of?
"Spread your feet a lil' bit wider. There, that's it."

The training fields of Erebor were built atop the huge outer walls, small patches of grass and dirt dotting the long fortifications so that the dwarves wouldn't have to step out from the city to practice on something besides hard stone. Bilbo was currently sitting on a bench beside one of those grassy patches, a stack of old blueprints resting to his right side and upon his lap, all of them in desperate need of restoration. The hobbit had restored his fair share of documents back in the Shire, so this was familiar business that could then be used by the reconstruction crews down in the mines. Apparently, these blueprints mapped one of the oldest and most fertile shafts in the Lonely Mountain, so Thorin and Balin had been ecstatic when Bilbo had offered his knowledge on how to restore all of them without any lasting damage.

"If you keep your knees straight, then your enemy can kick them and blow out the bones there," explained Dwalin. He was standing in the middle of the training patch with Frodo. "So always keep them bent, like this."

Bilbo smiled at the pair. "I think Dwalin's actually enjoying this."

"He's always been good with children," said Balin. The older dwarf was sitting to Bilbo's far right, carefully applying the chemicals he'd bought and collected to restore the diamond mine blueprints. "Few people expect it from him because of his appearance and gruff demeanor. He trained Fíli and Kíli, you know."

"Really? Well, that would certainly explain why they look up to him so much," said Bilbo around the new pipe he'd found in his room. It had the most lovely dragon-esque design to it. "It makes sense that he would've been their primary instructor whenever Thorin couldn't be there."

"Aye, and I think Dwalin missed it, after the boys no longer needed daily training sessions," Balin explained. "Guarding a palace in the Blue Mountains can become rather monotonous and tedious after several years. Very little action. And if there's anything my little brother enjoys, it's action."

"Now, if someone ever tries to grab you around the front like this, reach out for an ear and give it a sharp twist. That'll send them screaming."

Bilbo cringed at that statement. "Well, these last few years have been chock-full of action. I personally think the lull is quite nice right now."

"Or jam them in the eyes! Don't matter the species or size, if you stuff your finger or a knife into an eye, they'll topple right off of you."

"I'm honestly hoping Frodo never has to use any of this," sighed Bilbo. "It'd be real nice if he didn't have to fight for his life in his own home. Hobbits aren't made for fighting, as I proved so well on our journey."

"But you are very good at sneaking," Balin reasoned. "And everything my brother is teaching the lad focuses on jab and escape, a fighting style that I personally believe can be quite useful for hobbits like yourselves."
"We can be very quiet when we want to be," admitted Bilbo with a grin. "Frodo's been pilfering Kíli's arrows all week and he still can't seem to find them."

Balin laughed at that. "It's delightful to finally see that rascal getting some of his own medicine for once. A worthy opponent for him, one could say."

"Uncle! Look, look!"

"I'm looking, Frodo. What is it?"

The little hobbit was standing in front of Dwalin, expression focused and hands at the ready for an attack. Bilbo had a difficult time suppressing a smile, thoroughly amused by the way Frodo kept glancing up at Dwalin for confirmation that he was doing the deed or action correctly.

"Five main points of attack," said Frodo, pointing to Dwalin's body parts for each of them. "Twist the ears, jam into the eyes, kick the knees, smash the groin, and break the nose. And if that doesn't work, just bite them."

"All quick, efficient, and hobbit-friendly," added Dwalin.

"That's excellent, Frodo."

"Good work, laddie."

Frodo gave them all a proud smile and turned back to Dwalin, demanding another round of tackling to practice his newly learned moves. It was apparently quite rare to even see dwarf children anymore, a direct result of the high mortality rate that had plagued the dwarven cities and overall population in the last hundred years. Frodo was one of the few youths left in Erebor of any species, most of the others belonging to dwarf mothers who'd migrated to the Lonely Mountain on the last caravan. And even though Bilbo had not seen a great deal of the population yet, it was very clear that males vastly outnumbered females and children.

And that was never a good sign in any population.

"I've finally finished them," said a familiar voice to Bilbo's left side. "A dropped stitch or two in the left glove, but I've fixed those pretty well, I think."

"They look wonderful, Ori."

The young dwarf had been diligently working on several sets of knitted clothes for Frodo, each of them with unique designs and specially fitted to the little hobbit. Bilbo had tried to tell him that such finery wasn't necessary, but Ori had insisted upon it. In order to show his gratitude, Bilbo had been baking the dwarf his favorite mixed berry scones once a week. It seemed that every member of the Company had a particular baked food that all of them loved, so Bilbo had taken to repaying each of them for their services or child-care help with buttery foods.

"Owww! You've got me!"

Bilbo looked up and watched as Frodo smacked the warrior dwarf in the groin. It was a defensive exercise, of course, but that did little to lessen the sheer hilarity that was Dwalin getting beat up by a hobbit child.

"Now go for the eyes!"

So far, his list included pumpkin cupcakes for Dwalin, vanilla cupcakes with lots of icing for Fíli,
mixed berry scones for Ori, blueberry tarts for Bifur, blackberry muffins for Óin, honey cakes for Dori, raspberry sticky buns for Nori, strawberry cheesecake for Kíli, pumpkin cobbler for Balin, red velvet cookie sandwiches for Bofur, apple crisp for Bombur, lemon meringue pie for Glóin, and then chocolate and raspberry mousse for the King Under the Mountain himself. It seemed that dwarves were devoted lovers of berries and Bilbo could barely keep his jam jars full with them coming in and out of his kitchen during the day.

"Frodo will love these," said Bilbo as he examined one of the pairs of blue gloves Ori had made for his nephew. "They'll be perfect for winter."

"I padded the inside of those for extra insulation," explained Ori. "And these ones here are fingerless for autumn. And I've been working on a blanket, too."

The dwarf reached into his pack and pulled out a beautiful blue and silver knitted blanket, perfectly hobbit-sized and wide enough to fit both uncle and nephew during one of Erebor's chilly nights. Bilbo ran his fingers over the intricate silver pattern that lay on the dark blue yarn, amazed by the young dwarf's thoughtfulness and astounding talent for detail. A small pile of knitted hats, scarves, arm and leg warmers, over-shirts, and gloves were resting on the ground between them.

Bilbo pointed to the pattern on the front of the blanket, curious as to why half of the garments were decorated with it. "What does this symbol mean?"

"That's the insignia of the line of Durin," said Ori. "I thought it'd be a nice touch given the circumstances."

The hobbit blinked in confusion. "Circumstances?"

"You're living in the royal wing," stated Ori, "Across the hall from both the royal princes and directly beside the King himself. In our society, that automatically makes you an honorary member of the Durin family. It's extremely rare, of course, since not even an important dignitary or visiting royal from another kingdom would be permitted to stay in such a residence. Circumstances like these are generally viewed as…"

Bilbo frowned when the dwarf trailed off. "Viewed as what?"

"Well, you see…"

The hobbit turned to look at Balin, who was being mysteriously quiet compared to his usual full-of-explanations self. But a tiny smirk was on his face, something that made Bilbo all the more suspicious of the situation.

"I'm not going to be thrown out of Erebor for violating some odd kind of dwarven royal code or something, am I?" asked Bilbo. "Because if I am, then I'd really like to find out ahead of time so I can make a quick getaway."

"Oh, most certainly not," said Balin immediately. "I've tried to tell Thorin and the boys that hobbits do things very differently back in the Shire, but we dwarves are a thick-headed lot at times."

"He's truly been going about it all wrong," Ori said to Balin. "I offered him some of the books I found on the matter, but he refused them."

"Ahhh, so that's why Fíli and Kíli have been chasing him around with those dusty ol' things," mused Balin. "Books usually aren't their pastimes of choice, so I was starting to worry about their sanity."

"He threw them out of the counsel room last night," sighed Ori with a shake of his head. "Quite the
"sad state of affairs, if you ask me."

Balin nodded in agreement. "And on a subject as simple as this."

"It's been quite entertaining seeing Fíli and Kíli attempt to figure out a solution, though," admitted Ori with a small grin. "I personally doubted their initiative at the start, but they've become quite determined this last week."

"Well, if it's not handled soon, then I'm sure one of them will be sending out for some new advice from their mother," Balin assured the younger dwarf. "Dís always was the brains and common sense behind the Durin line, after all."

"What in the world are you two talking about?" asked Bilbo. He hadn't been able to make heads nor tails of the purpose behind their sigh-filled jabbering. "Am I missing something here?"

The two dwarves shared a long look before Balin said, "Well, you see, there's an unfortunate issue that's been handled quite—"

"If you've a comment to make," snarled Dwalin, "Then I suggest you make it to my face, you filthy elf-lover!"

All of their heads shot up, surprised eyes looking at the now abandoned piece of training ground with confusion. Turning a little to the left, they soon spotted Dwalin and Frodo off to the side, the warrior dwarf pinning another dwarf to the outside wall with a knife to his throat. Kíli suddenly appeared from the nearby arrow range, snatching Frodo up and whisking him away from the angry dwarves. The unfamiliar dwarf was yelling in Khuzdul, spit flying from his mouth and onto Dwalin's face.

"I've slit throats and smashed in skulls for far less offense," growled Dwalin, his huge arms slamming the other dwarf's head into the wall. "Filth like you should've never been allowed to reenter this city."

"What happened?" demanded Bilbo when Kíli finally arrived at their side. "Is he okay? Frodo? Darling, are you alright?"

Frodo looked more puzzled than anything. "I'm okay."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," said Frodo, both arms wrapped around Kíli's neck as the shouting in Khuzdul got louder and more violent. "Dwalin was showing me how to wiggle and bite out of a choke-hold and then I heard something and he just charged after that other dwarf. Why's he so mad?"

Bilbo couldn't understand a word they were saying now. "I don't know, darling. Is it serious, Kíli?"

"From what I can hear," said the prince, "It's very serious."

"My brother does not take insults against the King lightly," explained Balin, face a grim mask as he watched Dwalin drag the other dwarf towards the edge of the wall. All of the stranger's companions were standing back, obviously too scared or cowardly to try to intervene against the King's strongest warrior. "And threatening a small child will earn you the wrath of any respectable dwarf worth his beard. Dwalin's retribution stands well within our laws."

All heads turned to the prince.
Dark eyes hard and face eerily grim, Kíli said, "I've heard the words he spoke and I have no plans to interfere in such a clear-cut matter. Let Master Dwalin pass justice unto him."

Ori and Balin nodded in agreement. None of them said a word as Kíli walked off with Frodo still in his arms, the prince a harsh shadow of his usual cheery self. Bilbo and Ori trailed behind him, both stopping just outside the training ground entrance as Dwalin raised his voice again.

Balin continued to look on with stone-cold approval.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't throw your filth from this city?" asked Dwalin, the other dwarf dangling from his hand above the ground outside the walls. "You live here under the protection of King Thorin and the House of Durin, and yet you dare to mock him inside the very halls he almost gave life and limb to reclaim? I should slice out your traitorous tongue and feed it to the buzzards for such an offense!"

"That dwarf and his kin have been instigating dissent within the mines ever since their arrival eight months ago," explained Ori. "Whatever punishment he receives will be very well-deserved."

Other guards were now rushing to the scene, the anger of the King's top enforcer and an obvious threat to Thorin's life a grave matter that drew many from inside the city. The violence in Dwalin's voice was unfamiliar to the hobbit, this absolutely vicious display of anger and protectiveness something Bilbo had never seen from the large dwarf before. It was a very frightening sight to behold, even for someone like Bilbo who was quite firmly within Dwalin's circle of protection.

"Let's see how many insults and threats you can fling without a tongue, shall we?"

Ori gently took Bilbo by the arm. "Come, my friend, I've yet to show you some of the knitted stockings and sweaters I've made for Frodo. I'd like your opinion on a few of them. They're in my rooms."

"Oh, umm, of course."

Bilbo tried to ignore the muffled screams as they walked back into the cavernous halls of Erebor.

Chapter End Notes

As a self-defense and combatives instructor myself, everything that Dwalin teaches Frodo is exactly what we teach small children. And yes, chapters will be getting quite a bit darker from here on out. I highly doubt that ruling Erebor so soon after reclaiming it wouldn't come with a gigantic laundry list of problems, including dissent among groups from other parts of Middle-Earth. And Dwalin's a protective, loyal badass. Enough said.
"Roar! I'm the mighty Smaug! Bow down, foolish dwarves!"

The royal drawing room was raucous that evening, all of the dwarves gathered in small circles throughout the large chamber. Bilbo sat in a plush chair before the glowing fireplace, one of Ori's new knitted blankets draped over his lap and a warm cup of apple cider in his hands. His nephew was on the carpeted floor beside him, playing with some of the many toys Bofur, Bifur, and the princes had made for him. The glorious battle was currently being narrated by Bofur, who was playing the dreadful part of Smaug with the extremely detailed toy dragon he'd designed himself.

Bilbo had almost objected to all of the toys, but the excited expressions on each of the dwarves' faces had stayed his tongue. The only reason Fíli and Kíli weren't also down there playing with the toys themselves was because of their presence down in Erebor's real-life dungeons instead. Both princes had been very grim when Bilbo had seen them shortly before supper, their mouths set into thin lines as they ate their ham and cheddar casseroles and then departed to meet up with their uncle. It was an unsettling sight to Bilbo, seeing a frown of that sort on the princes.

Even Bard would've been impressed, and that was really saying something. Few existed who could be grimmer than the King of Dale.

He much preferred the boys smiling and laughing, it fit their personalities so much better than those nasty, terrible frowns. Even if Fíli's frowns made his braided moustache look like a weeping willow. But that was pretty depressing, too.

"No! You can't eat him! Bad dragon! Very bad dragon!"

Frodo was crawling all over Bifur in an effort to attack Bofur's flying dragon, his toy version of Thorin trying to whack at the cackling lizard with a tiny wooden rendition of Orcrist. The older hobbit was very relieved that Frodo seemed to have forgotten all about the drama from earlier, his own ears still ringing with the screams of the unknown dwarf who'd had his tongue cut out by Dwalin. He'd scarcely even glimpsed Thorin earlier, the Dwarf-King only confirming Frodo's safety before storming out of his throne room, both of his nephews directly behind him.

Balin appeared at his side a few minutes later. The elderly dwarf took a seat in the armchair across from him, smiling down at the game of siege being played on the floor. A tankard of ale was clutched in his hands, a testament to how long and grueling the past several hours had been for the King's advisor.

"How are you doing, laddie?"

"Alright, I suppose," said Bilbo. He took another sip of his cider. "I'm still fairly puzzled by what happened earlier, but Frodo seems to have forgotten all about it. So, I'd say I'm alright with that."

"Well, I reckon some explaining would be called for right about now," said Balin, carefully waiting until Bofur and Bifur had lured the younger hobbit to another part of the room. "Especially considering the circumstances in which it occurred. My brother reacted quite a bit more violently than usual, but I think you'll understand his anger once I've had a moment to elaborate on the actual cause."
Bilbo waved his hand. "Well, elaborate away."

"The dwarf that incurred my brother's wrath goes by the name of Kozul. He's one of several dozen dwarves who arrived in Erebor about eight months ago from northeast of the Sea of Rhûn. And if you know your geography as well as I suspect you do, then you'll be able to deduce that the climate's quite inhospitable up that way. We were quite wary of their sudden arrival, especially since Erebor had very little in the way of good relations or peace treaties with the far eastern dwarves during Thór's reign. But Thorin believed that turning them away would make his claims to Erebor appear weak, so he accepted them as miners and craftsmen within hours of their arrival."

"Do they still have a king in their homelands?" Bilbo inquired.

"We assumed them to be similar to the likes of Nori," said Balin with a smile. "A group of misfits or petty criminals who'd not mingled well in their own kingdoms. It'd be simple to remove them, if need be. Several left Erebor within the first few weeks, not too pleased to be living within a kingdom of strict laws again. We expected as much, since an assemblage of such sorts rarely lasts for long, internal backstabbing and profiteering often destroying them well before they ever become a threat to powerful outside forces like our King or the Bowman. But a few dozen have remained and both Thorin and myself have begun to suspect that an ulterior motive may be behind this."

"Foreign reconnaissance?" hazarded Bilbo. "It would make a good bit of sense, if you ask me. I saw firsthand the way dwarves react to gold, so it'd only be logical that a rival dwarf kingdom would wish to prey upon Erebor and the new King while numbers are still so few. No dragon to keep them away anymore. And Dale's still in shambles. Just a few hundred exhausted humans and pigheaded dwarves who did all the hard work of killing said dragon and reclaiming it themselves."

Balin gave the hobbit a cunning smile. "Great minds think alike, my boy. We've a network of loyal dwarves from the Blue Mountains keeping a close eye on them. And for all of the complaining Dori does about him, Nori's skills have come in mighty handy over the last few months."

"Nori's a good dwarf with a huge dash of trickster in him," said Bilbo with a fond smile. "But I've a question, aside from the awful politics behind all of this. What did that other dwarf, Kozul you said his name was, say that infuriated Dwalin so much?"

The elderly dwarf sat further back in his chair. "According to my brother, he said that the hobbit child should be given to the King as kalinak shul. This is neither a term nor a ritual that is practiced by dwarves in our era. If you were to ask most dwarves, especially our woman-folk, they'd tell you that they'd prefer the word simply be removed from Khuzdul altogether and forgotten in the sands of time."

"So it's really, really bad, then?"

"The practice itself, during ancient times in the far east, involved the torturing and eventual beheading of a child from rival clans. The child's head would then be sent to his king atop a pike, the other severed body parts placed inside a chest with the royal insignia on it."

Bilbo paled, eyes darting around the room. He quickly located Frodo near the left-side drawing table, his toy of Beorn doing battle with Glóin's toy of himself. If he hadn't been so upset by the information Balin had just given him, Bilbo would've probably been smiling at his nephew's playfulness. But at that moment, all the older hobbit could see or picture was Frodo's head being given to Thorin on a blood-covered pike, the remainder of his tiny body stuffed in a disgusting trunk.

"Now do you understand the reason for my brother's fury?" said Balin. "Making a statement like Kozul's in dwarvish society is tantamount to premeditated kidnapping and child-murder. No one
speaks of kalinak shul in present times. It's a great source of shame for our kin. History classes only briefly mention it, and even that has died out in recent decades."

"How can they even joke about such a horrible practice?"

Balin's face became even more grim. "That's where the problem lies, along with a great amount of my brother's fury. Our languages differ quite a bit, but I do believe that I can firmly say that many Khuzdul words contain less flexibility to them than in most of the common tongues. The word choices that Kozul used could not be mistaken for joking by any dwarf who possessed even rudimentary lessons in our mother tongue. Dwalin may not be an academic of any sort, but he heard and recognized the purpose behind each of Kozul's words. And he's paid the price with his tongue."

"And Thorin?"

"I do believe he called our King an arrogant prick," said Balin with a small smirk. "But it was probably the part about Thorin being given soup made from our little hobbit's flesh that truly pushed my brother off the slippery slope. I'm honestly surprised that Dwalin was able to restrain himself and not kill the brute altogether."

"He left that honor to me."

The King Under the Mountain walked through the side doorway, flanked on either side by his grim-faced nephews. Dwalin was right behind them, scrubbing at his left hand with a pink-tinted cloth. All of them scanned the room upon arrival, their eyes obviously searching for Erebor's resident pair of hobbits.

"Look, Kíli, look!" shouted Frodo, scrambling over to show the royal dwarves his newest toys. "Bofur made me a dragon. It ate you."

"Really? And you let him?!

"Well, I couldn't really stop it," said Frodo. He gave the youngest prince his best are-you-an-idiot expression. "He's a dragon. They eat people. And they like gold. So, he had to eat Thorin, too."

"Excuse me?"

Frodo looked at all of them like they were complete and utter morons. "He had to eat you to get to the gold. But you gave him a tummy ache and the farts, so he had to spit you out. See, you're over there."

"It's called indigestion, Frodo. Not the farts. We've talked about this."

"Uncle Rorimac always had the farts," said Frodo with a grimace. "But especially after drinking some bottles of wine. It was awful. Knocked Merry out once at a party."

"I can imagine. Fili's ability to break wind doubles with every tankard."

"Uh huh, and this coming from the dwarf who…"

The brothers lured Frodo back to his game of dragon slaying, allowing Thorin and Dwalin to take seats in the chairs between Balin and Bilbo. None of them spoke for a few moments, making sure that the youngest hobbit was completely out of earshot before they started to discuss the matters at hand.

"Here."
Bilbo reached out and took a small box from Thorin's hands, eyebrows creased in confusion when the King didn't provide any explanations. The box was no larger than his hand, string tied around it to keep the top cover in place.

"Ugh, Thorin, are you sure the lad will want—"

"Valar!" shrieked Bilbo, the box toppling from his hands and onto the floor. "Are those fingers?!!"

Dwalin pulled another box out of his vest pocket. "I've got the tongues."

"Tongues? Did he just say tongues?!!"

The Dwarf-King reached down and picked up the scattered fingers, seemingly not at all disturbed by the fact that he was holding severed body parts in his own hands. Bilbo just stared, completely taken aback by the…things he'd been given by the King. He'd known that Dwalin had removed the other dwarf's tongue, but his fingers?! And Dwalin had said tongues, meaning multiple tongues.

"He threatened to kill your child," said Thorin, "Therefore, you receive the limbs that have been removed as punishment."

"But what if I don't want any of the limbs?" Bilbo felt queasy just thinking about it. "And why are there more than one?!!"

"He was not the only one I heard making those comments," growled Dwalin, the box of tongues still resting in his hands. "The other fools should've known better than to speak such words within range of my ears."

Thorin's face softened, his voice a whisper. "Balin has explained to you about the significance and reasoning behind these punishments, correct?"

Bilbo nodded, eyes flicking over to Frodo again. "Aye, right before you arrived."

"Then you understand why I did this," said Thorin. "It is our law, and every dwarf in this kingdom is well aware of it. I made sure of this upon their arrival here. And as the parent of the threatened child, it's your decision as to what should be done with the limbs that we removed in our judgment."

"Can you just throw them into the fire and be done with it?" asked Bilbo. "I'm not too fond of severed…anything, really. It's not very…hobbit-y."

"If that is your wish."

Bilbo nodded, his eyes trained on Thorin's boots as the King and Dwalin took the fingers and tongues out of their boxes. The hobbit cringed when he heard the huge fires crunch and blaze around the thrown limbs, Dwalin muttering about maybe throwing their feet or heads in as well.

"Are there more of them?"

Thorin kneeled in front of Bilbo. "Who are of the same mind as Kozul? Yes. I've suspected their treachery for some time now." He looked over at Frodo. "I simply needed a good reason and evidence to act on it."

"Will they try to hurt him?"

"It's very likely," admitted Thorin. "My nephews are quite capable of defending themselves. I've already advised Bard to keep his three children of the mountain for now. And even you're a tougher
target due to your age and experience. But Frodo is an easier, more vulnerable target for them."

"Any of the children are," rumbled Dwalin. "We've already alerted the mothers. They'll be moving in pairs or groups at all times now."

"How are you going to get rid of them without alerting their king?"

Thorin smirked, the cruelty behind it an unfamiliar sight to the hobbit. It seemed many of his dwarven companions were capable of violent acts and judgments that Bilbo had never considered nor witnessed before. Yet strangely, the sound of Dwalin cleaning and sharpening his knives was a soothing sound to Bilbo's ears, a sign of protection for both Frodo and himself.

"Nori's already working on it for me." Thorin leaned forward, large hands resting on Bilbo's blanket-covered knees. "But I do have one request, my friend."

Bilbo looked up, Thorin's beseeching eyes too powerful to resist. "Anything."

"Allow Glóril to accompany you and Frodo whenever one of us is not present," he said. "Her loyalty to her brothers and myself is absolute. And she dearly misses her young nephew, Gimli, so Frodo's presence would be a dearest reprieve for her."

The hobbit was silent for a few moments before saying, "Alright. I'll accept. But I still stand by my need for privacy. You dwarves can be nosier than the Sackville-Baggins when you put your minds to it."

The Dwarf-King laughed out loud at that. "I apologize for my nephews and their large, wandering noses."

"I can see where they get it from," said Bilbo, flicking at Thorin's own large nose. "But I don't mind their nosiness. It's kinda endearing, once you get used to it. Although it would be nice if they stopped stealing the cupcakes before they've cooled…"

Bilbo looked to his right, spotting said nephews peeking over a nearby chair. Both of them were watching with wide eyes, dwarvish noses resting on the top of the furniture. Kíli let out a grunt when he realized they were caught, dragging his brother back down to the floor and scuttling off to do who knows what else. The hobbit wondered what kind of half-baked scheme the pair were up to now.

"Strange boys, your sister-sons."

Thorin gave him a small, rare smile. "They have their uses. Although I'll admit, it would be much easier if Dís was here. They always listen to her."

"Frodo misses his mother terribly," Bilbo lamented. "I've tried to provide him an alternative, but it's just not the same. No matter how much you dwarves made fun of my woman-folk habits, I can't give him the exact same care a mother would. And while I'm quite the opposite of Drogo, that role's much easier to fulfill than Primula's."

Bilbo paused, eyes looking over at where Frodo was now playing with Bofur. The game had moved to the bookshelves, which were apparently cliffs that Frodo's toys must scale in order to reach the dragon at the top. Toy-Bard seemed to be willing this time around.

"And now this has happened. It's confusing for him. I can tell."

The hobbit felt a much larger hand take hold of his chin, forcing him to look up at Thorin's somber face. Both of them could hear Frodo in the background, attacking Glóin and Dwalin with the dragon
toy he'd seized from Bofur. Both of the princes were playing dead on the floor.

"I will have their heads beneath my blade before they hurt either of you," said the Dwarf-King. "I give you my word."

"Roar! Now I'm King Under the Mountain! Give me the gold!"

Chapter End Notes

The practice of using a child's head as a declaration of war against a rival clan actually did exist in ancient times amongst Central Asian tribes. My undergrad history class gave me a whole new perspective on how cruel people could be in some ancient cultures. And I can easily picture the dwarves having some very "barbaric" practices, both in their past and in their present when it comes to traitors. Hell, there's still shit like this going on in some parts of the world today, so realistic it still is.

And here's some lovely fanart from Ohtd_luv4ever of Fili and Kili being their usual "nosy" selves:
https://41.media.tumblr.com/5405cc38e9be527fbd4555773cd959/tumblr_nk90pa8k3E1t9k53bo1_.
"Can I look at the pretty stone stand, Uncle?"

The markets of Erebor were crowded in the afternoons, dwarves out on their mid-day breaks stocking up on supplies both for the forges and their homes. Bilbo was quietly browsing a stall of baking ingredients at the moment, a long list in his hand of everything he needed to purchase to feed his hoard of dwarves. Coin wasn't a problem since three of those mouths belonged to the royals, but Bilbo was trying to figure out how Glóril, Frodo, Dori, and himself were going to carry all of it back.

"Not right now, darling," said Bilbo, blue eyes skimming over the various types of flour and sugar the vendor offered. "Hmmm, Bifur might like this…"

Frodo sighed, leaning against the stand and looking around the immense room. Dori was speaking with a dwarf woman across the aisle, two bottles of wine in his hands as he debated between the different flavors. The markets had seemed so interesting an hour ago, but having to stay right at his uncle's side made it terribly boring. He'd barely make it twelve feet before one of them had grabbed him.

"I hate shopping," mumbled a voice next to him. Frodo looked to his left side and noticed a red-haired boy who looked a little bit older than him. "And it's not like I'll ever get anything from it, either."

"I know," said Frodo. "We've been here an hour and all the adults have looked at is food and clothes and more food. Oh, and wine."

The other boy stared at him. "You look funny."

"No, I don't," retorted Frodo. "I'm a normal-looking hobbit. It's you dwarves who look funny. Too much hair all over the place."

"Hobbit?" The dwarfling looked thoughtful. "What's a hobbit?"

"We're halflings. From the Shire in the west."

"Oh, the puny, fat people from the holes," said the dwarfling. He shuffled closer to get a better look at Frodo. "We passed through that place on our way here. From the Blue Mountains."

"We do get kinda wide," admitted Frodo. "My Uncle Rorimac was always eating, but he hardly ever got up to do anything. My cousin Merry once rolled a pumpkin down a hill at a party to see if he'd go after it. He just sat there."

"They just gave us stink faces the whole time we were passing through," said the other boy. "My amad told me to ignore them, but they seemed so cranky. The apple pies that I found cooling on a windowsill tasted real good, though."

Frodo gaped in amazement. "You actually took one?"

"Aye! Right from the window as we were walking by one of those hole houses," cackled the dwarfling. "The fat lady was so busy glaring at my amad that she didn't even see me swiping it. We
ate good that night."

"I tried doing that once to my Aunt Amaranth, but she just chased me and Merry off with a broom. Whacked my cousin right over the head." Frodo demonstrated a wide arc for him to see the collision. "A hobbit lady with a mop's as dangerous as a dwarf with a hammer. They'll bash your brains in!"

"My amad's got a mean right hook with her dish cloth," agreed the boy. "Every dwarf in my family avoids her when she's really, really mad. Like right now." He pointed to the woman Dori was talking to at the wine stand. "My father drank all of the good wine she brought with her from back home. She's not happy."

"What's that crying?"

"Ugh, those are my stupid lil' sisters," groaned the dwarfling. "They've been loud and stinky and crying all morning, but no one says anything because they're both girls and they're twins, so that makes them special." "I don't have any brothers or sisters," said Frodo. "My parents are dead."

The dwarfling stared at him with wide brown eyes. "That's kinda…sad. My amad can be scary sometimes, but I like her alive. And maybe my sisters, too."

"It was really bad at first," explained Frodo, "But then my Uncle Bilbo came and got me from Brandy Hall. No one really wanted me there, but I've got my uncle now. He adopted me. And I've got Fíli and Kíli, too."

"The princes?!"

"Uh huh. They're really funny."

"You're lying."

"Nope," said Frodo with a proud smirk. If a hobbit could puff up like a barn owl, then Frodo would be the puffiest hobbit-owl in the forest. "My uncle helped them take back the mountain, so I get to play with them. And live next to the King."

"I don't believe you."

Frodo just sighed at him. "I'm a hobbit. Why else would I be living here if I didn't know the King? Almost nobody ever leaves the Shire. Ever."

They were sitting next to a large meat stall now, neither of them paying too much attention to their parents. Both of them were so excited to be talking to someone in their age bracket that nothing else seemed to matter. Especially for Frodo, who had been in the presence of adults almost non-stop for several months. Despite the loneliness of being all-but ignored at Brandy Hall, Frodo did miss talking and playing with two of his cousins, Merry and Pearl.

"And see," Frodo held up his right hand to show the other boy the House of Durin fingerless gloves that Ori had made for him, "I've got these."

"Whoa," murmured the dwarfling. "What's he like?"

"Kinda cranky," said Frodo after some consideration. "But I like him. He lets me play with my toys in the throne room, and you need an actual throne for dragon sieges to work right. Here's my Kíli toy. He's the archer."
"Do you have the other prince, too?"

Frodo nodded. "Uh huh, Bofur made them for me. And a dragon. Hey, maybe you can come up and play with them sometime? I've got some other toys, too. Like Beorn the Skin-changer and Azog the Defiler. He's really ugly."

"Would I be allowed to? I mean, it's the royal wing."

"Thorin will let me if I beg enough and use the weepy eyes," stated Frodo, excited at the prospect of finally making a friend in Erebor. "But first, I'm Frodo Baggins. Nice to meet you."

"Donel, son of Farór," said the other boy with a slight bow, "At your service."

"Do you think your mother would let you come over to play today?" asked Frodo. "Because my uncle was planning to make some cupcakes, if you like them."

"Who doesn't like cupcakes," answered Donel with a smile. "She's so busy with my sisters that she'll probably be happy to be rid of me. Just let me go and…"

"What's wrong?"

"I don't see my mother."

Frodo stood up at this, peeking around the side of the meat stand and peering into the dense crowd of dwarves around them. None of them that he could see were his uncle, Dori, or Glóril.

"And I don't see my uncle. Or his friends."

"Amad's gonna be angry." Donel glanced around again. "Well, angrier. She's still maddest at Adad. You see, this is why I hate shopping!"

"It's okay, we can just walk around and if we see one of the other adults first, then we can go looking for your mother with them," Frodo reasoned. "She can't stay cranky if you were with friends of the King, right? And my uncle's really good friends with Thorin, so it'll be fine."

The boys walked out into the crowd, narrowly avoiding being trampled on several occasions, their small sizes being overlooked by the older market-goers. They kept a tight grip on each other's sleeves, neither wanting to get lost in the crowds and then be entirely on their own amongst so many strangers. Frodo carefully looked around for Bilbo's rather distinctive style of clothing. In his opinion, all of the dwarves dressed very similar, so his uncle would be the easiest to spot in the crowd.

"I don't see any of them," admitted Frodo a few minutes later. "Maybe we should just wait at one of the entrances. That's what my mama used to always tell me to do if I'd gotten lost at the Buckland markets."

"My mother says the same thing."

They went with the flow of the crowd until they were finally at one of the market entrances, both of them much more nervous than they'd been several minutes ago. Frodo had often ran around without any supervision in Brandy Hall, but the Shire was different in many giant ways when compared to Erebor. The dwarves had tried to hide it from him, but Frodo knew that something wasn't right in the mountain. Even the King and Dwalin and the princes had been acting…odd throughout the last few days, all of them vanishing or storming off without a word to him.
Frodo didn't like it.

"I know this entrance," said Donel. He took a few steps outside and stared at the huge staircases before them. "It leads to the west-central mines. My father and uncles all work down there."

"What do they find?"

"Mostly rubies and sapphires, I think. Amad's always talking about them. Says it will make buying food and clothes easier for her. No toys yet, though."

"That's okay," assured Frodo from where he'd sat down on the top step. "You can just play with mine until your mama lets you get some. I've got plenty thanks to Bifur and Bofur. They used to be toy-makers, before the quest."

"How big is your dragon toy?"

The boys continued to discuss all of the different scenarios and games they could use the various toys for, including the elves that Frodo had seen Bifur working on several nights ago. Unfortunately, neither of them noticed the three figures that were approaching them from behind until a large hand grabbed Frodo around the throat. The tiny hobbit screamed at the top of his lungs, the sound echoing off the staircase walls and into the markets right behind them.

"Let him go!" shouted Donel, pulling something out of his back pocket. He made a lunge for the older dwarf. "I said let him go!"

His attacker screamed when Donel stabbed a small knife into his left thigh, Frodo dropping to the ground and kicking the cringing dwarf in the face. Small hands grabbed at Frodo's tunic and pulled him down the staircase toward the mines. Another dwarf made a grab for them, but Frodo kicked him in the knee when he tried to pull at Donel's braids. With a frustrated growl, the little hobbit used his pointy Kili toy as a makeshift knife and slammed it into their attacker's groin area over and over again. And then he bit the dwarf's hand for good measure.

"You lil' bastards!"

"C'mon!" shouted Donel. "We've got to run! Now!"

Both of them sprinted as fast as their short legs would carry them, slipping through the thin openings in the staircase railings to drop down onto the lower levels quicker than their pursuers. The mines were still empty because of the afternoon break hour, so getting help from an adult was nigh-impossible at this point.

"Over here," whispered Donel. "I think this seam leads down into the old emerald shafts. My adad says that they're really narrow. We can hide there."

"I hope so."

The twists and turns of the mines became narrower and darker the further in they went, a musty stillness hanging in the air that wasn't present in the newer levels. Neither of the boys slowed down to pay this any mind, though. They could still hear the echo of footsteps behind them, small hearts racing at the thought of what their attackers might do to them if they were caught. Hiding in the darkened underbelly of the mountain was their only option now.

"Wait, wait," said Frodo. "I think I see something."

The tunnel they were running through was almost pitch black, its only source of light a tiny pinprick
from the sharp turn they'd made a long ways back. Frodo picked at several stones along the lower edge of the stone wall, some of them giving way when he pushed his hands through a little bit harder. Soon, his fingers were free to swipe about within the hole of darkness.

"There's an empty space here," whispered Frodo. "Someone must've carved it out with this old hammer."

"An illegal mine shaft," breathed Donel. "Can we fit in?"

Frodo pushed the rest of the rocks out of the way, thanking every deity he'd heard mentioned in the fairytales that he'd seen the light glinting off the rusty hammer. Several shouts and curses could be heard in the distance.

"I think so," Frodo whispered back. "It feels like it widens out. Kinda like a small cave. We should both be able to fit inside it."

"Then get inside," urged Donel when the angry voices started getting closer and closer. "They're almost here."

Frodo ducked down and crawled into the hole, only stopping when his head hit the end of the little cavern. The dwarfling was right behind him, quickly turning around to grab at the rocks and pull them back into place on the outside. They'd still be able to breathe with them stacked, but their pursuers wouldn't be able to see anything since Frodo made sure to bring the hammer in with him.

"Be real quiet," whispered Donel.

The boys huddled together in the tiny cave, their arms wrapped around each other as they listened to the sound of footsteps in the tunnel outside. Frodo reached around for his Kíli toy, but was extremely dismayed to find it missing. Even more terrified by this new turn of events, Frodo clamped a dirty hand over his mouth and tried to make his breathing as quiet as possible.

"Where'd those little brats go?" growled a wheezy voice. A loud thump sounded from further in the tunnel. "Be careful, you idiots! There's a reason these mines aren't in use no more. Real unstable, the maps said."

Another voice said something in Khuzdul.

"Do you think I don't know that?" snarled the wheezy voice again. "We should've grabbed the bastards and got out long before now, but thanks to your elf-loving ass, we're stuck looking for them down here."

The Khuzdul-speaker said some more things again.

"Kozul and Gorin were arrogant fools. But if we find the lil' brats and then leave before nightfall, Thorin will be too preoccupied to worry about them. That asshole's far too concerned with his gold and treasure to care about two low-born whelps. Then again, with all that bumbling you did earlier, it's probably too late for things to work out now, anyways."

More Khuzdul.

"Just shut up and put yourself to use," snapped the wheezy dwarf. "We've work to do and you're slowing it down. With all that noise the brats made, we're lucky Thorin and his inked hound haven't found us already. Do you want to go through ten rounds of torture with either of them?"

Another bunch of dwarvish was spoken, but this time from the third attacker. He did not sound
happy in the slightest.

"Of course, we need them. Especially now that you've screwed everything up. Try to think with your head for once. Just because Thorin won't give a rat's ass doesn't mean that some of the others won't. Collateral damage. Just in case. After all, it's harder to kill someone for pieces of paper if they've got a knife to a screaming child's throat."

And more dwarvish again.

"I don't care how you do it," said Mister Wheezy, "Just find them!"

The voices faded into the other tunnels, eventually disappearing altogether as the traitors tried to locate them in brighter areas. Both boys remained silent for a long time, a precaution to make sure they were finally alone.

Donel was the first to speak.

"They've got maps of Erebor," whispered the dwarfling. "That's what the one said in dwarvish. That they've got maps that show the weak points in the fortress walls. Taken from the King's rooms, he said."

They went silent again when voices could be heard at the end of the tunnel. It was almost too terrifying to even breathe for several minutes. And then the voices faded into a side shaft, the sound of rocks being kicked an unnerving sound given their position. If one of their attackers kicked the stack of rocks just outside their hiding place, they just might be able to spot the small opening in the wall.

"We've gotta get out of here."

Chapter End Notes

Well, I've certainly discovered that writing children isn't easy at all. Even when it's only a partial perspective. Here's to hoping that I didn't completely butcher Frodo or Donel in this chapter, because I'm honestly not sure if I managed to make them seem semi-realistic or not. Either way, I'm sure you can imagine how the adults are reacting at this point. There be attempted kidnapping afoot, which will not amuse his Royal Gruffness. At all.
"Where is he?!"

The upper levels of Erebor were in a complete uproar, several dwarven mothers in various states of distress and violence as they tried to locate their children. Bilbo had been browsing the bakery stalls when he'd heard a woman to his left calling out for her son and daughter, visibly upset at having lost them in the crowd. He'd glanced aside for a moment to make sure that Frodo was still sitting next to the stall, smiling when he saw his nephew talking with a red-haired dwarfling. Unfortunately, it all went downhill after that, an angry mother from another aisle shouting at a small group of male dwarves, accusing the four of them with the sudden disappearance of her son as well.

Surging crowds had pulled Bilbo away from the bakery stall, the sounds of Glóril and her angry voice fading into the slush pile for several minutes. He eventually ended up right next to the distraught mother, eyes widening when he saw her lunge for the group of dwarves from the other aisle. Glóril stood right behind her, a little dwarfling girl clutched in her arms.

"Where's my son, you orc-humping bastard?" snarled the mother, a serrated knife in her hands. "I'll carve out your eyes if you don't tell me!"

"And my daughter?!" yelled another mother.

"They took my son, too!" accused the other dwarf mother from earlier. "I found a toy of his on the ground. He'd never leave it behind except by force. What did you filthy fuckers do with them?!"

Heart racing at the mothers' pleas, Bilbo turned around and physically shoved his way through the burgeoning crowd. It took him several minutes, but he finally found the bakery stand again.

However, to the hobbit's absolute horror, neither Frodo nor the other little boy were there.

"Frodo? Where are you? Frodo?!"

"Donel?!

The hobbit looked further down the aisle and spotted a dwarf woman frantically looking in and out of corners, a pair of crying babies strapped to her back and pulling at her red braids. It didn't take long for the pieces to click in Bilbo's mind.

"Do you have a little boy with braided red hair?" asked Bilbo when he approached her. "Not old enough for a beard yet? Wearing a green tunic?"

"Oh, yes, yes," breathed the mother in relief. "Have you seen him? Where is he? I told him not to run off!"

"I last saw him with my nephew sitting right over here," said Bilbo, leading her to the bakery and meat stands. "But then I got caught in the crowds and it seems that several other children have vanished in the last few minutes as well."

The mother's pleasantly plump face hardened at that statement. "It's those bloody Rhûn miners! All they've been doing for months is snooping around and arguing with the foremen! And now they've taken my Donel! Where are they?"
Neither of them made it very far before they heard a piercing scream from one of the nearby market entrances. Bilbo felt bile rise up in his throat, immediately recognizing the high-pitched sound as belonging to a young child. He heard shouts, watching as Dori emerged from the crowds and ran off towards the doorway, both of his swords drawn and ready for confrontation. Several more screams came from inside the crowd, Bilbo briefly catching a glimpse of Glóril cutting into a dwarf's shoulder. Despite his ignorance about these dwarves' identities, all of the others seemed to be very well aware of who they were and what they might have done with the children.

"Tell me where they are or else I'll cut each of your fingers off!" snarled Glóril, an enormous knife slicing into a scruffy-looking dwarf's cheek. "Oh, so no talking, eh? Then it looks like Meela's getting a finger-necklace tonight."

The dwarf screamed, but he still didn't say a word.

"Or maybe cutting something else off would be more persuasive," purred Glóril as she lowered the knife to the front of his breeches. "I wonder where I should start? Perhaps at the very tip, before working my way down and severing the…"

"They're in the mines!" he screamed when Glóril's knife started to slice into his trousers. "All of them! We tried to lure them to the gates, but they…ahhhh!"

"Which mines?" She pushed the knife in deeper. "Tell me!"

"You don't wanna go down there," cackled another dwarf. His teeth were covered in blood from Glóril's knuckle-dusters slamming him in the face. "Well, unless you wanna be blown to bloody bits, that is."

Bilbo and the other mother paused, their eyes trained on the entrance where they had heard the scream come from, but neither knew if they should approach now that the Rhûn dwarf had given such an ominous warning.

"What's he talking about?" Bilbo demanded. "Blown to bits?"

"I have no idea," said Glóril. She signaled for the other dwarves and their captives to follow her. "But I'm sure the King would love to hear about it."

They dragged the Rhûn dwarves through the hallways and to the throne room, the King Under the Mountain already being informed of the situation by a messenger who'd ran ahead of the rest of them. Bilbo almost took a step back in fear when he saw the dark frown upon Thorin's face, the Dwarf-King looking more dangerous and infuriated than a person should ever look in their life. But the hobbit was still surprised when Thorin took Orcrist and slammed it into one of the dwarves' shoulders.

"You come into my kingdom and threaten our children," snarled the King, "And for that I will have your heads. But if you tell me now where the little ones are, maybe I'll make your deaths swift and mostly painless. If you refuse…well, I'm sure there are many in this room who'd love to spend a few weeks torturing your half-dead corpses. And I'll allow it. By Mahâl, I'll enforce it!"

"How many have been taken?" asked Dwalin.

Four mothers and one father stepped forward, all of them in states of distress as to the safety of their young children. Each of the parents named their child, hands twisting as they surveyed the dwarves who'd purposely lured them away.
"My son, Donel."

The father spoke next. "My niece, Farina."

"My nephew, Harak."

"My son, Ordin," said the first distraught mother.

"My youngest daughter, Dwina."

Bilbo was the last to speak. "And my nephew, Frodo."

It was like everyone in the room could visibly see Thorin's temper rising, his eyes dark with violence by the time he heard his little hobbit's name. Without making a single sound, Thorin pulled a small knife out of his nephew's bracers and slammed it down onto all of the dwarf's left fingers. And then he moved to the next hand, slicing off two more fingers and piling them on top of the rest.

"After I find the children," Thorin snarled, "I'll be back for your tongue. But for now, your fingers will have to do for their parents."

He shoved the screaming and whimpering dwarf to his guards, telling all of them to repeat the process on the others from Rhûn. He stopped next to Dwalin and the parents, watching as the traitors were dragged from the throne room.

"I don't care what you have to do, but make them talk," ordered the King. "I want answers and I will have them."

He turned to the parents and gave each of them a finger. It didn't appear to disturb any of them in the slightest, Bilbo being the only one who cringed when Thorin gave him the thumb of the mutilated dwarf. Large, blood-covered fingers encircled his smaller hand for a few moments, Thorin's blue eyes shifting over to the fireplace at the far right of the room. However, an important thing occurred to Bilbo after the Dwarf-King finally pulled away.

Thorin had kept one of the fingers for himself.

A series of loud bangs from the throne room entrance drew all of their attention to the doors, two figures coming through with a struggling and cussing dwarf between them. Nori smacked the Rhûn traitor over the head, hissing something into his ears that actually made the other dwarf struggle even harder. But Dori and Nori were no lightweights, so hauling him to Thorin's feet wasn't a problem.

"Look what we found outside the west-central mines," drawled Nori, throwing the beaten dwarf to the floor. Then he kicked him just for the hell of it. "And he was standing right next to this."

He handed Thorin the Kíli figurine that Frodo had been so fond of. The King took the small toy, thick fingers cradling the wooden likeness of his youngest nephew with an infuriated frown.

"What do you know about this, Nori?"

The trickster of the Company stood firm beside the traitor. "I've been keeping an extra close eye on their transactions and movements over the last few weeks. And it looks like they were planning to go out with a proverbial bang, if you get my drift. And I found a few containers of explosives in their rooms." He kicked the traitor again. "That last part was the most damning, if you ask me."

"Explosives?" breathed Bilbo, panic building in his chest. "Like the whiz-popppers that Gandalf uses? But that'd..."
"Burn them alive," Nori finished for him. "And blow out the tunnels in the mines. I've heard several rumors along a…grapevine about powders from the far east that create giant explosions when combined with fire. Kinda like Gandalf's whiz-poppers, only a lot bigger and more destructive."

"Which would cripple Erebor's defenses and allow for an invasion," stated Balin. "And I assume the children were supposed to be hostages, of course. Just in case none of these powders worked and they needed to make a quick getaway. Or use the little ones as collateral so that Thorin wouldn't attack while they escaped. Along with the possibility of the explosions demolishing the treasure room as well. Am I right, lad?"

The dwarf remained silent and wouldn't make eye contact with any of them. He flinched when the Dwarf-King grabbed his long beard and pulled him up to look at everyone in the room. Livid did not even begin to describe the scowl on Thorin's face.

"You laced my tunnels with the powders, didn't you?" said the King. "Speak now, or I'll be giving you to my nephews for target practice."

Fíli and Kíli gave him feral smiles.

"I'm far past the end of my patience," Thorin warned. He moved his knife to the dwarf's fingers and started to cut them. "Tell me where the explosives are or I'll cut off every limb until you've no more blood left to drip in my halls."

Nothing but groans of pain were his answer.

"Find a way to make him talk, Dwalin," ordered the King. He glanced around the room until he finally spotted the Company's miners. "Bifur! Bofur! Assemble a group of your best foremen and chemical workers. I want every entrance to the mines scouted and cleared of explosives as quickly as possible."

The whole room burst into action, everyone moving around to fulfill the demands of the King and ensure that the traitors' plans never came to fruition. Bilbo just stayed off to the side with the other parents, anxiously wringing his hands while Donel's mother tried to console her wailing twins. His heart was pounding with trepidation, terrified that something down in the mines would hurt Frodo or one of the other children. And he didn't even want to think about the traitors down there with them.

"Bilbo?"

The hobbit jumped when he felt Thorin's large hand on his shoulder, heart racing at the scare he'd just been given. And it wasn't until a moment later that Bilbo noticed an unusual cold in his right hand.

"You shouldn't do that, Thorin," snapped the hobbit. "I could've stabbed you. No, don't give me that look. I'm so nervous and angry and frustrated right now that I wouldn't care if I stabbed someone, either."

"I feel similar," Thorin admitted. "Chopping off their fingers didn't even remotely sate my desire to cut off their heads. And their king will be receiving those heads once I have solid knowledge on who sent them to invade my kingdom."

"You kept one of the fingers."

Thorin didn't bother to deny it. "I would greatly like to think that I've a right to it this point. But, if that's not presently true, then I hope I will have earned such a grand gift in the future."
Of all the times for Thorin to have made such a statement, it just had to be the day when Frodo had gone missing and Bilbo felt like transforming into Bullroarer Took. The Dwarf-King had terrible timing, it seemed.

"You've already earned it."

The expression on Thorin's face was hopeful, his eyes scanning Bilbo for any sign of hesitation or uncertainty on the hobbit's part. Bilbo still wasn't quite sure if Thorin was implying what Bilbo hoped he was implying, but the hobbit would be an oblivious fool to overlook the tender care and confused devotion the King had shown to Frodo. They could discuss the implied…possibilities later, but they could both agree that the littlest hobbit was their primary concern right now.

"I'll bring him back," promised the Dwarf-King. He still held the Kíli toy in his hand. "And I'll take a limb for every hair they've touched on his curly little head."

"I know."

Chapter End Notes

Uh, yeah, sorry to anyone who's kinda squeamish. I sometimes forget that most people aren't used to the bloody grittiness that comes with my job/hobbies/classes. And I'm really starting to like writing Thorin going all medieval on people's asses. Hopefully I'm portraying things fairly realistically because I just can't picture Thorin negotiating with Middle-Earth's version of "terrorists". Any dwarves you'd like to see go medieval on some asshole's asses?
"Do you still have the ability to turn invisible?"

The Dwarf-King and the retinue of loyal dwarves who'd be going down into the mines were assembled in the main entrance hall. They'd already been divided up into a series of groups, each of them designated for one of Erebor's ten primary entrances into the mines. Considering their closer position to the marketplace, it was assumed that almost all of the children had fled into the west-central and far west mines, but Thorin still wanted all of the other entrances and tunnels checked for explosives as well. And there was a good chance that the traitors were hiding in other places now, too.

"Of course," said Bilbo, unconsciously patting his jacket pocket. "And I've got the mithril coat on underneath my clothes. Just in case."

The King nodded in satisfaction. "You'll scout ahead of Bofur and Bifur after they have cleared each of the entrances and tunnels. Nori believes that the powders would only be effective at the larger entryways, so you should be safe in all other areas if they cannot see or hear you."

"If I could sneak past a fire-breathing dragon, then a couple of stupid dwarves won't be a problem," said Bilbo with a devious grin. "No offense, of course."

"None taken."

"Has Ori returned with the map yet?" asked Bilbo. "Because although I trust Bifur and Bofur's navigational skills, I'd really prefer to take a look at a layout of the shafts and tunnels before going down there."

"I gave him the keys to my room as well, so it might take him a few extra minutes to retrieve everything," said Thorin. He glanced over at the hobbit and noticed that he was reading a small piece of paper. "What's that?"

"A list of identifications for the children," explained Bilbo. "They probably won't come out even if we call for them. And none of them besides Frodo are familiar with any of our voices or appearances, so it's possible that they'll think we're a kidnapper trying to hurt them again."

"But that doesn't explain the list."

The hobbit released a low-suffering sigh. "This is a list of obscure facts that I have gathered from the children's parents. Absolutely no one outside the child's closest family members would know about these things. Most especially their attackers. So, if any of the children doubt our identities or won't come out, I'll recite one of these facts and tell them which parent gave me that information. I've supplied all of the other rescuers with the list as well, so make sure to memorize them."

"Rupert the stuffed bear is Frodo's fact?" mused Thorin once he had his own list.

"He loves that fuzzy lil' bear," said Bilbo. "And absolutely no one outside of you, me, and the rest of the Company knows about him. So it's perfect. Work on remembering the others, though. They won't be like Frodo, who'll run to your voice as soon as he hears it."
"I've found one!"

Everyone turned around to stare at Ori, who'd just emerged from one of the upper walkways with a dwarfling clutched in his arms. The little boy was dark-haired and blue-eyed, which allowed Bilbo to instantly identify him as Ordin, the son of the mother who'd tried to carve out a traitor's eyes. He was wrapped up in a knitted blanket and holding several of the maps Ori had brought with him.

"He was hiding in the library," said a breathless Ori. "Said he ran there after a bad dwarf tried to snatch him. And I ran into the rather unpleasant fellows when I was looking for the maps. Found Ordin in a pile of books after that."

"Did they escape?" demanded the King.

"Of course not," said Ori with some indignation. "I knocked them out and soundly hog-tied them in the back storage room."

"Well, that's one dwarfling off the list," said Bilbo with great satisfaction. "Only five more to rescue now."

"You…hog-tied them?" said Dori in disbelief. "All by yourself?"

"Now why do you have to go and make it sound like that," bemoaned the younger brother. "I'm perfectly capable of…beating up a pair of dunderheads who can't tell either of their beards from their asses."

Ori handed the quiet dwarfling off to his mother when she came careening around the corner, shoving Dwalin and two other miners out of the way to get to her child. Heart aching at the sight of the other parent being reunited with her son, Bilbo's strong resolve to find Frodo merely increased tenfold, a similar feeling to his own being mirrored on the Dwarf-King's face as well.

"And I'll have you know that the traitors might be missing a couple of eyes, too," snapped Ori, whacking his middle brother over the head with a rolled up map in his rant. "Ended up on the sharp ends of my knitting needles, they did."

"I'm feeling kinda speechless right now," admitted Fíli.

"Me, too."

"I'm just feeling proud," said Bilbo. "Good for you, Ori."

The bookish dwarf gave him a shy smile. "And I retrieved all of the maps, too. A couple of them were stolen by the Rhûn dwarves, but don't worry, I made sure no blood got on them."

"Are you sure they're secure?" asked Thorin.

"Oh, yes," snickered Ori. "Aunt Dhola's keeping a close eye on them. Every time they make a sound, she smacks them over the head with her Khuzdul grammar book. It's rather amusing for her."

"More like the highlight of the century for her," added Nori.

"Bofur!" called Thorin. He handed the maps to each of the teams, anxious to head down and find the cowardly scum who'd invaded his home. "Show Bilbo the route you'll be taking in the tunnels. I don't want him scouting completely blind, so make sure he's at least semi-familiar with them."

"Aye, aye," said the pig-tailed miner. "Okay, here's what we're gonna do…"
It took several minutes, but Bilbo was soon very well-acquainted with the tunnels they'd be passing through in the west-central mines. He was warned that many of the left-oriented shafts were extremely narrow and dotted with ancient or illegal passages that had not seen dwarven life in centuries. With these conditions, Bilbo’s smaller size would be a great advantage for the rescuers.

"Okay," said the hobbit, "I'm ready."

Thorin nodded, signaling for the other groups to start their descent into the rigged and traitor-filled mines. Bofur, Bifur, and two dwarf chemists were already surveying the primary entrance to the west-central mines, cautiously checking every hole or opening in the stone carvings that lined the entryway. They moved as fast as was safely possible, the air thick with tension when they gave the first signal to move into the mines. With a deep breath, Bilbo slipped the ring onto his finger and disappeared into the shadowy world that was a staple of it.

"We'll be right behind you," whispered Thorin.

The hobbit walked into the flame-lit tunnel, glittering crystals illuminating deeper parts where the firelight didn’t reach. His footsteps were light and cautious, eyes and ears searching for any sign of the traitors in the branch-off tunnels and shafts. Once Bilbo was sure that no one else was in that stretch, he walked back several paces and opened a small bag of pebbles Bofur had given him. With a flick of his wrist, Bilbo threw one toward the entrance to signal that all was clear in the tunnel.

"One stretch down," murmured Bofur as he walked by to check the next branch of entryways, "Only dozens more to go."

Bilbo fingered Sting more and more anxiously with every new stretch they came upon, frustrated at the complete lack of traitors they'd found so far. He stayed up with the miners and chemists when he was waiting for new tunnels to scout, but the hobbit would occasionally catch a glimpse of Thorin, Dwalin, and his nephews further behind. All four of them looked just as tetchy as Bilbo felt, their weapons of choice permanently affixed to their hands as the miners checked for explosive powders. And despite his hobbit-y nature, Bilbo actually hoped that they’d have something to attack real soon.

"All good here," whispered Bofur.

Moving into the next series of tunnels, Bilbo noticed that the lighting was rapidly deteriorating and he wouldn't be able to see two feet in front of him by the time they arrived at the next entrance level. And then he heard something…

"We should've waited longer," said a voice to Bilbo's left. "And those damn kids just made everything worse."

Leaning close to the wall, Bilbo narrowly avoided a pair of Rhûn dwarves who'd just emerged from an especially narrow tunnel. If they hadn't walked out of it, Bilbo was almost certain that he wouldn't have even noticed its existence.

"They've probably fallen into the old, abandoned shafts by now," drawled another dwarf. "Those things are all over the place in the tunnels they ran into, so I'd be amazed if any of them were even still alive."

"But what if they—"

"Every one of those things have a thirty-foot or more drop. They're dead."

"What I was gonna say was," argued the first dwarf, "What if none of them have fallen into the lower shafts?"
"Kodos thinks they're hiding in those puny side-tunnels we saw earlier. It should only take a few blasts of fire to flush them all out. Bastards won't know what hit them."

"And the others?"

"The explosives will take care of them," snapped the second dwarf. "And even if one of the others squeals, Thorin won't be coming down here. He'll be more worried about his precious treasure than a couple of peasant whelps."

"I don't know, what if he—"

"Would you stop worrying," hissed the nastier dwarf. "And besides, you've heard all the stories about how Thorin reacted after he reclaimed Erebor. The asshole practically started a war just to keep his beloved gold all to himself."

"I guess you're right," sighed the first. "He is a selfish bastard with…"

Retrieving two pebbles from the bag, Bilbo edged his way back toward the tunnel entrance and threw them into the air exactly five seconds apart. Both of the Rhûn dwarves came to a sudden stop in front of another narrow shaft, allowing Bilbo to slowly make his way behind them.

"Did you hear that?"

Neither of the dwarves were able to say anything else before Bilbo surged forward and shoved both of them with every ounce of strength in his hobbit body. As soon as they yelped in surprise, arrows were flying through the musty air and into their chests. Without a moment's pause, Bilbo leapt onto the nasty dwarf and stuffed an old rag into his mouth, the hobbit's hairy feet smothering the other dwarf's screams until he could shove an icky-smelling sock into his maw as well.

"I've got them."

The King and his nephews emerged from the shadows, the chemists right behind as they continued forward to check the next branch-ways for explosive powders. Dwalin grabbed both of the traitors and dragged them back the way they'd came, Bilbo following to watch the inevitable interrogation.

"Should've kept your yaps shut," snarled Dwalin, viciously throwing the dwarves onto the ground when they'd reached a more well-lit shaft. "But this works out much better for me, so I'm not complaining."

"Answer our questions, and we'll kill you quickly," said Thorin while the miners bound their hands and feet. "Don't answer them, and I'll allow the children's parents to torture you for weeks if that's what they wish to do."

Neither of them responded in a definable way.

"Bofur…"

The friendliest dwarf of the whole Company stepped forward and brought his pick down with a gut-churning crunch onto the nasty traitor's right foot. Muffled screams were audible as the dwarf struggled, Bofur's usually jovial face a mask of stone as he glared at the traitor.

"Tell us where the lil' ones are," said Bofur with a nasty smirk, "Or I'll shove my ol' pick here right into your thigh. You'll bleed to death right slowly if my aim's true. Of course, my dear cousin's polearm may also like to see some action today. Aint' that right, Bifur?"
"Mahk nzuka-shah."

"You see," taunted Bofur in a tone far too congenial for the situation. "He'd like to slice out your intestines and feed them to the buzzards, too."

"And I'd like to rip these out and let you bleed to death," said Kíli as he took hold of his arrow and twisted it until the dwarf was writhing on the floor. "But that'd be kinda pointless, now wouldn't it?"

"Aye, it most certainly would, nadad."

Bilbo strode up to the Dwarf-King and impatiently jabbed him in the stomach, the hobbit's desire to find Frodo becoming more and more intense the longer they were down in the tunnels. If Thorin didn't figure out a way to get more information out of them, then Bilbo would just have to do it himself.

"Enough of this," said the King, gently squeezing the hobbit's arm to show that he had gotten the message loud and very clear. "Dwalin."

"With pleasure."

The warrior dwarf knelt down and pushed his fingers into the sides of the other dwarf's mouth, effectively preventing anything more than muffled sounds from escaping his mouth. Even without the smelly gags, neither traitor could scream for help with all of the weapons shoved up against their throats. The King Under the Mountain trailed the tip of his knife around the dwarves' eyes.

"Where are the children?"

Chapter End Notes

For all those who've asked, I work at my university's hospital and I've been doing combat sports (full-contact kickboxing, self-defense, MMA, etc.) all of my life. So, if I occasionally go a little overboard on medical or combat descriptions in the story, it's probably because those are the two areas that I'm most knowledgeable at writing. Just let me know if I start throwing too much jargon around, medical or combat, and I'll restrain myself.
"Do you see anything?"

The King Under the Mountain was currently living up to his royal title, carefully moving through some of the deepest and oldest mines of Erebor in search of the traitors who'd threatened his kingdom. His dwarven eyes surveyed the darkness that appeared to rule this level of the mines, the pitch black a small obstacle to someone who had spent a large portion of his life deep in the bowels of the earth. The shadows were a familiar and comfortable place for Thorin, a welcome reminder of his early childhood and the various adventures he'd once had with Frerin and Dís in Erebor's mines. Thorin was finally in the element of his people again.

"Nothing yet," whispered the King.

His nephews were a short distance behind him, their footsteps as silent as possible in the eerie darkness of the lower tunnels. They were now in areas that had open shafts on the floor, most of them left uncovered seventeen decades ago by terrified miners who had been fleeing Smaug's wrath. The hobbit was a short stretch ahead, invisible to anyone not aware of the ring's magical powers.


Keeping his movements slow and cautious, Thorin followed his oldest nephew to the right side of the tunnel, Orcrist ready to run through any traitors that might emerge or pop out of a hidden shaft. Remaining completely silent, Thorin concentrated on the quiet sound that was coming from the wall.

"Is that water?"

"Well, yeah, but that's not the sound that I heard," said Fíli. "It sounded more like a scritchy-scratchy sound, you know?"

Thorin shook his head. "I don't hear anything besides rushing water. And that's coming from the open chutes beneath the floors."

"I know I heard something. And it was over here."

The oldest prince kneeled down and stuck his hand out, feeling around the wall to find the source of the scraping he'd heard moments earlier. His uncle sighed, accustomed to the unnatural instincts of his blond-haired nephew, which were pretty accurate most of the time.

"Hey, there's an opening here," said Fíli. "It's kinda small, but I think…owwwww! Something bit me!"

Without a second's hesitation, the prince lunged back into the hole and pulled out a small, wiggling creature that was hissing and snarling at him. Holding it tightly around the neck, Fíli raised it up for his uncle and the others to examine, internally hoping that it wasn't venomous or anything.

"It's a dwarfling," said Bofur.

Bifur mumbled a few words in Khuzdul, the little girl instantly going still when a particular phrase was spoken. She hung limp in Fíli's hand, dark brown eyes watching all of the adult dwarves with
"Who told you that?" demanded the little dwarf. "No one's supposed to know that or talk about it. It's a secret."

"Tur gëmil."

The little girl paused at Bifur's words. "Well, that makes sense, I guess. Where is she?"

The axe-ridden dwarf explained the situation to the little girl, assuring her that all of the good dwarves were either safe at the surface levels or searching the tunnels for the other children. The last statement had an immediate effect.

"They're behind me."

That caught everyone's attention, including the King. "What? Who?"

"That other dwarflings and the boy with the hairy feet," explained Dwina. "We'd been hiding in the tiny tunnels, Harak and me, when the side of one of the tunnels started to shake like this. And then it just broke and they toppled in on us."

"What were their names?" asked Fíli. "Do you remember?"

The little girl nodded. "Frodo had the funny feet and Donel's a dwarf like me. And Harak, too. I'll go back and get them. Farina fell into a chute and we've been trying to get her out for the last couple hours."

"By Mahâl," gasped Bofur, "Do you know if she's alright?"

"She's been yelling up to us since she fell," said the dwarfling. "She didn't sound too hurt. I think she landed on something soft. Now put me down."

Dwina wiggled out of the prince's arms and disappeared back into the tiny tunnel, the older dwarves all watching anxiously for her return. Thorin stood right beside Fíli, an excited feeling twisting in his stomach. Several minutes passed and the King thought that he was going mad with stress when Dwina finally crawled out.

"I got them."

Another dwarfling crawled out behind her, dark brown hair and blue eyes marking him as Harak, the youngest of the lost dwarflings. He was instantly snatched up by Bofur, who secured his mattock and then cradled the tiny child in his left arm, carefully checking the little boy for possible injuries.

"I like your whiskers."

Bofur chuckled in delight. "Why, thank you, darling."

"Thorin!"

The King surged forward and grabbed the little hobbit as soon as he had emerged, a wave of intense relief rushing through his body once he had Frodo in his arms. And then another little boy crawled over his feet, bright red hair standing out starkly in the darkness that dominated the lower mines.

"Are you alright?" demanded Thorin. He felt all over Frodo's dirt-covered body, a desperate need overtaking the King when his fingers found blood on the hobbit's head. "I feel blood? What happened? Frodo?"
"I banged my head," admitted the little boy. "One of the bad dwarves found us in a cave and then the wall toppled out behind us. I hit my head while getting away from them. It's gotten better, I think."

That did nothing to reassure the King.

"We'll send the kids back with the chemists and continue looking for the other little girl," ordered the Dwarf-King.

They'd left the two chemists behind in an area that had a bit more light, their services all-but useless in the pitch black, which was exacerbated by the inability to use fire in the unchecked stretches. Only crystals would work in the deep tunnels, so they'd have to return to the surface level for them.

"Bofur, signal for Bilbo to come back and—"

"We've got company!" shouted a certain hobbit who ran right into Thorin's side. "I've killed two of them, but there's more coming."

"The traitors? How many?"

"At least a dozen," said Bilbo. "Maybe two. I stabbed three of them when I heard them scouting the side tunnels. Ugh, what's that?"

"It's me."

"By the Valar," gasped Bilbo, his hands groping for the little boy. "Frodo!"

"Hide the children at the back and prepare yourselves," ordered Thorin. "It'll be a tight, dark battle, so keep silent and listen for their movements. I doubt they'll be fully aware of our presence until they're upon us."

All of the adults assumed careful positions throughout the tunnel, each of them in specific locations so that their comrades wouldn't accidentally stab them. Dori remained at the back with the children, his large frame and swords acting as an efficient barrier for them. Thorin, Dwalin, and his nephews kept to the front, their experience at fighting and training in darkened conditions giving them an advantage over the others. The Company miners came next, Nori, Óín, and Glóin right behind them to act as yet another barrier to the children.

"Remain mindful of the chutes," warned Thorin. He listened to the loud approach of footsteps, internally laughing at the amount of noise the moronic traitors were making. "Here they come. Ready…"

And then the traitors were there, two of them running straight into Orcrist and the well-timed arrows of the youngest prince. The battle was swift and brutal, Thorin's blade turning at least a half-dozen of the Rhûn dwarves into mince-meat, his Company driving them back without too much difficulty. Sneering at their foolishness, Thorin moved from his original position and sidelined anyone who made it past the advancing Dwalin, all of them taking full advantage of the element of surprise.

"It's an ambush!" shouted one dwarf. "They're waiting for us! Light the powders! Light them! Now!"

"Silence him!" roared Thorin.

A mighty roar came from Dwalin, sickening squelches echoing through the tunnel as the huge warrior plowed through each enemy that came into his war hammer's path. It went quiet after a minute, a sudden blast of light seemingly appearing in the tunnel out of nowhere. None of the
dwarves questioned the resourcefulness of their resident hobbit, his ability to think ahead saving them a great amount of trouble again.

"I've two others," said Bilbo's disembodied voice, "If anybody would like them."

"You won't be needing those," wheezed a voice from somewhere further down the tunnel, "Because you'll all be dead soon, anyways."

Thorin saw the faint outline of his hobbit appear beside him, Sting clutched tight in his hand as the other dwarves snarled at the newest arrival. He didn't attempt to come any closer and Thorin was instantly wary of his conceited tone.

"I'd say you're the one who'll be dead soon," drawled Thorin, a quick tip of his head signaling for Kíli to shoot the enemy. "And from the body count, it appears that at least two-thirds of your men are gone, too."

The other dwarf, Kodos was his name if Thorin remembered correctly, just gave a grunt when Kíli's arrow collided with his upper chest. However, the conceited smirk was still on Kodos' face, blood dripping down his chin as he reached into his pocket and took out something small and thin from within it.

Bilbo's eyes widened. "Thorin…"

"Into the chutes!" yelled the King when he realized what their enemy was holding in his hand. "Grab a child and jump into the chutes! NOW!

"He's got a match!"

Kíli grabbed the older hobbit around the waist and leapt into the nearest opening in the tunnel floor. Dwalin followed him, large frame barely fitting down the small hole that had been designed by a shorter miner. His oldest nephew was next, followed by the Company miners, both of whom had a small child in their arms. Thorin snatched up the halfling, Frodo's arms wrapped tightly around his neck as the Dwarf-King shoved their healer down the furthest chute.

"Erebor will be ours, Thorin!"

And then flames engulfed the tunnel, the King dropping into the open shaft just as the explosion roared across the ground above his head. Thorin clutched Frodo securely to his chest, arms protecting the little boy from the sharp rocks that littered the uneven edges of the chute. The King braced himself for a painful landing, one that would likely either break his legs or perhaps even kill him on impact. However, instead of hard stone, cold water surged up around them.

Gasping in surprise, frigid water poured into Thorin's mouth and nearly made him choke at the shock of it. But the feel of small arms brought the King back to himself, legs kicking after several seconds towards the surface and breaking for air without too much difficulty. He pushed Frodo higher up on his left arm, allowing the little hobbit to take a deep breath and then rest against Thorin's sturdier head.

"Uncle!" called a voice from behind him. "Over here!"

The King fought against the current and turned himself around, quickly spotting a group of figures standing several dozen paces away. Realizing that there was dry stone to his front, Thorin wrapped his arm even tighter around the faunt and started to swim for the shouting figures of his Company. A drenched Kíli and Dwalin were the first dwarves he recognized, what looked like a collapsed Bilbo laying on the ground between them. To the King's surprise and relief, he was soon able to see that
the hobbit was just hugging the beautiful ground, ever-wary of the proclivity that hobbits seemed to possess for drowning.

And that made the Dwarf-King remember something very important.

"I've got you," whispered Thorin into the faunt's wet curls. "There will be none of that drowning stuff going on while I'm around, lil' one. See, your uncle's right up there and worshippin' the ground he's collapsed on. Talk to me, Frodo."

"I don't like this," whimpered the little boy. "It took Mama from me."

"I know it did, but I'm here now," assured Thorin. "And I've always been a very, very good swimmer. Of course, warmer water's preferable, but I can handle some cold if the occasion calls for it."

"Still don't like it."

"Well, I'm not feeling too peachy about it right now, either," said Thorin. "But I got us to shore, didn't I?"

The little hobbit glanced down and around them, surprised to see that they weren't in the water anymore. He still wouldn't let go of Thorin's neck, but most of the tension in his limbs had leached out once dry land was underfoot.

"I do believe we landed right in the River Running," said Bofur, who was puffing on the ground with Dwina in his lap. "And a calm, shallow branch of her, too. Look at all the lovely crystals, lil' one."

"Is everyone here?" asked Thorin.

"Aye," shouted Dwalin from where he was standing with Óin, "And we've even picked up another passenger, it would seem."

The dwarven healer was kneeling over a red-haired dwarfling, her face pinched in a grimace as Óin examined her lower right leg. Most of the others had gathered around, a tenseness in the air while they waited for the healer to give a prognosis on the little girl. It was with a huge sigh of relief that Óin informed them of her broken leg, which thankfully was a clean break that he'd be able to splint down here himself.

"I cannot determine the full extent of the injury, but she should be fine until we've returned to the surface," assured Óin. "Bilbo, would you be so kind as to help me with the splinting process. I'd like another pair of steady, semi-experienced hands here. And bring me anything that can be spared clothing-wise. The poor child's freezing from her swim in the river and being down here so long."

The older hobbit had just begun making his way over to Thorin and Frodo, both of his feet tapping against the ground from time to time to make sure it was still there. But in his usual responsible way, Bilbo diverted his path with no small amount of regret to assist in Farina's treatment.

"It looks like this area was once used for crystal mining," said Dori. His dwarfling of choice, Donel, was sitting on the large dwarf's shoulders, freckled face covered in cuts and scratches from the tunnels. "Very old and abandoned, but we might be able to find an ample amount of supplies to escape from here."

"And what do you plan to do with those supplies?" asked Glóin from where he'd been sitting with Bifur and Harak. "Build a boat?"
"Precisely."

All of the other dwarves glanced at Dori, taken aback by the typically pessimistic dwarf's answer to Glóin's sarcastic question. The only one who didn't look shocked was Nori, the middle brother's clever eyes already roving over the abandoned crates that were situated along the crystal-studded walls.

"Dori's always been quite fond of boats and the engineering behind them," stated Nori. "You'd best listen to him on the subject. Especially since the river seems to be our only way out that doesn't involve incineration."

The oldest brother gave Nori a small smile, obviously pleased at the compliment he'd just received from his most difficult sibling. He then looked to his King for blessing, blue eyes confident in the possibilities behind an eventual escape. Thorin just gave him a nod of assent, not seeing any other viable options in the current vicinity. He wasn't fond of the idea of going back into the water, but they couldn't wait on a rescue from above or aside with injured children in their midst.

"What do you need us to do, Dori?"

Chapter End Notes

And they've found the children! I hope it wasn't too anti-climactic for everyone since I decided to chop out a few paragraphs that seemed to be rather unnecessary. If there's one thing I want to do with this story (besides its overall plot, of course), it's give each of the dwarves a chance to shine. Hopefully, I'm doing that so far, because I really don't want to leave any of them out by accident. That'd be tragic, in my opinion.
"That's not a raft, it's a blob of wood."

The dwarves had been toiling away for several hours under Dori's guidance, very slowly and tediously constructing a makeshift raft from the old supplies and crates that'd been left down there after Smaug's attack. Bifur had stayed off to the side with the young children, whittling away at unusable scraps of wood to keep them entertained and relaxed while the adults worked. The most injured dwarfling, Farina, was leaning against the axe-ridden miner's crossed legs, knocked into a drowsy sleep by the pain medication that Óin had given her. All of them were working as fast as possible for Farina's sake, her pallor a source of increasing worry to them.

"I don't think it's that terrible," said Bilbo, circling around the raft with a critical eye. "Maybe with a lil' more rope…"

"We're gonna be swimming with the fishies, I think."

Bilbo pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, "Bofur, we've talked about the gallows humor thing. Not around the children, please. And most especially not around a pair of hobbits."

"Oops, sorry."

"It's quite alright, we've all had a long day as it is," said Bilbo with an accepting smile. "Now, Dori, how likely am I to survive on this raft of yours?"

"Well, the waterfall seems to be directly behind us," answered the oldest brother, "So I'm estimating that the remainder of the underground river should be rather tame by navigational standards. We'll have to be careful of rocks and sharp turns, but the crystals and their light should greatly reduce our chances of crashing. And if I remember the old maps correctly from childhood, then this particular branch of the river will conjoin with three others and then flow out past the front gates of the city."

"That's all well and good, but is this thing even gonna float?" asked Fíli. "It's got quite a few holes in it."

Another boom came from above them.

"I think I'll take my chances with the holey, wooden blob of doom," said Kíli, his head tipped back to gaze at the ceiling. "That's boom number eight now."

"Damn bastards are destroying my city," growled Thorin.

"I'd still rather clean up rubble than dragon poo," cringed Kíli with a wrinkle of his un-dwarf-like nose. "My clothes still stink of it."

"Well, you can just destroy them when we get out of here," assured Bilbo when he saw the King glaring at his youngest nephew. The hobbit didn't like it when Thorin berated the boys for telling the truth, even if his kingly self didn't want to hear it. "I'm sure Balin's caught quite a few traitors in the other tunnels for you to…play with. Or destroy. And I'm sure the other parents will be quite eager to help out, too."
"And yourself?"

"Ugh, I think I'll leave that kind of...thing to you and the dwarves," stuttered Bilbo, a series of unpleasant images flashing through his mind. "We hobbits aren't exactly fond of such...acts or punishments. Not very...hobbit-y, you could say."

The King shrugged. "More fun for me, then."

"You can make some of those tasty pumpkin cupcakes while we're ripping them limb from limb," cackled Dwalin. "Torture's a tiring business, my hobbit-y friend. The cupcakes will be essential to productivity."

"Uh oh, Dwalin's using big words," snickered Nori. "He must be itching to skin himself a couple of traitors."

"Oh, I'll be skinning a special part of them alright," whispered Dwalin, his voice laced with barely repressed aggression. "We don't have enough children as it is, and then to go and attack six of them? Bastards deserve my knife."

"Where you gonna put it?"

Dwalin glanced down, shocked to see Frodo and three of the other dwarflings at his feet. "Well, ummm..."

"They've got awful warts," interrupted Bilbo, "All over their faces and arms and even on their behinds. Terrible business. I've never seen anything like it before. So, as a goodbye...present, Dwalin's gonna skin their warts off. Very painful, skinning all those giant, tuberous warts off. Very stinky, too."

"Wouldn't killing them just be easier?" asked Donel.

Bilbo blinked in surprise, taken aback at the bluntness of the little boy. "Well, you see, that's just not..." No one came to his rescue. "Ugh, dwarves..."

"I'm just saying," said Donel, "It makes sense. Gets rid of the problem."

"And everything else makes perfect sense now," said Bilbo, giving the King a glance that did not bode well for his future. "Chop the problem's head off with an axe and then raid a pantry for dinner. Absolutely no negotiating whatsoever. Typical."

"I never said I wasn't willing to negotiate," argued Thorin. "But only on certain...subjects. And not with elves. Ever."

"Oh, I can think of something Uncle would like to negotiate about," snorted Fíli, his brother smacking him upside the head not a second later. "Owww! Seriously, how don't they know about...owww! Stop it!"

"No smacking your brother, Fíli," scolded the hobbit. He just smirked when the younger stuck his tongue out. "His brain's damaged enough as it is."

"Hey! That's Uncle's fault," accused Kíli. "He dropped me when I was a babe. It got him pummeled by our mother, too."

Fíli nodded. "Sadly, he speaks the truth."
"I'm liking this sister of yours more and more every time I hear about her," stated Bilbo, smiling teasingly at the grimacing King. "Keeping Thorin Oakenshield scared and on his toes is no easy feat."

Fíli and Kíli puffed up with pride for their mother.

"And that's about as good as it's gonna get, my friends," grumbled Dori from where he'd been patching up a hole in the raft. "We're out of supplies and this is our only hope of a quick escape."

"We've no other choice with the children and no food," admitted Thorin, looking at the raft with no small amount of trepidation. "Alright, let's put this damned thing in the water. Ready the children."

"Fishy, fishy, fishy, fishies…"

"Bofur!"

"Terribly sorry. Forgot myself again."

The dwarves lowered the large wooden raft into the calmest section of the water, slowly assuming the positions that Dori assigned them on it. Each of the children were placed with an adult towards the center or the back, Bilbo being assigned to Fíli because of his hobbit-y proclivity for drowning. Not even Bilbo's protests that he did know how to swim reasonably well assuaged Thorin's worries. The deaths of Frodo's parents were more than enough to make the King obstinate on the matter, his glare soon silencing the hobbit's complaints about the Shire's distaste for water.

"But I thought you couldn't swim?" groused Kíli.

"Just because I can swim doesn't mean I like to swim," said Bilbo. "Hobbits are still much more prone to drowning than other species, but I've always been very strange by hobbit standards, haven't I?"

"Everybody secured and ready?" called Dori.

"Aye, aye, Captain Dori, sir," answered Bofur, little Dwina tucked partially inside his shirt and strapped to his front with some rope. "Ready to launch, sir!"

Kíli scoffed. "And they say I hit my head too many times…"

The King braced himself along the back of the raft, hands holding tightly to both of the logs beneath him. Frodo was tucked inside his outer tunic and like Dwina, he was also secured to Thorin's chest with a bit of rope. All of them had discarded any piece of armor they could spare, well aware of how easily one could drown with even a few extra scraps of clothes on their person.

"Ready the crystals!"

And then they were floating away into the watery currents, the opening of an ancient tunnel swallowing them into the depths of a subterranean river. Some splashes of water came up through the holes, but the raft seemed to be holding up pretty well as they meandered down the first stretch. It turned a bit more rapid and narrow and craggy after a sharp turn to the right, jutting rocks needing to be dodged with the pathetic planks of thin wood they were using for paddles. All of those with children or a hobbit strapped to them were exempt from paddle duty, but hanging on was still quite a chore once they finally hit a stretch of rapid water.

"Wooohooooo!
Thorin glanced over at Bifur, eyebrows raised in bewilderment when the miner let out another loud whoop of exhilaration. Everyone knew the dwarf wasn't quite right up in the head thanks to the orc axe embedded into it, but this was certainly one of the strangest reactions the King had seen from him. Then again, the little boy strapped to Bifur's chest didn't seem to mind, letting out a little whoop himself whenever they hit a section that made all of their stomachs flutter and drop. Even Frodo released a couple of stunned squeaks as they careened down the river rapids.

"He seems to be enjoying himself!" shouted Bilbo from Fili's chest. "Must be the you-know-what talking! Whoa!"

"I think I see natural light!" called Dori from the front. "We're almost there! And the four-way branch is coming up, so hang on!"

The wine connoisseur pulled on the measly ropes that he was attempting to steer with, shouting commands to the paddlers every few seconds as they neared the branches. Only Frodo's eyes were now peeking out of Thorin's tunic, his tiny hands clutching onto the King's exposed chest hair and pulling out large clumps of it. His oldest nephew shot Thorin a puzzled glance when he winced, inwardly cursing the peculiar bald spots that would no doubt litter his chest after this ordeal.

"Here we go!"

Everything seemed to speed up from there, the river turning into swift rapids as the dwarves were knocked from side to side in the tunnel. With a deafening call to pull right, everyone lunged to the side when they entered the branch way, struggling to shift into the correct tunnel that would open to the outside. Thorin actually felt the ceiling graze his head for a moment before the raft dropped down and narrowly turned in what appeared to be the right direction.

"Okay, now as soon as we emerge, pull to the right and make a jump for the chunk of rock on that side!" yelled Dori. "We don't want to topple down the waterfalls, now do we?"

"Waterfalls?!!"

"You've got to be joking," Dwalin groaned.

"Loosen the ropes and prepare yourselves!" shouted Dori. "We're almost there! Just a little bit further! And…nowwwww!"

With a quick lunge and kick of his feet, Thorin launched himself off of the flimsy raft and straight onto the semi-flat bed of rocks that stretched for several paces outside of the river's opening in the mountainside. He winced when another clump of chest hair was pulled from its rightful home, Frodo desperately clawing at the King's skin when he felt a sudden loss of gravity. And then Thorin landed, both relieved at having survived to kill some traitors another day and lamenting the uneven splotches that would now cover whole sections of his kingly chest.

"Is it over?" asked a small voice from inside his tunic. "Are we out?"

"Aye, we're out, lil' one."

Frodo's curly head peeped out of the low collar. "Can I come out now?"

"It'd probably be best if you just stayed inside," Thorin admitted, looking around at the great height they'd have to climb down. "I've less chance of dropping you if you're literally attached to my front."

"That's a big drop," gasped Frodo when he looked down. "I'll stay in here."
"Wise choice."

"And everyone's alive and accounted for," said Dori with a proud smile. "I can't believe it actually worked. Who'd have thought."

"Yeah, but now we've gotta climb down," groused Glóin.

Bilbo carefully approached the edge of the rocks. "Well, it's certainly not going to be pleasant, but I think we've had worse before. Stone giants and goblins, anyone?"

Fili cringed. "Ugh, don't remind us."

"I'd like to get back into my city and kill some traitors," said Thorin, "So let's just get on with it."

"Wait, wait," interrupted the hobbit, ignoring the odd hand gesture game that was being played by the dwarves. Whoever lost had to go down first. "Frodo? Are you alright in there?"

The littlest hobbit peeked his head out. "I'm okay. It's warm in here."

"Oh, really," said Bilbo, desperately trying not to laugh at Thorin's face. "And do you plan to stay in there?"

Frodo tipped his head back to look up at Thorin. "Uh huh, he said I could. Much safer in here."

Thorin actually looked uncertain for a moment. "Would you prefer I not..."

"Oh, most certainly not," answered Bilbo, reaching out to tuck in Thorin's tunic a little tighter around his nephew. Once satisfied, the older hobbit stepped back. "There's no safer place he could ever be."

Thorin's facial expression was stuck somewhere between narcissistically proud in his usual kingly fashion and pathetically hopeful in his not-so usual kingly fashion. Bilbo just gave him a very hobbit-y smile, completely unaware of how those simple yet very essential words affected the Dwarf-King. And neither of them noticed the pair of excited eyes and dwarvish noses that were peeking over a nearby rock.

"I trust you with him."

Chapter End Notes

And this chapter is a direct result of an extremely long, kinda boring, and very gross class on intestinal parasites and how to flush them from a person's system. Yummy, yummy. Of course, this now leads to the question of what Balin, Ori, and Bombur have been doing inside the main city? Hmmm...
"What in the world are you doing?!"

The dwarves and their hobbit had climbed down the mountainside without losing anybody to severe injury or broken limb, each of the children tucked safely away in their shirts during the descent. Once they were all at the bottom, Thorin quickly signaled for a pair of guards to allow them entrance into the city, impatience clear as he charged past all three of Erebor's titanic front gates. It was only when they reached the main entrance hall that the Dwarf-King paused in his stampede to the throne room, eyes widening at the odd sight in front of him.

"Toasting the traitors," said Bombur. "Would you like a turn?"

Bilbo started to laugh, amazed at the familiar scene before him. Bombur, bless his rotund and ever-hungry belly, was currently turning several traitors round and round on a giant spit that had been constructed in the center of the chamber. All of them were yelling obscenities at the plump dwarf, the hot flames licking their bums and feet with every turn of the wooden crank. Glóril and three dwarf mothers were toasting sausages over the fire, a sharp prong occasionally stabbing them in the head or whatever other soft piece of flesh was exposed and available.

"Simply brilliant, Bombur!" crowed Bofur with pride. "Roasted Rhûn!"

The King just stood there, staring in disbelief at the method of torture that several angry mothers and cooks had come up with in his absence. And from the looks of Ori and his list of papers, it appeared that many of them had partially confessed or at least spoken about their leader's plans in minor detail.

"It's official," mumbled Thorin as he pinched the bridge of his nose, "The entire city's gone mad."

Bilbo shook his head at the lunacy of dwarves. "Pity your cousin isn't here. Dáin would've enjoyed this whole debacle quite a bit, I imagine."

"Uncle," said Frodo, "I'm hungry."

"Me, too," piped in Donel. "Hey, do we still get cupcakes?"

"I don't know."

Donel looked contemplative. "I might have to talk with Amad first. She's always so cranky about sweets and stuff."

"Uncle…"

"Wait, wait," laughed Bilbo, "I'm just gonna stand here and appreciate this oddly wistful reenactment for a few moments."

Grunting in annoyance, the Dwarf-King just stomped off to find Balin, the subject of torture and punishment at the forefront of his mind. All of the parents soon swooped in to take their children, profusely thanking the rescuers and promising severe retribution on the turncoats who'd attacked their kingdom. Apparently, the moles had been concentrated in the west-central and southwestern mines, the latter of which had been effortlessly dealt with by Balin's assembled teams. Because those
mines were more regularly used and had seen quite a bit of reconstruction, tracking down and apprehending the traitors had been a lot easier than what Thorin's team had encountered in their tunnels.

"Yeah, well, I'd like to see them find five dwarflings without any explosions," grumbled Dwalin. "Still killed dozens more than…"

All of the dwarves started to disperse, Bifur, Bofur, and Glóin heading over to the fire for some much-needed torture while Dwalin and Nori followed the King to find their oldest Company member. Óin was speaking with Farina's uncle about the treatment she'd be needling in the coming weeks and Dori now stood beside his youngest brother, looking over the information they'd tortured out of the traitors so far. The only one Bilbo couldn't locate was Fíli, who'd disappeared somewhere after Kíli decided to start poking at one of the traitor's bums with a hot iron.

"Just look at your face," groused Donel's mother, "It's got more scratches on it than an unsupervised pair of tomcats. I swear, if those filthy fuc—"

"I think they're both in desperate need of a warm bath and some good food, don't you think, Thana?" asked Bilbo with a tired smile. "Quite honestly, I don't think I've ever seen my nephew this filthy before."

"Sadly, I can't say the same for Donel," sighed Thana. "He takes after his father in the cleanliness department. Filthy buggers, the both of them."

Donel pouted at that. "Fara and Halla stink all the time and you don't say anything to them."

"They're babes and you know it, mister," scolded the mother. "Now, I assume this sweet lil' fella must be Frodo, am I correct?"

"Yes, he is," said Bilbo with a proud smile. "And it looks like our two boys have…"

The hobbit trailed off when he saw something odd out of the corner of his eye, an unfamiliar figure looking around the corner of a large entrance. Squinting at the newcomer, Bilbo soon noticed that he was approaching the oldest prince, who was busy talking to an older dwarf near a large staircase. Due to their positioning, neither of the dwarves noticed the figure coming towards them.

"No, no, no…"

And then the figure drew a long and serrated knife from his belt, steps quickening as he drew closer to the blond-haired heir. Eyes widening in horror, Bilbo's body reacted on pure instinct, feet pounding against the floor as he tried to close the distance between Fíli and himself. He heard a shout from behind him, but Bilbo paid it no attention as he ran as fast as he possibly could, instinctively drawing Sting from its sheath as the figure took yet another step closer to Thorin's oldest nephew. Everything in Bilbo's body was pushing at him to run faster and faster, telling him that he must reach the traitor before he could hurt one of the goofy boys he'd come to love so much.

"The prince!" yelled Thana. "He's attacking the prince!"

With a last burst of speed, Bilbo covered the final few paces just as the figure took his first stab at Fíli. Fuelled by pure adrenaline, anger, and protective instinct, Bilbo slammed straight into the traitor and buried Sting right into his stomach. The cry of agony that the hobbit heard caused another burst of energy to spring forth, allowing Bilbo to stab at the figure over and over again, his other hand holding the traitor down by his face. The only thing that eventually stopped Bilbo were a pair of strong hands pulling him away, an unusual burble of words rolling right over his anger-fogged head.
The need to protect and destroy was more powerful than any other time in his life.

"Bilbo! Bilbo! He's dead! You can stop now!"

Huffing and puffing from exertion, the hobbit allowed himself to be pulled away from the bloody body beneath him. Bilbo's mind recognized the voice, which was probably the sole reason he didn't lash out at him, too. Bilbo had had it with child-kidnapping and prince-killing traitors for the rest of his life.

"Fíli?"

"He's been stabbed in the thigh," stuttered Kíli, his arms wrapped around Bilbo's chest in an effort to restrain him. "It's pretty deep, but he's alive. Your attack knocked the knife off course, I think. It would've been his...heart, otherwise."

"Let me see him," demanded Bilbo. "I need to see him!"

The youngest prince didn't even attempt to argue with him, instead crawling over to the prone figure several feet away from them. Óin was already at Fíli's side, ordering a handful of dwarves to fetch his other supplies from across the room. Hands pressed to the bleeding wound, Dori was talking to Fíli and demanding that he not fall asleep under any circumstances. Ignoring the blood that covered his entire front, Bilbo scooted up to Fíli's head and very gently patted his pale cheeks.

"You saved me again," chortled Fíli around a wince. "I'm going to get a complex at this rate, being saved so often by a lil' hobbit."

"Stop moving your legs," snapped Óin. "Where are my bandages, you fools?! And the stretcher?! Make yourselves useful and bring me a stretcher!"

"Look at that," scolded Bilbo, "You've got Óin all worked up into a tizzy."

"And I'll be dead of heart failure by my 200th birthday at this rate, too," grumbled the healer. "The line of Durin can't even go a single year without being stabbed or mauled or maimed in some way, it seems. Where's that damned stretcher?!"

"Mother's going to be so upset," joked Fíli. "This'll be my sixth scar since leaving. I won't be allowed to leave my bed or rooms when she sees it."

"Yeah, I think I'll be giving that same order, so you'd best plan on becoming a hermit from this point forward," whispered Bilbo. His fingers stroked the prince's golden mane as Óin began cleaning the knife wound. "And I think your uncle might actually agree with me on this, but his opinion isn't really needed on the matter."

"How is it?" asked Kíli.

"Pretty deep," admitted Óin, "But it doesn't appear to have cut through too many muscles, ligaments, or other dense tissues. I'd prefer to examine him in a proper bed and with better lighting, though."

"Did it hit an artery?" demanded Bilbo. "The main one in the legs?"

"No, I don't think so," said Óin with certainty. "He'd already be dead if that was the case. The knife missed it by a half-inch, it seems."

Kíli recoiled when he finally got a good look at the wound. "It's really long."
"About seven or eight inches," said Óin. "The serrated blade also made the wound more jagged and likely to fester. Bifur! Bring the traitor's knife to me! I need to check the damned thing for poisons."

"What?!" gasped Bilbo. "What poisons?"

"It's always a possibility," lamented the healer. "Assassins are very well-known for using them on intended victims. Now hold still, my boy."

Fíli cringed and gasped every time the healer cleaned around the wound or put too much pressure on it, but just like his uncle, no complaints fell from the elder prince's lips. Well aware of the horrible pain that Fíli was experiencing, Kíli simply continued to hold his brother's hand while Bilbo soothingly stroked his brow and sweaty hair. By the time a stretcher was finally brought, Fíli was growing paler and less able to focus on the stories Bilbo was telling him.

"Now very gently lift him," ordered Óin. "The blood loss has finally slowed down, but too much jostling could start it up again."

"Hey, hey, stay awake for me," urged Bilbo, the prince's head in his hands as they moved him up onto the stretcher. "Fíli! If you don't keep your eyes open and on me, I won't be making any more vanilla cupcakes for you!"

"But that's not fair," whined the prince.

"I don't much care," said Bilbo. "Keeping you awake is far more important. Now, open those eyes and look at me, little lion."

"Hey, that's my uncle's old nickname for me," Fíli groaned. "How'd you find out about it?"

Bilbo smiled down at him. "I may have received a letter from your mother several days before all of this crazy malarkey began. Sneaky lady, your mother."

"It's embarrassing."

"To be nicknamed after a great beast of the Harad? I'd think it was a compliment, especially from someone like your uncle."

"Mother started it."

"And yet your uncle kept it up," Bilbo pointed out. "If the pictures and stories I've seen of them are true, then you are the dwarvish portrait of a lion. Golden mane and fierce personality, all lumped together."

Fíli gave him a weak smile. "Thank you, Bilbo."

"My pleasure," answered the hobbit with a gentle stroke of his hand. "Both of you boys deserve every bit of praise for what you've done. And since your uncle's too thick in the head to dole it out in correct proportions, it looks like I'll have to pick up the slack for him."

"We'd like that," said Fíli, his smile a little wider. "He's got a lot of slack to pick up after, but it's really good slack, you know?"

"Careful with his left side, you fools!" snarled Óin at the bottom carriers. "I swear, of all the..."

Bilbo chuckled. "Yes, I know, but you also need to rest. Less talking and a bit more listening, little lion. Bofur! Could you grab Frodo and bring him to our rooms? I'm going up with Fíli from here."
"I can do that," mumbled the prince. "Always been good at listening, I think. My mother said so, but Kíli never listens. Too talkative."

"Hey!"

"Shut up, you know it's true."

"Behave, both of you," said Bilbo, running a gentle hand over Fíli's head as they made their way up the steps. Even with the stretcher, the prince still felt the bumps and a wince or gasp could be heard every few seconds. "Have I ever told you about the terrible tendencies of Lobelia Sackville-Baggins?"

"Isn't she the one who's always trying to steal your silver?"

"Ha! That's an understatement! Did you know that upon my return to the Shire, Lobelia and her husband had moved themselves into Bag End and attempted to auction off many of my belongings? It took me weeks to track everything down. And the looks that they gave me when I said I'd be moving to Erebor, but that Gaffer Gamgee would live inside Bag End with his family and care for it in my absence. Oh, the scandalized looks upon their faces were a sight to behold."

Fíli's pained brow wrinkled. "So you don't own Bag End anymore?"

"No, I still own it, but ol' Gaffer Gamgee is officially in charge of the estate while I'm away on extended...business, you could say. And the actual inheritance of Bag End is now in Frodo's name, so the Sackville-Baggins have no claim at all. And I trust my loyal gardener to take good care of Bag End while I'm here. We might even be able to go back and visit sometime, if the weather and road allows it."

"It was rather quaint," admitted Kíli. "And the food was very good."

Bilbo flicked the younger brother's rounded ear. "You boys raided my pantry and practically destroyed the plumbing. I don't think Bag End could handle another party thrown by the line of Durin. It'd be disastrous."

"Awww, you just say that because of your hobbit-y habits," teased Kíli, obviously trying to lighten the mood and keep his older brother distracted. "But you know you love us. We're just too irresistible to resist."

The hobbit sighed and glanced down at his bloody clothes. He'd viciously slain another living being, an act that almost no hobbit in the Shire could ever claim to have done or would ever dream of committing. But Bilbo, well, he could very easily picture himself in a repeat of that situation. The mere thought of someone hurting Fíli and Kíli was enough to make the hobbit's Took blood and paternal instincts boil with rage, their exuberance and warm presence something that Bilbo couldn't imagine living without. They were as essential to his life as Frodo now.

"That's most definitely true."

And he'd gladly kill again to protect them. No doubt about it.

"Uncle's head is gonna explode when he hears about this," stated Kíli. "I think all of the other traitors are officially dead now. You know, since he's gonna chop their heads off and everything."

"Hey, be careful and watch your brother's front, little bird. We don't want to crash on a broken step and kill the heir to the throne."
"Aww, she told you that, too."

Chapter End Notes

Attempt to hurt any of Bilbo's so-called kids and he'll snap you in half like a butterbean. I view Bilbo's relationship with Fíli and Kíli as being just as essential as Thorin's relationship with Frodo. Of course, it's pretty obvious even as early as the first movie that the royal nephews really like Bilbo, so it's been pretty easy for me to incorporate them into Bilbo's sphere of most-loved people. I mean, they are pretty lovable fellas.
"Owwww! What's in that damn stuff?"

The oldest prince of Erebor was tucked away in his bedrooms, stripped down to a flimsy pair of underpants and nothing else for his medical evaluation. His younger brother and Bilbo were sitting on either side of his bed, both holding down Fíli's twitching limbs while Óin applied some of his salves to the open wound. Poor Fíli had become even more pale after they'd reached his room, skin becoming clammy and heart rate increasing as the first stages of infection set in. Thankfully, the traitor's blade had not been poisoned with a toxic agent, which had been Óin's worst fear.

"Did you see how rusty that blade was?" said Óin, his fingers carefully picking at severely damaged tissue with a pair of tweezers. "Nastier than an orc's blade, it was. And the chances of you contracting lockjaw are very high, but the faster I clean out this wound with my salve, the less likely you are to develop the worst symptoms. Now hold still, I've almost finished the debridement. Or would you rather I use the maggots?"

Eyes widening in horror, Fíli shook his head. "No, no, I like tweezers. They're not squirmy and wormy and maggoty and…"

"Here, take another sip," said Bilbo, holding the pain tonic to Fíli's mouth. "Just a lil' bit, there you go. It'll take some of that nasty edge off."

"Why couldn't I be knocked out again?"

"Because you've lost far too much blood for my liking," answered Óin. He had an unpleasant looking set of scalpels in his hands now. "I'd prefer you ingest some food or warm drink before we let you fall asleep. It'll help replenish some of your lost strength and fight off the infection."

"Fíli?!"

The Dwarf-King came bursting through the bedroom doors, something he'd been doing more and more often as of late. Several members of the Royal Council could be heard in the corridor, all of them demanding clarification from the harried King about reconstructive damages, retribution, and the possibility of war with the home kingdom of the traitors. With a flick of his wrist, Balin slammed the door shut and then gave it a rather disdainful glare.

"Like a bunch of babbling toddlers, the whole lot of them," muttered the elderly dwarf. "Mahâl save us all from inborn stupidity."

"What happened?" demanded Thorin, stopping at the foot of his nephew's bed to examine the open wound. It was angry and swollen red, Óin trying his hardest to remove all the damaged tissues in and around it. "Who did this?!!"

"Bilbo skewered him like a wild boar!" said Kíli with a cruel smile.

"It was quite the sight, watching a small hobbit stab straight through a full grown dwarf like that," crowed Bofur upon his arrival. Frodo was holding his hand and walking beside him, newly cleaned and clothed in a fresh pair of pajamas. Rupert, as usual, was a constant presence in his drooping arms. "Don't reckon I'd like to see it again, though. I'd much prefer our hobbit-y burglar remain just
what he likes being, all paternal and garden-making and cooking extraordinaire of Erebor."

"Cupcakes?"

"Not for at least a few days, Fili," said Bilbo, readying the razor blade to shave off all of the hair on the prince’s injured thigh. "We need to get some hardier foods and warm liquids into you first, but after that, you can have all the icy cupcakes your dwarfy lil' heart desires."

Óin nodded in grim satisfaction at the irritated wound. "I've cleared away as much of the damaged tissues as I can, but infection's still a possibility. We'll have to make sure nothing gets into it. Oh, and you can start now, Bilbo."

"I feel bald already," Fíli grumbled. "A dwarf with no leg hair…"

"Button up, you whiny whelp," said the healer. "He'll only shave the hair directly around the wound site. You'll still look pretty for the lasses, so stop your belly-aching. Is my box of salves here yet?"

"Glóin's getting them," assured Bofur. He was sitting on a plush couch in front of the fireplace, Frodo sleepily watching the miner whittle away at yet another toy for him. It was an extremely endearing sight to the older hobbit. "You'll be able to hear him bashing his way through all those grey-beards out in the hall."

"Okay, Thorin, Kíli?" called Óin, gesturing to the prince's limbs. "I'm gonna need you to hold him down while I rub some of this into the lesion. It'll sting something fierce, but this salve works wonders in preventing lockjaw. Now hold still…"

The affect was immediate, a scream of agony ripping from Fíli's throat as he tried to squirm away from the burning salve. His uncle and brother held him down, muscles in their arms and legs straining as the oldest prince tried to kick them off of him. Bilbo himself moved to the side, eyes shifting between Fíli and the chair where Bofur was attempting to distract Frodo from the prince's cries of pain.

"Did you have to bring him here?"

Bofur shrugged with a sad smile. "He was fine during the bubble bath and when I treated his head wound, but he refused to sleep without you there. And then I accidentally told him that Thorin and you were over here and he ran out the door on me. Charged right through the council members, too."

"Awww, my poor lil' Frodo," cooed Bilbo, picking the little boy up from Bofur's lap and cuddling him close with a kiss atop the head. "This truly has been a dreadful day, hasn't it?"

Frodo just grumbled at him.

"Aye, it most certainly was," agreed Bofur, tongue sticking out in concentration as he carved something intricate into his wooden…oliphant, maybe? "I'm mightily hoping a certain brother of mine doesn't truly decide to make roasted traitor stew. I don't think any of the local bears would be amenable to it."

Bilbo blinked in horror. "Wait, wait, Bombur's actually going to make a stew out of them? That's barbaric!"

"Well, he won't if they confess and spill their guts," said Bofur with a frightening amount of nonchalance. "Thorin will deal with them after that, but maybe the bears and wolves really would like some extra sustenance before hibernation. No matter how nasty it may be taste-wise."

"Valar save me from raging, sadistic dwarves," murmured Bilbo, wandering back over to the bed again. "I'm going to have nightmares for the rest of my life thanks to the last few…hours? Days? I don't even know anymore."

"He's passed out," sighed Óin. "Poor lad."

"Will he be alright? Being unconscious with the blood loss, that is?" asked Bilbo, tucking Frodo's face into his neck so he wouldn't see the open wound. "I've heard a lot of bad stories about people not waking back up."

"A half-hour ago, I would've been very concerned," explained the healer. "But at this point, Fíli being unconscious is mostly a boon, both for us and himself. I'll be able to fully treat the wound without having to worry about his pain level and his body can begin fighting off the infection that's bound to come."

Kíli was off to the side of them, retelling the whole assassination story to Thorin, grand gestures of his arms showing what the hobbit had done to protect his older brother and kill the traitor. Bilbo tried to interject when the young dwarf embellished some parts of the incident, but Kíli would have none of it and dramatically waved off any denial the hobbit attempted to put forth. Sighing in exasperation, Bilbo wished Kíli wouldn't describe his actions in such vicious, gory detail. Quite frankly, the hobbit would've been happy to never speak or even think about the attack again.

"He was going to hurt Fíli," reasoned Bilbo, flushing under the intense stare Thorin was giving him. "And, well…I had to do something. Honestly, I'm surprised my sword actually went…umm, through him. Like, yes, like that. Thank you for that lovely demonstration, little bird."

"Hey!"

Thorin's eyes narrowed. "How did you learn about that?"

"Well, you see," stuttered Bilbo, "I'm not quite sure how it all began, but—"

"He's been exchanging letters with Amad," interrupted Kíli, standing between the two of them now with a wide smirk. "She even told him about Fíli's nickname, too. Very good sign. Our mother's a great judge of character."

"From one letter?"

"Depends on your definition of letter," drawled the youngest prince. "But she has all of her information on very good authority. Very, very good." The brunet was inching away from his uncle at this point. "But she's not very happy with you."

The King looked indignant. "About what?"

"Various…things…"

"Really," said Thorin, his arms crossed and eyes fixed on his nephew. "And what would those things be?"

"I'm not allowed to disclose that. Mother's orders."

Bilbo glanced between the uncle and nephew, more than little curious about what Thorin's sister could be so frustrated with him about. Of course, there was the usual, like how Thorin's unhealthy obsession with that stupid Arkenstone had nearly gotten both of her sons killed and started a multinational war between the elves, dwarves, and men. The hobbit could very easily understand her
anger and frustration towards those horrid events, since Bilbo himself still felt a little miffed about them, too.

"Uh huh, well, we'll see about that when—"

"All done," said Óin from his place at Fíli's bedside. "It'll have to be checked at least once every two hours, but my poultice should do quite fine for keeping away some of the worst infection. Here, Bilbo, I'll show you how to properly make one, in case I'm not available for various reasons in the coming days."

"Of course, I'll be right over," said Bilbo. He walked up to Thorin and very gently moved Frodo into the Dwarf-King's confused arms, the sleepy halfling snuffling around a little bit before settling down again. "And look at that, not a single fuss. He probably feels safer with you than with me."

"Awww, see, he really does like you, Uncle. I told you so."

"Stop teasing, Kíli, and go take a bath," ordered Bilbo on his return to the bed. "It smells like soot and wet dwarf in here. Or would you prefer a sponge bath like your older brother will be receiving?"

The youth was already in the washroom when Bilbo turned around. Nodding with a satisfied smile, the hobbit turned back to Óin and the injured prince. The King gaped at him in surprise.

"Good boys. They just need a firm hand and the right threats, is all."

"The entertainment has been so delightful around here as of late," said Balin in the background to Bofur. "And I do believe our young Ori might very well be writing a book on it."

"Indeed, he is," replied Bofur. "Very slow going, but an interesting read. The lad agreed to translate it into Khuzdul for Bifur once it's finished."

"Thorin will have a chicken when he finds out about it. A very large chicken."

"Aye, that I believe."

Bilbo spent the next half-hour with Óin at Fíli's bedside, carefully going over the various treatments they'd be applying to the oldest prince. Lockjaw was fairly rare in the race of dwarves, most of them possessing a natural resistance to the disease that plagued humans and elves alike. However, it wasn't unheard of for a particularly filthy wound to result in the severe muscle spasms that were so characteristic of the terrible disease. Fíli would have to be watched closely in the coming days.

"Here, Thorin, I'll take Frodo for you," said Bilbo once the healer and himself had finished their demonstrations and discussions. "Kíli's just finished with his bath and you, well, you've got soot and...blood in your hair. There's not much we can do here until Fíli awakens and I'm sure the prisoners will keep for the night."

"Bilbo's trying to politely say that you stink, Uncle," snickered Kíli from his spot at the bottom of his brother's large bed. "And you've got a sticker bush bulb stuck on the left braid of your hair."

"I think Kíli's gone slap-happy," muttered Bilbo, gently placing Frodo down next to the giggling dwarf. He then draped a knitted blanket over the pair of brunette youths, a warm smile spreading across his face at the sight. "Could you keep an eye on him for me, little bird? I feel like a troll sneezed boogies all over me again."

"Nah, you were grosser back then," mumbled Kíli from beneath the blanket. "I've got the pointy-eared munchkin. And Rupert. We're good."
"Balin?"

"Everything's handled, laddie," assured the elderly dwarf. "The traitors will keep through the night. Although they might have a few more holes in them come morning. It won't hurt to grab a few hours of shut-eye, though. And that includes you, Thorin. All of the prisoners can wait until tomorrow for their punishments."

The King grumbled as he disappeared into Fíli's washroom.

"I'll be back in a few minutes," said Bilbo, smiling at the influence Balin had over the stubborn King. "Just need to bathe and get a change of—"

"Don't worry, laddie," interrupted Balin. "Bofur and I will be here the whole time. And believe it or not, I've actually been around these two since their births. Like you said, all they need is a firm hand."

"And good threats," added Bofur.

True to his word, Bilbo returned less than a half-hour later. Dressed in his pajamas and favorite night robe, the hobbit chuckled inwardly at the sight of five sleeping dwarves and one little hobbit. Óin, Bofur, and Balin were all sound asleep on the plush couches in front of the fireplace, papers and salves and tonics scattered about the tables that lined the walls. Retrieving a few more blankets, Bilbo draped them over the dwarves and then went over to the bed.

"Shhh, it's just me, Kíli," whispered the hobbit. The youngest prince was gazing up at him through droopy eyes, Bilbo instinctively reaching out to smooth down his wild hair. "Go back to sleep. I'm checking on your brother now."

Kíli just snuffled and burrowed back into the blankets.

And then a thick arm was suddenly wrapped around Bilbo's chest. "I don't think I'll ever be able to thank you enough for everything you've done for them. My nephews, my heirs, would be gone if it wasn't for you."

"I would die for them," admitted Bilbo, tenderly fingering Fíli's moustache braid. "They're amazing, silly, rambunctious boys and I love them for it. This whole day was so long and terrible, I just couldn't…"

Thorin's arm tightened. "Tell me."

"I'm a hobbit, Thorin. I'm not a dwarf. We hobbits don't fight and brawl and cut off fingers and threaten to turn our criminals into stew. It's just not how we do things in the Shire. We like our gardens and food and doilies and never doing anything that might disturb the peace. Oh, and we like to eat our seven meals a day, which I've been missing quite consistently over the past few years. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins had the utter nerve to call me scrawny last time she saw me!"

"Are you unhappy?" whispered the Dwarf-King.

"About today's events? Yes, very much so," said Bilbo, fingers working at a knot in Fíli's golden mane. "About living here in general? No, I'm not. I can't even imagine a life without everyone here anymore. I do miss Bag End, but I'd miss these halls and these two goofy boys even more." He paused, uncertain about his thought. "And I'd miss you."

If possible, Thorin's arm tightened even more, his bigger and hairier hand joining Bilbo's in his attempts to untangle Fíli's filthy, twisted hair. They really did need to give him a good sponge bath
"I reacted terribly when Frodo first went missing. Too shocked to attack any of the traitors like the mothers did," confessed the hobbit. "But seeing that… that bastard charge after Fíli with a knife like that? It must've been the straw that broke the oliphant's back. I don't even remember attacking him, to be truthful."

The King’s warmth was addictive, Bilbo concluded, because he would've been an absurdly happy hobbit if he could've just stayed there for the rest of his life. Thorin was a furnace at his back, one arm wrapped around Bilbo's chest while the other reached out to soothe his nephew's troubled brow. The soft snores of Frodo and Kíli could be heard just to the left of them, both of them snuggled beneath one of Ori's knitted blankets. To Bilbo, these four people were his family now.

"Would you just kiss already?"

A pair of hazy blue eyes were watching them, Fíli's chapped lips curled into a tiny smile at the adults above him. The oldest prince even had the gall to snicker when Bilbo's pointy ears flushed bright red at the tips. And with the excuse of having pain tonics in his system, Fíli was going to speak what was on his mind about this whole starry-eyed ordeal, damn the consequences.

"We like him, Amad likes him, and everyone else likes him. Well, except maybe the council members, but who gives a damned hoot what they think. And he'd make a great, fantastic, amazing, vanilla-cupcake-baking uncle," declared Fíli. He was pointing at both of them, which would've been more serious if the prince was actually wearing more than a puny pair of underpants. "And Uncle's been trying to court you for weeks now, but he's been going about it all wrong and he won't read the damn book we found for him on hobbits and… and…"

Bilbo glanced up at the King after a half-minute, but Thorin seemed to be hiding in the hobbit's drying curls now. Deciding that he'd have to be the bigger adult here, Bilbo leaned forward and gently prompted, "And what, Fíli?"

"I don't feel good."

And then the oldest prince vomited on the both of them.

Chapter End Notes

Lockjaw is another name for tetanus, in case anyone was wondering. And there you go, pain meds made Fíli spill the beans about the whole situation. He's sick of cultural differences and stubbornness getting between him and his regular supply of cupcakes. I almost feel sorry for Bilbo and Thorin, having to deal with the human equivalent of two teenagers and a pre-schooler. Plus, all three of them are boys, which makes it even worse.
"What exactly did Fíli mean about you...courting me?"

The oldest prince was washed up and sound asleep beneath a thick quilt that Bilbo had taken from his own rooms, golden hair freshly braided by his uncle while Bilbo made a new poultice for his injured thigh. The hobbit had given Fíli another blend of pain tonic since the last one had upset the prince's stomach, hoping that the broth he'd just fed to the youth would actually stay down this time. Bilbo had already detected the beginnings of an unpleasant fever, Fíli's forehead hot to the touch while his gash was much more inflamed than it'd been during his last check up. But there were no signs of pus or discharge yet, an indicator that Bilbo took with no lack of optimism at this point.

"Exactly what the word means," answered Thorin, his words clipped and aloof. "I had merely assumed that my affections were not returned. But my nephews, as usual, took it upon themselves to interfere in my personal affairs. Although, since they like you, there were no arrows shot into a foot or bum again."

"They shot what?!" gaped Bilbo, his hand stilling on Fíli's wrinkled brow. "In the bum? That seems quite...excessive. Was it Kíli?"

"Of course. Although I'm sure his brother knew about it, too," said the King. One of his fingers flicked at the youth's hair, Kíli snuffling in return before rolling over to his other side. "Neither of them were especially fond of her. And Kíli started taking shots at her after about two weeks. Dís might have encouraged them, too."

"What did she say to make them dislike her so much?" asked Bilbo warily. "It just seems so odd for them to behave like that. Maliciously, I mean. Foolish and ill-mannered, I believe, but shooting actual arrows?"

Thorin lightly fingered a few strands of his nephew's hair. "I had noticed several times that she disliked being too close to Kíli, but I assumed it was because of his rowdy, boisterous behavior. But as Fíli soon overheard when running errands for me, she'd been referring to Kíli as being elf-like in appearance to other dwarves. And then everything just went downhill, as you can probably imagine. Fíli eventually managed to chop off seven of her braids, which is a very grave insult in our society."

"Well, that certainly explains the odd behavior," answered Bilbo. "Why didn't Fíli just chop it all off?"

"Am I sensing some vindictiveness, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo didn't even bother to deny it. "Although I wouldn't personally view it as an insult myself, I do understand the intense...dislike between elves and dwarves. And since such a comparison unquestionably hurt Kíli's feelings, then I'm only sorry that Fíli didn't shave her entire head. It would've served her right, gossiping and insulting a young child like that."

"She was the only person I've courted in my life until now," said Thorin. "And it only lasted a few weeks because of her treatment of my youngest nephew. I've had nothing besides very brief...dalliances since then, especially as the quest drew closer and the preparations for it took over my life."
"When hobbits wish to court someone, we usually engage in respectable activities like dancing, family dining, or going for walks together. And there's the various courting gifts, like exchanging flowers, baked goods, embroidered handkerchiefs, rocking chairs, a new pipe, or…"

"Well, it looks like our races have one mutual gift in common," stated the King, a small smile on his regal face. "Although I'm hoping that the exchange of baked goods has other meanings as well. I might have to fight off the entire Company, otherwise. Very few things entice dwarves more than good, homemade food."

"Of course not," said Bilbo, his cheeks flushing at the thought. "Baking for family and friends is the most common gift of the Shire. Courting foods are only a very tiny part of our traditional exchanges."

"Cheesecake…"

"By the Valar," sighed Bilbo, "There truly is no privacy around here."

"With these two gallivanting about, no, there truly isn't," agreed Thorin. "But if a certain dwarf doesn't keep his opinions and ears to himself, then we might only have to worry about one gallivanter very soon."

"If you'd just read the book we'd given you," said Kíli from beneath the blankets, "Then things would be going swimmingly at this point. But, no, ignore the nephews. We never know anything."

Bilbo swatted Kíli on the bum with a wet cloth. "Go back to sleep, you lil' rascal. We're having an adult discussion here."

"I'm an adult."

"You keep telling yourself that," muttered the King, reaching over to run his thick fingers through the youth's messy hair. "Now sleep, little bird. Your body needs the rest."

Kíli snorted. "You just wanna make kissy faces at each other. And it's about time, too. Do you have…any idea how annoying…it's been to…"

"Wow, now that's a neat trick."

"Massaging Kíli's scalp and hair knocks him right out," said Thorin a few minutes later. "His parents and I discovered it shortly after his fourth birthday. Works like a charm, more often than not."

"Ummm, huh," stuttered Bilbo, not quite sure how to ask or even talk with Thorin about the whole courting thing. "So, the dragon pipe I found in my room…"

"Was a courting gift," confirmed the King. "I expected my…intentions to be quite obvious after that, but you still didn't respond, so I assumed that either you were not amenable to my advances or perhaps I should be more subtle in my approach. My overall knowledge on hobbits is quite limited, but dwarf courtships are often very long and drawn out, depending on the family."

"We hobbits tend to move pretty slow by human standards, usually spending one or two years on our courtships," said Bilbo. "Everyone in the Shire believes that long and extended engagements will better guarantee a happy, friendly marriage. But, of course, an arrangement between two…males isn't very common. Or accepted. At all. They aren't in physical danger, like many humans would be, but marriage and respectable hobbits are meant to produce children. That's just the way it is."

"The production of children is a little more difficult amongst dwarves," confessed the King. "Only
one-third of our race is born female, and not all of them wish to marry or become mothers. Because of this, children are extremely precious to us, but dwarf society realized long ago that strict male-to-female marriage was not always possible. And once a dwarf marries, it's for life, unlike many other races. We love exclusively and passionately for all our lives, once we find that single, right person."

"So, in dwarf society, a male laying with a male isn't…"

"It's still not especially common," said Thorin, "But it's not frowned upon nearly as much as it is in the realms of elves and men. Or hobbits, it would seem. The large gap between our genders leads to unique companionships at times, not all of which have to be intimate or even romantic in nature. Because of this, official marriages are not as frequent amongst dwarves as they are in other races, but when we do marry, it's for life. And ours is a love that never diminishes, even when death takes us."

"I'm just surprised that dwarves are so...open about these things compared to other races. Although it does make some sense, given the gender circumstances," admitted Bilbo. "I've misjudged you and your people so many times on so many things, it seems."

"Dwarven society's more open on this subject because of necessity," stated Thorin. And then he grimaced, face twisted in disgust. "However, Kíli's interest in that she-elf captain..."

"Of course," mumbled Bilbo with a roll of his eyes.

Bilbo was sitting on Fíli's left side, small fingers playing with the youth's braided hair yet again. The Dwarf-King was situated directly across from him on the opposite side of the bed, both of them providing an instinctive barricade around the injured prince as he slumbered. Soft snores could be heard from the bottom of the bed and in front of the fireplace, their young charges and other companions unaware of the serious conversation that was being discussed near them.

"But still, wouldn't you need to, you know, take a wife to produce heirs? Such a thing is generally expected of kings, isn't it?"

"Perhaps amongst elves and men, such immediate blood descendents are required in the eyes of the people, but not amongst dwarves," assured Thorin. "My subjects will be perfectly fine with my sister-sons taking the throne. Dís boasts the exact same lineage and blood as I; therefore, Fíli and Kíli have just as much right to the throne as any child I were to produce. And personally, raising these two dwarflings after their father's death has been more than enough work for me."

The King ran a gentle hand over his heir's wounded leg, dark blue eyes softer than Bilbo had ever seen them before. If anyone ever doubted the integrity and goodness of the King Under the Mountain, they need look no further than the subtle love Thorin bestowed upon his nephews.

"I wish to see Fíli upon the throne one day," said the King. "He's been the greatest nephew I could've ever asked for, and he works so hard to prove himself. Fíli will make a fine king. I can feel it in my bones."

"That he will," agreed Bilbo. "What do the braids mean? Or are they merely a way of keeping your hair back like it is for us?"

"They don't have any meaning unless you want them to," said Thorin. "Beads are common gifts among dwarves, especially within families or during courtships. The beads on my braids here," Thorin pointed to the side braids that he always wore, "Are both gifts from Fíli and Kíli when they came of age. Making your first bead is considered a dwarven rite of passage, so they're traditionally given to the youth's parents. And since their father passed many years ago, I received these alongside Dís."
Bilbo leaned forward to look at them. "Emeralds and arrows for Kíli. Gold topaz and swords for Fíli. Right?"

"The placement of my braids does not mean much in the eyes of dwarves, but all others would recognize the beads as being coming-of-age gifts," said Thorin. "Many have assumed that Fíli and Kíli were my natural sons as a result. But it's appropriate for uncles or aunts to wear the beads of children they've raised to adulthood."

"And Fíli's?" asked Bilbo.

"His moustache beads were coming-of-age gifts from his mother, as were the ones in his hair from myself. The engravings on them symbolize important events or moments in Fíli's life. And this third one here was a gift from Kíli." Thorin smiled at it. "He has an unusual penchant for arrows, it would seem. You should probably expect a similar one in the future."

"Why?"

"Perhaps you haven't noticed, but my nephews have been valiantly attempting to instigate a more… open courtship between the two of us," explained Thorin, posture more than a little uncomfortable as his eyes looked everywhere but at Bilbo. "Quite shameless, by dwarven standards."

"Ah, so that'd explain all the giggling and snooping and stalking. And all of those extra boxes of essentials, as Fíli put it."

Thorin went still at that.

"Or did you tell him to deliver those?" asked Bilbo. "Because, quite honestly, I'm a little baffled at the thought of those boys browsing the marketplace for soaps, shampoo, parchment, fabrics, ingredients, and everything else in there. They'd probably purchase an entire cartful of candy or weapons instead, if I know them."

"I had prepared some…gifts ahead of time for your arrival," admitted Thorin, dark eyes still flitting around the room. "My nephews were a little overzealous in their delivery of them, though. I myself was not aware of your return when they gave them to you. Your rooms were also meant to be a gift, which Fíli must've overheard me speaking with Balin about. Like you said, no privacy whatsoever."

"The pipe was amazingly lovely," said Bilbo with a shy smile. "And Frodo loves a good bubble bath, so I must admit that that was a very pleasant surprise. I never imagined either of them were… courting gifts, though."

A new layer of confidence seemed to be restored to the King. "I based the design of the pipe off of an old sculpture in the treasure vaults. And the Blue Rooms are usually reserved specifically for the…intended of the King."

"Oh, well, that…" Bilbo's eyes widened after a moment. "Ohhhhh…"

"My nephews guaranteed your placement even before I was able to," said Thorin with a small smile. "They're quite determined to formally turn you into the uncle they've never had. And my sister appears to have become involved as well."

"It was only one letter," said Bilbo, his nervous fingers fiddling with Fíli's braids again. "And it just suddenly appeared by raven outside on the balcony last week. I'm not too sure how she even knew that I was here."

Thorin poked his oldest nephew's big nose. "This one here has been sending out ravens every week
since your arrival. And they've been acting too much like dwarflings since your return for me not to suspect their intentions."

"Well, at least they haven't been shooting me with arrows," laughed Bilbo. "I'll take their snooping and boorishness any day over that. My bum isn't made to have arrows sticking out of it. Or my foot."

Thorin mumbled under his breath with a smirk.

"What'd you just say?" demanded the hobbit. "No, don't shake your head like that or deny it. I heard you say something. You insulted me, didn't you?"

"I believe you're becoming paranoid, Master Baggins."

"Well, considering the day I've been through, can you blame me? First, Frodo gets kidnapped from under my nose, and then we're scrounging through the mines with almost no knowledge of what—"

And then a set of large hands were cupping Bilbo's hairless cheeks, warm lips and rough beard pressing against the hobbit's mouth. Momentarily stunned, Bilbo felt his entire face flush as the King tilted his head and very gently deepened the kiss until the hobbit was practically melting beneath him. It might have lasted only a few moments, but it was more than Bilbo had had in quite a few years and the first time he'd ever done anything with someone outside his own race. Unfortunately, as Bilbo tried to move a little bit closer to Thorin, his hand landed on the sleeping prince's stomach.

"As I said, no privacy at all," whispered Thorin when he pulled away. The Dwarf-King carded a thick hand through Bilbo's curly hair and then down his flushed face. "Are my intentions clear now, my burglar?"

Bilbo nodded, still in shock over the whole revelation. And it was only after a few moments that the hobbit realized that Thorin was twisting several strands of his curly hair together. A small, intricate bead was then held in front of Bilbo's face, the little sapphires that outlined an engraved eagle twinkling in the candlelight. A tiny, glowing gem was slotted into the eagle's eye, its luster matched by only one other stone in Erebor.

"Is that the Arkenstone?" breathed Bilbo.

Thorin nodded, clipping the beautiful bead at the bottom of the braid he'd twisted into the right side of Bilbo's dirty blond head. The King leaned back to admire his hobbit, visibly pleased at the new adornment on Bilbo's person and the light glow that emanated from his courtship bead.

"If there is anyone who deserves to wear a sliver of the Arkenstone," said Thorin, "It's the hobbit who brought Durin's Folk home to the Lonely Mountain once again. You gave us a home. And despite my fool pride before, my hobbit, that's worth far more than any stone within this mountain. Even the heart of it."

The King Under the Mountain leaned forward and gave Bilbo another gentle kiss, his fingers running over the bead as the hobbit relaxed into him again. Thorin pulled back after a half-minute, lightly bumping his forehead against Bilbo's when the hobbit gave him a dopey smile.

"Finally…"

"And you're supposed to be asleep," scolded Bilbo, face flushed redder than ever before in his life. "By the Valar, that bloody leg will never heal at this rate. And a little bit of privacy, even if it's not truly there, would be much appreciated. You're more than old enough to understand that now."

"I had to make sure Uncle did it right, even if it traumatizes me," said Fíli, an unabashed smile on his
fever-flushed face. "Did he?"

"Yes," chuckled Bilbo. "Yes, he did."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, well, there's my attempt at romance and settling a few cultural differences between their races. I've tried to look up what information I can on the culture of hobbits, but sadly, stuff about the dwarves is really hard to find courtesy of their secretive culture. Hopefully, this is at least semi-realistic given the gender ratios of the dwarves. And see, I told everyone that I had a plan for them. It just took a while and there's the kiss, people!
"Now hold still, Fíli. I'm almost done."

The hobbit had spent every waking moment of the last week tending to the oldest prince of Erebor, fighting against an infection that had set into Fíli's thigh wound. Glóin, Dori, and Bombur had been a tremendous help, the three of them taking care of Frodo or preparing meals and gathering ingredients while Bilbo was busy with Óin and Fíli. All of the other Company members were assisting Thorin with the traitors, something that Bilbo wanted no part of anymore. That particular issue was an internal dwarf problem and none of them objected to Bilbo's preferred distance from it.

"There we go, another poultice ready for action," said the hobbit with a tired grin. "And some of the inflammation and redness is finally starting to go down. Óin should be very pleased when he returns for the night."

"I don't hear the lil' ones," mumbled Fíli. "Where'd they go?"

Bilbo crawled over to the edge of the large bed and peeked around the curtains, a cluster of quiet voices soon drawing his attention to the far corner of the room. Frodo and Donel were sequestered near a far off bookcase, dozens of toys scattered about as they defeated a dark lord figurine that Bifur had carved the other week. The hobbit could hear Dwina's voice inside the prince's small kitchens, Bombur's delicious cooking luring the dwarf girl away from her friends without fail. It had taken several days to assure the children enough for them to stray from their parents' sides, but they all appeared to be recovering from their very scary ordeal without too much lasting damage.

"The boys are waging war in the corner and Dwina appears to be helping Bombur in the kitchen," said Bilbo. "I think we have a budding chef on our hands, from the looks of it."

"Bombur will be pleased," muttered Fíli, sleep tugging at his eyes yet again. "He's real fond of children, and Dwina would make a good apprentice for him. It'd be hilarious, too."

"Why?"

"Have you seen how bossy that little girl is?" said Fíli, wincing when Bilbo tied off the poultice edges. "Poor Bombur won't stand a chance. She'll be ruling Erebor's kitchens in less than a decade."

Bilbo laughed. "You might be right about that. Now, the pain tonic should start to kick in soon, so I think a nap's in order for you."

"Ugh, all I've been doing is sleeping. It's boring."

"That it may be," conceded Bilbo, "But your infection's finally beginning to clear up and sleeping will fight it off quicker than anything else. Besides, you still have a bit of a fever and it might break during a good nap. And Bombur should have supper ready once you're done with it, anyways. No cupcakes yet."

"Awwwww, no fair…"

Bilbo tucked the quilts in tight around Fíli and then cleaned up the scattered supplies he'd left all over the bed. Placing those on a nearby table, the hobbit made his way into the tiny kitchen that Bombur
was happily toiling away in. From the smells of it, the plump dwarf was making a delightful chicken and vegetable soup that would be very easy on Fíli's stomach while also filling the ravenous bellies of the little ones and Company as well.

"That smells fantastic, Bombur! Do I smell a hint of parsley?"

"Aye, that it is," said the large dwarf with a pleased smile. "I wanted to add a little bit of extra flavor to the broth without upsetting Fíli's stomach again, so parsley and some thyme were the only things I could think of. Would you like a taste?"

"Of course, now lets see here," muttered Bilbo as he sampled some broth from the dwarf's giant ladle. "It's superb as usual, Bombur. And the noodles should sit rather well with Fíli's stomach. Mmmm, I do love those noodles."

"They're an old recipe of my mother's," said Bombur, his shy demeanor always a source of endearment to the hobbit. "She used to always make them for Bofur and myself when we'd fallen ill or scraped our knees as dwarflings."

"Well, in that case, I'm certain everyone will be in for quite a good surprise then," assured Bilbo with a wide smile. "And it looks like you've got yourself a lil' helper here, now don't you?"

"I cut up the vegetables!" declared Dwina. "And bashed the dough."

"And you did a very fine job of it. Would you like to help me with a dessert? I'm feeling a bit peckish for some apple pie and honey scones. And then we'll send a few of them home for your parents and sister, too. How does that sound?"

Dwina nodded. "I've never had them before, but they sound really tasty."

It hadn't taken more than a few days for Bilbo to realize that both Donel and little Dwina came from families of miners and tinkers, all of whom had lived in a state of near-constant poverty and nomadic destitution for seventeen decades. Even now, both families appeared to be struggling to make enough to properly feed their children, a direct result of Erebor's slow and painful recovery. Because of this, Bilbo had taken to feeding them and sending extra food home to their families whenever the opportunity presented itself. Each member of the Company had more than enough treasure for themselves, so the hobbit did not hesitate to use some of the gold for an important cause. And the well-being of Frodo's new friends was a very good one, indeed.

Bilbo Baggins wasn't about to walk around with a damned Arkenstone bead in his hair while families and children went hungry in the night. No good hobbit worth his name would stand by and ignore those in need of food and warm meals. And despite his strange ways, Bilbo was a good hobbit when it came to this particular matter, especially when the tummies of children were involved in it.

"Now, we'll want to start with the crust and…"

Dwina helped the older hobbit make two apple pies and several batches of honey scones, her little fingers pounding the dough and carving funny patterns into the edges of the pie crust. And while Dwina had her fun with the dough, Bilbo himself kept an eye on the already baking scones, his ears always partially listening to the other two children out in the main bedroom.

"So, Bombur, I heard from a certain toy-making miner that there's a pretty lass in the kitchens who's caught your attention," queried Bilbo, his lips curling up when he saw Bombur's cheeks flush red. "And he might have mentioned something about a delectable bowl of apple crisp. Or did I hear
"Ugh, no, you…heard right," stuttered Bombur. "Her name is Hania. And she's a mighty fine lass, indeed. We've been working in the main kitchens together for over a year now. I decided to…umm, give her a few of my pumpkin swirl brownies the other month, just to, you know, test the waters and see if she reciprocated at all."

The dwarf paused here, leading Bilbo to prompt, "And?"

"Well, I haven't been able to see her much over the last few weeks, and I assumed she wasn't, umm…interested because she hadn't talked to me since I gave her those brownies. But then, she just came up to me the other day and handed me a bowl of sweet apple crisp! And there was a bead dangling on the side of it! A bead!"

"She sounds like a very lovely lady," said Bilbo, his smile widening even more at the excitement in his bashful friend's voice. "Why don't you tell us more about her while we wait on the scones? I'm sure Dwina could give you some good advice on what a lady would like as courting gifts."

"Cupcakes!" suggested the little girl. "And rubies, we love rubies. And a sapphire like the one my mama got from papa before they married. It's so pretty."

Bombur smiled down at them. "She does have the loveliest beard, perhaps even as fine as Glóin's wife's beard. And sapphire beads would look so nice in it. With silver as a base metal to…"

Another two hours passed before some of the other Company members started to filter into Fíli's rooms, all of them hungry and exhausted from a long day of construction and dealing with the traitors' aftermath. The royals were the last to arrive, both of them a good bit taken aback when Bilbo shushed and shuffled them onto the far end of the room. With a tilt of his head, Thorin soon saw why his intended was being so pushy with every dwarf who entered Fíli's bedroom.

"They fell asleep about an hour ago," whispered Bilbo, a soft smile on his face as he gazed at the prince's crowded bed. "I put the boys down next to Fíli and then Dwina's sleepiness started to set in, so we've got a dwarfling pile now."

Ori was sitting in a bedside chair, diligently sketching the endearing scene with a stick of charcoal at Bilbo's request. The hobbit would be employing the youngest dwarf's skill quite often in the near future.

"Has his fever broke yet?" asked Thorin, smacking his younger nephew upside the head when he laughed too loudly. "I thought a minor infection would be over with by this point. It's been nearly a week now."

Bilbo ran a gentle hand over Thorin's forearm. "It's much lower than before, and he was sweating quite a bit this afternoon. I suspect that it may have broken already, but I can't be sure until he wakes up. And Óin suspects the same as me."

The Dwarf-King looked like he wanted to march over and check on his nephew's condition himself, but Bilbo could tell by the set of Thorin's jaw and twitch of his fingers that he was suppressing the protective instincts that came so naturally to dwarven parents. Bilbo interlaced their fingers together, his much smaller ones running over his intended's rough joints until they slowly relaxed under the soothing ministrations. And both of them ignored Kíli's excited and very unmanly giggle of joy, the youth's enjoyment of his uncle finally showing their burglar affection a constant source of annoyance for the older dwarf.
"Fili's going to be alright, Thorin," assured Bilbo. "You wouldn't have been able to pry me from his bedside if I'd thought a turn for the worst was possible."

Thorin nodded, looking mildly ashamed that he'd doubted Bilbo's devotion to his nephews, especially after witnessing the dedicated care Bilbo had given to Fili for the last week. He'd gotten so used to being the only father-figure in the boys' lives that Thorin sometimes forgot himself around their companions, including Balin, Dwalin, and the very hobbit he was courting. If Dís were here, she'd probably smack him over the head for questioning the intentions of those so close and dear to them.

"I know," whispered the King. He could hear tired but happy laughter coming out of the kitchen now, their companions readying themselves for a good supper. "I'm simply not used to—"

"Look, look!"

Thorin glanced down and spotted Frodo at his feet. The little hobbit was grinning up at him, a new and very noticeable gap now present in his front teeth. Ever wary of his strength when around the child, the Dwarf-King bent down and scooped up the little boy, large hand accepting the tooth Frodo gave him.

"I lost a tooth," said Frodo. "See, right up here."

"Indeed, you did," declared Thorin, holding up the tiny tooth for Bilbo and Kili to look at. "Do you know what dwarflings do when they lose their milk teeth? They receive an extra serving of dessert and then we make a necklace out of the old teeth. I believe my sister still has both Fili's and Kili's milk necklaces."

"Do I get one, too?"

"I think your uncle would much appreciate one," said the King. "They symbolize an important transition for parents and child. But I'll need you to give me all of them as you lose them, or else we won't have enough for a necklace. Understand?"

The halfling nodded eagerly. "I've got another loose one, too. See? I've tried to pull it out, but it's kinda stuck."

"You don't need to pull it, little one. It'll come out when it's good and ready. And then we can add it to the necklace string."

"I didn't even know any of them were loose yet," Bilbo sighed, the Dwarf-King's unoccupied arm rubbing gently at the small of his back. "So soon…"

Then Kili was nibbling at Frodo's hand, the little hobbit shrieking in surprise and smacking the beardless dwarf in the nose. Sputtering with ridiculous yelps, Kili grabbed at the halfling and ran off with him, cackling the whole way about delivering a few more teeth for the necklace. And maybe a few for a bracelet, too.

"I think an ambush on the prince is in order," suggested Bilbo, shooting the two dwarflings a devious smile. "Does the King approve?"

Thorin looked at two sets of eager eyes. "The King does. Go get him."

A newly rested Dwina and Donel launched themselves off the bed, chasing after a cackling prince and squealing halfling. They sprinted right through Bifur's stretched legs, the dwarf staring at the children in surprise as they raced out of the rooms and into one of the side hallways of the royal
"He just had to go and get them all riled up before supper," sighed Bilbo, walking over to the bed to check on an awakened Fíli. "I swear, you'd think Kíli was still a young child himself, with the way he behaves sometimes."

"Blame our mother," said Fíli from where he was leaning against the pillows. "She's always spoiled him since he's the babe of the family."

"Why does that not surprise me," muttered the hobbit. "Now let's feel that brow of yours and see how the… ah! You're a sweaty mess! This is fantastic! Thorin, his fever has finally broken!"

The King was beside them in a moment, calloused hands running over Fíli's cool forehead while Bilbo changed the older poultice. Hearing the news, Óin appeared within a few seconds and conversed with Bilbo about the wound's appearance and what else the prince would have to receive treatment-wise. None of them paid any attention to Kíli and the children as they raced through the rooms again.

"We'll continue with the poultices and tonics for at least another week," stated the healer. He poked and prodded at the prince's wound, mindful of the stitches he'd just redone a few days prior. "I'd prefer to sway towards the side of caution on this. A relapse of the infection would be most dreadful."

"Can I have some cupcakes now?"

"By Mahâl, you'd have people thinking your mother and I never fed you, with the way you go on about those cupcakes," said Thorin with a grimace. And then they heard a crash and yell from behind them. "And it remains to be seen if your brother's now too old to be put over my knee and given a long-deserved tanning. Kíli!"

"It wasn't me!"

"That's the story of his life," lamented the uncle.

"I'll make you a whole batch of them tomorrow, Fíli," assured Bilbo, gently helping the prince to the edge of the bed. "Could you help him up, Thorin. It'd do his muscles and mind some good to get out of this bed and sit at an actual table. Right, Óin?"

The healer nodded. "Just support most of his weight and be careful of his leg. It'll be a few more weeks before Fíli will be able to walk without assistance. And I've already had crutches made by a smith in the lower halls."

After Fíli was seated and being fed some soup by Bombur, the hobbit walked over to the big balcony and opened the glass double doors to let some crisp autumn air into the fire-warmed rooms. It was then that Bilbo noticed something approaching the front gates of Erebor.

"Thorin?"

The King was there right away, a thick arm wrapping around Bilbo's shoulders as the hobbit tried to make out the figures in the distance. With a grunt of surprise, the King leaned forward even more and his usual guarded expression slipped from his face, swiftly being replaced by a relieved smile.

"My sister has arrived at last."
I'm doing my best to keep Bilbo as properly masculine and hobbit-y as possible. I personally get very annoyed when I see or read about males who are ridiculously feminized in stories, completely destroying their canon personalities. I know and work with several gay/bisexual males and females, none of whom act like that in their relationships. Or, at least, I have never seen them acting like that in all the time I've known them. Yet again, I hope I'm keeping this semi-realistic here.
"Frodo, my boy, could you come over here for a moment?"

The caravan from the Blue Mountains had arrived late in the evening, hundreds of dwarves and their families bustling about the entrance hall in excitement. Bilbo remained in the royal wing with Fíli and the children throughout all of it, quite conscious of the fact that some of the new dwarves might not respond very well to a pair of hobbits living in the Lonely Mountain. All of the dwarves who'd been living in the mountain for months were already accustomed to Bilbo's presence, a direct result of his actions in the previous weeks and the Company making it very clear that Erebor wouldn't have been reclaimed if it was not for the hobbit. None of them had acted rude or hostile towards him, even when Bilbo was down in the kitchens the other day with his courting bead in plain sight. But there was no guarantee that the same would apply to these new arrivals, their loyalty to Thorin and the princes far more questionable than the earliest volunteer migrants.

"Yes?"

Frodo had spent the last hour in bed with Fíli and the other dwarflings, the injured prince going over Khuzdul runes and elementary grammar with the three children. And to Bilbo's great surprise, it seemed that Fíli was an excellent instructor, his voice patient and demeanor soft as he worked with them.

"Would you like to add a string into the bracelet?" asked Bilbo, barely able to get the words out before Frodo was scrambling onto his lap. "Okay, okay, careful with those knees and feet, my boy. Now, which color would you like?"

"Light blue," said Frodo. "He really likes blue, right?"

"Aye, that he does," assured the older hobbit. "Now, give me your fingers and we will start right about here, twisting like this and…"

The next ten minutes were spent with Bilbo assisting his nephew with the colorful bond-bracelet that he'd been preparing for Thorin as a courting gift. Hobbits often made a thick and multi-colored string bracelet for their intended, a gift that the receiver was never supposed to take off for as long as their husband or wife lived. For as long as Bilbo could remember, his parents had worn an inversely-making set, which had finally been removed when Bungo took ill and passed two decades ago. Although not nearly as grand as the gift he'd received from the Dwarf-King, Bilbo hoped that Thorin would appreciate the feeling and love that went into hobbit courting gifts.

"Now through the hole right over here. Ah, that's it! A superb Proudfoot knot, my boy."

However, despite his newfound love for Erebor, it would be nice to visit the Shire every couple of years. The journey would be quite a bit easier once Frodo was older, and Bilbo felt a strong urge for his nephew to remain well acquainted with their homeland and its customs. After all, they still had Bag End to return to for prolonged visits, Gaffer Gamgee and his family ever-loyal friends of the Baggins family. And it'd be good for Frodo to mingle with his more accepting and adventurous Took and Brandybuck cousins, a relationship that all young hobbits needed at some point in their lives. It'd be a nice reprieve from the sometimes dangerous climate and politics of Erebor as well.
"Almost done," said Bilbo. He reached over to the small container that Thorin had placed Frodo's lost tooth in. "Just a few finishing touches."

"My tooth?"

"Aye, a little memento for him," answered Bilbo, very carefully needling into the tiny tooth with a miniature drill Bifur had given him. "My parents had specially designed and crafted bangles, but I think this will do just fine, too."

"Can I give it to him?"

Bilbo slipped a few strands of sturdy string through the hole, slowly weaving the tooth into the primary threads of the bracelet. The tiny white tooth clashed very well with the blues, blacks, and dark purples that Bilbo had used to construct his gift. And with one final pull, it looked like the bracelet was ready to be given to the King.

"How about we both gift it to him?" Bilbo asked, very happy that his nephew had taken to Thorin so well. The little boy had caught them kissing the other day, eyes wide at the prospect of his uncle being courted by a grumpy but really nice and very hairy Dwarf-King. "And we can show him your superb string work, too."

"And my tooth?"

Bilbo ruffled his nephew's curls. "And your tooth."

The sound of the door opening immediately caught their attention, Frodo grinning when he recognized Thorin's familiar figure in the frame. Eager to show off his work, the halfling ran over to the King and pulled at his furry coat, demanding that Thorin pick him up and come over to the desk. Thorin scooped the little boy up and stepped aside from the doorway, the sound of voices filtering in after him.

"C'mon, over here! I helped make you this really pretty…"

Frodo trailed off after that, light blue eyes narrowing as he more closely observed the dwarf that was carrying him. And then he unleashed a piercing scream, arms hitting at the Dwarf-King's face and scrambling away from him.

"You're not Thorin!" yelled Frodo, hiding behind Bilbo's legs and pointing at the kingly imposter. "Uncle! He skin-napped Thorin!"

"Oh goodness, he truly is adorable," said the imposter. "And even tinier than Kíli said in his letters. Quite the strong right hook, too."

Bilbo just stared at the mysterious figure, astounded at the nearly indistinguishable features between Thorin and the person in the doorway. And when the Dwarf-King strode through the entrance a moment later, Bilbo's eyes widened even further when he couldn't tell the difference between them without a closer look. However, Fíli's excited shouts told Bilbo all he needed to know about the imposter.

"So this is Bilbo Baggins. I've heard a lot about you."

The sister of Thorin Oakenshield was an imposing figure, especially since she was almost identical to her brother in every way at the moment. From the short beard to the twin braids and beads to the armor, clothes, and dwarven weapons, Dís looked like an exact duplicate of a certain Dwarf-King who was going to receive a very well-deserved reprimand and lack of raspberry mousse for scaring
poor Frodo senseless. However, if Bilbo looked a little more closely at her cheeks and stature, the slight differences between brother and sister became somewhat clearer to the hobbit.

"Dís. At your service."

Bilbo snapped his mouth shut. "And the twin who Thorin never mentioned. Why did you never mention that she was your twin?!"

"I'm actually fourteen years younger than him," laughed Dís. "Although the close family resemblance is very handy whenever a stupid brawl needs to be ended right quick. Being Thorin works like a charm every time. And I think I made one particularly boorish dwarf wet his trousers. Highlight of the decade."

"Oh, yes, you are most definitely the mother of Fíli and Kíli," admitted the hobbit, reaching down to pick up a still frightened Frodo. "The resemblance is uncanny. Well, to Kíli, that is."

"Hey! I look like my mother!" shouted Fíli from the bed. "I've got her cheekbones and strong gait! Which I'd show you…if I could walk. But no, that's not allowed, says the bossy hobbit."

"Ah, and there's my oldest boy!" said Dís with a wide smile.

Bilbo walked over to stand beside the King, more than a little amused by Thorin's anxious posture and overly quiet behavior. An only child himself, Bilbo would be the first to admit that he wasn't very familiar with the complex dynamics that existed between siblings, especially those that had more than two children like Thorin's family. But due to his experience with dozens upon dozens of cousins, the hobbit felt pretty confident in his ability to recognize a nasty sibling spat when he saw it.

"From the looks of it, someone's scared of their sister right now," said Bilbo, left hand gently running over Thorin's clenched fist. "Want to tell me about it? Or would that be a violation of kingship or something equally silly?"

Thorin didn't bother to look at him, instead mumbling something under his breath while he patted a still startled Frodo atop the head. The littlest hobbit ran his hands over a familiar beard and nose, eventually satisfied enough to reach out to Thorin and demand to be held by the disgruntled dwarf. Frodo tucked himself into the King's neck, still leery of the new stranger on the other side of the room. With a smile, Bilbo made a mental note to ask Ori for his drawing skills again in the near future.

"What was that?"

"She smacked me upside the head," grumbled the King. "And she shouted my ear off when she heard about Fíli's latest injuries. I think she plans to kill me in my sleep and usurp the throne for herself."

"I think she could pull it off, too."

"That's because all of our women masquerade as their male relatives whenever an adventure or journey demands it," answered Thorin, his eyes crossing when Frodo leaned in to take an extra close look at his face. "That is why outsiders frequently think that there are no dwarf women. It gives them much more freedom and safety, to pose as males when venturing in the outside world. But within the safe walls of Erebor, our women are free to dress as they please, as you've already seen with the dwarf mothers."

"It'll be good to wear comfortable clothing and no heavy armor again," stated the King's sister. She approached the two of them with Donel and Dwina at her side, both of them watching the princess
with awe-struck eyes. "I like the freedom to come and go as I please as much as the next dwarf, but
the armor of males is terribly heavy and unsuited to the female form."

Bilbo nodded in sympathy. "I can imagine. My mithril coat drowns me every time I've worn it so far. 
But it saved Frodo's life, so I can't complain."

"Ah, mithril," muttered Dís with a sly smile. "That's quite the exquisite gift. Very rare, but perfect for 
protection. How befitting, brother."

"It served its purpose."

Dís smiled even wider at that. "Oh, I can see that it did. You've two charming and brilliant hobbits to 
show for it. I'm impressed." Her eyes flicked from Frodo to the top of Bilbo's head. "And very 
pleased. Is that the Arkenstone?"

Bilbo's hands shot to the bead in his hair. "Well, ummm…"

"It is."

"So it seems that that curse-ridden lump of stone actually has some good uses after all," snorted Dís 
with a roll of her eyes. "Where's the orb itself now?"

"In the tombs of our grandfathers."

"And I certainly hope it'll be staying there," said Dís with a hard glare. "That rock has caused far too 
many problems over the past few centuries. Leave it buried in the earth where it belongs, I say."

"The Arkenstone will remain there so long as—"

"I wish to see my boys grow old and give me grandchildren, Thorin," warned Dís with crossed arms. 
"Anything else is unacceptable."

"I agree with her," added Bilbo.

The siblings shared a meaningful look, Thorin seeming to cow beneath his sister's unwavering stare 
of amusement and doom. Bilbo could barely hold back a smile when he realized that Thorin was 
clearly not the top-dog in this relationship, his sister very much a force to be reckoned with at all 
levels.

"At least we'll have another person with some common sense in this family," said Dís. "So tell me, 
Master Baggins, what's your favorite part of Erebor so far?"

Bilbo stiffened at being the new center of attention. Despite his great love of every member in the 
Durin family, being pulled into sibling spats or discussions about the hard politics of dwarves wasn't 
something he wanted to be involved in. At all.

"Well, from what I've been able to see so far, the library's absolutely magnificent. I'd really like to 
take a few hours and truly explore it. When I actually have the free time, of course. Everything's 
been rather hectic as of late."

"So I've heard," murmured the princess. "The library was always my favorite part of the city, too. 
Dwarf women tend to be much more…intellectual than our male counterparts. Have you found 
anything of interest yet?"

"Oh, yes, several things actually," admitted Bilbo with an excited smile. "I didn't get to spend much
time down there, but I did find several fascinating maps on the eastern reaches and places called Ered Harmal, Daldunair, and Lygar Kraw. I haven't the faintest idea where they truly are, but I'm sure there are more maps and charts just waiting to be rediscovered in those giant piles and back rooms."

"There are," assured Dís. "My memory's rather vague due to my youth at the time, but I'm positive that Erebor has far more maps of Middle-Earth's reaches than any the western libraries can boast about. I recall several on the Northern Peninsula and the dwarf tribes of that region in Deep Archives. Those are located beneath the floors of the current library proper, I believe."

"Truly?"

"Aye, that's where all the most ancient texts and maps are stored for safe-keeping, which has hopefully saved them from Smaug's wrath as well," explained Dís. "There will be several texts down there on the Blacklocks and Stiffbeards, our distant kin to the northeast."

Bilbo gave her a shy smile. "I'd really like to compose a large map of the far reaches, if I'm able to find enough smaller ones to accurately support it. And Frodo's quite keen at map-reading as well. Maybe it'd help Erebor, too. Somehow."

If possible, Dís smiled even wider. "I like this one, Thorin. He's much better than that conceited bint you brought around last time."

Kíli had sidled up to his mother at some point, looking back and forth between all of them and grinning like an excited puppy that had been given an extra large bone. If the youth had had a tail, it'd be thumping the floor right now.

"And I don't have to shoot him."

"Or chop off his hair," added Fíli from the edge of the bed. "Bilbo's newest braid is quite the sight, isn't it, Amad?"

"Aye, I think it accents those pointed ears of his rather well," agreed Dís, a nod of her head finalizing the matter. "Don't you think so, too, Thorin? And maybe a second one to accent the other ear as well."

"With a matching sapphire," added Dwina. "It'd be pretty."

Thorin sighed, looking down at the sleepy hobbit in his arms. "I truly don't stand a chance anymore, do I?"

"Nope," yawned the faunt. "You're...outnumbered..."

The Dwarf-King tucked the hobbit into his neck, Frodo instinctively cuddling into the blazing warmth that radiated from Thorin's center. He watched as Bilbo spoke merrily with his sister about Erebor's archives and libraries, the hobbit thrumming with energy at the prospect of reading so many ancient manuscripts. Despite the exhaustion that seemed to dog all of their steps, it was a great relief for Thorin to finally have all of his family in a single space together. And with two other dwarflings to boot, something that Dís was delighted to discover when both Dwina and Donel bombarded her with questions until their fathers eventually came to retrieve them.

"Oh goodness, how very rude of me," gasped Bilbo. "You've been standing here all this time, just returned from a long and tiring journey, and I haven't even offered you any food or drinks yet. My mother would be just..."

"He cooks, too?"
Thorin didn't even get to open his mouth before his nephews were praising and all out raving about the many desserts and meals that Bilbo had made for them. Aside from a tiny hobbit tucked into his shirt again, the Dwarf-King was relieved that his sister had two sons to distract her attention away from Thorin himself.

"Well, there's nothing better in the world than a man who can cook a good meal," said Dis. "And it'll be nice to finally have someone besides myself cooking around here. Feeding you boys was exhausting work."

"His cupcakes, Amad. Oh, the cupcakes. Hobbits are just amazing. I swear, they must have a secret or something for it."

"Maybe it's the feet. Strange things, those feet."

"I just want cupcakes."

Chapter End Notes

Wow, seriously, after looking up a full map of Middle-Earth, I've only just realized that it's absolutely huge and the books barely touch on a quarter of it. Personally, due to their scarcity, I can picture dwarf women having quite a bit of political and economic power in their cities. And since we know almost nothing about them, it's something that I can actually play with and not disturb canon information, either.
"Be careful not to spill any ink on the floor, Frodo."

The hobbits were both sitting in the heart of Erebor's massive library, their bodies warmed by the blazing fireplace on the eastern wall. Bilbo himself had been indexing and cataloguing several large piles of manuscripts since very early that morning, wandering to the front at times to assist Ori and Dhola with a particularly perplexing heap of far-eastern maps. His nephew had spent most of the day with Donel and Nori, the latter of whom had volunteered to watch the youngsters for the afternoon. But it was approaching suppertime now, so Bilbo would sadly have to pull himself away from these fascinating diagrams of a far-off jungle and instead face a hoard of hungry dwarves. Honestly, the hobbit was trying to figure out if some of them had hollow legs or a second stomach, because Fíli and Bofur should not be able to eat that much in a single sitting.

"I'm almost done," said Frodo, his pink tongue sticking out in concentration. "Do I have to use Merry's fancy name at the end?"

"No, his normal name will work just fine," answered the uncle. "Just make sure to spell it correctly or your letter might fall into the hands of yet another relative of the same title. Valar knows there's enough of them."

"Okie dokie."

They spent the next few minutes in relative silence, the shuffling of papers and the faint sound of Ori jabbering away to his aunt acting as a soothing agent to Bilbo's excited mind. He'd been itching to explore the archives for weeks now, so the past three days had been paradise for the bookish hobbit, maps and books quickly overtaking his rooms and an unused corner of Fíli's bedroom as well. Thorin and his sister had opened one of the floor passageways that led down into the Deep Archives, Bilbo easily squeezing his way to and fro in the dark rooms beneath the library. And after Nori had dropped the boys off, plucky little Donel had offered to squeeze into the tighter areas in the back, retrieving dozens of maps and tomes from the dustiest corners of the archives.

"I've got another one," stated Donel, signaling for the older hobbit to help him up the ladder. "But it's really strange looking. What's it say?"

Bilbo settled the little boy beside him on the floor, unrolling the ancient map from the string and clamps that bound it. Yellowed with time and disuse, the entire left portion of it would have to be meticulously restored, but Bilbo was able to decipher a plethora of runes and elvish script in the upper right corner. Unfortunately, the hobbit wasn't familiar with either of them.

"I'm not quite sure," admitted Bilbo. "But this top one here is underlined, so I've a strong suspicion that that's the name of the region. Desdursyton, I think it says. What a peculiar name, if that's what it is."

"And I found these ones, too," said Donel with a proud grin. "They'd fallen back behind the shelves. Got myself a splinter to get them."

"Here, let me see that? Ah, it's not too deep. I should be able to get that out with a few pushes," reassured Bilbo, his nails gently working at the irritated skin on Donel's left thumb. "We hobbits are
always getting splinters when working out in our gardens. I've an unfortunate habit of getting them myself. Especially in this one little spot on my right foot just between my biggest toes. Never developed quite enough calluses there, I suppose. An unpleasant predicament for a hobbit, as I'm sure you can believe. And it's quite…ah! There we go! No more splinter."

Donel had closed his eyes sometime during the procedure, a pained grimace on his face as Bilbo pried the skinny sliver of wood from his tender finger. But Donel was a real trooper, if you asked Bilbo. The red-haired dwarfling did not release a single complaint or whine during the whole ordeal, something Bilbo knew he had not accomplished whenever Belladonna pulled a splinter out of him.

"And it was a right nasty one, too," declared Bilbo with a firm nod. "We'll have to let your mother have a good look at it later. Show her how well you did in retrieving all of my maps with this terrible thing in your finger."

Donel nodded with another proud smile. "I hate splinters. They're really nasty. Do we need to look for anything else?"

"No, I think this is more than enough for today," said Bilbo. "We've got supper in an hour or two, and I've still got to sort through all of these maps. Frodo, are you finished with your letter yet?"

"Uh huh. And I spelled Merry right."

Bilbo took the paper from his nephew and quickly skimmed over the messy lines, sharp eyes checking for any major misspellings or grammatical mistakes. But, as always, Frodo's literacy was superb for his young age and Bilbo wouldn't have to make any kind of corrections to it.

"What're those about?" asked Donel.

"Well, I'm not quite sure about these, either," said the older hobbit. "Both of them seem to have some kind of elvish written at the top, but I'm not familiar with it. However, I think the underlined words are the native names of the region. This map appears to show some place called…Lú Tyr Sû… Very strange name. And this mountainous one looks like it says…Orocarni? I've no idea what that means, either. Maybe it's the indigenous title of the mountain range. Hmmm, Karn Ord…"

"Ugh, look what you've done," groaned Frodo. "He's at it again. There's no hope of prying him away now."

"I wouldn't say that."

All three of them looked up to see Kíli's head peeking around a bookshelf, a wide grin on his beardless face as he surveyed the haphazard piles of maps on the floor. With a devious whistle, the youngest prince joined them near the fireplace and attempted to look as innocent as possible. He failed miserably at it.

"What do you want, Kíli?"

"Oh, I just thought our darling little hobbit and dwarfling would like to know that a momentous event has occurred since the lunch hours," drawled the prince, nonchalantly picking at his dirty fingernails. "But alas, it would appear that all of you are quite busy. A most unfortunate shame, that is."

"What's happened?" demanded Frodo, curiosity piqued by the prince's tone. "Did something explode? Are there elves?"

The prince looked puzzled for a moment. "Ugh, what? No, no! There's no elves. Uncle's far too
paranoid to even let men from outside of Dale or Laketown into the city yet, let alone a bunch of those prissy tree-shaggers."

"Kíli!"

"Sorry, sorry, I forgot, you don't like those names," whined the prince. "I know a couple of nicer ones, though. How about…pointy-eared bastards?"

"No! Absolutely not!"

"Weed-eaters? That's a pretty nice one, if you ask me. Even Tauriel thought it was funny."

"Ugh, why do I even bother?" muttered Bilbo. "Stubborn dwarves, never listen to anyone besides themselves." He rolled up the maps and gently whacked Kíli over the head with one of them. "Now what did you come down here for, little bird? I'd like to catalogue all of these before supper, so spit it out."

"It's snowing!"

And there went any semblance of calm inside the room, both Frodo and Donel all-but tackling the older hobbit to demand that they leave immediately to play in it. The brat who instigated everything was shameless in his begging as well, stating that little hobbits needed lots of fresh air and snowball fights and ice ramps and snowmen and fruity ice cones to grow up strong and healthy and not wither away in the dark tunnels of Erebor. He tried to call foul on several of them; but being hugged and tackled by three boisterous children, of which Kíli was most definitely an associate seventy-five percent of the time, was quite difficult to resist under any circumstances.

"Please, Uncle Bilbo, please," whined Frodo. "It barely snowed at all in the Shire these last few years. I'll make a really nice snow hobbit for you, I promise. And it'll have big sticks for arms and a carrot—"

"Yeah, we'll build a wonderful one, Uncle Bilbo," pleaded Kíli, puppy dog eyes out in full force as he wrapped himself around the older hobbit. "And we'll put a lovely, fancy red waistcoat on it with a bit of curly leaves on the top for hair and a fancy pipe in the mouth to—"

"And the ice ramps," added Donel. "My amad told me that they always poured a lot of water down the steps and then they'd slide down them like—"

"Enough!" shouted Bilbo. He pushed all three of them to the floor. "Help me get these piles cleaned up and onto that table over there and then we'll go up to our quarters for a change of clothes. Understand? Now get to it."

Bilbo Baggins had never seen two youngsters and the dwarven equivalent of a tween move so quickly in his whole life. The piles were stacked on the tables in less than twelve minutes and then the four of them were marching up to the royal wing for a quick change of warm clothes. The prince wandered off to his own rooms to get ready while Bilbo took care of Frodo and Donel with the winter clothes Ori had made for them. He bundled little Donel into his nephew's second set of long johns, trousers, boots, coats, hats, and gloves, making a mental note to order one of each for the impish dwarfling when he next saw Ori or went to the market. Thana and her husband wouldn't be able to refuse the gifts if Bilbo claimed they were an early solstice present and they had the Durin family's names attached to them as well.

Who said hobbits couldn't be sneaky when a situation called for it?

"Okay, everyone ready to go?" asked Bilbo out in the hallway. "Ears covered? A glove on each
hand? Boots laced and secured?"

"Aye, aye."

"You coming, Fíli?" queried Bilbo when he saw the older prince bundled up and leaning on his crutches. "If you do, I won't be letting you out of my sight with that busted leg of yours. You'll be sitting with me."

"I wouldn't dream of doing anything else, Uncle Bilbo," said the older prince with a cheeky smile. "I adore your company."

"You both think you're cute, don't you?" said the hobbit with a sigh. They'd been calling him uncle for the past week now. Bilbo had a strong feeling that their mother was behind it. "What am I saying, of course you do. But those puppy dog eyes won't work on me like they do your uncle and mother. So behave yourselves. Or else…"

He poked both of them in their big dwarvish noses. Well, except for Kíli. His nose was unusually small for a dwarf. But it was still equally vulnerable to a good flick, which Bilbo never failed to use to his advantage if the situation called for it.

"No cupcakes. Or cheesecake. Got it?"

Both princes stared at him in disbelief, Kíli whimpering, "You're a cruel hobbit, Uncle Bilbo. Very, very cruel."

"Yeah, those puppy dog eyes? They don't work on me. Now, let's move along and enjoy the snow, people. Uh uh, you're with me, Fíli."

It only took them a few minutes to reach the front gates of Erebor, snow falling at a very fast rate from the white skies above the mountain. Bilbo double checked the coats, boots, and gloves of the boys before he unleashed them onto the hillside, ordering both of them to stay within clear sight at all times. And then he did the exact same thing with Kíli and his brother, enjoying the indignant squawks that the princes produced when he tugged at their knitted winter hats.

"If you two act like children, then I'll treat you like children," reasoned Bilbo. "I'll be up here at the top of the stairs and you're sitting with me, Fíli. Keep an eye on the boys for me, would you, little bird?"

Kíli gave him a cheeky salute. "Like an eagle of Manwë, dearest uncle." And then he bounded off down the stairs with a whoop. "Who's ready for a snowball fight?! I'm on Frodo's and Donel's team!"

"He's not gonna stop doing that, is he?"

"Nope."

The children were running all over the place, whooping and hollering in the snow as it floated down upon them. Adults were scattered about, some making snowmen with their little ones while others slid down the long ice ramps that a certain pair of silly miners had created with several buckets of cold water. Bilbo himself was quite content to just sit atop the entrance stairs and puff away on his beautiful dragon pipe. Like most hobbits, he preferred to observe the snow from a distance, safe from the icy snowballs and exuberant frolicking of his Took cousins. Or in this particular case and situation, far away from Kíli, Bofur, and an unusually feisty and snow-loving Bifur.

"It looks like we arrived just in time," said a voice to his left. "Traveling in the snow is always
dreadful business."

"I can imagine," replied Bilbo after a large puff of smoke. "We were able to avoid the winter during our journey. Both times, in fact. Quite honestly, I don't know if my naked feet would've been able to withstand it."

Dís smiled down at him. "Those are lovely boots."

"The snow's one of the only things that can affect or harm a hobbit's feet," Bilbo explained. "Dwina's father was kind enough to make a pair for both Frodo and myself. I never gave much thought to Erebor's climate, to be truthful."

"It's not so terrible because of our location inside the mountain," stated Dís. "The city of Dale suffers much more so than us because of their exposed location. But the men and dwarves of the north are used to such wicked weather, harvesting early and insulating homes with sturdy stone and woodwork. So long as we have enough food stock to last us through the winter months, everything should be quite comfortable within Erebor's walls and the surrounding settlements. King Bard will have our assistance if he needs it."

"I do hope so," hummed Bilbo through another puff. "There's still so much work to be done. Cataloging and reorganizing the library is going to take several years at least. And I can't read half the stuff in it."

"You'll learn some of it with time," assured the princess. "My, my, that's quite an amazing pipe you have there. The woodwork is exquisite."

Bilbo flushed to the tips of his ears. "Well, ummm…"

"Uncle Thorin made it for him," said Fíli from his place beside the hobbit. "Spent weeks carving it in his rooms at night. He was very intent about it. And see that down on the right side there? That's malachite and aquamarine. Perfect for dragon scales and eyes along the main pipe shaft."

"Very fine stones," smiled Dís. "Now, does anyone want some—"

And then a snowball whacked the princess on the side of her head. Eyes narrowed in suspicion, Dís gazed over a snowy embankment of shale and pointed menacingly at her youngest son. With an unmanly giggle of exhilaration, Kíli threw another big snowball at his mother and then took off down the hillside.

"I brought you into this world, little bird," singsonged Dís. "And I can just as easily take you right back out of it. Tell Thorin not to wait for me, okay?"

"Well, Kíli's dead."

"Thorin? What did she mean about wait for—"

"I'm right here," rumbled a deep voice in Bilbo's ear. And then a big hand rested atop Bilbo's hat-covered head, the King's finger playing with the pointy tip of his hidden ear. "My sister heard about the snow and insisted on coming outside to see it. She's quite the lover of winter, so prepare yourself for her decorations and exuberant behavior as the solstice approaches."

Bilbo leaned back into the King's legs, fiddling with his intended's larger fingers as Dís tackled her screeching son in the distance. "I think we'll get along just fine in that respect. So, what've you been doing all day?"
"Executions."

Fili snorted beside them. "Great mood killer you've got there, Uncle Thorin. I'd give it a nine out of ten on the scales of romantic disaffection."

The hobbit could feel his intended stiffen behind him, so Bilbo impulsively went with an action that he'd been wanting to commit for nearly a week now. Reaching into a side pocket of his coat, Bilbo pulled out the bond-bracelet he'd created several days ago, an excited knot settling in his stomach. Grabbing the King's left wrist, he tied the bracelet tight around Thorin's scar-peppered skin and then gave it a quick, bashful kiss before the Dwarf-King could pull away from him.

The King Under the Mountain just stared at his newly adorned wrist in amazement. "What's this supposed to mean in hob——"

"Thorin!"

And then the King was smacked with a snowball right in the face, Frodo giggling as he leapt down the ice ramp and disappeared into the snow forts that now lined the hills around the castle entrance. Bilbo and Fili couldn't help but burst out laughing at the sight of Thorin covered in snow, his face a mask of apparent indifference at the snowball that'd just collided with his big dwarvish nose. Until he started to descend the stairs…

"Two can play at that game, little hobbit."

Not even bothering to stifle their laughter, the older hobbit and injured prince just watched as Thorin stalked through the snow forts and hills like a giant predator. None of the other dwarflings dared to attack the King in their snowball fights, instead going about their business without more than a passing glance at their leader. And then Thorin made a sharp turn into one of the snow forts, appearing a half-minute later with a shrieking Donel and Frodo dangling from his outstretched arms.

"Awww, they've been caught," laughed Fili. "Poor rascals don't have any clue how mean Uncle Thorin can be in games like this. And there it is! Snow down the back of the shirts! Poor Kíli's getting the same from amad, too!"

Frodo had latched himself to the back of Thorin's mane of black hair, a handful of snow shoved into the King's un-hatted head while Donel provided reinforcement from his position on Thorin's lower back. Off to their right side, Dís and several women had Kíli, Bofur, Glóin's son, and a half-dozen other miners pinned down at the bottom of a hillside with no hope of escape. But it was the happy smile on Thorin's face that truly made Bilbo feel warm inside, its brilliance something that the Lonely Mountain and Durin's Folk had not seen in many, many decades.

"Could someone please get Ori for me? I need a sketch of this. Right now."

Chapter End Notes

It's been snowing the past couple days here, so I felt like writing about snowy stuff. Trying to balance Thorin's behavior when he's around his family and the Company vs. when he's around outsiders can be tricky at times, so I hope I'm managing it somewhat well so far. I'm partially basing aspects of his behavior/reactions on my own uncle's, who is a retired member of the U.S. Special Forces and a realistic comparison to Thorin's own troubled past with war, death, and duty. And now for Bombur and his
lady friend...
"Okay, I grabbed all the apples I could. Do we have everything else?"

The snow had continued to fall into the next day, prompting the dwarves to close the front gates and prepare for the first blast of winter from the northern wastelands. The prospect of being stuck inside a mountain for months on end still hadn't really settled in the hobbit's mind yet, but Bilbo had a feeling that braving the frigid cold for a few moments outside would be very welcome in one or two months time. Unlike dwarves, hobbits did not enjoy going for long periods without sunlight. In fact, as Óin pointed out, both Bilbo and Frodo would probably develop rickets or another bone disorder if they did not spend several hours a day absorbing sunlight on their snow and wind-blasted balcony. So, in an effort to combat this problem, the Company's healer had spent all afternoon scouring the library and compiling a list of replacement food sources.

"I've already started the roasted potatoes and onions," stated Bombur, his fingers pounding and kneading a lump of dough on the counter. "And the beans and bacon are in the pot and warming up. The carrots still need cutting, though."

"I'll get right to that," said Bilbo. "How many pumpkins are left?"

Bombur paused in his dough kneading. "There should be at least two of them, if I remember correctly. The harvest was very good this year, thanks to those instructions you received from your gardener before departing. All of the human farms around Dale had an amazing turnout because of it."

"Never underestimate the green thumb of Hamfast Gamgee," chortled Bilbo. "I've never in my life met a more knowledgeable nor skilled farmer than that hobbit. I was truly surprised by Dale's selection the other month, especially so soon after the reclamations of the cities. Hamfast will be pleased to know that his letters were so helpful to Bard and the dwarves of Erebor."

"You call those letters?" laughed Bombur in disbelief. "That thing was almost the same size as Ori's journel! Twelve whole pages on potatoes alone. The poor raven could barely fly with it."

Bilbo shrugged. "What can I say? We hobbits love our food."

"And we dwarves dearly love you for it!" shouted Fíli from his place on the plush couch in the drawing room. "Mmmm, cupcakes…"

"Ugh, he's still fighting the pain tonic," sighed Bilbo. "That gash won't ever heal properly if he doesn't rest and stay off of it."

Bilbo peeked around the kitchen doors and narrowed his eyes at the oldest prince, more than a little perturbed at the lazy wave Fíli gave him. The blond dwarf had pulled a pair of stitches four hours ago, resulting in his banishment to the couch while his mother, brother, and uncle discussed the reconstruction of the eastern tunnels at a table on the far side of the room. Upset at being left out and having to take another pain tonic, the prince had been drowsily fighting the inevitable for over an hour now. Honestly, Bilbo was just surprised that Dís hadn't smacked him over the head yet.

"If I give you some cupcakes, will you button up and go to sleep?"
Fíli nodded with a dopey smile.

"Alright, give me a minute," sighed Bilbo, returning to the kitchen to retrieve an ordinary-looking bowl from the potato cabinet. Hidden inside of it were a dozen vanilla cupcakes with raspberry buttercream icing, the last of four batches that Bilbo had baked the other day. "Okay, three is all you're getting, mister. I'd rather not take the chance of you throwing them right back up."

"You're my favorite uncle," declared Fíli. And then he stuffed a cupcake, swirly icing and all, right into his mouth. "Ohhh, my cupcake uncle…"

And not even five minutes later, Fíli was sound asleep beneath a swath of quilts, the pain tonic and a full stomach finally knocking him out. It hadn't taken Bilbo long to realize that both princes were under a great deal of strain and pressure to live up to their designated roles. Fíli received the brunt of it since he was Thorin's heir-apparent, but an unpleasant amount transferred over to Kíli as well. And because Bilbo usually only saw the brothers during private gatherings, it was quite surprising when the older hobbit first witnessed their stern, attentive faces at a council meeting.

It was a sobering moment, to say the least.

"What about the lower seam? This one here?" said Kíli's voice from the table on the other side of the room. "The markers from Dekor's team show that there's only been a minor amount of damage to the ceilings and surrounding shaft. All of the old blueprints show that those mines are rich with amethyst and beryl. That'd be an excellent source of revenue until the northern mines can be opened again."

"Aye, the lad might be on to something here," agreed Bofur. "None of my teams have been down in that area yet, for various reasons, but the rubble and collapsed pillars seem to be minimal from what little I've seen so far."

"The prospect of more gemstones being produced in the mountain could bring an extra string of southern caravans to Dale," mused Dís as she leaned against her brother's shoulder to take a closer look. "Our winter food supplies from Bard seem adequate, but it would be very nice to start refilling the granaries and storage chambers for future use. An attack from the east is always a possibility and an emergency supply would be a wise way to guarantee the protection of Dale's citizens and the local farmers in the case of a sudden siege. How many of the deep roads have been rediscovered?"

"My lads and lasses are working on them," said Nori. He stepped forward and ran his fingers over several unmarked portions of the blueprints. "No one will be sneaking in or out of this mountain without me knowing about it."

Each member of Thorin's Company had been given a high-ranking position in the mountain, including those of humble and non-noble origins or questionable backgrounds; a direct repayment for their loyalty, courage, and resolve in reclaiming Erebor. According to the list that Bilbo had compiled, the position of Spymaster had gone to Nori, Executive Foreman of the Central Mines to Bofur, Head of Kitchens to Bombur, Commander of the Archery Corps to Kíli, Captain of the Royal Guard to Dwalin, Royal Healer to Óin, Executive Foreman of the Western Mines to Bifur, Guildmaster to Dori, Head of the Treasury and Commander of the First Army to Glóin, Royal Scribe and Archivist to Ori, Chief Advisor and Tutor to Balin, Lady Under the Mountain to Dís, and Heir Under the Mountain to Fíli. And with a furrow of his brow, Bilbo realized that he wasn't quite sure what position he himself held in the mountain yet.

"And then, with the coming of the dawn, they turned to stone!"

Bilbo glanced over to the upper left corner of the room, smiling at the sight of Ori entertaining a riveted Frodo, Donel, and Dwina with various tales from his personal book about the Quest for
Erebor. All three of them were gasping and twittering along, their eyes wide with delight and awe at the scribe's storytelling. Apparently, the account of the trolls was a fan favorite for this particular bunch.

"Ewwww! Uncle Bilbo got covered in troll boogies!"

"It was most dreadful," said Ori with a dramatic shudder. "His coat never seemed to quite recover from that filthy incident."

"What about the trolls?" asked Dwina, her eyes wide with wonder. "Are they still there? Turned to stone, I mean."

"I'd certainly think so," said Ori, flipping through to the pages that no doubt had some of his sketches on them. "Mighty big things, those trolls were. Stood as high as an old oak tree, it seemed. I was grabbed by this one here and I can assure you that the drop wasn't pleasant in the slightest."

"Who cut you down?" asked Donel. The boy had a good memory for battle tactics and strategy, if his responses to their stories were any sign. "It'd be hard to get up that high on flat ground. I've tried, and it hurt my bum."

"Ah! See this sketch here." Ori flipped over a couple pages. "When it grabbed me, Mister Dwalin somersaulted over the fiery pot and landed right over here. And then King Thorin jumped off his back like a stepstool, Deathless slicing through the brute's arm and dropping me onto my poor behind."

Bilbo smiled at the impressed gasps from the children, all three of them looking at the Dwarf-King and Guard Captain in sweet-faced wonder. Carved toys, bookcases, and a series of wooden weapons were scattered about them on the thick warg-fur rugs, the left side of the royal drawing room having been converted into a play area at Thorin's request. Boxes of dwarvish games were stacked atop a table that's top had been carved into some kind of complicated puzzle. The princes and Bifur had explained that unlocking all of the drawers on the table's side was the point of the game, which had been used for centuries to inspire the minds of crafty dwarflings. Basically, Thorin and the rest of the Company were doing a very good job of spoiling his nephew rotten.

"The goblins?" asked Frodo. "Tell the one about the goblins!"

"Oh, I don't know," said Ori with a devious smile. The scribe was by far the shyest member of the Company, but whenever storytelling time came around with any of the children, it was like Ori came alive with newfound confidence. "That might be a bit much for Mister Donel and Miss Dwina."

Dwina's glare was truly a sight to behold. "Not at all! I can handle a simple story about goblins! They're stupid, stinky, fart-headed, wart-lickers!"

"Me, too!"

"Alright, alright, I suppose you're all old enough to hear this one," sighed Ori in a dramatic fashion. "Now, it first started when we left Rivendell and…"

With a fond shake of his head, Bilbo returned to the kitchen and was very amused to see Glóin's son sitting on the other couch. He was subtly listening in on the stories that Ori was telling, occasionally nodding and humming to the conversation that was going on between his mother and Dori. According to Dís, young Gimli was now at an age where he didn't want to be looked at or treated like a child by the adults around him. So, in order to showcase his apparent maturity, Gimli could no longer take part in childish pastimes like storytelling, hide and seek, or a good game of conkers.
before afternoon tea. It seemed that young dwarves temporarily lost all sense of fun and merriment by their 60th birthdays, but then regained it by their 70th birthdays once the novelty and strangeness of near-adulthood wore off.

Dwarves never failed to amaze him.

"It smells wonderful in here, Bombur," praised the hobbit. "Hania and her family will be knocked off their feet when they see all of this. Oh, those potatoes really do smell lovely. Do you need any help with the pies?"

"No, thank you," smiled the rotund dwarf. "They're almost ready to be put in the oven now. If you don't mind my asking, what are you planning to use the two pumpkins for?"

"My mother used to make the most delicious pumpkin cinnamon rolls when I was only a little faunt," explained Bilbo while he carved up the innards of the pumpkin. "And I bought quite a few containers of cinnamon on my last visit to Dale, so we've got plenty to spare for a grand event like this."

Bombur blushed at the wink Bilbo sent him, fingers shaky as he started to prepare the main dish of spiced beef with a warm charred pepper steak sauce. The poor dwarf was as nervous as could be, picking at his clothes every few minutes and puttering around the kitchen when he didn't have anything to occupy his twitchy hands. And since his brother, cousin, and everyone else in the Company were currently engaged in debate over what or when something should be done about the eastern tunnels, Bilbo had taken up the post of helping Bombur make a courting supper that would blow the socks off of Hania and her family members.

"And there we go," said Bilbo about an hour later. "Almost everything's ready, if I've read this list correctly. Now to set up the table."

The hobbit bustled over to the adjoined dining room, which was typically only in use when Thorin had to entertain visiting dignitaries or hosted holiday celebrations. And since his intended wasn't exactly the most social or hospitable of beings, the royal dining hall very rarely saw the presence of anyone in it. However, for something as important as Bombur's official courting supper, both Dís and Bilbo had insisted upon using that room to show Hania's family just how significant Bombur was to the King and his Company of highly respected heroes.

"Okay, everyone, enough debating for one night!" said Bilbo from where he was gathering the silverware. "All food to the table, but nice and neat, please. We'll want to make a good first impression."

Kíli blinked at him. "You do realize that Uncle's the King Under the Mountain? If they aren't impressed by Bombur being valued by the King himself, then I don't think it's possible to make a better impression at all."

"I beg to differ," drawled Bilbo, carefully eyeing the plates in front of him for any sign of soap smudges. "Your uncle was downright rude and discourteous the first time we met at Bag End. Not the best first impression, I can assure you."

Thorin, who was walking over with a gigantic bowl, looked like he'd just had an oversized boulder dropped on him. And if glares could kill, the King would have been a smoking pile of ash at his sister's feet.

"Why am I not surprised?" muttered the princess. "He's always been as charming as a badger in heat. All looks and brawn, but no manners at all."
"Oh, he has his charms," said Bilbo with a fond smile. "You just have to do a bit of digging to unearth them. They're buried under several layers of stoicism and brooding and stubbornness, so it's quite the arduous job, I'll admit." He strode by the Dwarf-King and plucked at the bond-bracelet. "But it's worth it."

"Not in front of the children, please," whined Kíli. "And that includes me. I'm a very impressionable dwarf, in case you haven't noticed. Easily scarred, too. And I don't need any more of those at this point."

"Don't remind me," rumbled his mother.

Thorin cringed at the glare his sister shot him. Again. Honestly, they were all surprised that Dís hadn't outright tried to kill him after she'd seen the horrific scars that littered the whole expanse of her sons' bodies. Kíli's chest and left thigh looked like someone had used him for archery practice while his older brother had countless long, jagged scars littering his entire torso and one of his calves. And both of them had smaller ones all over their faces and necks, a testament to how close death had come to taking them. If it had not been for Bilbo's sudden appearance at Ravenhill and eventual begging to Thranduil for his superior healing skills, the proud line of Durin would not have survived that fateful day.

"So he's like an onion!"

The line of wandering food paused for a moment, everyone looking down at little Frodo and his deviously smiling face. Of course, this statement was only made funnier by the fact that Thorin was holding the bowl of roasted potatoes and onions. The halfling did not overlook this, either.

"Lots of layers and pretty stinky sometimes, too. And you can draw silly faces on them, like the ink he's got all over him."

"Oh dear," chuckled Bilbo, reaching out to finger at his intended's braids. "I think you might have broken him, my boy."

"Oops. Sorry."

And then they heard a loud series of knocks at the drawing room door, an obvious signal from the royal wing's guards that Hania and her family had arrived. Bombur would have to greet them along with his remaining family members, everyone else staying in the drawing room while the actual meal took place in the dining hall. Nori assured all of them that there were strategic holes in the wall for listening in, something that was apparently a new piece of information to the Dwarf-King himself.

"How many of these rooms are rigged, Nori?"

The spymaster shrugged. "Enough that I'll know about an assassin long before he ever gets to one of your throats. Necessary evil, unfortunately."

"We'll talk about this later," warned the King. "I can assure you of that."

"I figured as much."

Bilbo interrupted before the glares could get too intense. "Okay, we've got both of the apple pies, roasted potatoes and onions, beans and bacon, mushroom soup, buttermilk roast chicken, spiced beef, and the pumpkin cinnamon rolls. And for an extra punch to the dessert, I've whipped up some vanilla custards with roasted blueberries. Don't worry, I've made enough for everyone. Stop it with the bloody glaring!"
"I think I'm gonna faint," mumbled Bombur.

"No, you're not," assured Bofur as he straightened his brother's clothes for what must've been the tenth time. "That's our burglar's job, remember? But it's your job to be a gentle-dwarf tonight and gift me with a new sister-in-law. I want a niece or nephew before the end of this decade. Got it?"

Bombur gave him a shaky nod, glancing around at all of the friendly faces staring and smiling back at him. Always the bashful type, Bombur went bright red at the fact that so many important people were standing behind him. Even the King Under the Mountain gave him a nod of encouragement and approval. It was all extremely overwhelming for a dwarf of such humble and quiet origins.

"You'll do just fine, Bombur," said the hobbit. "Just be yourself and don't let your brother start singing about knives and forks and they'll all love you."

Taking a deep breath, Bombur nodded and started towards the door. His cousin and brother were right behind him.

"Okay, let's do this fancy dinner thing. I'm getting hungry."

Chapter End Notes

I really do enjoy expanding on all of the dwarves and the possible cultural aspects of their society. They're all such charming fellows and yet everyone seems to ignore them just because they're not quite as attractive by human standards. Which is something that I'll address with poor Kíli sometime soon, too. So, since I've got some room to work with and play around in the next chapter, is there anyone you'd like to see some more of?
"This is going to be a repeat of Bag End. I can see it now."

The whole Company was leaning against the dining hall doors and the portions of the wall that had peepholes in them. Bilbo, Thorin, and the women of their odd makeshift family were sitting on the unoccupied couch and armchairs, watching in amusement as all of their companions tried to listen in on Bombur's courting dinner. The children were too busy snacking on cupcakes and playing with a puzzle box to care about the strange supper in the next room over. Nearly an hour had passed since Hania's arrival, so the Company's anxiety levels were rising by the minute now.

"At least Bombur won't be crushing anyone this time," said Thorin with a smirk. He was still looking over the blueprints about the eastern mines. "And there haven't been any screams or crashes yet. That's always a good sign."

"Thorin tried to slit my husband from ear to ear," sighed Dís. "It was rather awful considering the circumstances. Nearly ruined my dress. Very irritating."

"What'd he do to deserve that?"

"I don't even remember," admitted the princess. She fixed her brother with a half-amused, half-annoyed glare. "He'd been itching to thrash the crap out of Víli for months at that point. Thorin didn't think anyone was good enough for me."

Thorin shrugged without shame. "None of them were. Simple as that."

"Well, you wouldn't have Fíli and Kíli without that giant lump of blond stupidity, as you liked to call Víli on his better days," said Dís. "To think that two grown dwarves could act so immature towards each other. Oh, don't give me that look. You didn't even try to hide your dislike until Fíli was born. And then I couldn't even get you to give my own son back!"

"It's perfectly acceptable for a King to show off his heir," sniffed Thorin. "And he was a very strong babe, if you recall."

"Oh, I recall very vividly," snarked the princess. "After all, it was me who pushed our dear Fíli's big head out of my overstretched body, not you. Honestly, males, they're a bunch of crybabies at the best of times."

Glóin's wife nodded in sympathy. "Aye, aye. It took me nearly two whole days to push Gimli out. And then his bloody father had the nerve to just run off with him! One is more than enough for me. If Glóin wants any more, he'll have to find a way to do it all by himself. Maybe that wizard can help him."

"No male in their right mind would ever do that," said Bilbo as he looked down at himself. The mere thought of childbirth was enough to make him nauseous and Bilbo was very relieved that he'd been born into this specific gender. "I've never understood my aunts and cousins. Some of them have more than ten children!"

Both women groaned at the implications. "Those brave, brave souls. Gimli laid on my spine for months. And then pushing out his fat head..."
"Amad!"

"What? It was an extremely difficult task," reasoned Dala. "And Gimli was just a few inches shy of being the same size and weight of a human infant, too. Very healthy, of course, but excruciating to bring into the world."

"And that's why I'm very relieved that I was born with a penis," said Fíli from his place on the other couch. "We're a straightforward and simple lot, us males. Much less…painful, if you ask me."

Thorin grumbled in thought. "I wouldn't have minded a niece…"

"Then you'd better find a mysterious, long-lost sibling to do all the work for you," said Dís with a dignified sniff. "Or another halfling in Bilbo's family to adopt. Three boys should be more than enough for you, brother dear."

"Ugh, no, Frodo's more than enough," stated Bilbo without hesitation. "And it's a very rare occurrence for faunts to be orphaned in the Shire. Nope, Frodo will just have to make due with Fíli, Kíli, and Gimli. And it seems that he won't be wanting for playmates until the next batch of dwarflings comes along, anyways."

"Uncle, look! Look! Donel inked me!"

The adults looked down behind the couch, eyes widening when they realized that all three of the children were covered in black charcoal. Every section of exposed skin on their arms, cheeks, hands, and feet had drawings on it, most of the sketches too chaotic or childish to make sense to the grown-up mind. They'd hardly taken their eyes off of them for more than a minute, but that had obviously been more than enough time for the rascal pack to steal Ori's charcoal and transform themselves into mini-Dwalins. All of them had his head inkings on their foreheads, too.

"We're like Mister Dwalin," said Dwina with a proud smile. "But I think Donel's finger ink's wrong. The runes look kinda funny."

"At least I tried," defended the dwarfling. "You had them even more wrong. And look, they're just like Mister Dwalin's, just smaller right here."

The little boy ran to where the other dwarves were eavesdropping in on Bombur's courting supper, grabbing a hold of Dwalin's much larger hands and comparing the inked warrior's fingers to his own charcoal-coated digits. Surprised at the sudden appearance of the tiny dwarf, Dwalin picked the boy up by the scruff of his tunic and dangling him up in front of his face for closer examination. Donel just gave him a toothy grin and eagerly put his arms out for the Royal Guard's inspection.

"Oh goodness, what did he do now?"

Donel's mother stood in the drawing room door, hands on her hips as she took in the sight of her eldest child being dangled in the air. Sharp-tongued and levelheaded to a fault, Thana had become a valuable ally and open supporter of the hobbits in the last few weeks, especially since the arrival of the Blue Mountain caravan. Despite being poverty-stricken throughout much of her life, Bilbo had discovered that Thana was a capable and very gifted linguist during one of their children's playdates. Apparently, being a nomadic merchant and crafter on the eastern plains had familiarized her with numerous languages, including Sindarin, Tyran, Ulgathig, and Ioradja. Compiled with her flawless knowledge of Westron and Khuzdul, it hadn't taken long for Bilbo to convince the Dwarf-King that Thana would be a very useful advisor.

"It would seem our little ones decided to try their hands at inking," said Bilbo, his fingers rubbing at
the hopeless mess all over Frodo's face. "Thankfully, it was only Ori's charcoal that got onto their skin this time. Ugh, it's getting sooty…"

"Donel, you know better than this," groaned the mother. "Now you'll have to take a bath before bedtime. And it's in your ears, too!"

"No, I don't need one!"

"Well, you're going to get one whether you like it or not," said Thana as she took Dwina by the hand and threw a stack of papers on the table. "Oh, and here you are, your majesty. I finished translating these missives this afternoon. This dialect of Linerin's very straightforward and simple, so I'd likely place it from the Daldunair region of Endor. Of course, that's what the missive claims, too."

"What else does it entail?" asked Thorin.

"I've personally never been to Daldunair myself, but I do know that the lake has a very strategic location in the region. It sits astride one of Endor's busiest trade routes, east of Rycolis, which my husband and I have visited before for trading purposes. The missive appears to be interested in opening an overland trade route of some type with Erebor. I've not been able to deduce some of these exact terms yet, though. But a few mornings sifting through the archives should turn up some results by the end of the week. My Linerin's not what it used to be, unfortunately."

"You've been an amazing help, Thana," said the King, his hands full with keeping an overexcited Frodo from probing at his own inkings. "Those missives have simply been collecting dust for months since I did not know of anyone who could read them. Balin has been pleased to finally have a linguist among us."

The oldest dwarf gave a thumbs up in agreement from his peephole. Even Dwalin had returned to his space, Donel still dangling from his hands with a resigned pout on his blotchy face. All of the Company's dwarves had become accustomed to three tiny beings running around their feet in recent weeks, so dodging squirmy little bodies had become a common evening exercise for them.

"I'm just happy to be of service, your majesty," said Thana. "Now, I've got a pair of filthy dwarflings to sort out and Dwina's mother is waiting outside for us. Donel! Stop dangling there and leave Mister Dwalin alone. No couth at all."

"Just wait a moment, Thana. I've got something for you."

Bilbo watched as the red-haired dwarf ushered Dwina and Donel out of the hall a few minutes later, her hands full with the two apple pies that he'd made for their families earlier in the day. And then he turned back to his own family, smiling at the sight of Frodo and his incessant chattering to the Dwarf-King.

"Does it hurt to get it done?" asked the little hobbit. "Because Donel said that his papa got a new inking last week and it was really red and angry for a bunch of nights. I'd not want it to hurt, if it was me."

"That won't be a problem," said Bilbo, "Because this little faunt will never get an inking or piercing of any kind. It's just not done. At all."

Several days prior, Frodo had spent an entire afternoon and evening with the King while Bilbo worked down in the library with Dhola and Ori on their newest map projects. Part of that evening had involved a bath in which Frodo got to see all of the piercings and inkings the dwarves so coveted in their culture. As a normal fauntling of the Shire, Frodo had never seen such body work before in
his life. And as a direct result, the halfling had been fascinated with the intricate artwork and metals that adorned the dwarves' bodies, asking each of the Company members to show him their ornamentation and explain the meanings behind them. Of course, some of those…things were not appropriate for a hobbitling to witness, so Bilbo had put his foot down and told his nephew to leave the older dwarves alone on the subject.

"It depends," answered the King. He'd been ignoring Bilbo's hobbit-y indignation on the matter so far, carefully responding to every question that Frodo asked of him. "The pain goes away quickly with some, but for others it can linger for weeks. The lowest ones tend to be the worst. Right, Dwalin?"

"King or no, I will throw you off the battlements if you—"

He just smirked at his oldest friend. "See, he's still sour about it. Whimpered like a babe for weeks after he'd gotten his—"

"Thorin!"

The look his intended gave him wasn't apologetic in the slightest, and Bilbo knew he'd have to put his hairy foot down even harder to make Thorin see reason on the matter. Bilbo didn't mind Frodo being incorporated into many parts of dwarven culture, but their proclivity for inkings and piercings was one area that Bilbo wouldn't allow Frodo to take part in at all. Thorin and his fellows could strut around with their inked parts and pierced…pieces, but hobbits just didn't do those things in their lives. Maybe some of the gentle-hobbit ladies would get their earlobes pierced in their tween years, but anything beyond a twin set of simple studs was very, very scandalous in the Shire.

"Did you know that lady dwarves are inked as well, Frodo?" asked Dís. "But not in the same manner as our men-folk. We only receive ours in one place on our bodies to symbolize the importance of our families."

"Really?" asked Frodo from his seat on Thorin's left shoulder. He'd been poking at the inked runes on the King's upper back. "Where're they at?"

"We receive them down our spines," stated Dís. She plucked the little hobbit from where he'd half-buried himself down Thorin's shirt again. "An intricate rune to represent each of our closest family members' names. They're much lovelier than the inkings that a dwarf male receives throughout his life. Quality over quantity, you could say. And we've less hair on our backs, so you can actually see them, too."

This intrigued Bilbo to a degree. "I never knew that. But I guess it makes sense that you would receive inkings as well. Are they only family names?"

Dís nodded. "Always. It's an expression of our love for them."

"Can I see them?" asked Frodo. He'd become much more relaxed around Thorin's sister over the past week, mostly because Dís had made a concentrated effort to ingratiate herself to the little hobbit after the terrible scare she'd given him. "Are they black like the other ones, too?"

"If you're referring to my brother's and Dwalin's, then yes, they're all black with a little bit of red in them," explained Dís. She signaled for Bilbo to follow her, striding to the drawing room door and then disappearing into the hallway. "I'm feeling quite in need of a bath at the moment. Would you like to see them now?"

Frodo nodded, chattering away about anything that came to mind. It was rather funny how easily
manipulated the little boy could be once his curiosity was piqued, as Bilbo had used to his advantage at bath, meal, and bedtimes. And from the looks of it, the princess was quite well-versed in the art of child-directing as well. Of course, this was the mother of Fíli and Kíli that he was talking about here.

"Could you lay some nightclothes out for him?" asked Dís when they arrived at Bilbo's rooms. "I'll handle everything else, so you can go back and rest for the evening. Enjoy the stories from Bombur's courting supper."

"Thank you," said the hobbit with a relieved smile. He gave Frodo a quick kiss on his messy cheeks and then showed Dís to the washroom. "All of his bath toys and the bubble soap are along the left side of the tub. We've been working on his doggy-paddling the last few weeks, too. Because of the nearby river and all."

"A very wise idea," agreed the princess. "Now, my little one, lets see how some of those Khuzdul lessons have been coming along for you. All of my ink's written in…"

Bilbo selected a pair of warm winter pajamas that Ori had made for Frodo several nights ago when the faunt complained about the chilly air in the royal wing. Since then, a regular supply of winter clothes had been appearing on Bilbo's bed in the mornings, each of them specially designed for the hobbit's tiny frame. He left the embroidered night shirt and trousers on a table outside the door, retreating back to the drawing room where all of his friends were eagerly awaiting news from Bombur. And it seemed that in the short time of Bilbo's absence, the supper had come to an end and Bofur was loudly bragging about a bright future full of nieces and nephews.

"So, the supper went well?" asked Bilbo, sitting down beside Thorin and Fíli on the far couch. "Where's Bombur?"

"From the sounds of Bofur's and Bifur's bragging, it went very well," said Thorin as he wrapped an arm around his hobbit. "Her family is very impressed with Bombur and his standing within the Company. Of course, the personal blessings of the King Under the Mountain and his heirs probably helped matters, too."

"Ah, so that's why you're looking so smug," said Bilbo, happily returning the soft nose-nuzzle that Thorin gave him. Fíli made a gagging sound beside them. "Ohhh, stop it, little lion. You instigated half of this, anyways."

The hobbit had learned that nuzzling was a much more common way of showing open affection than mouth-to-mouth kissing in dwarven society. Apparently, kissing was almost exclusively confined to intimate situations because of the problems with beards and the decorations placed within them. According to Thorin, many a dwarvish couple has ended up locked together through their beads, a most embarrassing situation for any adult dwarf to find themselves stuck in. But the King had also been quick to point out that such an issue didn't apply to them.

"I know," groaned the oldest prince. Fíli was leaning against his uncle, still sleepy and lethargic from the pain tonic's effects. "But it's still scarring to actually see it. I'm an impressionable dwarf, after all."

Bilbo laughed. "Are you sure he and Kíli aren't twins?"

"Very much positive," assured the King. "I have very vivid memories of my sister trying to break my fingers on two very different occasions."

"That's a lot of very's."

"The situations called for it," said Thorin with a firm nod. "And this fathead down here almost got
me killed during his delivery. My poor hand was—"

"Your majesty!"

Everyone went silent when one of Nori's lads rushed into the room, several Royal Guards at his heels as he entered without so much as a knock. Bowing deeply, the lad was quick to explain himself to the once-jubilant crowd of dwarves.

"The skin-changers are at the front gates. I fear it's urgent."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, this chapter's a direct result of me treating infected tattoos, piercings, and assisting in an emergency birth over the last week. After seeing Dwalin in the film, I've had a mental picture inside my head that the dwarves might be similar to the Maori or Samoans when it comes to cultural body art, especially those with a long warrior past like Dwalin, Glóin, and Thorin. Also, due to the time period and their behaviors in the book, I can picture the dwarves having very different standards on nudity and communal living than our more prudish modern world.
"Something must be wrong. Skin-changers never visit without a good reason."

The throne room was lined with members of the Company, Royal Council, and an entire contingency of the Royal Guard. Bilbo stood at the far side of the chamber with Ori and Nori at his side, watching the huge doors at the front of the room in anticipation and a trifle of nervousness. Everyone was quietly whispering amongst themselves, their King an unmoving statue upon his granite throne, the royal heirs and princess seated on either side of him. More than a little confused by the strained atmosphere in the room, Bilbo came to the conclusion that some extra reading on skin-changers and their history with dwarves or northmen would be necessary in the near future.

"Will they be dangerous?" asked the hobbit.

"Not unless we attack them first. They're a pragmatic bunch, the skin-changers. A lot like Beorn, although not quite as bizarre in their behavior. Well, okay, I take that back. They're still a peculiar bunch, but these skin-changers live in communal packs, so they're a little more sociable than our beary friend," explained Nori. "The line of Durin has had a long-standing agreement with this particular pack and several others around the numerous borders of Erebor. Basically, if we stay out of their territories and let them live in peace, a strange presence of any type in or around Erebor will be reported to the King. Aside from Smaug's assault, the Lonely Mountain has always had timely forewarnings from the skin-changers about potential invasions."

"What do these ones change into?"

Nori grinned. "We've got ourselves four wolves and two badgers today. They're a part of two conjoined packs, if you want to get technical. Because of this, the full range of their territory's huge, stretching from eastern Dyr to the edge of Mirkwood and then north to the upper foothills of the Barl Symac. I'm sure you'll find a bunch of maps about those regions eventually, just ask our aunt for some help with it. If you ask me, next to the men of the Forodwaith, they are the toughest people of Middle-Earth. Only those with balls of pure iron could live right under the snouts of dragons. I'm surprised they weren't eaten by a drake centuries ago."

"Do they know Beorn?"

"I've no idea," admitted Nori. "We've only been in communication with them for eight months now. It was actually one of the first things Thorin did after taking the throne since they're such a great source of information. Well, when we can actually find the wily bastards, that is. Took over six months for me to track them down along one of the northeastern rivers, and even then my lads had to corner them near a high ravine to even start a discussion." He shrugged his left arm. "I got an unpleasant bite for that particular scheme of mine."

"They sound fascinating," said Bilbo with an amazed smile. He'd never given too much thought to skin-changers in general. "Are they friendly at all? Or do they distrust all outsiders like Beorn did when we first met him?"

"Why don't you see for yourself?" Nori pointed to the throne room doors, his dark eyes growing more serious now. "Here they come..."
Six cloaked figures walked to the front of the chamber, each bowing their heads to the King Under the Mountain in an open display of respect and solidarity. Considering all of the ways Beorn had behaved towards the dwarves, Bilbo was genuinely surprised that a skin-changer of any form would be willing to show even the minimum levels of deference to a dwarven king. Of course, the hobbit could also see many similarities just from gazing at their bare feet.

"Looks like we got the nude ones again," snorted Nori. "Shedding clothes must be annoying, especially in this climate." One of the skin-changers glanced over at them. "Oh, yeah, they can also hear you talk from afar. Wolf ears and all."

"King Thorin," said the figure at the front. "We come to your mountain city at the behest of our matriarch, Mother Nymeria. We've an urgent problem to discuss with you. I ask that you listen to our words without interruption."

"Of course," rumbled the Dwarf-King. "You may speak with a free tongue and my people will heed any warnings you might give us."

Bilbo could tell by their speech and tone that these were familiar words, obviously a formal greeting that had taken place between their people for many centuries. Stoic and composed as ever, the elder Durin siblings watched the skin-changers with suspicious eye and ear, an unfortunate habit of their hardened lifestyles. In contrast, the Durin heirs were staring at the figures with wide eyes and slightly reddened cheeks, which Bilbo figured to be a direct result of their guests' nudity beneath the offered cloaks. Apparently, despite all of the nude-openness Bilbo had seen at bath times among the dwarves on their quest, that candid attitude didn't apply to other races or genders.

"Kili's gonna lose an eyeball if he keeps staring like that," sighed Nori. "Even by skin-changer standards, ogling a nude female's just plain rude. Not that *they* truly care in the slightest. But Dís will, though."

The hobbit couldn't blame the prince too much. It wasn't every day that you saw a bunch of very tall and very wild-looking people standing directly in front of you without a stitch of clothing on their person. The cloaks had obviously been provided by the dwarves if the newcomers' naked feet and Beorn's proclivity for partial nudity were anything to go by in reference. And just like the bear-man, each of the figures somewhat resembled their animal of change, including the woman standing at the front. Her wild nest of long brown curls looked like it required a very thorough brushing, her muddy toenails were in need of a good trimming, and the pale skin of her face, lips, neck, and legs was cracked and bright red with windburn. All of her equally rugged and feral companions seemed very much the same in terms of hygiene and cleanliness, including the two other females who stood right behind her.

"About two fortnights ago, a band of twenty-eight dwarves were found wandering the lower plateaus of the Barl Syrnac range nearest the Lusraig River. I will not pretend to know your current beliefs, but this region has long been forbidden all travel because of its close proximity to Gostir's caves. After intensive questioning by Mother Nymeria, one of the dwarves told us that they wished to reclaim the Mirror Halls and Hollow Spire of their ancestors."

"Thorin sat up even straighter on his throne. "Kheledhkhizdín was abandoned long ago for good reason. No dwarf would be idiotic enough to attempt reclaiming it. Not even the most senile or arrogant of Ironfists."

"I speak only of what I've seen and heard with my own eyes and ears," stated the skin-changer. "The dwarf's heartbeat remained steady and pure; he spoke the truth, even if it was under duress. An Ironfist dwarf-lord from Nurunkhizdín desires to reclaim their ancient place of awakening, something that cannot happen under any circumstances. The consequences would be disastrous."

"We come to your mountain city at the behest of our matriarch, Mother Nymeria. We've an urgent problem to discuss with you."
"Although the thought of Ironfists so close to Erebor pains me, I don't understand why their foolhardy attempts have driven you to inform me of the issue," said Thorin. "It is no concern of mine what happens to the spineless Ironfists in their pursuit of riches and ancient mining halls."

"I can smell their stench within your halls," answered the woman. "And wasn't an especially greedy drake from the north what brought your kingdom to its knees before? A similar fate could manifest itself again if the northern mountains were opened to dwarven picks and axes in the current age. Our mother knows the acrid stink of a dragon well. And she believes that one or more of Smaug's scaly kin reside deep within the snowy peaks of Azjan and the watery caves of Ukal Sêj. Not only would such an awakening spell extreme hardship for my kin and the northmen of Dyr, Lotan, and surrounding settlements, but it'd likely bring the eye of a dragon back unto the Lonely Mountain."

The entire chamber was shocked into silence at this. None of them had considered the possibility of another drake descending from the north, especially so soon after they'd reclaimed their home from Smaug.

Nori shook his head. "Bluntest bastards you'll ever meet, these skin-changers. I'd wonder about the lass's sanity if I didn't know they were all like this. It's no surprise that they don't get along with other races at all."

"Where are these dwarves now?" asked Thorin.

"In the custody of Mother Nymeria to the east of the Iron Hills. The coming storm forced us to separate several nights ago, the six of us carrying your message while our kin found a secure location to keep the dwarves and ride out the blizzard. An eagle should've already been released to confirm their exact position."

"If what you say is true, then transporting the captive Ironfists to my cousin would be the most logical option at this point," said Thorin. "And considering the strange events of the last few weeks in this mountain, it would seem that the Ironfists of Rhûn seek more than just the reclamation of Kheledhkhizdín."

"Dwarven politics remains a non-issue to my kin," assured the skin-changer. "Our concern lies in an attempted recolonization of the ancient Barl Syrnac strongholds. We do not need another drake awakened in the north."

"And I very strongly share that sentiment," stated Thorin. "A raven will be sent to the Iron Hills and passage will be provided for your kin through the storms. Do you know if any other colonist bands have passed through your territory?"

"Our scouts are presently monitoring another group of wandering dwarves that've been sighted near the Dyrian wood. My kin have seen none except the dwarves of the Iron Hills for well over a century. Mother Nymeria suspects that the successful reclamations of Erebor and Dale may have spurred the Ironfists into a fervent desire of recovering their own long-abandoned strongholds in the far north."

"All of the traitorous dwarves rotting in our dungeons at the moment are Ironfists as well," sighed the Dwarf-King. "Tell me, were there any Stiffbeards among your lot of captives, or were they all Ironfists?"

"If there were any of another clan, they chose not to disclose it."

Thorin nodded. "I will begin investigating the matter the moment we adjourn. The Ironfists have long been the most difficult and warmongering of our people. They care not for loyalties of kinship
or cooperation with other races. As the King of Durin's Folk, I am apologetic for the actions of our turncoat kinsmen."

"We are all well-versed in the history of Sindri's Folk, but our agreement with the line of Durin has always been honored in the past," said the skin-changer. "It's in the best interests of all northern peoples that the Barl Syrnac and their caverns remain uninhabited and abandoned by Mahâl's Children. The awakening of another drake will be inevitable if those mountains are colonized again."

"The dwarves of Durin's Folk will work to prevent this," stated Thorin with a stiff nod. "Balin, Kíli, escort Sister Currin and her kinsmen to their rooms. I'm sure some food and clothes would be much appreciated at this point."

Nori snickered at that comment, nudging Bilbo in the ribs and pointing toward the twitching shape of their youngest prince. For the most part, Kíli appeared to be relaxed on the outside, but his wide eyes and fidgety fingers gave the younger heir away to the rest of the Company. As the spoken-leader of the skin-changers flexed her neck and hands, some of her teeth elongated in the process, filling up her jaw and flexing the bones in a way that wasn't natural to the mortal eye. Of course, the fact that all six of the changers were either buck-naked or caught in a constantly shifting state of mud-matted hair made for a peculiar view as well.

"Wow," breathed Ori, his fingers sketching away in his newest journal. He'd been at this one for several weeks now. "They're really tall. Balin doesn't even reach her chest. Or Kíli, for that matter."

"The bigger the animal, the bigger the skin-changer," guessed Nori. "Doesn't look like any of them are as big as Beorn, though. Leaner and meanner, I'd say. Especially those two badgers over there."

"Are they hissing at each other?"

As they left the chamber, Bilbo watched the female badgers hiss and snap at each other, their movements non-aggressive and almost conversation-like in appearance. None of them quite knew what to say about it.

"Very strange lot, those skin-changers."

And just before they disappeared out the doors, the leader snapped at the bickering badgers with a mouthful of elongated teeth, irritated growls rumbling low in her chest and throat. If possible, Kíli's eyes went even wider, his feet naturally dragging him away from the skin-changers' toothy leader.

"Not the friendliest bunch, either."

Bilbo stood off to the side with the brothers and watched as Thorin ordered many of his council members around, demanding that a raven be sent to Dáin that evening and the prisoners brought in for another round of questioning under the skilled eye of Dwalin and Nori. A number of other names and places were mentioned as well, but Bilbo did not recognize any of them.

"Why does everyone distrust the Ironfists so much?" asked the hobbit. "I've never heard the Firebeards or Broadbeams referred to in such a resentful manner before. What'd they do to deserve it?"

"Many of them aided Sauron during the Battle of Dagorlad," answered Dwalin, an unpleasant frown on his face as he approached them. "The filthy bastards were so blinded by their greed and selfishness that they preferred to fight for that evil abomination instead of joining in the Last Alliance through Moria or just staying out of it altogether. None of those traitors and turncoats deserve an ounce of pity from you or anyone else. They're always at war with one another, anyways. Let them
destroy themselves, I say. At least the Stiffbeard clans have honor and loyalty in their blood."

Bilbo watched the warrior dwarf stomp off, murmuring Khuzdul curses under his breath the entire way out of the throne room doors. Despite Dwalin's gruff appearance, it'd not taken long for Bilbo to realize that he was actually a pretty calm and collected fellow underneath all of those inkings, battle axes, and swords. Angry reactions like this weren't the norm for Dwalin, son of Fundin.

"Don't mind him," said Nori with a tight smile. "Dwalin possesses a special kind of hatred for Ironfists. Partially because he used to arrest even more of them than he did me back in Ered Luin. And they offered no aid to Durin's Folk after Smaug's assault on the Lonely Mountain. Add all of that to their already treacherous past and you've got a lot of reasons for an honorable dwarf like Dwalin to despise them."

"Hurry it up, you starfish-headed clot!"

"And that's my cue to leave," laughed the spymaster. "Another evening of making Ironfists squeal. Oh, what a lovely prospect."

"Nori!"

"There's just no pleasing that fellow," he sighed, "There really isn't. Well, good night, lads. I'll probably not be seeing you until the morning at this rate. I'll save a finger or a tongue for you, Ori. Aye?"

"Ugh, no thanks."

"Well, suit yourself, little brother. More for me."

"Nori!"

"I'm coming, I'm coming. Untwist your ass hair, Mister Inky. We've got all night for torturing and tooth pulling and evisceration and incineration and…"

And then Thorin was suddenly at their side, a list of place names in his hand. The script was messy and unfamiliar, which meant that it'd likely come from the skin-changer Thorin had been speaking with earlier about the dwarves. Bilbo really hoped they were as honorable as Nori said, because he really hoped that Kíli would keep his usual comments to himself tonight.

"I need you to take this list to your aunt, Ori. Tell her to gather every map and text about these specific areas," ordered Thorin. "We need to know every possible trade route, dirt road, goat path, or water passage that the Ironfists might take towards the Barl Syrnac Mountains. And if there are any texts on dragons, all the better."

"I think we have most of these," assured Ori. "I'll have another copy of this ready by morning for you, Bilbo. Hmmm, a complete map on the Talathrant River might be a bit hard to find, though. I'll have to look in the…"

"Will everything be alright?" asked Bilbo once they were alone. "I didn't think an issue of this nature even existed among the dwarves."

"Enough pettiness exists between dwarven clans for those bloody fools to not only attempt to invade my mountain, but to also run the risk of awakening another dragon from the far north," snarled the Dwarf-King. He wrapped an arm around Bilbo's shoulders and gently led him out of the chamber. "My kin have avoided those mountains like the plague for centuries because of the dragon menace. I
won't allow an Ironfist with the sickness of gold and mind to bring another one of those wrecked beasts upon my home. I won't make the same mistake as my forefathers. Not again."

"I know you won't." Bilbo kissed the King's hand. "I know."

Chapter End Notes

I'll probably be wrapping this story up in the next few chapters. The main storyline itself will be coming to a close and my ability to update on a weekly basis will be slowing down as exams roll around and my clinical rotation schedule increases. I've already received a number of complaints and PMs about how my updates have been much slower than they were over Christmas break and that the chapters are not as original or engaging anymore. But, either way, I'll finish up the main storyline and see how things are going from there.
"Now twist the left strand over the top strand. There you go, that's it."

The Company members had all gone their separate ways after the issues of urgent raven messages, naked skin-changers, and imprisoned traitors of the stupidest variety had been dealt with to Thorin's satisfaction. Bilbo had spent the better part of an hour helping Dís heave her oldest son back to his rooms, the crutches catching on carpet edges and tiny pieces of rubble that had been overlooked in the initial cleanings of Erebor's central halls. There was still so much work that had to be done around the city, including huge amounts of reconstruction on the walkways, lower corridors, and central floorings. It would take at least several more decades of meticulous, nonstop labor to restore the Lonely Mountain to its former glory.

"Pull that one down there over the strand in your other hand," instructed Thorin, a patience to his voice that was rare even in private. "Pull a little bit tighter around the ends to keep it taut, and then tie it off with this."

"You've got too much hair," said Frodo. "Like a bear. Or Farmer Maggot's bloodhounds after their baths. It made them kinda fuzzy. Ah!"

"Here, try it again. But hold onto the ends really tight this time, okay?"

"I don't think it likes me."

Thorin laughed. "That's okay, I don't think it likes me half the time, either. Or Fíli and Kíli. My younger brother and sister, too. All of them used to yank tangled clumps out when they tried to comb and braid it. Kíli's the worst, though. There's a very, very good reason why his hair's always unbraided, you know."

"I got marmalade in my hair before," said Frodo, pink tongue peeking out in fierce concentration as he tried to braid Thorin's hair. "Mama chopped it off because she wasn't able to get the stickiness out. I thought it smelled tasty, though."

"Eating your hair isn't healthy, little one." Thorin was leaning forward so that the little hobbit could reach past his rounded ears, large hands supporting Frodo's body as he practically crawled up the King's chest. "I can imagine that it'd cause quite a bit of nasty indigestion, too. And I assure you, there's plenty of indigestion in this Company to go around, especially if Bombur's in the room."

"And Glóin," giggled Frodo, spreading his arms wide to show Thorin how big the fart had seemed to him. "He let out a gigantic, stinky one last week. It smelled like Uncle Rory after he'd eaten Aunt Menegilda's bean soup. Icky."

"Why does that not surprise me," mused the King. "Ah, ah, careful with the beard. It's rather sensitive until the first few inches start to grow in. Here, watch how I do it. The strands have to be much smaller until it's lengthened a bit more, but I've managed a small braid the past couple nights. It is quite pitiful compared to the braided beard I wore before the desolation, though."

"I like your beard right now," said Frodo. "It's fuzzy. Like a peach."

Bilbo could barely contain his laughter from where he was secretly watching right inside of the
washroom door. The hobbit had been finished with his bath for a half-hour now, but the sight of Thorin lounging on his bed with a curious and sleepy Frodo in his lap had been too precious for Bilbo to interrupt. Frodo had made himself at home on Thorin's big thighs, intently braiding the Dwarf-King's black mane of hair as Thorin explained exactly what a skin-changer was and how they were useful to Erebor in the long-term. Intelligent and attentive as ever, Bilbo's nephew asked just the right questions at just the right times, thoroughly proving the older hobbit's suspicions about the craftiness that lay behind those innocent baby blue eyes.

He'd have to watch the little boy around Nori in the future.

"Like a peach? Now that's just plain cruel," accused Thorin, his face still as stoic as ever despite the joking tone in his voice. "We dwarves are more like—"

"Onions! You're a peaches onion."

The Dwarf-King had obviously had enough of this verbal abuse, his thick fingers curling with menace as they attacked the faunt's vulnerable sides. Frodo gasped in shock, hands flailing about until they collided with Thorin's giant honker and then refused to let it go until the tickle assault ended. Never one to give up a battle, Thorin leaned down and blew air onto Frodo's soft tummy, the little boy howling with shrill giggles and smacking the King right upside the head with a tiny fist. And then hairy feet connected with both of Thorin's ears, the dwarf toppling off the side of the bed in surprise and twisting over onto his back to protect Frodo from hitting the floor.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Both dwarf and faunt looked upside down at Bilbo, their eyes wide at having been caught in the act by a freshly bathed and checkered robe-wearing hobbit. Thorin was the first to react, a faint blush of embarrassment spreading across his cheeks as he put Frodo up onto the bed and then stood up beside him. Of course, this didn't last long as the little boy launched himself right back into Thorin's arms, climbing up the harsh King like one would an oak tree along the Brandywine River.

"You're staying the night, right?" asked Frodo. He was wrapped around the dwarf like a sloth, practically buried in the King's thick hair. "I'd be good if you stayed. Uncle's always happy when you stay. And Rupert, too."

Thorin just blinked at him.

"And I won't tangle up your hair this time," stated the little hobbit. He appeared to wrap himself even more tightly around Thorin's neck. "Or smack you in the eye again. Or in the nose. I promise. And Rupert does, too."

Thorin still just stared at him.

"Honestly, I'm surprised you're still standing," laughed Bilbo, stepping forward to nuzzle his nose against Thorin's rough cheeks. "I mean, could those eyes possibly get any bigger? I truly don't think the world could handle it."

"What eyes?"

"Oh, don't you even dare try to play dumb about that," huffed Bilbo with a waggle of his finger. He was pressed up close to his intended now, content to absorb some of the potent warmth that radiated from Thorin's furnace-like body. "You know exactly what those doe eyes will get you, my boy."

"You're barmy, Uncle."
"Well, most of the Shire would agree with you on that." And then Bilbo leaned in close to whisper in Thorin's rounded ear. "He sleeps better when you're close by, doesn't think that the Rhûn dwarves can get him when you're in the room. And the lack of crying did wonders for my sanity last week."

"I don't see why I can't stay, if that's what you want…"

Frodo had been quite clingy after the kidnapping incident, stubbornly making sure that one of the Company members were in his sight at all times or taking naps on Bombur in the afternoon. Not that Bilbo could blame him; after all, Bombur's giant belly had quite the comfy look to it. But the darker hours had been the worst, Frodo's nightmares coming back with a vengeance just when he'd finally started to move past the drowning deaths of Drogo and Primula. And as Bilbo pointed out to Thorin several days ago, this was normal behavior for a traumatized faunt, especially one as young as Frodo. Hobbits were a sturdy race of people, but they were neither designed nor inclined to live the harsh lifestyles that seemed to be the norm amongst dwarves. Because of this, Bilbo had made it very clear to the dwarves that Frodo was no dwarfling and some extra coddling might be needed whenever something particularly un-hobbit-y happened in the city.

"Well, then that's settled," said Bilbo, pulling the quilts back and vaulting himself up onto the large four-poster bed. "Now, it's already an hour past Frodo's bedtime and I'd really like to get him back on schedule. Hurry up."

"Can I have a bedtime story first?" pleaded Frodo.

Thorin climbed under the quilts with Frodo tucked in his right elbow, positioning the little hobbit between the two of them for added protection against the darkness. Bilbo smiled at his intended's thoughtfulness, once again reminded that Thorin had played both maternal uncle and father-figure to his nephews for several decades now. The little hobbit snuggled into the warmth of the King, happily accepting his stuffed bear from Bilbo before burrowing completely into Thorin's unbuttoned over-shirt. And then, as was their nightly routine, Bilbo leaned back against the pillows for story time.

"Which one would you like to hear about tonight?"

Despite yawning over and over again like a disgruntled baby otter, Frodo still had the cheek to flash a sneaky grin up at the Dwarf-King. "The one about the Elvenking and your barrel escape. That's one of my favorites."

"This is an evil child, Bilbo."

"You've just realized this," laughed the older hobbit. "He's been manipulating all of you for months now, but you've just been too gullible to notice it. Gimli's convinced an unpleasant spell or mesmer's been cast upon the whole lot of you. Keeps muttering about magical feet and whatnot, the poor lad."

"Gimli's real good at farting," snorted Frodo. "Icky stinky."

"Well, that's, umm, nice to know," said Bilbo with a strained smile. Thorin didn't even try to hide his deep chuckles from the little hobbit. "It makes sense that…something more than red hair, fiery tempers, and a distinct love of money would run in that family, I guess. Always very gassy, those brothers were."

"Dwalin has his moments, too."

Bilbo laughed at that, astounded at their topic of conversation. "Now that I find hard to believe, but also very plausible. How'd you find out?"

"Several dozen years of sharing a tent or innroom with him," said Thorin with an exaggerated
shudder. Frodo giggled into his throat, poking at the semi-bald spots that still littered the dwarf's chest. "He's usually quite mannerly because of Balin's influence, but after an hour or two of hitting the mead, you'll be lucky to escape with all of your nose hairs intact if you're in the same room as him."

"I'll make sure to avoid dwarven taverns and Company drinking games from now on then," stated the hobbit. "Our quest taught me a thing or two about dwarvish digestive systems and I'd prefer not to learn any more, thank you very much."

"You live with Fili and Kili," reminded the King. "There's no escaping the stinky and uncouth portions of dwarf culture with them around for the watching. Then again, an improvement has taken place in the last year."

"Not in private."

Thorin smiled, leaning forward to nuzzle Bilbo's nose. "No, that it hasn't. But all of their childish antics just shows how much they've come to trust and love you. Both the quest and Erebor's conditions have made them much more reticent in public, especially if the council or newcomers are involved. You'd hardly recognize them."

"I hope they never feel the need to act like stuffy adults around me," admitted the hobbit with a guilty smile. "I much prefer their silliness and peculiar personalities to what politics and intrigue will inevitably force them to become in the future. The Shire and the innocence that embodies it will never truly leave me, it seems."

"And I hope it never does," said Thorin, leaning forward to give Bilbo a deep kiss on the lips. "I fell in love with Bilbo Baggins of Bag End and the Shire, not some gold or gemstone-loving dwarf from Ered Luin. My nephews love you for it. The Company loves you for it. And I'm pretty sure my sister at least likes you for it. It's really hard to tell with her sometimes about stuff like this, though."

"She certainly seems to like Frodo."

They both glanced down at the small child who'd fallen asleep sometime between their conversations about the Company's farting habits and the more serious one that they were embroiled in at the moment. Frodo was curled into a tight ball against Thorin's huge chest, right arm wrapped around Rupert while the other had buried itself in the dense nest of hair that lined Thorin's ribcage. An equally hairy bicep was positioned beneath Frodo's curly head as a makeshift pillow, the frigid chill of winter and mountain tunnels chased to the edges of the bed by his own personal dwarven heater. And from the sappy smile that'd spread across Thorin's severe face, the Dwarf-King appeared to fully embrace the various responsibilities that such a position brought upon him.

"I think she might try to steal him," warned Thorin. "For all her stubborn curtness, my sister's always had a great fondness for children. I suspect she'd even take an elf child if the situation called for it."

"Just so long as she eventually gives him back, your sister can steal this little faunt to her heart's content," said Bilbo. "I never once intended to become a parent, so it's quite nice to finally have someone with genuine parenting experience to assist me. Well, besides you and Glóin, but throwing rocks at misbehaving children isn't exactly a staple of hobbit childrearing."

Thorin shrugged. "It always worked with Kili."

"You see, that statement right there is why Frodo goes to Dori or Bofur whenever I'm busy in the archives," retorted Bilbo. "Dwarflings have hard heads, little hobbits have soft tummies and scalps and... what're you doing?"
"Braiding in your second courting bead," said Thorin. He held up a small, rounded silver bead that had the intricate shapes of a map and an old dwarf tome carved into either side of it. Slivers of the Arkenstone decorated the rune-like script that looped around both figures, glinting and shifting in the soft candlelight from the bedside table. "I used mithril, silver, and platinum to forge it. The slivers are from when the Arkenstone was first cut on my grandfather's own carving table. The Consort of the King Under the Mountain deserves no less than the finest stones Erebor can offer him."

Bilbo blinked. "Wait, did you just say consort?! I mean, well, uh, wouldn't I have to be an, uh, actual dwarf to be a consort? Oh dear, a hobbit as royal consort?! That's just not possible! I've no idea what I'd be doing and then I'd probably insult somebody with a comment on their beard like Prince Legolas did with Glóin's wife and then I'd get a knife in the back for not being—"

Thorin silenced his hobbit's rambling with a kiss. "After reclaiming our ancestral home, I could proclaim a farmer's ass to be my chosen consort and none of Durin's Folk would offer slight against it. Well, at least not openly. And even if disapproval's raised in regards to your race, my sister has already made certain that I have heirs to the throne and that a female dwarf will sit beside it until death takes me. None of Durin's Folk would be calling Erebor home again if it wasn't for your fearless actions against Smaug and my own gold-ridden stupidity."

"Oh, there was plenty of fear involved," argued Bilbo, happily accepting each of the nose nuzzles and kisses that Thorin kept giving him. "But you were quite unbearable during those last few days. Of that, I can assure you."

"And as for the stabbing," said Thorin, "I'm pretty sure that Nori and his web of minions would have a knife sunk and twisted into the back of any traitor before they could even get into the same room as you."

"Dori approves of this?"

"I believe it was Dori who supplied him with the knives. And Óin the poisons. Dwalin's even been cooperating with him as of late. Never underestimate the protective instincts of a dwarf, my dear hobbit."

"So I've seen."

Frodo snuffled and smacked at Thorin's neck, practically burying himself into the King's chest when he shifted the position of his curled arm. It hadn't taken long for Bilbo to discover that Frodo was one of those sleepers who insisted on wrapping himself around someone or something in his slumber. Basically, if you slept within the general vicinity of his nephew, you'd unquestionably have an armful of Frodo come morning. And with how hairy and warm Thorin was, Bilbo internally rejoiced at the prospect of not being leeched on for one night of the week.

"I'd braid this in, but my arm seems to have been taken hostage," said the Dwarf-King. "Maybe if we move him a bit to the—"


"And that would be your darling nephew," chuckled the hobbit. "You really need to have a talk with him about majestic royal entrances, because I don't think he's doing it right. What do you want, Kíli?!"

"Can I come in?"

"Why?"
"The badgers are trying to eat me!"

"Oh dear." Bilbo grabbed a tin on his bedside table. "He took my honeycakes."

"Well, he is the spare..."

"Thorin!"

Chapter End Notes

I'm glad to hear that so many people have enjoyed the extra detail and research I've put into the chapters. The realist in me just demands that I write situations in a semi-realistic light, so a straight-up love story will probably never come out of my head. There's just so much history and culture to play with in Middle-Earth and I just can't resist writing about or extrapolating on it. And there won't be any smut coming from me, either. I'll let your imaginations and other stories/authors handle that particular part of Thorin and Bilbo's relationship. Most of the complaints I received were about the lack of romance/smut, anyways.
Revenge

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for the wonderful reviews yet again! And I'm very sorry about the late update and my lack of response to several PMs, but I've been having some problems with someone sending me repeated harassing messages and reviews over the last month on FF.net. I have removed all of the reviews there and have finally figured out how to block the PMs, but it took up a lot of my free time since the constant, troll-like messages were really starting to get on my last nerve. I still haven't figured out if it was more than one person or not, but I intend to ignore or block them as best I can from now on. I'm always okay with advice or suggestions from readers, but when someone repeatedly demands that I write something I don't feel comfortable writing for the public (smut) or even thinking about (incest), then I must draw the line. And again, I'm sorry for the overly long note, but none of my other responses have gotten these people off my back about the so-called shipping issues of my story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Please tell me I didn't hear what I think I just heard?"

The issue with the badgers the previous night had been easily solved by removing the honey cakes from Kili's pockets and giving them to the honey-loving creatures. As all of them learned, the honey badgers and their cousins had been given their nicknames and infamous reputations for a very good reason. According to Currin, even the faintest whiff of honey was more than enough to whip her companions into a frenzy, their natural urges and extreme lust for honey overriding basic decency and common sense. No harm or foul had been done, but Bilbo had a strong feeling that the youngest prince would be avoiding anything with honey in it for quite some time. And Bilbo had moved the honey jars to the back of the kitchen cabinets this morning, hidden behind the sweet smell of apples and an unusually large potato. Just in case.

"Eh? What'd you say?"

Bilbo blinked, internally sighing at the ear trumpet that was now directed towards his face from across the table. The older dwarf's hearing was much sharper in private, but noisy settings like Erebor's western mess halls basically made the healer deaf to everyone around him.

"Listen. To the table behind me."

The Royal Healer paused, dark eyes narrowing as he concentrated on the group of miners and smiths sitting directly behind the hobbit. Several seconds passed without Bilbo or Óin hearing anything, but then a bunch of sniggers erupted from the group, the burliest of the dwarves pointing towards the kitchen food lines. And despite his gob being stuffed full of food, Bilbo could still understand every word that came out of his big, fat, uncouth mouth.

"The runt's still as bare as a babe's bottom."

"Disgraceful to the whole line of Durin, is what it is. My twenty-year-old daughter has more beard than him."
"Looks more like an elf than a dwarf."

"Doesn't look an ounce like that Firebeard father of his, either. Far too delicate. If it wasn't for the lad's dark coloring, you'd never suspect his relation to the princess or his uncles. Very strange."

"At least the other archers have sideburns."

"Those Firebeards always were strangely friendly with the elves and local men. It wouldn't surprise me if that boy's got mixed blood in him."

"Aye. Far too peculiar that he's still bare at his age."

"Must be why the King's assigned him to the eastern tunnels. Keeping him out of sight and out of mind. Terrible business."

"Would've mistaken him for a lass if I'd not known…"

The hobbit reached out and grabbed Óin's shoulder, his short arm straining as the elderly dwarf tried to stand up from his seat, ear trumpet brandished in hand like a deadly weapon. Teeth gnashing and nostrils flared, Óin looked ready to throttle the disrespectful dwarves who'd insulted the youngest prince of Erebor.

"Wait, Óin! Wait!" hissed Bilbo. "We've got to think this through. By the Valar, save me from the rashness of dwarves. Sit down!"

"But you heard what they said! It's downright—"

"Yes, yes, I know, I know," assured Bilbo. "But attacking outright wouldn't look good for us, now would it? No, don't give me that look. I don't care what you dwarves do about insults and whatnot. I've got a better idea."

"Really?"

"Of course, we hobbits can be quite crafty when we want to be," said Bilbo with a snooty sniff. He glanced over his shoulder, blue eyes narrowed at the snickering group of dwarves at his back. "And I've a strong desire to utilize that craftiness right now. They'll not know what hit them."

Óin huffed. "Well, what've you got in mind, laddie?"

The hobbit gave him a wicked smile. It hadn't taken long for Bilbo to realize that Kíli's lack of facial hair was a major source of embarrassment and shame for the younger prince. Even Gimli and little Donel had more facial hair than Kíli, something that seemed to constantly smash the prince's self-esteem into tiny little pieces. Bilbo suspected that an unfortunate amount of bullying had occurred as a direct result of Kíli's softer features and complete lack of beard, moustache, or sideburns. And from the sound of the sniggering at his back, Bilbo understood that it wasn't just Kíli's age-mates who'd likely picked on him over the decades.

"Do you still have all of Fíli's medications with you?"

"Of course."

"Then I know the perfect way to make them eat their own words. And it'll be a lot of fun to watch, too." Bilbo snorted with contempt. "Then again, it's quite regrettable that Ori won't be here to sketch it."
"I don't have any poisons with me right now, Bilbo."

"Oh, there'll be no need for those, my friend. I have a much better idea."

"Vindictive hobbit…"

"No, that'd be Lobelia Sackville-Baggins. Dreadful woman, that one."

"Fierce hobbit…"

"When it comes to the boys? Oh, yes. Very fierce."

"I'm starting to see that."

"Yeah, well, playing a game of riddles with a psychotic skeleton and snobby, fire-breathing dragon tends to do bizarre things to a person's sense of risk management. Now, give me the bag. I'd like to have my vengeance sometime today, please."

"No wonder you get along so well with Dís. Utterly ruthless and bloodthirsty, the both of you. Poor, poor Thorin…"

"I'm going to take that as a compliment."

Bilbo spent the next few minutes rooting through Óin's medical bag, so engrossed in his search that he didn't even notice Kíli and Bifur sitting down beside him. His supper of roasted taters, pork, and mixed vegetables lay forgotten, quickly falling victim to Kíli's sneaky fingers and hungry stomach. Already in a foul mood because of the morons who'd been picking on the young dwarf, Bilbo had no qualms about spoiling the boy today and a basketful of raspberry scones and Kíli's gasp of happiness was exactly what Bilbo needed to retain his sanity at the moment.

"When'd you make these?" asked Kíli around a mouthful.

"Earlier this morning," muttered the hobbit. He eyed a bottle of tonic with a crafty smile, tucking it into one of his waistcoat pockets while pushing Óin's medical bag back across the table to him. "I needed to use the fresh raspberries your uncle got me before they went rotten after this week. We'll have to ration the berry and fruit desserts until spring arrives, I fear." Bilbo patted Kíli's cheek when he pouted. "However, Bombur did promise to turn whatever I didn't use into some lovely jams and jellies, so it won't be too terrible. You've a hobbit living with you now, little bird. And we love our food."

"Mûkh khâli ma."

"Thank you, Bifur. I thought you'd like the cinnamon flavor. Just a pinch, but it's got a very distinctive taste with the raspberries, doesn't it?" He leaned down to Kíli's ear. "What'd he actually just say?"

Kíli shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. His Iglishmêk is easy enough to interpret, but I can't speak or understand Ancient Khuzdul. And that was some Ancient Khuzdul. Or, at least, I think it was. Hard to tell with Bifur."

"Are you finished for the day?"

Kíli nodded. "We had to practice inside because of the snow and wind. Several of the arrows blew off the battlements when we tried to use the outdoor archery range. It's a shame that the indoor one's still in such disrepair. There's a giant rock right in the middle of it."
"Well, at least you've got something to work with, unlike poor Bard." Bilbo glanced over at Bifur's flailing hands. "And Bifur's right. I'm sure the high range practice will serve the trainees well. Erebor's terrain is anything but even and flat."

"I never thought of it like that," admitted the prince. "Hey, where's Frodo? Didn't he go with you to the library?"

"Not today," said Bilbo. "We had too much to do, with all of the numerous issues that dwarf clans seem to have with each other. He's with Dori right now. Probably being mothered in a way I'll never pull off in my lifetime."

"I bet Ori's glad that he's found a new victim," laughed Kíli. "That poor kid's not been allowed to have any fun for decades. Mmmm, these are good!"

The healer was just staring at Bilbo throughout all of this, his expression showing that he knew which bottle the hobbit had taken from his medical bag. He waited until Kíli and Bifur were thoroughly occupied with their meals, following Bilbo's shifty eyes across the room to where the skin-changers were eating their own supper. If there was anyone in the Company who could pull off dour and suspicious, it was Óin.

"What are you planning to do with that, Bilbo?"

The hobbit smiled innocently at Óin, absentmindedly patting Kíli on the head as he inhaled the scones in front of him. Bilbo could still hear the hushed conversation just behind him, sensitive ears picking up on their various mutterings about halflings and the bareness of certain princes. A vindictive streak a mile long was currently flowing to and fro inside the hobbit, the fingers of his unoccupied hand tapping at the green bottle full of spiteful goodness. Bilbo didn't personally care what the dwarves said about him since he was an unfamiliar and quite peculiar outsider to most of them. But saying cruel things about Kíli? That was unacceptable.

"I aim to misbehave."

And with a final pat to Kíli's messy head, Bilbo wandered off towards the kitchen and entered that familiar domain of lovely smells without a second glance. He'd provided occasional assistance to Bombur since his arrival, so most of the cooks and other workers were used to Bilbo drifting in and out of the food halls at random hours. And it wasn't more than a minute before Bilbo spotted the dwarf he was looking for, her back turned to him as she prepared several huge pots of beef stew.

"Good evening, Hania."

"Oh, hello there, Master Baggins," said the female dwarf with a wide smile. Three shiny beads were braided into her beard, something that Bilbo recognized with an internal cheer of happiness for Bombur. "What can I do for you this evening? Were the vegetables to your liking? I've tried to keep them as fresh as possible for Frodo and yourself, but I've little experience with them at the best of times."

"They were delicious, Hania. I do believe Bombur's found himself a rival when it comes to green dishes," praised the hobbit. "However, I've a little problem at the moment that I might need your help with…"

Bilbo explained the situation in very brief terms to Bombur's intended, the female dwarf scowling at the rude behavior of her loud-mouthed and bully-like kinsmen. Hania's reaction brought great relief to Bilbo since it showed that not all dwarves were as mean in their mind-set towards Kíli's unusual appearance. The sad tale behind Kíli's choice not to wear braids had shaken some of the high-
opinion Bilbo had held the dwarves in, Thorin's angry scowl still etched into Bilbo's mind when the Dwarf-King had told him about three bullies chopping a thirty-year-old Kíli's braids off. Thorin himself had punished all of the offenders with the help of an equally pissed off Dwalin and Dís, but poor Kíli had refused to wear braids ever since that fateful day.

"I remember what those bastards did to the prince back in Ered Luin," said Hania, her plump face shadowed by an irate scowl. "Attacking a small child like that was disgraceful. Banishment and shearing was too kind a punishment for those judgmental whelps, in my opinion. And if there's such slandering talk going around, it'd be best to nip it in the bud right and early, I say."

"Will you be able to do it, though?"

Hania scoffed at him. "Of course! What kind of chef would I be if I couldn't give some loudmouth jerks the runs from their suppers. Just give me the bottle, tell me which table they're sitting at, and I'll have them shitting their trousers by sunset. The fools have no common sense from the sounds of it, either. A much needed lesson in propriety will do them some good. Talking about the young prince like that. My mother would've slapped them right over their granite heads if she'd heard such disrespect! Shameful to the whole line of Longbeards, is what it is."

"Just make sure to give it to them before they leave," reminded Bilbo. "And don't let them know that there's anything in—"

"Don't worry, Master Baggins. They won't suspect a thing," assured Hania, hands already preparing a slew of laxative-laced tarts for the offensive dwarves. "Finish up that other prank you mentioned and then sit back and watch the show. This dosage is perfectly safe, but they'll be feeling it within minutes."

Bilbo gave her a wide smile. "Thank you, Hania. I'm in your debt."

"Make me some of that amazing apple crisp that Bombur was bragging about last week and I'll call us even," said Hania with a wink. "Now let me work my magic. Giving dwarves the shits isn't easy business. Iron stomachs and all."

"I can imagine," laughed Bilbo. "They're right behind Kíli and Bifur. I should be back by the time you're done here."

"No problem."

Bilbo rummaged through a nearby cabinet before he left, pocketing a jar of honey for the second part of his vindictive plan. Reentering the primary mess hall, Bilbo turned to the right and approached the table where the skin-changers were eating their supper. It didn't take more than a few seconds for the leader to signal for him to have a seat, one of her comrades scooting to the side to make room for him. Only two of them were eating at the moment, the third wolf glancing around the huge chamber with a strong curiosity that seemed to pervade the entire group. An odd bunch with odd habits, had been Balin's very apt description of them last night.

"Can I help you, Master Hobbit?"

Unlike the other night, all of the skin-changers were now clothed in loose trousers and tunics, their feet still bare both by preference and necessity for future transformations. Currin's mass of curls and sharp nails at least looked clean now, a vast improvement over the filthy state she and the others had arrived in. Crouched down to eat at tables that were far too small for their towering statures, the skin-changers didn't look nearly as menacing as they had upon their entrance to the city. And if Currin's scolding of the badgers was any indication, then it appeared that the skin-changers weren't nearly as
feral or animal-like as Bilbo had presumed in the throne room.

"Perhaps. I was wondering if it'd be alright for me to…borrow your badger kin for a few moments?" He placed the jar of honey onto the table. "They'll be rewarded for their assistance, I can assure you."

The she-wolf stared at him, bright golden eyes and slightly pointed ears assessing the smaller being for malicious intent towards her kin. When Currin seemed to find none, she gifted Bilbo with a toothy smile that was equal parts beautiful and terrifying, her chin resting on twined fingers as her comrades huffed in amusement. All three of them looked like oversized puppy dogs at that moment.

"I'm listening."

All it took was the mention of child-bullying for Currin to give him an affirmative on the borrowing of her badger kin. The only conditions that Bilbo had to meet for Currin was the assurance that Thorin would be okay with the prank, and that the stationed guards wouldn't try to skewer her kin during the act itself. It seemed that skin-changers had some mischief in them, after all.

"Warn off the guardsmen, set things up, and I'll be back within five minutes," said Currin, her kin sniggering at the show they'd be getting today. "Oh, and tell the princeling to stay out of their way this time around, okay? Getting between a badger and their honey is a good way to lose a limb or, in a male's case, their penis."

The other skin-changers snarled uproariously at that and Bilbo took it as an opportunity to excuse himself from the table of furry lunatics. He quickly went around and spoke with the mess hall guards, actively using his position as the King's intended, a central member of the Company, and a close friend of Dwalin to keep them at their posts while his pranks went down. Neither of them objected to Bilbo's requests, especially when he mentioned a certain royal's honor being the cause of this whole incident.

"What've you been doing?" asked Kíli.

"Oh, nothing much," said Bilbo when he sat back down amongst his friends. He noticed that Kíli was much more subdued now, his shoulders fidgeting whenever a laugh came from the other table of dwarves. It made Bilbo's Took blood boil in anger. "Did you eat all of my scones, little bird?"

"No, Bifur did."

"Ut kâhl!"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what they all say, Bifur."

"Kíli…"

"What? I was hungry."

Throughout this whole conversation, Bilbo stealthily coated a small spoon in thick globs of honey and lightly flicked it underneath the table. Droplets landed on the calves of each dwarf at the table behind them. With a flick of his wrist, Bilbo rolled the now-empty honey jar backwards across the floor, smirking inwardly at the occasional groan or mutter that he heard coming from behind him.

"Hania brought some lovely tarts out," said Óin, a knowing grin on his face when he informed Bilbo of this. "Enough for almost everyone in the hall. Desserts like that will be hard to come by in the deep winter months."
"Oh, I'm sure."

A loud fart came from the other table. Kíli snickered. And then an even wetter and noisier one ripped through the air. Bifur nearly choked on his soup. The healer released a huge sigh in return.

"Whoa," coughed Kíli. "Now that's some potent gas right there."

"Might rival Glóin, I think."

"I never would've thought that was possible," said Kíli. "Damn, that's really…"

Another thunderous fart and groan came from the dwarf directly behind Bilbo, the hobbit internally cackling at the great success of his ingenious prank so far. He could hear the queasy rumbling of the dwarves' stomachs, their moans and groans of discomfort and distress becoming more prominent as the minutes passed.

"What is that smell?" shrieked a voice from another table. "Did Malor's mutt drag another dead carcass into the halls again?!"

"By Mahâl, I think it's in my mouth!"

And then Currin returned with the badgers in tow, her face impassive when their noses suddenly shot up into the air and started to sniff around the entrance. Both of them turned to walk toward the table where the distressed dwarves were sitting, Bilbo fighting back Tookish giggles of glee the entire time.

"What the…"

"Get off my leg, you wretched furball!"

"Ah! It's licking me!"

"Get outta my way! Where's the nearest washroom?!"

Bilbo watched all of this with a satisfied smile, not the slightest bit ashamed at the amusement he was receiving from the culmination of his prank. The noxious fumes could have been skipped, of course; but they were essential to making these dwarves understand that ruthlessly tormenting and harassing another person just wasn't right. So, when one of the foulmouthed dwarves turned around, Bilbo didn't hesitate to give the uncouth miner a nasty smirk.

Nobody messed with his boys and got away with it.

Chapter End Notes

Bilbo's cleverness and ability to sneak around was always my favorite aspect of his character in the books. And I can easily imagine that Kíli would've been bullied for his appearance growing up, perhaps even more so as he ages and doesn't produce a proper beard. Many of the dwarves are also mentioned to use bows in the book, so I don't think Kíli's proclivity for 'elven weapons' or wearing an archer's sideburns would be a problem since it's obviously one of the main ways that dwarves hunt for food after the desolation. And how has no one ever heard of a honey badger before?
"So, when's the khalâk ceremony?"

The skin-changers were officially the strangest bunch of creatures Bilbo had ever met in his admittedly sheltered life. Well, he wasn't quite so sheltered anymore, but each of the skin-changers behaved in ways that set them apart from the other civilized folks of Middle-Earth. The badgers were the worst of them, of course, but the four wolves had an unusual demeanor about them as well. They tried to sniff and smell at everything within a twenty foot radius, something that unnerved most of the dwarves and resulted in plenty of bemused glances thrown their way. And the skin-changers seemed to enjoy the befuddled reactions of their stouter hosts.

"Pardon?"

Currin just smiled at him. "Ah, so they haven't told you yet."

"Mind your manners," warned Balin from his position on the opposite side of the map-covered table. "The King and Master Baggins have much to sort in their relationship due to different cultural norms and practices. You of all people should understand such an issue, Sister Currin."

"Ah, you know my parentage," stated the she-wolf. "Or were you just guessing like so many others have in the past?"

"One of your parents was human," replied Balin, carefully arranging stones on the map to identify the Ironfist's most likely travel routes. "Your behavior around outsiders is much calmer and more restrained than that of true-born skin-changers, like the badgers and dark wolves in your company. And your little brother is the same, it seems. Restraint of a sort like that usually only appears in skin-changers who have mixed parentage or constant interaction with outsiders. The former's much more likely than the latter, for any member of your kin."

The she-wolf snorted in return. "I like this dwarf. He's clever."

"A result of necessity, my lady."

"It's too bad that you and starfish-head don't have good noses or ears. Impossible to ambush or outsmart, both of you would be."

"I'll give Nori your compliments. He'll be flattered."

Bilbo had been surprised by the amount of leniency and freedom that the dwarves had given to the skin-changers, especially since they still wouldn't even let any men besides Bard and his citizens into the mountain yet. When he'd finally asked Balin about it, the elderly advisor explained that Mother Nymeria's pack had come to the aid of Durin's Folk after Smaug's attack on Erebor, bringing the homeless dwarves whatever food, clothes, or other supplies they could spare. It hadn't been much, but the skin-changers had done their best to assist a longtime ally and Durin's Folk hadn't forgotten it.

"Balin?"

The elderly dwarf gave them a smile and then wandered off to help his King, who had been pouring over another heap of maps, geological charts, and several tomes for the past five hours. And if Bilbo
knew his intended fairly well, which he liked to think he did by this point, then the Dwarf-King would soon be throwing a growly fit of frustration and stomping off to clobber Dwalin in the training hall. Both of them seemed to enjoy beating the crap out of each other on a weekly basis, a practice that still unnerved Bilbo despite Dís’ assurances to its safety and necessity. No matter how long Bilbo lived in Erebor, the more violent habits of dwarves would always confuse him.

"Hmmm," rumbled Currin, her nose sniffing the air around them. "It seems that the King wants to mate with the hobbit. Just as I suspected."

Bilbo nearly tripped over his chair in surprise.

"You do not say things like that in polite company, Sister Currin," sighed Balin as he attempted to keep an irritable Thorin in his seat. "By Mahâl's beard, you skin-changers are just as blunt as I remember. It must be the noses."

"I tell it as I smell it."

And then the young woman went silent, her head cocking to the side while both of her pointed ears twitched in concentration. Standing now at her full height, Bilbo felt very small next to the towering she-wolf, something that he was certain many of the dwarves had experienced as well. Like Beorn before them, Currin and her kin were both physically and mentally imposing, their demeanors an odd mixture of animal and human that appeared to endlessly confuse the inhabitants of Erebor.

"I can hear your little one," said Currin. "Down the hall. He's crying."

"Oh dear…"

Bilbo was gone from the war room within seconds, ignoring Thorin's shouts and walking quickly through the halls to the royal drawing room. He could hear the sound of Frodo crying long before he entered through the door, which had been left partially open by someone already inside of it. Dori, Óin, Dís, and Dala stood around the central tables, two bawling children wiggling in their arms whenever the royal healer attempted to treat the lacerations and scrapes that littered their faces. Poor Dís almost dropped Donel when a cloth of disinfectant was pressed to his bloody chin and swollen nose, yet another shout of pain tearing its way from the little boy's throat.

"What happened?"

"One of the steps in the entrance hall crumbled under Donel's feet," said Dori, his usually immaculate beard disheveled from Frodo's constant thrashing. "He toppled down into Frodo and then they both rolled to the bottom. I tried to grab them, but they just went down at a speed I couldn't keep up with and…"

"It's alright, Dori," assured Bilbo. "Things like this happen sometimes when little hands and feet are involved. And they're still in one piece from the looks of it. Nothing's broken, is it, Óin?"

"Frodo's got quite the bump on his head and several missing teeth, but neither of them appear to have broken anything," said the healer. "Plenty of gashes and bruises and scrapes to go around, though."

"I lost my teeth, Uncle."

Bilbo ran a gentle hand over Frodo's bruised cheek. "That's okay, darling. You'll have your new ones growing in before the end of the year. And we can use them for your milk necklace, too."

"But they're gone," whined Frodo. "They fell off."
"Gone?"

Dori's arms tightened around Frodo, thick fingers running up and down the little boy's back as Óin swabbed at his bloody eyebrow, cheeks, chin, and hands. A green tint had overtaken the fussy dwarf's features, something that Bilbo had only ever seen when one of the Company members acted like an uncivilized idiot or when one of his brothers were injured on the quest. It was an unnerving sight, to say the least. And Frodo seemed to agree with the older hobbit's assumptions, his small arms reaching up to dangle about Dori's rigid shoulders.

"It's okay, Dori. I've got more of them. See…"

"Oh, I know, little one. And what lovely, pearly teeth they are," said Dori. He was all but clutching Frodo to him, a clear sign that Bilbo was still missing essential pieces of the stairs-toppling-puzzle. "I think it'd be best to keep them well away from hard surfaces in the future, though."

Frodo nodded, face scrunching up when Óin dabbed his chin again.

"What did you mean about them falling off?" queried Bilbo when both boys were distracted by Óin's continued treatment. His friend's clinginess was beginning to unnerve him now. "Dori? What happened?"

"They nearly fell off, Bilbo," whispered the dwarf. "I only allowed them to walk a few steps in front of me, but then Donel tripped and they nearly went over the edge of the walkway. It was one of those areas where the railings were knocked off in Smaug's wrath. I'd never take the children near the unrailed walkways, I swear it. But it was already past their dinnertime and this walkway is only missing a few parts of the rails on the left side, so I decided to take a shortcut with them."

Dori's fingers were massaging gentle circles into Frodo's side, an obvious attempt to soothe both himself and the injured boy. The incident had terrified Dori in its simplicity and swiftness. All it took was one second and a crumbling lump of stones to thrust two children into the abyss of Erebor's mines. And Dori had nearly fallen prey to such a tragedy not even twenty minutes ago.

"And then Donel tumbled forward and I couldn't catch them in time," said Dori, a pale falling over his face as he recounted the incident. "They landed inches from the edge, Bilbo, and there's nothing I could've done to grab them before…"

"You nearly went over yourself, Dori," soothed Glóin's wife. "I witnessed all of it from the level beneath you. The entire central wing's a menace to Erebor's children and a good portion of our adults, too."

"That thrice damned dragon did so much damage," snarled Dís. "Even after death, his ghost still dogs the footsteps of our children."

"Owww!"

It took over a half-hour for Óin to finish patching up the boys and then administer the pain tonics that would allow them to sleep through the night. Both of them had nasty-looking gashes on their cheeks, foreheads, chins, and hands along with swollen noses and bruises littering every part of their small bodies. Donel had sprained his right ankle in the fall, which Óin had wrapped up tightly in a soft splint for the time being. In contrast, poor Frodo had bumped his head on the way down while also skinning his lower calves, a very unfortunate result of the boy's traditional hobbit attire. And he'd lost five more teeth from the looks of it, too.

"The poor thing will be gumming his food for weeks," lamented Dís. "Frerin lost half of his teeth in
less than one month, if I remember correctly. He looked like an infirm warg whenever he tried to chew his meat."

"How is that any different than regular dwarf meals?"

"The food actually fell out of his mouth," said Dís with a chuckle. "You don't see that at regular dwarf meals. Our men practically start to whimper and bawl if something doesn't manage to get into their mouths. Frerin sure did."

"Sure explains a lot about Fíli, then."

The Lady of Erebor was sitting on the couch with a slumbering Donel wrapped up in her lap, hands gently combing through his messy red hair so that she could then braid it into some semblance of order later. Bilbo sat opposite her on the same couch, a huge knitted blanket draped across both their legs while drowsy children filled their laps. Frodo had an unpleasant frown on his scratched up face, bandaged hands twitching in discomfort whenever he tried to move in his sleep. Overall, both boys looked like they'd gone three rounds in the arena with Dwalin on a Mersday morning.

"Here's some tea for the two of you," said Dori when he returned from the nearby royal kitchens. "My favorite blend of chamomile, this is. Works wonders with sleep and a passing ache in the back."

"Thank you, Dori. Now have a seat over here." Bilbo patted the armchair directly beside the drawing room couch. "You look like you're dead on your feet, my friend. Just rest yourself for a little bit, alright?"

"Aye, and they feel like granite, too. Dreadful evening."

"I've sent word to Donel's mother about what happened," said Dala a few minutes later. Thorin, Óin, and Balin followed behind her. "I assured her that everything was okay, but I still think she'd like to know about it."

"Thank you, Dala. I didn't even think about that," admitted Bilbo. "It'd probably do the lad some good to see her for a short while, too."

Poor Thana had been exhausted over the last few days. The twins had been going through their first bout of teething, so Bilbo had offered to watch Donel for several nights, or at least until Thana and Farór didn't look like they were going to pass out or fall down a flight of steps themselves. Donel had been more than happy to get away from the thunderous crying of his baby sisters, eagerly making himself at home in Frodo's bedchambers, play area, and pool-like washrroom.

"Are they alright?" asked Thorin.

"Just bruised, bumped, and scraped up," said Óin as he sunk into one of the side chairs with a groan. "None of their gashes are more than superficial, so I'd expect both of them to be back on their feet and playing by tomorrow morning. Donel's ankle might take a few more days of recuperation, though."

"I've already spoken with the foreman in charge of resurfacing the—"

"Khan háknith munza lâhk!"

Dala sighed. "I will never understand half the words that come out of that sweet lad's mouth. He uses the most obscure dialect."

"I tried to look it up," whispered Dís. "Still haven't found it yet, either."
"Me neither," said Dori.

"Oh, hello there, Bifur," said Bilbo when the toymaker entered through the door. "It looks like your trip to Dale went well. What've you got there?"

"Mûhk al—"

"Iglishmêk, my dear cousin," said Bofur as he breezed into the room with a bunch of boxes in his arms, "Iglishmêk. And don't throw the basket while you do it! That'd be a traumatizing situation, no doubt about it."

"Bifur?"

_I have something for the boys, signed the dwarf. An early Midwinter's present, in case of more snow from the north._

The axe-ridden dwarf was practically bouncing up and down where he stood, both hands clutching a cloth-covered basket in front of him. Bifur tended to be quite excitable, even downright manic some times; but this was a whole new level of energetic that Bilbo had scarcely seen before. It almost looked like the dwarf was going to explode like one of Gandalf's whiz-poppers if he didn't give his present soon.

"Finally! Some good news," stated Dori with a loud sigh. "We need some of that right about now. Very, very dearly."

"That was extremely thoughtful of you, Bifur," said the hobbit with a smile. "Just give Dís and myself a few moments to wake the boys, alright?"

Bifur didn't stop hopping, though.

It didn't take long for them to rouse the boys from their tonic-induced slumbers, a series of near-toothless yawns from Frodo illustrating just how many teeth he had lost in today's dangerous escapades through the entrance hall. However, the mention of presents woke both children up without a second's pause.

"Presents?!"

"Well, that certainly got their attention," said Balin with a laugh. "Nothing wakes a child up quicker than the sound of gift boxes and tearing paper. Ah, ah, careful with the bandages, lads."

"Balin's right, boys," scolded Bilbo. "You've already got more than enough cuts and scrapes for the month. Slow down. Thorin."

The Dwarf-King reached over and snatched up a wriggling Frodo, nodding to his sister when she kept a tight hold on the dwarfling. Both of them walked over to Bifur, an impatient armful of children struggling forward to see what was in the basket. Of course, considering their long and arduous past with two other squirmy dwarflings, neither of the royal siblings had any problem controlling the situation.

"Now hold still and mind your manners," rumbled Thorin. "Fussy little boys don't get presents until they're calm and say their thanks to the gifter. Now…"

"Thank you, Bifur!" chorused both boys.

With that done, the eager dwarf pulled off the blanket and allowed everyone to see what exactly he
and Bofur had bought while trudging through the snow to Dale. And with squeals of childish joy, it was obvious that the gift didn't disappoint either of the children or the adults in the room.

"Kittens!"

Frodo and Donel were reaching for the basket within seconds, both royals leaning forward so that they wouldn't drop their injured charges. Always fond of animals himself, Bilbo made his way over to the basket and peered inside at the three sleeping kittens, two of them a dusky grey and the largest one a dark orange. The excited shouts of the children appeared to have woken all three of them.

"Now be gentle, boys," warned Dís. "And careful with your bandages. We'll have to give them a bath, Thorin. In case they've got fleas."

Thorin's eyebrows shot up. "You're planning to keep them?"

"I'm certainly not planning to say no to them," said Dís with her patented are-you-an-idiot-dear-brother look. "The boys or the kittens. Have you seen those eyes? I refuse to be the villain in this story."

"And you expect me to be it instead?"

"Well, if you want to upset your intended, sister, nephews, and the children; then by all means, forbid the keeping of pets in the royal wing. But I won't defend you when a pair of hobbits and dwarflings decide to kick your royal ass."

"You're a cruel woman."

"Perhaps," said Dís with a shrug. "Though I'm not the one hesitating to give my child a pet kitten. Honestly, Thorin…"

"You know I've never been fond of cats. He should've gotten the boys some kind of mongrel or hound that's good for—"

"Klunk!"

Thorin was suddenly faced with a faceful of furry orange kitten. And a toothless, exuberant, and scratched-up little hobbit. If there were any doubts about Thorin's kingly demeanor being ripped to shreds by the children in his life, then they were all crushed to teeny-tiny pieces by Frodo's joyous smile.

"He keeps bumping into the table," explained Frodo. "So I've named him, Klunk. And that one's Bumble. And that's Zuzu. His stripes look like Zs."

"Those are…very good names."

Bilbo was cuddling with the grey-striped kitten named Zuzu, jabbering on and on to Balin about the old tomcat he'd had as a young faunt at Bag End. The second grey cat, Bumble, was rolling around on the floor and batting at Donel's loose bandages. All of the other dwarves were making over the tiny creatures as well.

"Can we keep them? Please, please, please, please, please?"

"Well, we'll have to—"

And then there was a whole bunch of barking and banging and cursing from the nearby kitchen,
Bofur tumbling through the door with four little balls of sleek grey fuzz milling around his booted feet. One of them was carrying a wooden toy in its muzzle, an obvious no-no if Bofur's reprimands were to be listened to. Bifur and the children let out whoops of excitement when the puppies made their appearance, every other dwarf in the room gaping in shock at this new development.

"You got puppies, too?" gasped Bilbo.

_Deerhounds. Future hunting dogs, signed Bifur. Only five in the entire city now. All of them belong to Malor. We need more for the hunting seasons._

"Puppies!" shrieked a voice from the door. "Finally!"

Kíli was across the room in seconds, scooping up the squirming pups and making over them with coos and kisses and cuddles. His brother wasn't far behind on his wobbly crutches, blue eyes brighter than they'd been since Bilbo's initial arrival. To say that both of the princes were enamored would be an understatement.

"I'm gonna name you, Granite!" declared Kíli. "And you'll be Jasper. And you'll be Onyx. And you'll be...ugh, whoops, this one's a girl. Well, hmmm, you can be Beryl! A good, strong name for a good, strong girl."

"How come you get to name them?" demanded Fíli.

"Because I've had those names on a waiting list for over seventy years," said Kíli with an upturned nose. "First come, first names."

"Snotty brat."

"Well, that's one dream come true," stated Dís with a delighted smile. "They've been begging for a puppy for decades. Thank you, Bifur."

"And I must thank you as well," said Dala while she watched Gimli fawn over one of the pups. "Gimli's had a similar desire in recent years. Maybe having some pets will make Erebor more... hospitable for the little ones."

"I'm inclined to agree," stated Bilbo from his spot on the floor. One of the kittens was attacking the hair atop his feet. "And Bifur's selected a fine bunch here."

"He's always had a way with the beasts," said Bofur. He'd finally escaped the pile of pups and had wandered over to the pile of kittens. "Used to take care of any stray he'd find on our travels from village to village. Saved quite a few of them, he did. They're one of the reasons he's still with us, I think. Helped pull him out of the other world when Azanulbizar and the axe wound became too much. He'd have been lost to us if not for all of those dogs and cats and goats and cows and ponies and such. Brought him back to our world, they all did."

"And now?" asked Bilbo with a concerned tone. "Will these animals help Bifur?"

Bofur nodded. "Aye, I think they will. Help ground him to this world, my brother and I reckon. Might also help him interact with the boys, too. He's got a real soft spot for all of them, but communicating's difficult for him. Even with those who have open minds like Frodo and the princes. But the animals might help, I hope."

Thorin couldn't argue with that. Or say no. And he honestly didn't want to, either.
The incident with Frodo and Donel falling is actually based on an actual accident I had to treat last week at work. Two little girls fell down a flight of stairs and nearly rolled under a high railing and into heavy traffic below. Terrifying story to hear from the parents. Plus, Erebor's got to be a gigantic hazard for little children to live in, especially due to Smaug's destruction inside of it. And I picture the new family pets looking fairly similar to domestic longhair cats and Scottish deerhounds, the latter of which is pretty hilarious considering how huge those dogs get in real life.
"You enjoy acting all mysterious and broody, don't you?"

The past few weeks had been extremely hectic in the mountain. One of the miners in Bofur's crew had uncovered two dozen more precious metal mines that Thorin and his council had believed were fully collapsed after Smaug's rampage. But as it turned out, all of them were still in working order and a short excavation period around the primary and side entrances was all they needed to do before mining could resume in them again. Most of the Company had been extremely busy as a direct result of this, so Bilbo had seen little of Thorin, the princes, and everyone else in recent weeks. Ori, Dhola, the children, and an unruly bunch of baby animals had been Bilbo's main source of company during the daytime hours, a fact that he'd lamented about to Thorin last night.

"And you're a nosy hobbit who can't keep questions to himself," replied the King. His hands were gently guiding Bilbo down a series of tunnels that branched off of the side corridors in the royal wing. "Now close your eyes and stop pestering me for information. I won't be giving in so easily on this."

"I can certainly see that," said Bilbo.

"Someone's feeling quite sassy today," chuckled Thorin. "Does my brooding and mysterious presence bring out such tantalizing feistiness often, Master Baggins? Or have you been hiding it from me all along?"

"I think you're underestimating the large number of times I've told you off during the last few years," snickered the hobbit. "But if you purposely let me run into a wall or a door, I can guarantee that my so-called sassiness will result in several days of indigestion, unpleasant bowel movements, and stinky gas for you, Master Dwarf. We hobbits aren't as naïve as everyone thinks we are, I can assure you."

"Oh, I'm betting on it," rumbled the dwarf.

"Thorin! Behave yourself," snapped Bilbo when he felt a hand drifting a little too low on his backside. "We're still out in public, you perverse dwarf. Anybody could walk by and see you groping me."

"Do not fret, my dear hobbit. These tunnels are still sectioned off from the rest of the city," assured the King. "The royal wing's entrance is the only one that didn't collapse during Smaug's charge through the middle levels. We will be the only ones wandering in, out, or near these tunnels for some months to come, so there's no reason to worry about a stranger seeing us."

"And the boys?"

"They shouldn't be…well, okay, maybe they're always a problem," admitted the King with a loud sigh. "But they know better than to become too overbearing. I'd assign them to outside duty if they decide to push me too far."

"No, you wouldn't."

Thorin's fingers tightened on his shoulder. "Oh, really? And you know this how?"
"I have to live with those rascals," said Bilbo, "And the last thing anyone needs is for one of them to come down with a nasty cold. Fíli's thigh wound is almost healed, and Kíli's bruising from last week's cave-in doesn't look quite so hideous anymore. But, if an unnecessary round of outdoor guard duty results in more whining and complaining from a certain set of boys who shall not be named, then I won't be responsible for the abrupt lack of royal heirs to Erebor's throne."

"You spoil them."

"By refusing to throw rocks at their heads or toss them outside into the snow when they've behaved like a bunch of short-sighted nincompoops? If that's the case, then yes, I spoil them rotten."

"They have to be prepared to govern Erebor when the time—"

"Are you planning to die sometime soon? Because if you are, then I'd really like to know about it. I don't know if I want to be married to a death-seeker. I prefer my spouse alive and somewhat healthy, for obvious reasons."

"Of course not!"

"Then there's no reason to keep pushing the boys to the breaking point. I've done enough reading and conversing with Dhola in the library to know that neither of them are yet considered full adults in dwarf society, either. And since you're not planning to die or abdicate any time soon, then I don't see any reason why I can't spoil them whenever I feel like playing the doting uncle archetype. Which is quite often, I must admit, if Kíli gets his way like he always does. Evil child, that one is."

"I think I'm finally beginning to see why other races avoid the Shire. You hobbits are an incredibly bossy bunch."

"Ha! How else would we throw such grand parties all the time? Someone needs to take charge and establish a sense of order. Any hobbit worth their salt must be able to get their entire family under control at birthday parties. Now, where exactly are you leading me to, my dear dwarf?"

"Just a few more moments," assured Thorin.

Bilbo allowed his intended to gently maneuver him through the twisting corridors of Erebor without a second thought, wholly trusting that the Dwarf-King would keep him from colliding with any door, pillar, or wall on this blind quest of his. Even with his eyes closed tight, Bilbo could feel Thorin's excitement radiating through twitchy fingers and a shaky stutter in his breaths. It was incredibly endearing and Bilbo could hardly wait to see what his dwarf had planned for him.

"Okay, we're here," whispered Thorin. "Open your eyes. Now."

The hobbit did as he was told and slowly opened his eyes to gaze at the place that Thorin had worked so hard to keep from him over the past hour. And what an astounding and wonderful place it was!

"Are those all crystals?" gasped Bilbo. "They're everywhere!"

"The Hall of Lights has existed within Erebor since its founding," said Thorin. "It represents the greatest beauty that can be found within rock and stone. My paternal grandmother, a great crystal carver in her own right, used to spend several long hours every day in these chambers. Her garden of crystals is over here."

"I saw crystals in the goblin caves, but..." Bilbo trailed as he turned around to get a close look at the gigantic white crystals that pierced through the center of the enormous cavern. "Nothing like this."
"They provide a light all their own," explained Thorin as he gently led Bilbo over to the smaller crystal gardens that lined the cavern walls. "Every family in Erebor used to own and tend to gardens here, both of the crystal and vegetative variety. My mother had a wonderful mushroom patch next to her crystal garden when I was a young child. She was quite the chef when she put her mind to it."

"Mushrooms?"

Thorin laughed at Bilbo's excited tone. "I had a feeling that you'd latch onto that little piece of information. But yes, the gardens can produce a wide variety of edible ones if they are properly tended to and watched over. Dori and Bombur have been tending to a handful of patches for several months now. I think Nori has a patch hidden somewhere in here, too; but those definitely aren't of the edible variety, I can assure you."

"Why does that not surprise me," said Bilbo with a knowing smile. "But shrooms of the poisonous variety sound like something right up Nori's alley, if you ask me. Dori's probably not too happy about it, though."

"He doesn't seem to care too much now that Nori has an actual job that won't be landing him in jail cells anymore. Dwalin, on the other hand, has been trying to find one of the patches for weeks now," chuckled Thorin. "Ah, see this patch over here? With the circular stones lining it? That's one of Dori's tended patches. The others have grown wild during Smaug's reign, but we should be able to harvest some of these patches in the next season or so."

"How many patches are there?"

"Thousands of smaller ones like this, and several hundred larger ones towards the back of the primary cavern," explained the Dwarf-King. "There are also dozens of shafts, tunnels, and ducts that lead to smaller caverns all around this one here. My family had an entire cavern just for growing mushrooms. It's this way."

"Good gracious, this is just so..."

Without any warning, the hobbit pulled Thorin down by his braids and happily kissed him on the lips. A pleased groan rumbled deep in the King's chest, his large hands instinctively gripping Bilbo's hips when the hobbit stood on his tippy-toes and opened his mouth for further exploration. Thorin wasted no time in plundering his hobbit's mouth, desperate to taste the addictive sweetness that he'd been denied for the past few months. A surprised squeak was pulled from Bilbo several seconds later, his small fingers flexing in Thorin's hair whenever the Dwarf-King squeezed or pinched at his sensitive bum. In retaliation, Bilbo's own hips rolled forward and punched another loud groan out of the taller dwarf.

"It seems I'll have to give you more food-related gifts," panted Thorin, "If this is the response I get for it."

Bilbo giggled. "Well, we hobbits do love our food."

"I can see that," said the dwarf as he lovingly caressed Bilbo's plump belly. "Keeping a hungry hobbit like yourself well-fed and content will not be an easy task, I fear."

"Do I sense some nervousness, my King?"

"Only for my kingdom's food stores and granaries, my Consort." Thorin was licking at the hobbit's pointed ears now. "But I'm sure we can find other ways to sate your ravenous hunger."

"Thorin! Behave yourself!"
"You have the most lovely bum, my dearest burglar. So very plump and soft and—"

"Hey! Stop that!"

"I'm just very happy to see you, my beautiful halfling."

"Oh, dear..."

Bilbo spent the next half-hour smacking at Thorin's lascivious fingers and exploring the beautiful cavern, amazed at all of the colors that the crystals came in and the ways that they could be cultivated over decades or centuries to emit the most gorgeous beams of light. The mushrooms especially interested Bilbo as he meandered through the side caverns, his eyes carefully surveying each type to figure out if it was edible or not. He recognized several varieties of button mushrooms, which six families in Hobbiton cultivated throughout the year, but many of the shrooms were not at all familiar to Bilbo's internal mushroom catalogue.

"I'll have to look for some books on these tomorrow," said Bilbo as he poked at a small patch of shrooms growing along the walls. "Oh, I can't wait to use some of these in my cooking. Do you know of any mushroom experts? Bombur?"

"You'll have to ask around," rumbled Thorin from where he'd taken up residence at Bilbo's back. "I've never paid too much attention to the chefs, I'll admit. But Bombur might have a good idea who to speak with, knowing him."

"Of course," said Bilbo.

The hobbit leaned back into his intended's larger body, relishing the warmth that Thorin always radiated in delicious waves. They were deep in the heart of winter now; a few short days away from Yule, if the calendars were correct. Times were still tough and lean in both Erebor and Dale, so gifts would be much sparser than Bilbo preferred, but he had already secured at least one Yule present for each member of the Company and extra presents of sentimental value for those in his immediate family.

"Did Uncle Bilbo like his courting gift?"

Speaking of family...

"Aye, he did," answered the hobbit. "Uncle Bilbo liked Uncle Thorin's courting gift very, very much. Although it would have been even lovelier if a certain pair of nosy dwarves hadn't come barging in uninvited."

"Aww, we're just protecting your virtue until the khalâk ceremony, Uncle Bilbo," said Kíli with a shit-eating grin. He'd somehow climbed on top of a large crystal, legs and arms dangling in the air around him. "Isn't that right, Uncle Thorin?"

"Yeah, don't worry, Uncle Bilbo," laughed Fíli from atop his own crystal. "You'll not have a trace of virtue left in a few days. Uncle Thorin will make sure of it."

"I don't care what Dís says. I'm killing them."

"Fíli! Get your hairy dwarf behind down from there this instant!" yelled Bilbo around his bright red cheeks. "That leg of yours isn't healed yet!"

"Uh uh, I'm not coming down," said the older prince. "Uncle Thorin will kill me."
"Clearly, I need to rethink my life choices," Bilbo mumbled to himself. He heard a startled yelp from off to the side, obviously meaning that Thorin had thrown something at Kíli again. "Because something's seriously not quite right with these dwarves. Maybe it's in the water or the—"

"Awww, c'mon, Uncle Thorin," giggled Fíli from his glowing perch. "Someone's got to warn Uncle Bilbo about dwarvish customs. And it's not like we want to, anyways. Telling him this stuff is like having the talk all over again."

"Ohhhhh, mushroom…"

Thunk!

And then a small rock collided with the side of Kíli's head, effectively preventing him from eating the button-like shrooms that were growing along the cavern walls. King, Heir-Apparent, and younger prince all stared in shock at their hobbit, watching as he took quick steps toward the crystal and glared at each of them. Another small rock was resting in Bilbo's hand, fully prepared to collide with another dwarven skull if they decided to do something stupid again.

"Don't you dare stick that in your mouth! It could be poisonous!"

The sound of Bilbo actually, legitimately yelling was enough to shock all of the dwarves into silence and immobility. Even Thorin froze in mid-attempt to grab at Kíli's dangling foot. If Bilbo hadn't been so terrified by Kíli's near-ingestion of a possibly-poisonous mushroom, then he probably would've laughed at the sheer insanity and lack of common sense that surrounded the line of Durin.

Dís was right. The males of her family were all halfwits and gold-addled fools.

"I take back everything I said about the rocks," lamented Bilbo. "I swear, it's just like the ponies all over again. How in the world are these two still alive, anyways? I'm in a right state of bafflement about it."

"Your guess is as good as mine," admitted Thorin.

"Well, if that's the case, then get your immature butt down here, Kíli. Let me take a look at that thick head of yours. And you can come out now, Frodo! I know you're here and hiding somewhere in the crystals."

Neither prince put up any resistance, both sliding down from their perches so their newly appointed uncle could look over their still-healing injuries. Frodo emerged seconds later from amidst a large cluster of crystals, smiling sheepishly at the adults who'd caught him again. It was much harder to trick Bilbo than his Brandybuck relatives, which he had learned several times over the last few months. Fíli and Kíli were good partners-in-crime, but they also tended to give themselves away with goofy mistakes that his cousins Pippin and Merry would've scoffed at if they were here.

"What's this, Kíli?"

Bilbo leaned forward to take a closer look at the prince's left shoulder, which had a series of dark bruises lining it. These weren't the ones from last week's cave-in. They'd probably came from the grappling and ground-fighting training that Thorin had signed his nephew up for earlier in the month. Bilbo would be having a chat with Dís and Óin about how overworked the princes were as soon as possible. Someone had to make sure that Thorin didn't push them too far and too hard again.

"Oh, yeah, Náli landed on my shoulder during practice yesterday," stated Kíli with a muted shrug. He winced when Bilbo gave him a knowing look. "And I, ummm, haven't had a chance to see Óin about it. Yet."
"And yet you had time to come here," said Bilbo with a loud sigh. "Okay, let's get you to a healer before your mother sees it. Thorin?"

The Dwarf-King had barely turned around to see what his intended wanted before Bilbo planted a sound kiss on his lips. Frodo made a gagging noise from Thorin's arms, a deerhound pup bouncing around at the King's feet. Probably Jasper, if the droopy tail and overly floppy ears were anything to go by for identification. Bilbo pulled away and smiled at the dopey look on Thorin's face, still more than little amazed at the fact that this strong, courageous, thick-headed, and stubborn dwarf would be his in just a few short, nerve-wracking days.

"Thank you for the amazing gift, Thorin. I'll make some mushroom soup with the first batch that my garden produces. And no, boys, you may not comb through all of the others to find them now. Off to the healers. Get!"

"So, you really like it?" asked Thorin as they left.

"It's one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen in my life, Thorin. Of course, I love it. And I can grow mushrooms here, too! Nothing makes a hobbit happier than the gift of food, my King," said Bilbo, pressing another kiss to Thorin's bearded cheek. "And I must admit, although I loved the courting dagger and axe, I'll actually know what to do with this gift. A pot of mushroom soup and spiced steak flavored with morels. Mmmmmm."

"Hobbits. Always thinking with their stomachs."

"Ugh, could you two please stop kissing so much? You're gonna scar Frodo for life. Eww! Stop it!"

"They've got cooties."

"Only girls can give you cooties, Frodo."

"Uh uh. Dwarves can, too."

"Then that means you've gotten cooties from all of us, Frodo."

"Ah! I'm infected!"

"Don't make me use this rock, Kíli."

"Thorin!"

Chapter End Notes

The Lonely Mountain wouldn't be complete without some crystal-filled caves, now would it? And one of my coworkers was complaining about how her four kids are always cockblocking her and her husband from having sex or even mild romantic moments, so Bilbo and Thorin get to experience the joy of being in a relationship while having two teenage boys and a pre-schooler running around. Plus, Dís is probably laughing her ass off in the background, too. And I'm almost done! Only two chapters left! Finally!
Weddings

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Are you sure I need all of this?"

The first night of Yule had approached far more quickly than Bilbo had anticipated, creeping right up on him while the rest of the city bustled about and prepared for the khalâk ceremony that would be held on Yule Eve. Unlike hobbits, elves, and humans, who all conducted their marriage ceremonies in a fairly similar manner, the dwarves did not practice weddings or marriage rites in any way that was familiar to Bilbo or the other races of Middle-Earth. Dwarf society held grand ceremonies on the solstices and equinoxes of each year, celebrating the continued prospering of their cities and the new marriages that would be confirmed that night. As Bilbo had learned from Balin, dwarves only married on specific days of the year, such as the solstices and equinoxes, and at specific times of the day, such as twilight or sunrise. Some customs differed from clan to clan, but the celestial restrictions remained constant amongst all dwarves.

"Of course!" chirped Kíli. "We've got to have you looking your finest tonight."

"And since you won't be participating in the actual khalâk tournament, some extra finery is necessary to make you even more alluring to the dwarvish eye," said Dís. Her fingers swiftly braided Bilbo's hair, expertly weaving the short strands into his first marriage braid. "My brother will probably be a sweaty and bruised mess by the end, but my hard work won't be ruined on you, now will it?"

Bilbo shook his head once Dís had clipped the marriage beads into place. "It figures that you dwarves would incorporate fighting and arena combat into your wedding ceremonies."

"I won my khalâk shah-âi," said Dís with a wicked smile. "It's all in good nature, of course, but roughing up some other dwarrows is always quite fun. Víli was knocked out in the third round, though."

"Uncle Thorin's the strongest warrior in tonight's khalâk shah-âi," boasted Fíli. He was holding the box of gems that Bilbo would soon be slathered in. "Kíli and me aren't allowed to perform the actual khalâk with him since we're still considered underage, but the rest of the Company will be there for it."

"War dances, combat tournaments, and giant communal weddings," whispered Bilbo to himself. "I'm really not in the Shire anymore."

"The boys will be sitting with you the whole time," assured Dís as she clicked bejeweled clasps onto his ears. "As a hobbit, you aren't expected to actively participate in anything besides the khalâk maza, or the vowing ceremony, so your nephews will be allowed to stay with you until the very end."

"Hear that, Uncle Bilbo," snickered Kíli, "We're officially your nephews now!"

"Valar help me."

"We've been saying those exact words for decades," said Balin as he entered the Blue Room. "Everything coming along well, my Lady?"

"He's been fussy about the jewels and ceremonial attire, but I've sorted almost everything out now,"
said Dís, her fingers covered in a blue paint that she then started to spread carefully around Bilbo's eyes and upper cheeks. "Thorin's not being too difficult, is he? The fool kept insisting on wearing that awful kilt-like thing of his to the khalâk shah-âi."

Balin chuckled at this. "It's traditional, my Lady."

"And it's ugly."

"If I remember correctly," drawled Balin, "Your own father and both of your grandfathers wore the same ones at their khalâk. Everyone else will be wearing their family colors as well."

"That doesn't mean they're any less ugly," said Dís with a final sniff. "Víli didn't have to wear one and he looked perfectly fine."

Kíli giggled to himself. "Maybe Longbeards just like a nice breeze around their privates!"

"And you people say hobbits are odd," muttered Bilbo. He poked at the gold embroidery that twisted up the arms of his dwarvish finery, marveling at the sheer number of ways that dwarves could incorporate gold, mithril, and precious gems into their clothing. "Where's Frodo?"

"Dori has him right now," said Balin. "The lad's quite the little ball of energy today."

"Of course, he is! It's not only Yule, but our family's also having a khalâk tonight," reasoned Kíli. "What's not to get excited about for a little boy?"

"Well, that certainly explains why you've been bouncing all over the royal wing this afternoon," said Dís with a snort. "Fíli, make yourself useful and retrieve my spool of dark blue thread. It's on the bureau in my bedchambers. Second drawer from the bottom. And be quick about it. It's almost time."

"Oh, gracious..."

"You have nothing to be nervous about, Bilbo," assured Balin. "Thorin's the one who actually has to be impressive tonight. His kingship and victorious quests have resulted in many of our people placing him on a very, very high pedestal. Your race automatically removes such high expectations from your person, but Thorin must perform well in the khalâk shah-âi tonight so that his people won't experience any disappointment in their King."

"It all sounds so dreadfully stressful," lamented the hobbit. "Even the dances look like war dances. But there will be food, correct?"

Balin laughed. "Yes, there will be much food after the ceremonies are complete. And you won't have to cook a single bit of it."

"It will be nice to actually have a large meal made by someone other than myself," admitted Bilbo. "Feeding the whole lot of you is hard work. Thank Eru that I've got Bombur for help."

"Bombur eats half of it, though!"

"Thank you, Fíli." The princess moved around to stand in front of Bilbo. "I'll have to hem those sleeves a little bit unless we want you losing your mêinel ring in them. Now, hold still..."

Dís fixed the sleeves on Bilbo's tunic while the boys spoke with Balin about tonight's festivities, both of them practically bouncing up and down in excitement as the older dwarf explained the finer details about traditional khalâk ceremonies to them. According to Balin, khalâk ceremonies were usually only performed in a massive chamber built on the western or eastern edge of a mountain, which
differed from clan to clan depending on which time of day they preferred to hold their ceremonies. Durin's Folk always held khalâk at twilight, so Erebor's ceremonial chamber was situated beneath the western slopes of the Lonely Mountain, allowing it to capture the last rays of sunset through strategic openings in the ceiling.

A khalâk ceremony had not been held in the Lonely Mountain for over seventeen decades, so tonight was an extremely important and symbolic event for the dwarves of Durin's Folk. For many of them, this would be the first traditional khalâk ceremony that they'd ever particulated in or watched in their lifetimes. Bilbo had heard some of the older dwarves talking to each other and reminiscing about the ceremonies before Smaug, several of them bragging about their own khalâk and how wonderful their spouses had looked in their twilight finery. Yet again, Bilbo was reminded of how difficult the nomadic lives of Thorin and his people had been after Erebor's fall.

"So, it's basically war-like dances, tournaments, vows, feasting, drinking, and partying," said Bilbo after a few minutes. "All staples of dwarf culture. Huh. I should've seen this coming, after all."

"Well, the rest of us will be partying," said Fíli with a waggle of his eyebrows. "You and Uncle Thorin will be busy doing something more...strenuous back here."

Dís smacked him over the head with a brush. "Watch your mouth, young dwarf. I've had it about up to here with all of your pranks these past couple weeks. Tonight's a big night for your uncle and Bilbo, so you'd better be on your best behavior. Or else..."

Fíli and Kíli both clutched at their bums.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," said Dís. "Honestly, what is it with this age? They all think they're invincible and nothing can chop their heads off. And the cruder the words are, the better. Yes, I'm talking about you two! Now, stop sitting there like a bunch of lumps and retrieve your little cousin. He'll be with you the entire time, so keep an extra close eye on him. Do you hear me?"

"Loud and clear," said Kíli with a salute.

The princes marched out of the Blue Room and towards the voices that could be heard down the corridor. They laughed and pushed and shoved at each other the whole way, jabbering on and on about the tournament and who would win over who in the khalâk shah-âi. Bilbo couldn't help but smile when both of them came to the conclusion that Thorin would wipe the floor with everyone else in participation.

"Sometimes I really wonder about those boys," sighed the princess. "They get it from Thorin and their father, I swear. A bunch of halfwits and deathseekers, the whole lot of them. Are you sure you want to marry into the insanity that is Durin's line, Master Baggins?"

Bilbo heard a crash and a yelp out in the hallway. Kíli had probably flicked at Dwalin's half-bitten ear one too many times again.

"Eh, I think I can handle them."

"If you say so. Now, stand up and let me look at you," ordered Dís.

Knowing better than to argue with his soon-to-be sister-in-law, Bilbo stood up and did a complete rotation so Dís could see his formal attire from every angle. By hobbit standards, he looked like a walking and talking jewel, covered from head to toe in rich blue fabrics with gold embroidery and enough jewelry to buy Bag End fifteen times over. Lobelia Sackville-Baggins probably would've knocked him out, stripped him of all valuables, and then kicked him into a ditch if she'd had the
opportunity. It looked like Bilbo had taken a tumble into the Royal Treasury!

"It's perfect!" crowed Dís with a clap of her hands. "Thorin's going to trip over his feet and choke on his own tongue when he sees you. Doesn't he look handsome, Balin?"

"You've done an outstanding job, my Lady," said the advisor with a wide smile. "The braided foot hair and beads are a delightful addition."

Bilbo wiggled his toes with a dismal glare. He'd tried to talk Dís out of braiding his foot hair, but the princess had insisted and arguing with Dís was an exhausting affair. It was only for one evening, after all; so Bilbo was willing to suck up his pride and go with the flow for Thorin's sake tonight. The excessive amount of jewels, accessories, and gold linen made Bilbo feel several pounds heavier, though.

"Okay, I think we're ready to go," said Dís with a firm nod. "As Thorin's sister, I'll be escorting you to the ceremonial chamber. But once we're there, I'll have to leave you and spend the rest of the evening with Thorin. Someone needs to keep an eye on him, after all. The boys will be waiting for you at the thrones, and they'll stay with you for everything else aside from the vow ceremony."

"Thrones?"

"Where else did you think you were going to be sitting?" asked Dís with a laugh. "The King and his family always preside over the khalâk, but Dáin, his son, the boys, and you will be the only ones up there tonight. Royal khalâk are rare due to our long lifespans and monogamous nature, but they're always very big events. Thorin and myself will be in or near the arena most of the evening."

"So, basically," Bilbo said with a cringe, "I just have to sit there and look pretty."

"That's about it."

Dís and Balin walked on either side of him, gently guiding Bilbo through the vast hallways and chasms and walkways and corridors that made up most of Erebor. Bilbo had gotten much better at navigating through the main passages of the city in recent weeks, but the side tunnels still tripped him up at every turn. And the long robes Dís had put him in were very, very likely to break his neck on even the smallest flight of stairs, so the extra help was much appreciated by Bilbo at this point.

"Public objections are allowed at the khalâk, but I've already told Dáin and all of our princes to be extra intimidating to anyone who walks by you," explained Dís. "So, don't mind the warhammers or battle-axes that they'll be holding on their laps. It's all perfectly acceptable."

Bilbo nodded, desperately trying to keep up with everything they were telling him. "Is there an actual chance of someone objecting?"

"There's always a chance, but it's a much higher possibility when someone of another race is involved in the khalâk," said Balin. "Many dwarves are quite hostile towards those from other clans, let alone those of another race. But your position in the Company and participation in the reclamation of the Lonely Mountain should stay most of their tongues. And if it doesn't, well, then, I'm sure Dáin and the boys will set them straight on the matter."

"Ah, here we are!"

Before Bilbo could ask about anything else, he was escorted into the massive chamber where the khalâk ceremonies were traditionally held in Erebor. Huge crystals lined the towering ceiling and provided ample light. Between the crystals, several small, circular openings were etched into strategic parts of the mountain side, allowing the sun's rays to penetrate through thick granite walls. Pits of
sand and dirt littered the center of the chamber, all of them carefully tended to for the upcoming
tournaments. Long tables for dining and conversing lined the walls and other open spaces, large
clusters of dwarves already gathered together at several of them.

"The thrones are just up here," said Dís as she led Bilbo to the far side of the chamber. "And it looks
like my dear, sweet sons have already made themselves at home, too."

"Amad! Look at how handsome little Frodo is!"

Fíli and Kíli were both seated in their respective thrones and decked out in full royal regalia. Frodo
sat in Kíli's lap, blue eyes watching everything that was going on in the room with great interest. The
little boy was dressed more modestly than every other member of the royal family, but Bilbo had a
feeling that that was because of very loud protests on his nephew's part.

"Dáin, you have my permission to clobber them if they get out of control," said Dís. She leaned
down and gave Frodo a kiss on the cheek, telling the little boy how incredibly handsome he looked
in his new clothes. "And to knock the head off of any objectors who happen to come along. Thorin
might cut out their tongues, otherwise."

"You won't hear a word from them," promised the Lord of the Iron Hills. "I've already got my
Thorin scouting around for any animosity in the crowds."

Bilbo blinked, and then remembered that Dáin's son was named Thorin as well. Thorin III, to be
precise. The lad was about the same age as Kíli and possessed a similar coloring, but that was where
the similarities ended between the two of them. Like his father, Thorin III already had a very
substantial beard, broad stature, and nasty glare that could send even the most foolhardy of drunks
running for their lives. Overall, Bilbo found him to be a very nice lad, if a bit on the loud and rowdy
side.

"I always knew that habit of his would come in handy," laughed Dís, obviously sharing some kind
of inside joke with her equally amused cousin. "Now, just sit here, Bilbo, and enjoy the show.
Thorin will be shirtless for part of it."

"That woman is going to rule the world someday," said Dáin.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

Frodo ended up on his uncle's lap within seconds, happily cuddling into the older hobbit's pudgy
stomach. The past few days had been very hectic for Bilbo and Thorin, so poor Frodo had been
pushed off onto other members of the Company more often than not. For the umpteenth time that
day, Bilbo felt a wave of relief at not having to participate in most of the ceremonies. Instead, he
could just sit on his hobbit-y behind for everything except the actual vows and cuddle with his
parental-attention-deprived nephew.

"Weddings here are really strange, Uncle Bilbo. They don't have any flowers."

"I don't think dwarves are very fond of flowers or proper dances or doilies or silver spoons, my boy.
Well, I take back the part about not liking the silver, but I think you get my point."

And the next half-hour passed by with Frodo comparing everything between dwarf and hobbit
weddings, his small feet digging into Bilbo's sapphire-stubbed belt whenever he wanted to ask Dán
or the princes about something that he had not already been told. None of the dwarves seemed to
care, attentively answering each of Frodo's questions whenever the little boy's curiosity got the better
of him. It wasn't until an hour later that silence finally descended on the crowded room, a dozen or so
groups coming forward to stand in each of the large dirt patches that littered the chamber.

Thorin, Dís, and several other members of the Company stood at the center of the room, all of them shirtless (except for the females) and covered in inkings. Bilbo recognized most of the body art since the Company hadn't had any qualms about running around naked in rivers or ponds during their quest, but some of them had new inkings that the hobbit had never seen before. Dwalin was practically covered in them now.

"The khalâk begins with the ceremonial dances," whispered Dáin from Bilbo's left side. "Usually, only blood relatives participate in it since each family has their own specific combination of movements. However, since Thorin is a member of the royal family and representative of all Longbeards, then he may select anyone else from the line of Durin to participate alongside him."

Bilbo nodded, watching as Dwalin, Glóin, Dori, Bofur, Nori, Glóril, Bifur, Dís, and several other members of Thorin's personal guard circled around the Dwarf-King. Loud yells in Khuzdul started all around the chamber, one of the other groups starting the first khalâk of the night. As the sixth group performed their sharp and shouted movements, Bilbo was still convinced that the khalâk was a war dance, no matter what Balin said to the contrary. He'd certainly never seen such an aggressive dance performance in the Shire or local human villages before!

"Dwalin looks funny," giggled Frodo when Thorin's group started their khalâk. "Did he eat a lemon?"

"No, my boy, he didn't eat a lemon," whispered Bilbo with a chuckle. Thorin was yelling in time with the group's foot stomps now, slapping his thighs and reaching his arms skyward in a call to Mahâl for guidance and goodwill. "I think the funny faces and shouting are part of the khalâk."

Every part of the khalâk was loud, sharp, aggressive, and perfectly timed, the entire group moving as one and remaining entirely in-sync with each of Thorin's guttural chants. Bilbo thought that it created a beautiful symmetry, something that was quite lacking in many of the more laid-back and carefree Shire dances. Thorin ended the khalâk by slicing both of his cheeks with a small dagger that Bilbo had had commissioned several weeks ago. The Dwarf-King flicked the blood off the blade and onto the dirt at his feet, both offering and promising part of himself to Mahâl and his new spouse for all of eternity.

Bilbo couldn't stop grinning and blushing like a tween at Lithe.

"Are they gonna start fighting now?" asked Frodo, bouncing on Bilbo's lap in excitement. "When does the tournament start? Now? Who's Uncle Thorin fighting first?"

"I don't know, darling. We'll have to wait and see, alright?"

And it wasn't long after that the tournament began, dwarf couples lining up with their chosen volunteer partners. Bilbo noticed that nearly all of the female spouses-to-be were participating as well, which really shouldn't have surprised him considering the astounding toughness of all the dwarf ladies he'd met so far. Dwalin, of course, was Thorin's partner for the fights. The giant of a dwarf had tried to explain the various traditions and reasonings behind the khalâk shah-âi, but Bilbo still thought that it was just another excuse for the dwarves to get together and beat the crap out of one another for the hell of it.

"I think Dwalin's going to enjoy this," said Dáin with a smirk.

As it turned out, the Lord of the Iron Hills was completely right. Thorin and Dwalin easily plowed through every opponent they came up against, their movements fluid and perfectly in tune with one
another as they cornered and defeated each pair that they were set to battle. Fíli, Kíli, and Thorin III cheered loudly and raucously from their seats, narrating every part of the fights to Bilbo and Frodo as they took place, none of them caring that the hobbits could see it all with their own eyes. But Bilbo was used to the rowdy nature of young dwarves, so he didn't bother to object whenever the boys pointed out a very obvious move or simple means of attack. And it was somewhat helpful at times since, well, watching Thorin in combat could be quite distracting.

"Uncle Thorin's trying to be extra impressive tonight," chuckled Fíli. "I think that dwarf flew over fifteen feet!"

Kíli puffed up with a prideful sniff. "Did you expect anything less?"

"Of course not," said Fíli with a roll of his eyes. He then reached over and plucked up Frodo from his uncle's lap. "I'll be taking this little scamp now, Uncle Bilbo. You'd best be getting ready for your vows."

"Good gracious," fretted the hobbit. "It's almost time, isn't it?"

"I'll be escorting you over to the vowing stones," said Dáin with a kindly smile. Like his older cousin, the Dwarf-Lord's heavily bearded face still managed to look gruff and surly even when he was relaxed or surrounded by trusted family members. Bilbo figured that it must have been a trait that passed down through the Durin line, although Fíli and Kíli appeared to have missed out on it. "And the khalâk shah-âi appears to be almost over now. It'd be best not to keep Thorin waiting, aye?"

Bilbo nodded and allowed Dáin to gently guide him by the elbow, hands clammy and throat constricted with anxiety for the upcoming events. Bilbo Baggins, the perpetual bachelor of Bag End and once respectable hobbit of the Shire, was going to be wedded or vowed or khalâked or whatever the crazy, fight-loving dwarves called it to...well, a dwarf. And the King Under the Mountain at that! Belladonna would've been so proud. And Bungo would've passed out.

"Do not fret, Master Hobbit. The most difficult part of the night is almost over," assured Dáin as they approached several large stone platforms. Moonlight shone directly down onto them. "Ten minutes from now and you'll be feasting and drinking and laughing and scurrying off for lovemaking right quick."

The hobbit nearly tripped at that. "Umm, ugh, thank you. For the reassurance. Lord Dáin."

"Now don't start with that formal hogwash now, laddie. I don't know much about how you halflings do things in that Shire of yours, but we dwarves don't use titles when speaking with our relatives. Meaningless drivel, that is. You'll be witnessing plenty of embarrassing and un-lord-like actions in private family settings, I can assure you."

"Good to know."

"I just thought some forewarning would be much appreciated," said Dáin with a chuckle. "My dear wife surely would've appreciated some from Thorin or Dís, I'm sure."

"Telling terrible stories about me already, dear cousin."

"Paranoia doesn't befit your charming visage, my King," chuckled the Dwarf-Lord. "And I think our hobbit friend would agree with me on that as well. Muhudel ukrat, Master Baggins."

With a nervous smile, Bilbo stepped onto the stone and stood beside Thorin, eyes flickering about to look at each of the other couples gathered around them. He could feel Thorin's warmth where their
shoulders had brushed, its familiarity a comfort that Bilbo desperately needed right now. And then an even more familiar voice came from behind them.

"Bilbo Baggins. It seems that you've been quite busy these past few years, my friend. The Shire will be in quite the tizzy when they learn that one of their own has wedded into dwarvish royalty."

"Gandalf!"

"A certain princess and her sons sent for me some weeks ago," said the wizard as he came to stand before the gathered dwarven couples. "Her letter spoke of courting, political intrigue, inter-clan disagreements, and the strong possibility of a royal wedding. That last tidbit of information piqued my interest, as I'm sure you can understand. Especially since there was mention of a hobbit being involved. And as a proud expert on hobbits, I instantly knew that my attendance at such an event was absolutely necessary."

"No, it wasn't."

The wizard didn't pay Thorin any mind. "Now, does everyone have their rings ready? The moonlight is wonderful at the moment and I wouldn't want to miss such an excellent opportunity for the jewels to sparkle and shine. Yes, I think this will work quite nicely. Okay, say your chosen vows, my friends."

Quiet words of Khuzdul passed between all of the couples, Bilbo only stumbling over a few of the most difficult phrases to pronounce in the rough dwarven language. Thorin recited every verse with precision and perfection, but the Dwarf-King also made certain to give his beloved a gentle smile whenever a Khuzdul word didn't come out quite right. Once that part of the vows had been completed, Thorin pulled out the small dagger he'd used to cut himself earlier in the khalâk ceremony.

"This will only hurt for a moment, âzyungel," said Thorin. "And I swear that I will never shed another drop of your blood for as long as I live in this world or the next, sanghivasha."

As swiftly and as painlessly as possible, Thorin cut a tiny line into the ring finger of Bilbo's left hand. Wincing slightly at the sting, Bilbo reached forward and spread the gathered blood on Thorin's nose, a symbolic gesture to show that Bilbo's blood was now as important to Thorin's life as his own. The Dwarf-King reciprocated a few seconds later, lightly coating his beloved's nose in the blood from his left ring finger.

"With the exchange of blood completed," said Gandalf, "You may now exchange rings and seal the khalâk mêinel. Muhudel, my friends!"

Bilbo was barely able to get the mithril and sapphire mêinel ring that the young princes had helped commission onto Thorin's hand before the Dwarf-King himself was desperately trying to shove his own beautifully handcrafted ring onto Bilbo's finger. Cringing at the roughness, Bilbo was just about to tell his new husband off when Thorin cupped both of his cheeks and pulled Bilbo into what was very likely the most passionate kiss of his life.

"I've been wanting to do that all week," confessed Thorin when they finally pulled apart. Bilbo felt like he couldn't breathe or even think; it really wasn't fair that Thorin was so delectable. "The celibacy and restrictions of dwarf courtship are pure torture."

"Well, we don't have to wait anymore," said Bilbo with a blush. "Do we?"

"Absolutely not."
The hobbit giggled in delight, leaning forward to hug and kiss and appreciate his new spouse for the very first time. All of the other dwarves seemed to be in the same state, far too preoccupied with one another to care about anyone else in the ceremonial chamber. Bilbo's attention only drifted back to reality when two figures appeared right next to Thorin and himself.

"I'm very sorry to interrupt this breathtaking moment," said Dís with an all-knowing grin, "But we need to crown our new Consort Under the Mountain, my dear King."

"Of course, of course."

The princess presented a beautiful, elegant, and fairly simple mithril crown that was lined with sapphires, diamonds, and small slivers of the Arkenstone. It had obviously been crafted with a hobbit in mind, tiny forget-me-nots and delphinium belladonna carved into the mithril by an expert's hand. Thorin took the crown with a beaming smile, ignoring his sister and Gandalf in favor of his new consort.

"Now, everyone will know exactly how important and treasured you really are, âzyungel." Thorin placed the crown atop his beloved's curly head and pulled him in for another deep kiss. "You are now Bilbo Baggins, a hobbit of the Shire and the Consort Under the Lonely Mountain."

"And I couldn't be happier for it," said Bilbo with a wide smile. He leaned forward for another kiss before turning to look at the rest of the chamber. "So, now that I'm wedded and crowned, where's that grand feast I was promised? It's been a very long evening and we hobbits need our suppers to stay happy and healthy, in case you haven't noticed, my King."

Thorin just laughed and kissed him again.

Chapter End Notes

Well, there we are, it's all done. A short epilogue after this and that's all there is. Whew, I'm glad this is done, really. And in case anyone was wondering, I got some of the dwarf wedding ideas from several cultures around the world, such as the Maori, Samoans, Vikings, a few old Germanic tribes, and a couple of other obscure or extinct ones as well. I hope the wedding and cultural traditions didn't disappoint. The Khuzdul endearments are real as well, since I found them in an actual dictionary of basic Khuzdul words. And I hope you enjoyed reading the story as much as I did writing it. It's fun to write casual, laid-back stories like this every once in a while. Thank you again for reading!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Thank you to everyone for the wonderful reviews again! And here's the final ending. I tried to stay as canon and close to the source material as possible, but as some of you might notice, I had to play with ages and times and dates a little bit to properly facilitate the story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo Baggins had lived a long life.

Few hobbits could claim to have traveled even a few miles past Bree, let alone a large expanse of Middle-Earth itself. The forests of Mirkwood no longer frightened him, the waterfalls of Rivendell no longer punched the breath out of him, and the depthless chasms of Erebor no longer felt like they would swallow him whole if he took the tiniest step to the left or right. Living eight decades with a bunch of crazy dwarves could really change a hobbit. But for the better, Bilbo sincerely hoped.

A shadow had started to fall over Middle-Earth in the years since Bilbo had become Consort Under the Mountain. Orcs and goblins and wargs had become more and more common in the Misty Mountains. Spiders overran numerous parts of the once beautiful Mirkwood, forcing Thranduil and his people into a constant state of warfare both inside and directly outside of the wood. Tensions rose between the Easterlings and the men of Dale and Esgaroth, small skirmishes breaking out more and more often with every year that passed. Tales of Mordor and its looming threat filtered up the Anduin and Carnen from human kingdoms like Gondor, Rohan, and Dorwinion.

Bilbo's travels to the Shire, which had taken place every five years during the initial four decades he had lived in Erebor, came to a halt for quite some time.

Ironfists continued to remain a big problem for Thorin all throughout his rule in the Lonely Mountain. Dwarves were quite similar to elves when it came to disagreements, feuds, and an innate proclivity for long, drawn out warfare. Bilbo had been on his toes for the first few years he'd lived in Erebor, waiting and watching for the next strike that the Ironfists would level against his family and himself. They'd already kidnapped Frodo and tried to blow up Erebor's main source of wealth, so why wouldn't they attack while the attacking was good? Well, it turned out that when dwarves went to war with or had feuds with other dwarvish clans, it wasn't at all unheard of for the dispute to last centuries. So, while dwarves weren't very good at biding their time for most sensible things, inter-clan warfare and internal dissent was an exception to the rule.

For the most part, dwarves all over Middle-Earth barricaded themselves inside of their mountain strongholds, ignoring the going-ons of the men and elves in the surface world. Dale's close proximity to the Lonely Mountain facilitated a great deal of trade and a more open relationship between northmen and dwarves than was typical, but even Thorin kept a careful yet peaceful distance between his people and their surface-dwelling neighbors. However, there was a sturdy peace between dwarves, elves, skin-changers, and northmen for all of Thorin's rule, something that the communities directly around Erebor desperately needed after so many years of living in Smaug's shadow. Inter-clan relations, like those between the Longbeards and the Ironfists...well, that was a whole other story right there. A giant migraine, too.
Honestly, dwarves had to be the most stubborn, thick-headed, and feud-loving race on Middle-Earth. Bilbo was sure of it.

And during all of this, the Ring stayed nestled in Bilbo's waistcoat pocket or hidden in a small envelope atop the mantle of his bedchambers. Bilbo didn't give his nifty little Ring much thought over the years, only using it when times turned dire and Nori needed the assistance of a proper burglar to deal with assassins or rioting traitors within the mountain. A simple little bauble, magical though it was, had not raised any red flags in Bilbo's mind. After all, he lived in the richest dwarven kingdom of Middle-Earth, so why would an austere golden Ring draw any suspicions or extra attention from him?

The arrival of the Ringwraiths had changed everything.

Bilbo had been in Rivendell at the time, making the long trek to visit his homeland for the first time in over a decade. As it turned out, long distance travel was much harder for a hobbit once they had passed their first century of life. Tired and weary after passing through the Misty Mountains, Bilbo had urged Frodo and the caravan of dwarves who'd accompanied them to continue on to their final destinations, assuring the nervous guards that he'd find an elven escort in the next few weeks to bring him the rest of the way to Bag End. Five personal guards had stayed behind while the rest continued on to Ered Luin, Frodo going along with them to the Shire. A few months with the Gamgees, Tooks, and Brandybucks would do the gentle young hobbit a world of good, Bilbo had thought.

By Mahâl, how wrong Bilbo had been, when he looked back on it now.

Five months into Bilbo's stay at Rivendell and several dozen pages into his newest book on the Quest for Erebor, a raven had arrived from the Lonely Mountain. Unlike all of the other messages that Thorin had sent during Bilbo's and Frodo's journey to the Shire, this one had come with the urgent seals of the High Office of Erebor, something that Thorin never used in a personal letter to his family members. Its contents had made Bilbo's legs collapse out from under him, Glóril's fast reflexes the only reason that his head didn't collide with the dining hall table. And then Bilbo had searched frantically for that blasted Ring of his, hands trembling uncontrollably when he eventually realized that it must have been packed in one of the boxes or satchels that Frodo had taken with him to Bag End.

Bilbo had never been so terrified as he'd been at that moment. His Frodo, his dear, sweet Frodo, would be hunted by the abominations that Thorin had described in his letter. Not even a direct blade-to-face slash from Orcrist or a brutal smash from Grasper and Keeper had killed the messenger from Mordor. A half-dozen more ravens arrived within as many days, Thorin's worry and growing terror for his hobbits palpable in every word he wrote. The letters from Fíli, Kíli, Dís, Frodo's friends, and the rest of the Company were no better, all of them frantic in their worry for the traveling hobbits.

"I've sent a ranger from the north to retrieve him," Elrond had assured. "Estel will protect and guide him."

As it turned out, the protection of Aragorn had not been enough. Bilbo had had to watch his nephew writhe and scream in pain, the Ringwraith's shadow continuously pulling at Frodo through the horrific wound on his chest. Even Glóril had been deeply shaken by the sight. As the nights passed by, Frodo's slow recovery had left Bilbo even more drained and wary than before, the bitter absence of Thorin only multiplying those feelings tenfold. It drove home the cold reality that Bilbo was no longer the young, adventurous hobbit of yesteryear.

Frodo's shadow-ridden pleas for Uncle Thorin had broken the elderly hobbit's heart. And the cries for Fee and Kee and all of the others in their odd, makeshift family had then crushed it into shattered little pieces.
The arrival of Glóin, Gimli, Thorin III, and several other dwarves had been a tremendous relief for Bilbo, especially when all of the talk amongst the elves and gathering men turned out to be true. Bilbo had spent half of his life carrying Sauron's One Ring around in his waistcoat pocket. Poor Glóin had nearly exploded when he had found that out, his face bright red as he cursed every instance in which they had used that foul thing in the last few decades. All of them were very thankful that Nori wasn't there.

"Watch over and protect him, my son," Glóin had said the night after the Fellowship of the Ring had been formed. "Make Fíli and Kíli proud, Gimli. And show up that pointy-earred bastard's spawn while you're at it, too."

Bilbo had smiled at that, always amused by the insults that dwarves and elves liked to trade with one another. Legolas was an intelligent and kind soul, but Bilbo knew from experience that Gimli would attempt to goad the elf prince at every opportunity. And that was why Bilbo had had a long talk with the dwarf before the Fellowship's departure. Bilbo's own near-assault on his nephew over that damned Ring had made the elderly hobbit even more fearful for Frodo's safety, something that Gimli had picked up on without any difficulty.

"I'll do everything I can to bring him back to you, Uncle Bilbo. I promise on my grandfather's tomb that I will bring Frodo back to the Lonely Mountain. Only death could stop me." Gimli had reached out and gently bumped foreheads with the hobbit who had been a constant presence in his life for many years now. "You have my word."

And Gimli had brought Frodo back to him, but the War of the Ring had destroyed almost everything that Bilbo had once known and loved in Middle-Earth. Shortly after Bilbo's return to Erebor with Glóin and a large contingency of wood elves, the Easterlings from Rhûn had swarmed over the Carnen river in a horde of soldiers, opening up a second front that was the northern arm of the War of the Ring. The sheer force of the Easterlings had crushed the men of Dale within days and forced them to rally back into the protection of the Lonely Mountain.

The dwarves and men had fought a long battle against the invaders, the impregnable gates of the Lonely Mountain easily withstanding the technologically advanced siege equipment of the Easterlings. The Lonely Mountain gave its defenders great tactical leverage against the Easterlings, Kíli's archery corps raining arrows and flinging huge stones down below the walls in reprisal. All of the decades that Thorin had invested in improving the Lonely Mountain's defenses against the Ironfists had paid off, and the defenders had outlasted the Easterlings during the siege. In the end, the Easterlings had been forced to withdraw, suffering a disproportionate amount of casualties in comparison to the dwarves and northmen.

But Erebor wasn't without her casualties. Dáin II Ironfoot, the Lord of the Iron Hills and trusted cousin of Thorin, had been killed while defending the body of King Brand of Dale before the gates of the Lonely Mountain. Thorin himself had witnessed the slaying, his cries of grief and rage echoing through the halls of Erebor as he led a defensive charge against the Easterlings just before the gates were finally closed. That last charge had cost Thorin his left eye and a whole lot of blood, including Fíli's right arm and the lives of Bifur, Glóril, Donel's father, and numerous other dwarves and skin-changers. One of those skin-changers had been Mother Nymeria, the elderly grandmother of Currin and Erebor's most loyal ally in recent history. A familiar pair of female badgers had numbered amongst the fallen as well. Not even Kíli, who had been married to Currin for five decades, had been able to console the grief-stricken wolf.

Not that Currin had escaped the battle unscathed, either. The skin-changer had been struck in the head so hard that she could barely recognize her own husband or children. And that didn't even hold a candle to her sudden difficulties in shifting; Kíli hadn't even been able to speak when the healer had
warned them of this. It could continue for the rest of her life, he'd said. What form she'd possibly be stuck in, they couldn't hope to guess.

Tauriel had disappeared into the library not a few minutes after that, her own injuries be damned. They all knew the elf-maid wouldn't stop searching for a cure or treatment for her dear friend's condition until there were no options left. Bilbo hadn't seen her since... 

"Our time in this world is drawing to an end, âzyungel," Thorin had said on the last eve of the siege. "And I do not think that my wounds will heal quite so easily this time, either."

"Don't say such things," Bilbo had wept. "You're too stubborn and thick-headed to say such awful things."

Thorin had just smiled sadly at his consort. "Why don't you read some pages to me from that newest book of yours? The part about the barrels sounds particularly interesting."

"I thought you liked the one with the pictures?"

Thorin had nodded, blinking back tears in the single good eye he had left. "I'd very much like to see that one, too. Ori's drawings of the boys and yourself are always a delight to gaze upon."

"At least something is still delightful to look upon here."

"Don't say such things," Thorin had mimicked with a loving smile. His fingers gently combed through Bilbo's thinning hair and rapidly withering face. "You're still as handsome and breathtaking to look upon as that first summer night when I met you in Bag End. A treasure to outshine all other treasures, âzyungel. My own living, breathing Arkenstone."

"Someone's feeling sappy tonight."

"And there's that wonderful sassiness that I fell in love with," Thorin had said with a smile. "Now, I'd appreciate a little bit more reading, sanghivasha. Dís will be coming to knock me out with that awful tonic of hers at sunset."

Seven days after the siege had ended, Thorin II Oakenshield, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, King Under the Mountain, died of wounds sustained in the defense of his city, people, and beloved family members. The moment Thorin took his last breath, Bilbo knew that his soul was not much longer for this world, either. Gimli's return several weeks later with official news of Sauron's demise and the deaths of Balin, Ori, and Óin in Moria had only further solidified Bilbo's final decision.

"I will be returning to the Shire," Bilbo had said to the remaining members of his family. "I wish to spend the final days of my life with Frodo and the rolling hills of my homeland. I briefly discussed this with Thorin before the end, and he agreed with me on the decision."

Fíli and Kíli objected the loudest, both of them already grief-stricken by the death of Thorin and their separation from Frodo, so the sudden prospect of losing Bilbo as well was simply too much for them. But Bilbo had stuck by his ultimate decision, subconsciously knowing that there wasn't much time left for him in this world. Leaving the boys in Erebor had been heartwrenching, but necessary in the end. They were responsible adult dwarves and husbands and fathers and co-kings now, all four of those positions far more important than escorting a widowed consort back to his homeland. But in the typical stubbornness of being a Durin, both of his boys decided to appoint Thorin III Stonehelm and Dís as stewards in their temporary absence.

"We want to see Frodo," they had both said. "And you can't stop us."
How could a hobbit argue with that? And even Bilbo had to admit, the company of Fíli and Kíli on the road back to the Shire was immensely comforting. Both of them had matured into handsome and thoughtful dwarves, their resemblance to Thorin most obvious in Kíli’s coloring and Fíli’s strong facial features. Not even the loss of Fíli’s right arm seemed to discourage their vivacity for life. Bilbo was incredibly proud of them.

"You all came," Frodo had cried upon seeing them. "It's been so long and..."

"Of course, we came, laddie," Dwalin had said, giant arms wrapped tightly around the hobbit who'd become like a son to him. He had promised Thorin on his deathbed to watch over the lad. "Letting your uncle go on adventures by himself is what got us all into this mess in the first place."

"You don't know the half of it," Frodo had croaked, staying tucked in tight to Dwalin's shoulder for several moments after that. "Uncle Thorin?"

Dwalin had just shook his head and hugged Frodo even tighter when the young hobbit started to sob in earnest. A little ways up the hill, Bilbo could see three familiar figures standing under a tree, watching the reunion and proceedings with cautious, protective eyes. Donel and Dwina had both accompanied the rest of them to the Shire, but it was still very nice to know that Frodo's hobbit friends were here for him as well.

Glancing west to the sea, Bilbo knew that his time was drawing shorter and shorter with every passing day. With the Ring destroyed, it was only a matter of months or a few very short years before death came for him. And Bilbo would welcome it. Thorin had already embraced it, so there was truly nothing tying Bilbo to Middle-Earth now.

And one year later, on September 29, 3021; Bilbo Baggins sailed out of the Grey Havens and into the Undying Lands of Valinor with Gandalf, Elrond, Galadriel, and his beloved nephew at his side. Beneath the stars of the ocean skies, Bilbo dreamed of dark blue eyes, black strands of hair, and a deep rumble of laughter that always made his heart sing. It was a lovely dream.

Bilbo smiled. He was ready for one last adventure.

Chapter End Notes

And we're all done. I hope everyone has enjoyed the story. My drabble story set in this universe, Tales of a Disgruntled Hobbit, takes place between the Battle of the Five Armies and the War of the Ring. It's basically just a bunch of random, laid-back drabbles from the perspective of various members of the Company. That will be the only story I will be working on for a very long time, if ever again. Real life is just too busy right now for me to write anything else. But thank you to everyone for reading, even if it wasn't your usual cup of tea. Toodles!

* There is now a direct sequel, Beware the Nice Ones, set in this same universe.

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