The Unexpected Hobbit: A Journey

by alkjira

Summary

An AU wherein Thorin is the Hobbit and Bilbo is the king of Dwarfs. Somehow this didn’t turn out to be crack.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” Gandalf began, and Thorin started a little at the use of that name. He hadn’t known that Gandalf was even aware of it. How much had the old man been snooping around? “May I introduce the leader of our company –”

The Dwarf held up his hand to Gandalf in a signal for quiet and gave a short but courteous bow as he held Thorin’s gaze.

“Bilbo Baggins, at your service,” he said and finally stepped inside, a bemused Thorin giving way almost without thought. Whoever this was, if he would dare to quiet Gandalf – well, perhaps this night still had a chance to turn for the better.

Notes

Thanks to diemarysues for the beta!

Chapter one of many.
Will follow basic book and film premise, with eventual Thorin/Bilbo as well as other pairings.
Isn’t it the prettiest thing ever?

The incredible art belongs to
The dark-haired Hobbit was just settling down for his evening meal when the bell at his front door rang.

The last time someone had been at his door at this late an hour, it had been one of the younger Sandydowns who had broken the clasp on their mother’s favourite necklace – desperate for their resident smith to fix it before she noticed.

Sighing lightly, Thorin got up to check on his visitor. Perhaps someone had broken all their cutlery and risked starving to death by missing dinner. He would even take another kettle emergency so long as it wasn’t a certain Miss Toadfoot looking for an evening walk. He had run dry of pleasant excuses long ago, and if he ended up losing his temper it would be the final nail in the coffin for his reputation. Not that he cared very much about it, but as someone forced to depend on customers to make a living, reputation did play a fairly big part into things.

The person at the door however, was neither a Sandydown nor any other sort of panicked nor amorous Hobbit. In fact, he wasn’t a Hobbit at all.

“Dwalin,” the Dwarf – because it had to be a Dwarf - said with a small bow. “At your service.”

"May I ask your business?” Thorin asked, and put his hand against the Dwarf’s chest when he made to enter uninvited. He refused to be intimidated by the look the bearded stranger gave him and held his ground. The Dwarf might look as if he had a bear as a not-so-distant relative, but if he had wished to do harm Thorin supposed the greeting would have been a lot less cordial.

“I wouldn’t say no to supper, lad,” the Dwarf drawled and crossed his arms over his barrel-like chest.

“Neither would I,” Thorin said impassively and crossed his arms as well, showing off the muscles from half a lifetime working the forge. “However, someone interrupted me.”

They spent several moments staring at each other before the Dwarf snorted.

"Gandalf said we would meet here and the mark is on the door, plain as day. What is the problem, eh, lad?"

"Gandalf,” Thorin stated and briefly shut his eyes. That meddling… Thorin had thought he’d seen a grey shadow skulk by earlier that day, but had merely passed it off as another bunch of curious children.

"About as tall as your ceiling,” Dwalin said and glanced upward. “Wizard? Seem familiar?”

Thorin considered just shutting the door in the Dwarf’s face. But… he did owe Gandalf, and a Durin always paid what they owed, however high the price.

Sighing, Thorin raked a hand through his short curls and stepped aside to allow the Dwarf to enter, knowing full well that he would regret it later. But what was the use of crying over a lost button when your shirt had already been made into rags?

Shrugging off his travelling cloak, Dwalin scanned Thorin’s hallway.

“Which way, laddie?” he enquired and sniffed. “Is it down here?”
“Is what down where?” Thorin asked and stepped aside once again as Dwalin threw the cloak at him. Looking at his cloak now resting on Thorin’s admittedly not too clean floor, Dwalin laughed and slapped Thorin on the back on his way into Thorin’s Hobbit hole.

“Supper, of course. He said there would be food, and lots of it.”

Oh, Thorin was already regretting not slamming and locking the door shut.

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Hours later Thorin had learnt a valuable lesson. It was never too late to slam a door shut and throw away its key. At this point, he was completely prepared to do it with himself on the outside if it would spare him another moment of sharing his space with a dozen Dwarfs and a deranged wizard. He didn’t care about his food, he was past caring about the noise, and he especially didn’t care what his neighbours would think. But if Dwalin did not stop patting his head and calling him ‘laddie’, he would go down to his smithy, get his hammer, and see if it would stick to the bald Dwarf’s head as well as the axe had apparently stuck to the other fellow’s.

Grabbing his pipe Thorin set for the peace and relative quiet of his bench outside, making sure to use his large feet for loud stomping as he went. After this he owed Gandalf nothing. Nothing. The wizard could be choking on his own hat and Thorin would politely bid him a good day and leave him to suffocate.

He had just made it into the hallway when someone knocked, quite heavily, on the door.

“Wonderful,” Thorin muttered between clenched teeth and consciously had to loosen his grip on the pipe to avoid breaking it. “First there came one, then another, then two, then eight. If this isn’t at least a baker’s dozen, I won’t be able to contain my disappointment.”

Jerking open the door Thorin was once again taken off guard by an unexpected figure standing outside it.

At first he wasn’t even sure the newcomer belonged with the party of Dwarfs. He wasn’t very large, not even to a Hobbit, being shorter and slighter than all Thorin’s other ‘guests’, except possibly the youngest ones.

There was something in the way that he carried himself, however, that made Thorin realise there was something special about him.

And if the fur-lined coat and rich cloth wasn’t clue enough, the way his hallway had suddenly become very crowded with bowing Dwarfs certainly painted the picture that whoever this was, he was not without importance.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” Gandalf began, and Thorin started a little at the use of that name. He hadn’t known that Gandalf was even aware of it. How much had the old man been snooping around? “May I introduce the leader of our company –”

The Dwarf held up his hand to Gandalf in a signal for quiet and gave a short but courteous bow as he held Thorin’s gaze.

“Bilbo Baggins, at your service,” he said and finally stepped inside, a bemused Thorin giving way almost without thought. Whoever this was, if he would dare to quiet Gandalf – well, perhaps this night still had a chance to turn for the better.

As he came into the light Thorin wondered how he had ever mistaken this Bilbo Baggins for a
Hobbit. Rough honey coloured locks and braids flowed a good way down his back in a manner proper folk would talk about for the next age, contrasting sharply with the neatly trimmed beard and moustache. His face was youthful still, but lined with wrinkles earned not only from time but also from squinting at the sun and facing howling winds.

There was also something in his eyes. Something Thorin couldn’t put words to, but whatever it was, it wasn’t something he had ever seen in the eyes of a fellow Hobbit – or of anyone else.

“This is our Hobbit, then?” Bilbo asked of Gandalf, and Thorin felt his eyes widen in horror. No. The Dwarf clearly had not meant it in any way that would be acceptable, like ‘oh, this is the poor Hobbit mad enough to owe Gandalf the Grey a favour and thusly ending up having his pantry pillaged by a dozen Dwarfs’. No. No.

“I am not your Hobbit,” Thorin growled, before Gandalf had the chance to make matters worse.

“You have not told him, then?” the Dwarf enquired softly, but with steel in his voice. “I saw the look on his face. You expect him to leave his home and yet you do not have enough decency to tell him why?”

Never before had Thorin seen Gandalf look apologetic. Well, except for… Shaking his head to clear the unwanted memories, Thorin crossed his arms and met Bilbo’s gaze straight on.

“I have been told nothing.”

Shooting Gandalf a piercing glare Bilbo then turned a small apologetic smile at the Hobbit.

“My apologies, Mister Oakenshield,” the Dwarf said and inclined his head. “If you would be willing, let us start again.” Here, to the Dwarf’s clear discomfiture, his stomach gave a noisy rumble.

To the side, one of the Dwarfs – one of the young ones with dark hair and almost no beard – snickered, and Bilbo shot him an exasperated but clearly fond glare.

“While we talk, might I trouble you for something to eat?” Bilbo asked and removed his coat.

“If there is anything left,” Thorin said coldly and turned to glare at the assembled Dwarfs crowding the doorway to the kitchen.

“I will see to it,” a Dwarf with intricate braids set into his grey hair said, and disappeared towards the kitchen.

Growling, Thorin strode after him. He had had quite enough of Dwarfs in his pantry for one night.

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A short time later found the Dwarfs once again crowed around Thorin’s table, albeit this time in a much more orderly way.
Banishing the Dwarfs from his kitchen, Thorin had found enough to make a stew and put it together, getting himself a bowl as he still hadn’t managed to eat. As he brought it to Bilbo he was once again mystified by the way the other Dwarfs deferred to this fellow as they, upon his request, efficiently and even quietly cleared a seat for him next to their leader.

“Again, my apologies, Mister Oakenshield,” the Dwarf said and nodded his thanks as he was given the bowl with stew. “I was under the impression that you would be informed, and more importantly asked regarding our presence here.”

Feeling mollified, Thorin frowned, as he had no intention of being mollified just yet. He might not be the most typical of Hobbits, what with his lack of appreciation for gardening and meaningless social gatherings – but he wouldn’t suffer pantry pillaging gladly.

He turned the frown on Gandalf who, to Thorin’s great annoyance but miniscule surprise, played at being completely innocent.

“Will you hear us out?” Bilbo inquired between spoonfuls of stew.

Grudgingly Thorin nodded and took up his own spoon, ignoring the huge smile coming from the same young Dwarf that had snickered at Bilbo earlier. He was also prepared to ignore the loud whisper of “I knew Uncle would-”

“Kíli,” Bilbo warned, not as prepared to ignore the youngster as Thorin was.

The blond Dwarf seated next to Kíli elbowed him, which caused Kíli to likely stomp on his foot as the blond’s knees then smacked the table and made the two bowls jump, but just when it looked like it would escalate into a scuffle Bilbo broke it up with a snapped:

“I will send you back to your mother if you continue to behave like children. In barrels if you won’t go voluntarily.”

Drooping slightly they both settled down with mumbled apologies.

“Sorry, Uncle.”

“We meant no offence.”

As silence fell upon the table, Gandalf rose to his feet and pulled out what seemed to be a map.

“Far to the East, over ranges and rivers, beyond woodlands and wastelands, lies a single solitary peak.”

Thorin scanned the map now spread on the table, reading the names of places far beyond the reaches of the Shire.

“The Lonely Mountain,” he murmured, surprised at hearing his own voice as he had had no intention to speak.

“The Lonely Mountain,” Bilbo echoed. “Erebor.” His voice seemed to re-animate the rest of the Dwarfs and thereby sparked one most insane explanations and discussion Thorin had ever been part of.

Dragons, returning birds, and prophecy? Mountains of gold and stolen homes? A quest to destroy said dragon by entering an invisible door on an unreadable map, and they wanted him to act as a burglar?
“I am no burglar,” he stated, finding again that his arms had crossed in front of his chest. “I am a smith, and if you would like for me to make you armour.”

“What does a Hobbit know of armour?” one of the Dwarfs called from down the table.

“Have you ever even been in a fight?” another questioned.

A new debate broke out regarding if Hobbits had ever gone to war at all, and Thorin rose from the table, biting his tongue lest he say something he would later regret.

Silently he collected his pipe yet again, and this time his attempt to reach the outside was met with success.

The night air was almost chilly compared to the stuffy heat he had left, but it did not succeed in cooling his temper. When the door creaked behind him he bit down on the pipe hard enough to hurt his teeth.

“If you’ve come to tell me of the uselessness of Hobbits, please hold your tongue,” he snapped without looking back. Or if you are Gandalf, he thought, I hope you-

“And if I have not?” The voice of Bilbo interrupted his thoughts and a glance showed the Dwarf making his way down the narrow path, looking strangely at home between wild bushy greens and sweet flowers.

“Then you may still go back inside and leave me be,” Thorin stated and stared out into the night. “I trust that you will all be gone by the morning.”

“We will,” Bilbo agreed and stopped by the side of the bench. “May I?” he inquired and gestured to the place beside Thorin.

Shrugging Thorin continued to stare at the quiet landscape, smoking his pipe.

“Gandalf says we need you,” Bilbo stated, voice low and sincere.

“So I did hear,” Thorin said flatly. “Though it was not the only thing being said.”

“Unlike my companions - and again I would offer my apologies on their behalf - unlike them, Gandalf has the annoying habit of very rarely being wrong.”

The statement lured an edged smile to briefly play across Thorin’s lips, for it was true indeed.

“You do not know us, and have no reason to trust yourself to our quest. Indeed -” the Dwarf waved his hand towards the distant horizon. “- I can’t promise your safety on the road, or a happy ending to our tale when we finally do reach Erebor.”

The Dwarf’s eyes were distant, fixed on something not visible to Thorin’s eyes.

“And perhaps it is unfair to ask this of you, but when has fairness ever entered into any being’s existence?”

Turning to face Thorin directly, Bilbo put his hand on the Hobbit’s stained shirtsleeve.

The Dwarf’s fingers were scarred and rough, just like his own, and even of a similar size. From inside his own shirt, Bilbo used his free hand to pull out the contract Thorin had refused to read earlier.
“You know our path. I would ask that you would take this and once more consider our request. For that alone I would be in your debt.”

Rising, Bilbo then placed the contract beside Thorin on the bench and rejoined his Company. His people, Thorin realized after remembering that the blond Dwarf was either prince or king of a people in exile. The story of the Dwarf’s father and grandfather had never been completed.

Thorin remained on the bench long after, pipe forgotten in one hand, and gaze locked to the East.
Chapter Two

Thorin would never know exactly what made him accompany the Dwarfs on their quest.

If it was madness, he would not have been surprised. At least then he would have had an explanation and not merely the memory of a haunting song, a night lost to heavy thoughts, and the lake-coloured eyes of Bilbo reflecting the moonlight.

By the time the embers had died in his fireplace Thorin had finally given up on sleep and had gone about the business of packing with a heart neither heavy nor light. By the re-lit fire, he wrote notes to his customers, with apologies for those whose work he had not yet completed and instructions for what still needed doing.

One of his closest neighbours’ son was a decent enough boy, if a bit preoccupied with such useless things as gardens, and while Thorin was certain that young master Gamgee would look after the place in his absence even without being formally asked, it was not Thorin’s way. He also left a purse with coin for the boy, but did not have high hopes that it would actually be touched. Still, his garden would likely look better than ever, for all that the local gossip mongers loved discussing its disgracefulness.

Not to mention the gossip his departure would likely spark.

The Dwarfs had made sure there was precious little food to pack, so when his business was settled Thorin collected a light and quietly made his way into his now-deserted hallway. Putting the light securely on a low shelf, Thorin gracefully knelt in front of the chest closest to the door.

Hobbits had little use for swords and armour, and he knew the Dwarfs’ words had mostly been borne of surprise and not spite. He believed that if he brought it up, they more than any would have understood the feeling of grasping good steel, of hearing it sing its purpose to the ears of a careful listener – even if, unlike Dwarfs, Thorin did not forge crafts of immeasurable beauty or weapons of unmatched deadliness.

Thankfully he had always lived close enough to Men to sell the wares he did make – the useless trinkets and the less useless chest plates.

In the chest lay items he refused to part with, of both his own make and others, few though they were. At the top was a box which he knew contained a necklace once belonging to his mother, and his father’s ring.

Hastily putting the box aside, as if it hurt to touch it, Thorin then reached down with both hands to bring out the only armour he had ever kept and the only sword he had ever made.

The armour was made up of countless pieces of iron fastened on a leather breastplate, the design meant to deflect a blow in the same way a fish was protected by its scales. Thorin had kept it because it was clearly too small for a full-grown Man and too heavy and wide for a boy; as such no one would buy it. If he was honest with himself, however, he’d already known that he had made it for himself, and now it seemed he had found its purpose.

The sword was not as elaborate and made only to satisfy a curiosity. Thorin had henceforth never wrought weapons. It did not sit well with him to make items solely with the intent to harm.

Gripping the scabbard with one hand and the hilt with his other, Thorin unsheathed the blade to see
if it needed any service before being put to use. But no; it was as sharp as it ever had been. Despite never truly thinking they would find a use, he had not been able to leave them to the ravages of time and rust.

A noise behind him made him quickly return the blade to its sheath.

“You know, lad,” Dwalin said as he entered the hall, Thorin’s kneeling position making him seem even larger than he actually was, “It would be a treat if your reflexes told you to draw your sword instead of hiding it away at the first sign of trouble.” His face was half covered by his beard and the dark, but his bald head gleamed like a moon in the low light from Thorin’s candle.

“I hardly expect to be attacked in my own home,” Thorin said, before he remembered exactly why he would be leaving at first light.

Dwalin must have seen something in Thorin’s face, even in the poor light, because he did not seem offended, merely tired.

“Few do,” was all he would say before coming closer to inspect Thorin’s work.

“Feels good enough,” he grudgingly admitted as took the sword from Thorin’s unresisting hands and unsheathed it. “Yours, I take it?”

Thorin nodded, and collected the breastplate in his arms before standing.

“You know how to use it?” Dwalin asked as he tried the edge on his finger, grinning as the tip came away bloodied. “Because if you don’t, you’ll do more harm to your little self than you will to any foe.”

Gritting his teeth, Thorin held out his hand for his sword, gazing towards the ceiling in the hopes it would grant him the tranquillity of mind not to fetch his hammer after all.

Sheathing it again Dwalin held out the sword, hilt first, but would not release it until Thorin met his eyes.

“I mean it,” he said, face now grave. “That is no toy you’ve made, and in a fight you could just as easily hack my arm off as that of an Orc unless you know what you’re doing.

“He will learn,” Bilbo said. He was leaning against the wall at the end of the hallway, arms crossed, giving the appearance that he had been there for a good while. Pushing himself away from the wall he crossed the room in a few strides.

“You are coming then,” Bilbo said, with a glance down at the burdens Thorin now held in his hands. Surprisingly, there was no triumph in his expression, merely something close to weariness.

“I only thought these would be needed when your company realizes my pantry is empty,” Thorin jested, wanting to shift the storm that had clouded the Dwarf’s gaze. It stirred something within himself.

Dwalin gave a braying laugh and slapped a hand on Thorin’s shoulder. The Hobbit stubbornly refused to flinch at the pain.

“Good to have you with us, lad,” he said and turned away. Giving a short nod to Bilbo, he then left them both standing in the dim hallway.

“I suppose it would make no sense now to ask you to remain here,” Bilbo murmured. “The words I
spoke earlier were the truth. I do believe Gandalf when he says that you are needed, but no less true were my words about being unable to promise you a safe return.”

“My mind is made up.” With that Thorin made to leave the hallway to change his clothes, and put on the armour, but Bilbo’s hand on his arm made him halt.

“You will learn,” the Dwarf said, the steel once again in his voice. “Dwalin is correct in saying that you are currently as much of a threat as you will be of use. I will ask Fili to give you lessons.” Suddenly Bilbo’s face split with a smile, clouds lifted from his eyes once again. “He has gotten into his head that two swords are much better than one, so regardless what arm you favour, Mister Oakenshield, he will be a good teacher.”

The fatherly pride visible on the Dwarf’s face caused a sting of hurt inside Thorin’s chest. Nephew or not, he obviously considered the boy closer than such, and that awakened bitter memories. Any sweetness of his past had long faded, even though memories still remained– but it was useless to dwell on such matters.

Remembering this time that he was in the presence of royalty Thorin sketched a quick bow before leaving the room, letting Bilbo read that as his response to the offer of sword practice if so he wished.
Despite Gandalf’s assurances that the way to the Hobbit’s home would be easy to find, Bilbo had been forced to turn around twice and retrace his steps. Perhaps he had forgotten the exact instructions, or maybe he was just distracted. It had been little over a month since he had met Gandalf in Bree, but so much had happened and so much needed to happen yet.

The meeting in Ered Luin had not gone as he wished, but much as he had expected. They would not receive aid from their fellow Dwarfs; none would journey with them to reclaim Erebor.

“This is not our quest,” Dáin had said, holding up his hand for Bilbo’s silence when he would have protested. “It is not our quest,” he repeated, meeting Bilbo’s eyes from across the table, dark eyes grieved but resolute.

The leaders from all seven Dwarven realms had answered to Bilbo’s summons and sat together for the first time in several centuries. In their eyes Bilbo could see understanding, and pity, and around the edges of that: refusal. It burned him to think they would not help him reclaim his home. He looked again at Dáin. That his own blood would not help…

“You speak for all then?” Bilbo asked, rage burning away as quickly as it came, leaving only tiredness.

“I do,” the Lord of Iron Hills stated before continuing: “Friend, it is not that we do not wish to help, but what can we do? If the Dragon is dead there is still the question of getting into the city. No army will force those open doors if they have been sealed.”

Bilbo thought of the map the wizard had showed him, the map drawn by his father. It did not show a way in, but hinted at the hope of one. With Dáin’s next words, he knew that that hope had been in his eyes for anyone to read.

“If there is a way in,” Dáin said, almost making it sound like a question. “And if the beast turns out to be alive, then we would still be of little use. The mighty army of Erebor could not defeat the Dragon Smaug, and no army will.”

Nods of agreement around the table and Harrim, King of the Grey Mountains, smacked his meaty palm on the table.

“We stood with your grandfather at the battle of Battle of Azanulbizar,” he growled. “But we can ill afford another ‘victory’ like the one at the East-gate of Moria.”

The words were true. Too much had been lost that day, for precious little gain, and Bilbo had known then that words would do nothing to convince the other Dwarf Lords. A part of him no longer wanted to.

Dáin, this time reading the despair in Bilbo’s eyes, had asked for a private conference, remaining as the rest of the Lords departed.

“Cousin,” he said when they were alone, the familiarity of his address letting Bilbo know that Dáin wished to speak as kin and put their titles aside. “I hope this has not placed a wedge between us.” He rose from the table, prompting Bilbo to do the same. Dáin walked the short distance to where Bilbo
stood at the head of the table and put both of his hands on Bilbo’s shoulders.

“I hope that you see that my reasons for refusing you do not stem from avarice, or that I in any way begrudge you the throne you were born to. Please let me finish,” he added when Bilbo opened his mouth to speak. “This is no quest for an army, but if you would have use for me, you need only call and I shall answer.”

Putting his own hands on Dáin’s shoulders, Bilbo pulled the silver-haired Dwarf in for a quick embrace, ending it with a rough slap on the other’s back.

“Thank you, cousin,” Bilbo said as they separated, and saw Dáin relax slightly. “I do understand, and I will only request your aid when absolutely necessary.”

“We all lost many things during the battle for Moria,” Dáin said gruffly – as this was his custom, Bilbo knew not to take offence. “I would not like to see it happen again, but I would rather stand beside you a thousand times in vain than abandon you in need. Say the word and I march by your side this very day.”

Bilbo shook his head.

“No, you are right. This is not a battle to be won by great numbers, or a fight where steel alone shall guarantee the winner his victory.” As Bilbo spoke he realized that he truly believed that. Believed what Gandalf had said about needing not only strength, but also cunning and trickery.

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Alone in his chambers, he had dressed himself for the journey to Hobbiton, to this ‘Thorin Oakenshield’ the Wizard had claimed would be so essential to their quest. Bilbo’s thoughts strayed to the road ahead and to what a Hobbit would think of the dangers they would surely encounter along the trail. He knew little of the true nature of Hobbits, knowing them only as peaceful gardeners and sources of excellent pipe-weed. But if Gandalf would personally vouch for one, there must be something more to them than that.

He was almost ready when a knock came at his door.

“Enter,” he called as he fastened the clasps of his cloak.

Keti, a Dwarf from his personal guard with bright red and bushy moustache (with matching beard), popped his head in and Bilbo gestured for him to come inside.

“M’ Lord,” the young Dwarf said, standing at attention. “I- that’s to say, we – that would me and several others, Belni for one – and, uh, oh balls.”

Immediately after this last word Keti looked hilariously appalled at himself and Bilbo struggled not to laugh and give the poor lad a complex for life.

“There is something on your mind, I take it,” he said instead, aiming for stoic but likely ending up closer to resigned amusement. His nephews had unfortunately given him plenty of practice with that particular expression.

Keti looked miserable, but bravely soldiered on.

“I told them I would make a mess out of this,” he confided in Bilbo.
“Deep breaths,” Bilbo advised, “and then just let me hear it.” He already had an inkling of what this was about.

“It would be our honour if you allowed us to come with you on your journey.” Keti rushed to get the words out of his mouth, as if Bilbo would walk out the door before he had the chance to finish.

“And with ‘our’, you mean you and Belni?” Bilbo gently teased. “No, no,” he said when Keti blushed and scrambled for words. “I do not mean to make fun of you. I take it you and several others from my guard wish for my leave to join me on this quest to Erebor.”

Once again having straightened his spine, Keti then ruined the military precision by nodding eagerly.

“Keti, your offer is very much appreciated,” Bilbo said and hated the way the younger dwarf perked up at his words, as it wouldn’t last through what he had to say next. “But you would be of more use to me in staying here, to protect Dís – please don’t tell her I said as much, though – and of course our city.”

Putting a hand on Keti’s shoulder – which had started to droop, as had his moustache – Bilbo shook the Dwarf a little.

“I speak truly,” he said simply. “I am grateful, but it would not do to leave Ered Luin without protection.”

“Yes, m’ Lord,” the guard murmured, though he did stand a little straighter.

Putting his arm around Keti’s shoulder and walking him towards the door, Bilbo changed the subject to happier things, such as the pretty young lass helping out in the Metalsmith’s hall.

Before he left, Bilbo would have to have a word with Dís about keeping the young ones busy enough to ward off any “help” that would otherwise be coming his way.

The sentiment was very much valued, and Keti was a good warrior, without doubt - he would not have been accepted into the royal guard otherwise.

But, as Bilbo had come to understand, numbers would not sway the outcome of this quest. He had also realized that he already had those with him who he needed.

He had those who were loyal and brave. Those who had already proven themselves by his side, and once more when answering his summons.

He could ask no more than that.

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Finally standing outside the marked Hobbit hole, Bilbo shook his head to clear his mind and knocked twice on the round door.

“Gandalf, I do hope you know what you are doing,” he murmured as he waited for the door to open. “For all our sakes.”

Chapter End Notes
Regarding actual canon, I kinda refuse to believe that Thorin would ask practically all Dwarfs in existence for aid and only so few would answer that call. No. Way. So above is kinda this AU’s rationalization of what happened.
Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

From here on out we'll be heading into even more AU things than Bilbo being the Dwarf and Thorin the Hobbit. (Or well, perhaps not *more* AU things...) Anyway, you see something strange it's likely there on purpose.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It took almost being eaten by trolls before Thorin fully grasped why the Dwarfs treated their leader with such clear reverence, and why they were prepared to follow him on such a fool’s errand.

That wasn’t to say that Thorin found Bilbo foolish or unworthy of respect. Thorin had come of his own free will after all, having actually left his home to seek the unfamiliar, instead of the opposite. But it would seem that some part of him doubted still.

He didn’t doubt the Dwarf’s honour. The stories the Dwarfs had shared told of a prince - now king - not only willing to die for his people, but who would also take work as willingly as any commoner.

There was glory to be gained in war, but few would praise someone merely for earning a living, for not giving up on life when fate had turned it upside down.

As a Hobbit, and as someone too familiar with the cruelty of fate, Thorin could certainly admire the latter, but part of him – the part that had made his armour and sword - also revered the skill required to face down an army of Orcs and live to tell the tale.

Or actually, not tell the tale - because it had been Balin who’d described the battle against Azog the Defiler, while Bilbo had merely turned his face towards the darkness surrounding their camp, gaze once more locked East. It could have been false modesty… but Thorin did not think so.

The heart of the matter wasn’t that Balin’s story rang untrue, but how this Bilbo could be such a fierce warrior, when he wasn’t much larger than Thorin himself, when he carried such gentleness about him when speaking to his nephews, to his friends, or even to strangers.

Again the memory woke within Thorin, of the soft, distant look in Bilbo’s eyes from when they sat together on the bench. It was hard to reconcile that owner of such a look with the same Dwarf who would fearlessly spilt blood in battle, and Thorin couldn’t quite fit the pieces together.

That would soon change.

- 

Not one of them had dared voice the thought, but their leaving Shire had almost been too peaceful.

They had made good time with the ponies that had been awaiting them at the Green Dragon, staying the occasional night at an inn when one was available, otherwise sleeping beneath the stars. Soon enough, though, there was only the wilderness to rest in - something which surprisingly enough suited Thorin just fine.
Another thing to set him apart from most Hobbits, he mused, another thing which would be deemed most improper by the old nags of Hobbiton. But he discovered that there was much pleasure to be found in lying on soft grass and having only the heavens as a cover.

Even if Bombur snored loud enough to wake the dead of the First Age.

Fortunately, this wasn’t the only thing he had learned about his travelling companions. Despite their first meeting having been very trying for Thorin, they soon proved themselves to be tolerable enough when there was no pantries around to pillage.

Just the other night he had learnt that Nori knew almost every constellation in the sky by heart and he had quietly listened to the Dwarf recite them to his young brother, Ori, who almost seemed afraid of the sky’s vastness.

“It feels like I could fall into it,” Ori had complained, and in the dark Thorin had smiled at the petulant, accusing tone of the Dwarf’s voice. He sounded like he thought the heavens themselves should descend and apologize for their magnificence.

Concentrating on Nori’s voice helped drown out Bombur’s snores, so it was to stories of great heroes and magical beasts that Thorin fell asleep that evening.

Not quite a week after that occasion came the day when they stopped at a long-abandoned house.

With barely restrained impatience, Bilbo had listened to Gandalf’s suggestion of shifting camp, but when the Wizard couldn’t give a better reason than their sooner arrival at the Hidden Valley, to the Elves, Bilbo had lost his composure.

They hadn’t stopped since breaking camp that morning, and the weather had just cleared after three full days and nights of constant downpour, so just like the disbanding clouds on the sky, tempers were getting frayed at the edges.

“I agreed to seek the council of Lord Elrond because I freely admit it would be foolish to avoid the only being nearby who could possible help us make sense of my father’s map,” Bilbo had growled. “But we are hungry and in need of rest, and I do not intend to show up on their doorstep like a beggar looking for bread, nor will I creep around in the middle of the night as a thief.”

Equally matched in stubbornness, the Dwarf and the Wizard had then gone their separate ways, Gandalf disappearing along the road muttering about the thick-headedness of Dwarfs, and Bilbo giving out orders to set up camp between clenched teeth.

Fíli and Kíli had been put in charge of looking after the ponies, and Thorin agreed to bring them their food as a way to avoid the other Dwarfs for a while.

Usually he found the two young Dwarfs amusing enough, with the way they would inevitably get themselves into trouble of some sort and would have to endure their uncle’s disappointment – and then there were times Thorin found himself wanting to give them a stern talking-to as well. He always held back, as he figured it was not his place.

But as the day had been long, he did not wish to linger, planning to find a peaceful spot to calm his mind as soon as he had finished his errand.

Upon reflection, finding out that the pair had managed to lose two of the ponies came as little surprise. Sighing, and against better judgment, he agreed to help them search the nearby area before
letting their uncle know.

“He is hopeless when he gets into one of his moods,” Kíli complained.

“Is he very harsh with you?” Thorin questioned, doubtful of the fact, as he knelt to examine the tracks something worryingly large had left in its wake.

“Worse!” Fíli whined. “He turns into a bottomless pit of disappointment and it makes you feel about as big as a toad just having been stepped on by a Troll-”

Well. Speaking of.

Going after the ponies probably wasn’t the cleverest thing Thorin had ever done, but at the time it had seemed a good idea. He probably would have ignored the boys’ teasing if he hadn’t already been annoyed, but as it was, he’d figured that he was small enough not to be seen by the Trolls, especially since the creatures had been so caught up in their discussion.

On par for the day, Thorin’s plan had not quite worked, and getting caught turned out to be an even worse idea than taking on the task in the first place. He had been lucky that Fíli and Kíli had managed to collect the rest of the Dwarfs and arrive just in time to aid him in his attempts to not get stomped on. Taking advantage of his small size and sharp blade, Thorin had kept making stinging cuts on their legs and feet while looking for a way to make his escape. However, three against one certainly made that quite a challenge.

The Dwarfs’ arrival might have been fortunate indeed, but it had also been very distracting for Thorin to suddenly see them all pouring into the little glade.

In addition, as Thorin was not in the habit of lying to himself, he would admit that his distraction had only gotten worse when he had caught sight of Bilbo.

The blond Dwarf handled a sword like it was part of him, making it perfectly clear that the stories about him had not been exaggerated. A blade half his own size and he wielded it like he had been born with it in hand.

And then there was the way the light from the Trolls’ fire painted Bilbo’s face and hair in naught but reds and golds. The way his eyes seemed darker, but still glowed. How it all came together and made all sorts of thoughts suddenly crowd for Thorin’s attention.

The biggest of the thoughts, the boldest, the one coming entirely unbidden into his mind was the question of whether Bilbo might look just the same - eyes bright and focused, face intent - during heights of passion as he did in the heat of battle.

If Thorin could - if Bilbo would…

So yes, Thorin had been distracted. Enough that a Troll finally managed to grab him.

As he was held high in the air, Thorin fully expected not to see another dawn. He was thankful for his armour as it protected him from most of the trolls’ rough handling, but it wouldn’t be enough in the long run. This was made all that much clearer when they transferred their grips to just his limbs.

Despite what the miserable old Wizard claimed, Thorin was just one Hobbit. Hardly worth the lives of so many others - and so it was to great shock and horror that Thorin watched Bilbo thrust his sword down into the ground - and he watched how same shock was mirrored in the eyes of Kíli before he and the rest also threw down their weapons.
But cast them down they did, willing to completely put their lives in Bilbo’s hands. Not without reason, as would soon become clear.

When Bilbo had started questioning the Trolls’ cooking capabilities, Thorin had thought him mad, and he’d been struck stiff with dread when Bombur came close to being devoured.

But Bilbo had stopped them with the outrageous claim that they all had *parasites*. Thorin could have laughed when he at last understood Bilbo’s plan, but that would have spoiled it – as would Kíli’s wild protests over his uncle’s words. Thorin didn’t let himself think twice before kicking the young Dwarf silent, and he was relieved when Kíli swiftly grasped his uncle’s plan as well.

Then came the arrival of Gandalf, and for the first time Thorin greeted the Wizard’s arrival with something other than dread and trepidation.

As soon as he could, Thorin went to Bilbo’s side, wanting to make sure the Dwarf was unhurt. He also silently debating the merits of lying to oneself after all as the warm smile directed at him made him remember his earlier thoughts. Thanking his lucky stars that he never blushed anywhere except his ears – which were well covered with dark locks –, Thorin pushed away the troubling visions and instead brought up the other thought lying heavy on his mind:

"How did you know he would come in time?"

"I’ve recently learnt,” Bilbo explained as he collected his sword from where it lay, “that one of Gandalf’s more annoying habits is to appear when you least expect him but need him the most."

Throwing Kíli his sword and Ori his slingshot, Bilbo turned back to Thorin with a smile which quickly faded when he saw how the colour fled Thorin’s face.

Concerned, he put his hand on Thorin’s arm.

"If he hadn’t come, there would still have been a way," Bilbo comforted, mistaking Thorin's pallor for a fear of death narrowly avoided. "Despite the loss of our main weapons, Dwarfs are not that easy to unarm." Bending down he drew a dagger from the inside of his left boot. "I suspect those of us not suspended over a fire had almost cut ourselves out of the sacks, and a knife or two to the eye is certainly distraction enough for any half-wit of a troll."

Not knowing what to say without delving into memories he’d rather leave undisturbed, Thorin nodded curtly and turned to seek the growing light of the day, wanting to banish the chill that had overcome him.

He vaguely heard Bilbo inform their company that they would stay for a few hours to eat and rest a while, before continuing on.

Thorin stayed in the sun while a few of the others investigated the cave the trolls had used as their hide-out, and while the rest prepared a meal. But even standing fully beneath the golden rays, Thorin did not feel any warmer.

At the sound of someone coming up behind him, the Hobbit quickly turned his head.

“Here,” Bilbo said, and held out a short but graceful sword. Accepting it, Thorin looked it over and quizzically raised an eyebrow at Bilbo for an explanation.

The sword was beautiful, and likely made by a better craftsman than he would ever be. Its reach was
much too short to be effective, however, and would leave him at more of a disadvantage compared to the sword he already had.

"At least until we find you a shield to go with your name, I hope you will allow Fíli to further expand your education into dual wielding," Bilbo said, and motioned for Thorin to unsheathe the weapon again.

Thorin held the blade still as Bilbo traced the runes along it, explaining how the sword would glow in the presence of Goblins and Orcs.

“Fíli tells me your lessons are going well, and that you can wield your current blade with equal skill in either hand. This blade is of Elven make and will not break, bend, or blunt, so makes it a good option to stop a strike. Its shorter reach will also serve you well once the enemy can’t be kept at a distance.”

Noticing the large, unfamiliar Elven blade hanging at Bilbo’s side, Thorin found himself questioning the Dwarf once again.

"I was under the impression that you did not favour Elves."

"I do not favour those who abandon friends in need," Bilbo said, his tone short. “But I favour those who would let old grudges forever cloud their mind even less.”

With that their conversation was over, and as Bilbo left, Thorin secured the scabbard at his hip.

Despite being awake for more than full day Thorin felt very much alert. As he did not desire food - almost being food himself seemed to have put a damper on his appetite - he merely found a place to sit in the sun, instead of finding his bedroll or joining the others.

After a short while, Fíli and Kíli came to sit by him, settling down beside him with earnest looks on their faces.

"We are truly sorry," Fíli said.

"We never meant for you to go alone or at all really,” Kíli continued, a beat behind his brother. “I shouldn’t even have suggested it, I was just teasing.”

Thorin didn’t know if he should consider their concern as endearing or insulting; after all he was perfectly capable of making up his own mind. Even so, as he figured their uncle had once more threatened to send them back to their mother, he decided to go easy on them.

“Think no more of it,” he said, and smiled at the relieved look on their faces. Then they nagged him until he agreed to join them by the fire, mostly to make them shut up. As he settled by the fire, he hoped that the warmth of it would succeed in driving the chill from his bones better than the sun’s rays.

The pair on each side of him chattering about everything and nothing perhaps helped as well.

Dwarfs were a strange kind indeed because while these two likely had lived almost half again of his own years it was clear to him that they were still very young.

He did not know their exact ages, but he knew enough of Dwarfs to be sure that - princes or not - no Dwarfs close to his own age of 44 would have been permitted on a quest such as this. Even Kíli,
who had almost no beard, would likely be at least 70 or close to 80. Young Ori was probably somewhere near those numbers as well; it was harder to tell with him as he had the limbs of a pup who had yet to grow into his paws.

Then Thorin was struck by a thought.

When being told about the arrival of Smaug and the fall of Erebor, he had still been too angry and too disbelieving to really consider what he’d heard. But…

The Dwarfs talked about it as if it had happened not long ago, and perhaps for them not much time had passed. Objectively, though, many years would have had to.

More than a hundred years, perhaps more than a hundred and fifty or else he surely would have met a Hobbit or Man who told the tale of how his great grandfather had seen the Dwarfs first come into exile. They would likely have passed through the parts where Thorin now lived on their way to claim the Blue Mountains, but he had heard nothing of it. These days it was certainly common enough to see Dwarven blacksmiths and merchants sell their wares in the markets of the bigger cities.

What did this then tell about Bilbo’s age? He had been a young prince during the arrival of Smaug, and still called young during the battle of Azanulbizar. Thorin had assumed Bilbo was about 70 when the battle for Moria took place, perhaps a little younger as it had been noteworthy enough for Balin to remark on.

Then Thorin stumbled upon the barest edges of a memory, something he had read in passing many years earlier.

It had been a history book, exclusively concerning Hobbits, and a thick dull text. Thorin had been bored waiting for his father to come home, and with a child’s logic he had decided that it would make time go faster because even a boring book would seem fun in comparison.

He had been reading about his Great-Grand-Uncle on his mother’s side: Brandobas “Bullroarer” Took, who had fought bravely against invading Goblins. The book had spent several chapters going on about his courage, his unusual size, and a game called golf, and then Thorin had turned the page to find a short annotation scribbled at the bottom of one sheet.

(He remembered being shocked to find someone had dared write in a book, especially since it clearly had been an adult. Thorin had once tried to improve an equally boring book belonging to his grandfather by drawing horses in the margins and had been soundly spanked for his efforts.)

The note had been brief, written just below a long section droning on about how nice it had been for such a great hero to be allowed to die peacefully in his own Hobbit Hole and at such an esteemed age at that.

While Thorin could no longer remember the exact wording, it had connected the death of his relative with news arriving about how a great Dwarven king had fallen in battle. The scribbler had seemingly shared Thorin’s disdain for the game of golf, and had remarked sourly on the waste perfectly good paper which otherwise could have been used to comment on the largest ever battle between Dwarfs and Orcs.

Thorin glanced at the blond Dwarf where he sat on the other side of camp, talking to Nori. That almost would have had to been the battle where Bilbo faced Azog, where he lost his grandfather (the great Dwarven king in question). Only… the Bullroarer had died almost 130 years ago. And if Bilbo
had been in his seventies then, he would be close to two centuries by now.

It seemed impossible, as Dwarfs usually lived for two and a half centuries. Maybe three.

If there was any grey in Bilbo’s hair, it was hidden carefully between the tumbling blond locks, again turned golden by the fire instead of silver with age. Bilbo’s face had few lines, and his body was not that of someone well past his prime.

How young *had* he been when he lost his home, when he had faced the creature which had killed his grandfather? Not that anyone ever was old enough for such a thing, but still.

Thorin realised he had stared much too long when Bilbo caught his gaze. The Hobbit cursed himself when Bilbo left Nori, and when the two young princes suddenly found that they were urgently needed somewhere else.

"Something is on your mind," Bilbo stated, a bit of concern still lingering around him when he gazed at Thorin, even though Thorin’s clumsy words had driven him away earlier.

Thorin could have groaned. If he said it was nothing, it would be obvious that he was lying. Curtly informing Bilbo that it was none of his concern would be rude and also untrue, considering the subject of Thorin’s thoughts. But if he told the truth he would reveal his concern for matters clearly not of his business.

Thorin felt his ears flush again as he thought of another reason one would be caught staring at another for long periods of time. He would not welcome the awkwardness that would follow if the Dwarf’s mind managed to come to the same conclusion.

Therefore he decided to go for an almost-truth.

"How long has it been since the attack on Erebor?" After asking the question Thorin suddenly remembered a comment one of the Dwarfs had made while still in his home. "Someone said the dragon had not been seen for 60 years."

Bilbo’s eyes were warm, if a little distant.

"It’s been almost 160 years since anyone last walked the halls of Erebor."

"So long ago," Thorin said slowly, forgetting his calculations in the face of reality.

"But at least it might soon change," Bilbo said and nodded towards the Wizard. "You were there when he gave me my Father’s key. Only a month before he had shown me the map. It was thought lost with Erebor."

“How did he -”

Bilbo shook his head, cutting Thorin off mid-speech. "I do not know how he came by them. The key I did not even know about and I thought the map was in my father’s keep, and he was lost when Erebor was."

"Smaug," Thorin stated grimly.

"It was not an end fitting a king." Again the distant look had completely clouded Bilbo’s eyes. “My
mother always enjoyed the markets in Dale and they were there together with the royal guard when Smaug first showed. I'm told they were both crushed when the first guard towers fell. My grandfather hoped they had both managed to seek refuge, but in our hearts we knew.”

"I'm sorry," Thorin said, the words inadequate but needing to be said. Bilbo shook his head in again.

“Don’t be. I believe we talk so much of gold and treasure so as to not be forced to dwell on the lives lost. But grief is not a shame unless you lose yourself in it; when controlled it can also make you stronger.”

Thorin found himself nodding in agreement, Bilbo echoing the action.

“Unless I’m mistaken, you’re not unfamiliar with grief yourself. If you ever wish to talk, I will listen.”

Thorin inclined his head in thanks. He had no intention of doing so, but the words were well meant.

Bilbo rose, but before he left he put his hand on Thorin’s shoulder. "I am glad you’re with us, but the next time my nephews go troll hunting, would you come and get me first?"

When the Dwarf had left, Thorin sat looking into the merrily jumping flames, the memory of Bilbo’s touch finally making warmth spread through his body. That was quite fortunate, because the topic of conversation had made him again wish for the solitude he had not been able to seek earlier, and so Thorin gladly left the heat of the fire.

However, he had not been away from the others for very long before someone thumped down next to him on the grass. Thorin glanced up. Dwalin.

"If you get tired of playing with your letter openers, I will teach you how to handle an axe," the tattooed Dwarf offered gruffly.

Surprised, and a little offended Thorin ended up saying nothing.

"Just a thought," Dwalin said, falling quiet, but he didn’t leave.

"Did you want anything else?" Thorin finally asked.

"Nah," dismissed Dwalin. “But you’re not the only one wanting to get away from a certain Wizard. Gives me the creeps."

Searching eyes sought Thorin’s but he continued to stare out at the landscape.

"Your reasons are your own, of course. But there ain’t one of us who hasn’t noticed that you don’t seem to trust him." Dwalin shrugged. "Perhaps you have reason, perhaps not. But it would be good to know your thoughts, laddie – seeing as right now we’re all trusting him with a great deal. I don’t appreciate being moved like a pawn."

Originally planning to get rid of the Dwarf by saying that Gandalf was not the only one he had wished solitude from, Thorin was startled by Dwalin’s admission.

"You do not believe that Gandalf will help you?"
"I don't believe he means us harm, but I know Wizards, lad, and they always plan thirty moves ahead when you've only taken one. You can't trust someone like that. Not really."
Dwalin slowly stroked a hand over his bald head in a considering gesture. "Bilbo, on the other hand, he couldn't keep a secret from me unless he forgot it himself. Perhaps not even then. Trust him with my life."

"You've known him long, then?"

"Almost all my life, lad. And a good part of his." So Dwalin was younger than Bilbo. That was a little unexpected.

"So you grew up together in Erebor?" Thorin asked, knowing this wasn't any business of his, but Dwalin did not seem to take offence.

"Balin was born in Erebor, and Bilbo too," the Dwarf explained. "But when Smaug came I was just a glint in my mother's eyes."

"So you've never seen Erebor?" Thorin asked, shocked into speaking his mind.

"Once, Balin took me to see the gates. But lad," Dwalin said and the stoic look on his face turned a little wistful, "a home is a home whether you've been there or not."

Then completely out of nowhere Dwalin slapped Thorin hard on the back and rose to his feet.

"Now laddie, best off to bed with you."

Thorin gritted his teeth.

Chapter End Notes

Unless I'm mistaken, in the book Radagast does not show up just after the troll bit, and no Orcs coming shortly after either, so I decided our gang would get some rest before they headed out again.

Small rant coming, beware!
Filmverse and Tolkien aren't exactly in agreement of ages. Canon states Thorin to have been 24 when Erebor was lost. 53 when facing Azog and about 195 during the quest. 24 is pretty young for a Dwarf to be leading an army against a dragon, don't you think?

And did you know the age of 195 makes Thorin the most senior member of the company, older than even Balin? Bit hard to fit that against Richard Armitage’s portrayal of Thorin as the Dwarf merely has a little grey (cough *silver* cough) in his hair and apart from that obviously is in his prime.

Soooo, my head-canon is that Thorin is an amazing fighter and that the line of Durin (or in this AU, line of Baggins) matures quickly but ages slowly. But this then brings up issues with Kili and Fili, but denying and repressing works pretty well.
The brothers are respectively 77 and 82 during the quest. Going by the film and the age of his actor I would say Kili is barely pushing 30 in human years. Imagine getting rid of almost half of those years and you have Thorin when he cut off Azog’s arm. Yeah.
Get rid of two thirds and that’s Thorin when Smaug arrived.

Even counting the fact that the Dwarven aging seems to be a bit wacky compared to us humans (yes I did my homework), it still would mean he definitely would have been the equivalent of a teen when he left Erebor.

So the above calculations of Bilbo’s age, as well as Thorin’s age of 44, are something of a compromise between my brain and both source materials.
None of them managed to get much sleep before they had to continue.

When Radagast the Brown had abruptly showed up in their camp, Thorin had heard Dwalin mutter how more Wizards were just what they needed. And the tattooed Dwarf’s frown had not exactly lessened when Radagast appeared to have forgotten his important errand (and the incident with the stick insect had especially not helped sweeten Dwalin’s disposition).

The two Wizards wandered off to talk in private and the Company went back to what they were doing before the interruption. For Thorin this meant going back to not doing much at all. He knew he wasn’t going to be able to sleep, he wasn’t hungry, and the warmth from the fire had finally wormed its way beneath his coat and shirt to coil inside him. Instead he wandered aimlessly amongst the Company and ended up next to Bilbo and Balin where the two stood bent over their map.

“I can’t say that I look forward going to the Elves for help,” Balin huffed.

“I can only imagine what Father and Grandfather would say,” Bilbo said with a wry smile. “But it needs to be done. We can’t read it, not completely, and Gandalf says this Lord Elrond will be able to.”

“It’s not right,” Balin muttered. “As you say, your father would never have stood for this.”

The small smile on Bilbo’s lips slipped away.

"Regardless of what he’d think about this particular part of it, he definitely would have wanted me to reclaim Erebor.” The Dwarf sighed. “I’ve already found myself wondering if I would be on this quest at all if I didn't know he would approve. If I still didn't seek that approval.”

Balin patted Bilbo roughly on the shoulder.

“Oh you still would be here, my friend,” he comforted. “Returning to Erebor is the right thing for our people. If you had hated your father you would have gone just to spite his expectations of you.”

This made Bilbo’s lips quirk a little.

“It is the right thing to do,” Balin said quietly. “I'm not always certain it is the wisest thing, but -” He slapped his palm against his chest. “In here, I know it's right.”

“That’s not where the heart is located,” Óin grumbled as he walked by.

“Who asked you?” Balin sniffed, sounding offended. But as the white-haired Dwarf looked at his King, who had started laughing at Óin’s comment, he seemed to Thorin more pleased than offended that he’d been the one to help banish Bilbo’s glum mood.

Thorin, realising he once again had been staring at Bilbo, hurriedly turned and walked to the other side of the clearing. As he went he mentally berated himself. As if it wasn’t enough that he wanted the Dwarf, now he wanted to be the one who put a smile on his face too.

Thorin found himself next to Kíli and Bofur… just when a deep growl echoed through the trees.
“Wargs,” Kíli whispered, face wiped clean of its usual merriment. The next minute went by in a blur, and then they were running for their lives as Radagast tried to draw the Orc pack’s attention away from their group.

“There’s a passage, leading to the Hidden Valley,” Gandalf said as they ducked behind another outcropping of rocks.

“Letting Elves save us?” Dwalin growled. “I might just rather have us die here.” But while he spoke he shoved Thorin and Ori closer to the rocks and put himself in front of them, much to Thorin’s annoyance.

“Lead on,” Bilbo said shortly to the Wizard.

They had a close call when one of the Orcs almost stumbled upon them as they hid beneath the very boulder the creature had steered his Warg on top of. While Kíli’s arrows and Dwalin’s and Bifur’s hammer and blade provided a quick end for the Orc and his mount, the noise was still enough to give the rest of the pack knowledge of their whereabouts.

Again they ran.

“The passage should be around here,” Gandalf said as they passed yet more boulders and trees.

“You don’t know where it is?” Glóin panted, horrified. They did not have time to quarrel, however, because just as Glóin had finished his question Gandalf’s eyes brightened in recognition and he quickly led them to what to Thorin looked like every other boulder formation they had passed.

“Get down there,” Bilbo ordered as the opening in the ground became visible. “Quickly, all of you.”

The Orcs were still some distance away though closing in quickly as they clearly did not cherish the thought of their prey escaping.

One by one the Dwarfs and Thorin slid down the rock to find themselves at the start of a passage.

“What are you waiting for?” Gandalf demanded. “Run!”

They were not far along the path when they heard the call of a horn coming from above them.

“Elves,” Dwalin muttered from where he walked in front of Thorin.

The tunnel had quickly given way to a narrow ravine. They could see daylight high above them and hear the sounds of a fight.

Dwalin and Glóin both reached for their weapons but Bilbo just kept on going – albeit with a sigh – and the two soon followed, as did the rest of the company. After squeezing through an endless amount of narrow passageways, the path finally widened enough for them to walk more comfortably, and then widened even more so it became obvious that they had reached their destination.

From their vantage point high up in the mountainside, they had a clear view of Rivendell. Or, as Gandalf called it: Imladris.

To Thorin the sight was fairly beautiful, even if he could not understand what made anyone want to
build their homes in the midst of roaring waterfalls. How was that practical? However it was quite clear that the majority of the Dwarfs did not find anything about Rivendell positive in the least.

Gandalf finally tired of their grumbling and told them off in a way more suited to young boys than grown Dwarfs; Dwalin looked particularly offended.

When they’d made their way down into the valley they were welcomed warmly enough, not that it helped relax the Dwarfs. When Lord Elrond arrived just a short while later, the Dwarfs clearly thought they were being attacked and Thorin found himself unceremoniously pulled into the middle of their group.

Once it became apparent what the party of Elves had returned from doing, Bilbo expressed his thanks for their aid in distracting and ridding them of the Orcs. Despite his polite manner, the Dwarf’s shoulders were stiff and there was a restless energy about him.

It seemed to Thorin like regardless of Bilbo’s resolute words to Balin earlier the blond Dwarf didn’t really trust the Elves. And despite Bilbo’s words to Thorin, the Dwarf didn’t seem to like them much either.

Thorin wasn’t sure if his newly discovered feelings for their leader influenced his opinion in any way, or if it merely was the stories he had heard about the Elves of Mirkwood, but either way the Hobbit found himself looking a little suspiciously at their hosts.

Bofur, who appeared to always speak his mind, and who also appeared to notice more than Thorin would have given the ever-smiling Dwarf credit for, alerted Thorin to the fact that he should take care not to let his feelings be so obvious.

"You don't like the Elves do you?" Bofur softly asked.

They had been led to a set of rooms to refresh themselves before dinner. Everything was too high and too big and Thorin had been wandering around trying to avoid touching anything, feeling… he didn’t know what exactly, but it made his feet want to move.

Not really able to give voice to his thoughts, Thorin merely grunted at Bofur and went in search of a wet cloth to wipe his feet down. It irked him to think that his face was that easily read. If his dislikes were plain as that, then what if his recently realised interest in their leader was just as easily revealed?

During dinner and then through the reading of the map Lord Elrond was nothing but courteous, but the little seed of mistrust that had settled inside Thorin did not seem willing to be uprooted so easily.

When the two young princes sought his company that evening – finding him on a small balcony overlooking the valley – he had mostly sorted out his thoughts, but he declined to share them with Fíli and Kíli at first for fear of waking bad memories.

“No, no,” Kíli protested. “Speak your mind.”

“You can’t bring up bad memories with us,” Fíli said, nodding. “This is the first time we’ve ever even seen Elves.”

“Exactly,” Kíli said and slid a little closer to Thorin where they were sitting on a stone bench, his brother mirroring the action on Thorin’s other side. “And we’re very hard to offend. So please; we can see that you don’t like them, but why?” Kíli asked in a low voice.
Thorin sighed, but figured there would be little harm in telling them the thoughts that had been stirring in his mind. Perhaps voicing them out loud would help him sort out the last tangles – or make him realise he was just being a fool.

"When the Elvenking did not come to your people’s aid and refused to lead his army against the dragon, it could be said he acted with thought for his people, as well as yours,” Thorin began slowly. “Many of your people had already lost their lives, and surely more would fall in a second attack, along with countless Elves. And with Smaug already inside Erebor there wasn’t a great chance that their sacrifices would lead to victory.”

He paused, trying to find the right words.

“Elves are immortal whereas mortality brings with it one surety; we know we’ll die, we just don’t know when or where. Perhaps this influenced the king and made him hold back from joining the battle, even with the chance that his choice would lead to further Dwarven lives lost. He judged the value of Dwarven lives as less worth than that of his own people.”

“Mannish lives too, in that case,” Fíli said solemnly. “The town of Dale was completely destroyed when Smaug attacked. And many lives were lost during the attack –”

Two of those were their grandparents, Thorin remembered, and he inclined his head.

“– but many more were lost in the following days as there was no adequate way to care for the wounded.”

“That is exactly what I meant to say next,” Thorin stated. “While it makes me uneasy to think that someone would think me lesser just because I’m destined to die – my biggest grievance is that the Elvenking did not offer you aid. If only protection and care, it would have been better than making you trek across the world in search of shelter.”

“If he had, I don’t think Grandfather would have accepted anyway,” Bilbo said and stepped out of the shadows. Thorin was really starting to dislike this habit the Dwarf seemed to have. In Bilbo’s defence, he looked apologetic.

“Forgive me, I was looking for Fíli and Kíli and could not help but overhear,” he explained. “Even so,” Bilbo went on, “you should not judge Lord Elrond’s people based on the actions of his kin.”

Fíli and Kíli exchanged disbelieving looks.

“I said that he should not,” Bilbo said, looking chagrined. “And neither should we. Just as I hope they won’t judge all Dwarfs harshly just because my Company is currently in the process of destroying their furniture.”

“They’re doing what?” Thorin asked as Fíli and Kíli chortled.

“Apparently the content of your pantry made a much better impression on them than the supper provided for us here. When I left, they needed fuel for a fire to prepare another meal, and...” Bilbo seemed a little embarrassed, but there was also a mischievous spark in his eyes. He approved of it in a way, Thorin realised. Or else he would have put a stop to it. Perhaps old grudges were not as easy to give up as he had been led to believe. Or perhaps this thing between Elves and Dwarfs went back further yet than the loss of Erebor.

Fíli and Kíli quickly excused themselves, not wanting to miss out on food that was actually edible,
and left their uncle and Thorin on the balcony.

“Perhaps it’s unavoidable for them. The Elves.” Thorin did not want Bilbo to think him discourteous merely because of a grudge that was not even his to bear. “But I have the feeling they look upon us like children… or not children exactly. But as something fleeting. And I don’t appreciate that.”

Bilbo came further out onto the balcony and stopped by the railing. The sight of him gazing out over Rivendell should have looked silly as his head just barely came over the balustrade, but all Thorin could think of was how even crescent moon managed to lure out golden notes in the Dwarf’s hair and beard.

“When I was young,” Bilbo said, “I ran away from Erebor to go live with the Elves.” He gave a short laugh. “I think I might have been the only Dwarf – and certainly the only prince – of Erebor to ever do so. I barely made it to Dale before being caught the first time.”

“The first time?” Thorin stared incredulously at Bilbo.

“Oh yes.” Bilbo turned, smiling, to Thorin. “Father was quite furious. Especially when I got as far as the edge of Mirkwood on my second try.”

“Did you ever succeed?” Thorin asked.

“Grandfather actually took me to meet them in the end,” Bilbo said. “Father did not particularly approve of that either. But he was eventually convinced it was the better alternative.

“They were very kind to me,” the Dwarf mused. “To Elves, children are the most precious of beings, just as they are to us Dwarfs, as they are a rare blessing. So you are right in saying that they do not treat us as such. But if you want my opinion, you are also right in saying that they do not treat us as equals.” He joined Thorin on the bench and patted the Hobbit’s shoulder as he sat down. “Let it be unsaid if that’s because their souls go to the Halls of Mandos or because we break their furniture.”

At the Dwarf’s last statement Thorin was surprised into a laugh.

“It is good to see you laugh, Master Oakenshield,” Bilbo smiled. “I’m sure you have your reasons for being sombre, but still.”

Thorin felt his ears flush from both Bilbo’s smile and the Dwarf’s gentle teasing and he resisted the urge to touch his hair to make sure they were covered.

“Time for bed I think,” Bilbo said after the two of them had sat in companionable silence for a while. “I’ve already told the others we likely need to leave early tomorrow. Gandalf hinted at it being best.”

Thorin nodded and rose to his feet. Being put to bed by Bilbo was not nearly as annoying as when Dwalin tried to do the same. Perhaps it was because Thorin had no arguments about Bilbo and beds being connected, or perhaps it was simply because the leader of their company wasn’t nearly as overbearing as the large Dwarf was.

Despite knowing he would have to rise early, the unfamiliar surroundings made it hard for Thorin to fall asleep, even if the Elves had provided them with proper beds and plenty of soft blankets (neither of which had been sacrificed to cook dinner with, thankfully). They had been offered a room each, but by unspoken agreement they had split into three groups and Thorin ended up sharing a room
with Dwalin, Balin and Bilbo.

Perhaps the way Dwalin and Balin both snored also had something to do with Thorin’s inability to sleep. It seemed louder in their little room than it did out in the open.

When he heard someone open the door Thorin stiffened, but he quickly relaxed as he saw the familiar shape of Bofur’s hat backlit in the doorway.

“Bilbo?” Bofur whispered.

Thorin tensed again, wondering what troubles that would make Bofur seek Bilbo out when they both should be sleeping. The rustling of sheets indicated that someone, most likely Bilbo, was getting up.

The soft light from outside fell on blond curls and proved Thorin’s theory correct.

“You should be sleeping, is everything all right?” Bilbo inquired softly. As the Dwarf turned back to check on his presumably sleeping companions, Thorin quickly shut his eyes. He did not particularly want to eavesdrop, but he should be sleeping as well and he didn’t want Bilbo to think he’d be a burden in the morning. As it was Thorin felt quite useless enough, thank you.

When he gauged it to be safe, he opened his eyes again.

“I knew you wouldn’t be sleeping,” Bofur explained and to Thorin’s shock he reached up a hand to stroke through Bilbo’s hair.

“Old habits die hard,” Bilbo said wryly and touched Bofur’s hand with his own. But he did not remove it. Instead he tangled their fingers together and leaned forward as Bofur kissed him.

“You know there are plenty of free rooms,” Bofur said hopefully when they parted. Thorin could not see Bilbo’s face, but he could hear the affection when the Dwarf replied.

“Thank you, but –” Bilbo again turned his face back towards the bedchamber and Thorin hurriedly closed his eyes once more.

“No matter, I see how it is,” Bofur said and laughed softly. “Shame, we’re not likely to see beds again in quite a while.”

The two remained at the doorway for a few minutes more, but their conversation went unnoticed by Thorin as his mind was spinning too hard for him to focus. The Hobbit thought back on Bilbo’s interactions so far with the other Dwarf but he could not remember anything other than friendship between them.

Were they courting? At the moment they were kissing again, so perhaps that was it? Or was this merely how it was between Dwarfs? Some part of him proclaimed it not to matter anyway. If Bofur was the type Bilbo sought pleasure with, then what chance did Thorin have at all? He’d had little hope as it was, and now that had diminished even further. If the cheerful, laughing Bofur was who Bilbo wanted to bed then how could a silent and grumpy (Thorin wasn’t deaf, no matter what the gossiping frumps in Hobbiton thought) Hobbit ever compete?

Long after Bilbo had slipped into bed again Thorin lay staring up into the ceiling he could not even see for the darkness in the room.
Interlude Two - Bilbo

When Bilbo had departed for the Shire, he’d left his sister in charge of a people who were both prosperous and perhaps even happy. But out of love for his parents, his grandfather, and his brother, he still left them in an attempt to gain back all that had been stolen so long ago, to give honour to their memory and their deaths.

Perhaps it was then only fitting that it was during this quest born of love he would finally find love himself.

The first person Bilbo felt anything like love for (who was not part of his family) was a pretty Dwarven lass who had long copper braids and the comeliest smile the young prince had ever seen. Not that Bilbo got to see very much of it as she - Haria had been her name - would do nothing but blush and stammer in his presence. Bilbo was no more than 15 at the time and would have been more than happy to just keep admiring her from afar - after all, he hadn’t really had any better idea of what to do with someone you liked, but once his father had realised what was going on he had taken Bilbo aside and explained a few things. Amongst awkward explanations about where little Dwarfs came from was also a lesson about how courting was not the same for those who were destined to rule as it was for those who were destined to follow.

“You have to be very careful when approaching someone,” Bungo had admonished, disregarding how Bilbo’s wide eyes and the redness spreading across his cheeks from the earlier explanations likely meant his son was more likely to avoid girls – and their parts – for quite a few years more.

“Some who come to power mistakenly think that all who are below them are there for them to use, and it can be very hard for one of a lower status to turn down a command from their prince.”

“I’d never command someone to do -“ Bilbo’s cheeks flushed even hotter, “- that,” he ended lamely and tried to ignore how his father looked disappointed at his lack of refinement.

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Bungo said and his tone made it clear that no son of his would ever even dare think about it. “But despite your intentions, it might be read that way. So when you take someone to bed -”

Bilbo very attentively studied the gemstones inlayed into the stone walls so that he would not have to meet his father’s eyes.

Bungo sighed. “Make sure they are there of their own free will and not because they feel they can’t say no, or because they think they owe it to you.”

Surprised, Bilbo turned his eyes back to his father again.

“Why would anyone think they’d owe someone their… favour?” Bilbo finished the sentence with only the slightest wavering in his voice.

“Because we keep them safe,” Bungo had simply said and put both hands on Bilbo’s slim shoulders. “We keep their families safe. Erebor is the richest and greatest kingdom in all of Middle Earth, and all who live here know so, and know they are blessed by it. Your grandfather is honourable and righteous but not all who rule are cast in the same mould. It is not unheard of for kings and princes alike to dishonour themselves by asking too much of those they are sworn to protect.” Bungo shook
Bilbo’s shoulders a little for emphasis before he released his grip to gesture towards the direction of the main living quarters.

“We collect taxes from our subjects when it comes to gold and goods, and that is our tribute because we’ve made it possible for those trades to take place. In times of war we will hold their lives in our hands and they will be ours to command to die in battle as well as ours to guard inside the walls of Erebor. But despite that, it does not give us the right to use their bodies in other ways, especially not ways that only benefit ourselves.”

Bungo looked gravely at Bilbo.

“I trust that you will learn to know the difference.”

At the end of that conversation, Bilbo was no longer interested in looking at Haria as he couldn’t be sure if she was shy because she liked him back, or if she looked uncomfortable because she desperately wished he’d leave her alone – and feared he would not.

Five years later, at the still very young age of 21, Bilbo first learned that letting others make the first move was not always the better option.

He had met Zadi at the market in Dale one day after being forced to accompany his mother. Zadi was the daughter of a jeweller and while not traditionally pretty, her honey coloured hair, bright blue eyes, and equally bright laugh – like dropping pearls on stone – had set her apart from the others at the market and Bilbo had noticed her almost straightaway.

Bilbo, mindful of his own lessons, made sure to greet Zadi polite enough, but not in any way that would convey his interest.

To his surprise and delight, Zadi had answered his greeting with a lot more warmth than could be expected from mere politeness, and as Belladonna chatted with the jewellers, Zadi had entertained Bilbo with stories about the times her father had taken her with him as he had travelled beyond the western borders of Mirkwood.

When they left the market, his mother had remarked on his apparent distraction but Bilbo had avoided answering her questions by claiming tiredness. Not that his reasons hadn’t been obvious just a few days later when he had (not so) casually asked his mother if she would like some company to the market. And when Belladonna had agreed – more out of curiosity than any real desire to visit the markets again so soon – Bilbo spent an hour looking anxiously at Zadi as she was surrounded by suitors. The anxiety was immediately turned into a silly grin when Zadi finally noticed him and instantly beamed at Bilbo, ignoring all the other young Dwarf swarming around her.

“She seems nice,” Belladonna had said, smiling at Bilbo has they’d made their way back inside Erebor’s walls. Bilbo had blushed and stammered something about not knowing who his mother was talking about, but in the following weeks his interest in Zadi had become more than obvious as he started to go down to the market by himself, not even pretending he had any other errand than to talk to her. Dís had teased him mercilessly when she had found out, being much too young to think of love as anything other than something unpleasantly mushy that only happened to other people - but
Bilbo had been to blissfully happy to care.

At least, until the day when he’d gone down to the market to find Zadi surrounded by her friends, showing off the sapphire blue dress – the exact shade of her eyes – Bilbo had given her only the day before.

He had agonized about it, but had gone ahead and bought it for her anyway as he’d really wanted her to have it. He’d given it over as casually as possible, not wanted her to feel in any way obliged to give him anything she did not want to give freely, and seeing her show it off to her friends with obvious joy thrilled Bilbo as it was a sure sign he had pleased her. Then he heard what she was saying and his heart had cracked.

"I wonder what else I can make him give me," Zadi had laughed, and it was the same lovely laugh as she had always had – except now it made Bilbo feel ill instead of shivery. "He gave me the dress as if it were nothing more than a trifle."

"You should ask for the great Arkenstone," one of the girls teased. But instead of laughing Zadi’s eyes turned considering and shrewd and Bilbo immediately turned around and practically ran back to Erebor.

His mother had been concerned when he had stopped visiting the market, but Bilbo had put up a good front, merely saying that he and Zadi hadn’t had too much in common when they’d gotten to know each other better. Out of his entire family, it was only Frerin who came close to guessing the truth of what had happened. His brother hadn’t said a word, but he had made sure to run interference with their father for a time - to give Bilbo space to mend his heart - and also made sure Dís stopped teasing Bilbo about where he had misplaced his girlfriend.

Three years after that Smaug came; his parents and his home were lost to him, and for a long time there was no room for anything but survival. At least that was Bilbo’s opinion. But even as nothing more than a prince in exile, he found himself being pursued by Dwarfs who wanted things from him not in the least pertaining to their people’s immediate survival, or with Bilbo’s own wishes.

Some were drawn to the fact he was the young heir to the vast richness that still dwelled inside Erebor, regardless of how impossible it was that the gold would be reclaimed. Others were interested in power and status rather than gold and gems, and wanted to bind Bilbo to them with promises or even with a child so that they could one day rule by his side. Bilbo tried to pay them no mind and by the time he’d lost his grandfather, he almost didn’t notice their greedy gazes any longer.

Almost.

At the Battle of Azanulbizar Bilbo gained a crown and lost his grandfather and brother. At no more than 53 years of age, he became king of a people without a home. But a king he was nonetheless and he wanted to do right by the ones who had followed his grandfather and who would now follow him regardless of the fact that his chest seemed to echo emptily but for the presence of Dís, Balin and young Dwalin.

Getting their people established in Ered Luin took years and Bilbo imagined it would never have happened at all without a lot of aid from his cousin Dáin who sent some of his best builders and miners to aid their efforts.

Eventually they had a city to call their own again, even if it was not Erebor.

Ered Luin did not suddenly blossom like the trees did in spring but grew slowly and steadily like a
stalagmite rising from the stone. They no longer had a grand city like Dale just outside their gates, but there were several cities of Men close enough to Ered Luin to serve as trading posts.

It was in one of these cities that Bilbo first met Bofur. His cousin Bifur was already known to Bilbo through Dwalin, both being fierce warriors who had fought together more than once, but Bilbo had not heard of Bifur’s close call with an Orc pack. So it was with surprise that he found himself beside a small stall of toys, Bifur being one of the three Dwarfs behind it. The axe blade firmly attached to Bifur’s skull was perhaps a greater surprise.

“Bifur,” Bilbo had said, perhaps a bit too incredulously to be fully polite, but it wasn’t as if he could be expected to just disregard the axe. “What in Baggins’ name has happened?”

The explanation he got was in broken Khuzdul intermingled with plenty of grunting and Iglishmêk, but with aid from the other two Dwarfs, Bofur and Bombur, Bilbo eventually got the whole picture.

The first time he had met Bifur, Bilbo had silently thought him a more talkative Dwalin, so it was a bit ironic that Bifur was now even quieter than Bilbo’s old friend. But beyond that he was still his former self, more or less, and as Bilbo had always found him pleasant company, he often found himself stopping by the cousins’ stall when he came to the market.

When Dís married and gave birth to Fíli (followed in remarkably quick succession by Kíli), Bilbo finally had a valid reason to go browsing for toys. By that time it wasn’t just Bifur’s company that Bilbo actively sought out. Bofur and Bombur had also become good friends and Bofur perhaps even slightly more.

When Bofur first had approached him, he’d made it clear he did so because he liked Bilbo and found him very desirable. But he’d also made it clear he did not think of Bilbo as anything more than an attractive friend.

“Not that that's anything to turn your nose at,” he’d said and smiled warmly at Bilbo - who must have seemed a little taken aback, because Bofur’s expression then turned apologetic.

“Of course, it was just a suggestion,” he had backtracked, and Bilbo almost laughed at the notion that it was for once the other person who feared overstepping some boundary.

Bofur was a miner turned toymaker, male, and completely guileless, so it was very unlikely that he’d tumble Bilbo for riches or just in want of a future position as consort. He wasn't old enough to have lived through the Desolation, and he seemed happy enough in Ered Luin, so it wouldn’t be the past that drew him to Bilbo. Bofur also wasn’t young enough to look at Bilbo and only see the king and legend, sight obscured by the title and the stories. His family was not wealthy but neither were they poor. Just the size of his brother Bombur proved that their toys kept them more than comfortable.

More than that Bilbo liked Bofur, and while he did not love him that could perhaps come in time, so he’d accepted Bofur’s offer and had never regretted it.

But despite the passing years the friendship he felt for Bofur refused to bloom into romantic love and little by little they turned back into just friends, who only very occasionally tumbled each other. It was a relief to Bilbo that had not been forced to break Bofur’s heart because it seemed that the other Dwarf held true to his words and regarded him as just a friend as well.

No other Dwarf had really caught Bilbo’s heart after Zadi. Perhaps in another life he and Dwalin could have been close in such a way, but in this life Bilbo thought of him as a brother, just as he
thought Balin one. He held them just as dear as he had held Frerin and that was more than good enough.

Apart from that, he had the sneaking suspicion that Dwalin thought of him as no less than his little brother for all that Bilbo actually was older. It had to be the way Dwalin had just kept growing until he loomed over Balin and Bilbo both.

It wasn’t until many years later when a Hobbit named Thorin had almost been ripped apart by Trolls that Bilbo realised that he could still fall in love, and violently at that.

Thorin, with the same lovely and rare smile as Haria. Thorin, with the same striking eyes as Zadi - but completely without the greed that hindsight had revealed to Bilbo.

The Hobbit hadn’t been particularly kind or even courteous, but when Bilbo had realised he would be joining them on their quest, something had stirred in his chest. At the time he had thought it guilt, because he did feel bad about asking Thorin to join a quest that was not even remotely his concern, but by the time they arrived in Rivendell Bilbo had admitted to himself that he did not merely feel protective, or thankful, or guilty. He loved Thorin.

While Thorin did not seem the type to be weak-minded or easily swayed, Bilbo still could not – would not make the first move without knowing it would be welcome. And not only welcome, but truly wanted.

Thorin was just as unlikely as Bofur to agree to sleep with Bilbo merely for riches or power, but Bilbo had seen the awe in the Hobbits eyes when Balin told of the battle against Azog as well as the look in Thorin’s eyes after the Troll incident. If Bilbo gave in to temptation and tangled his hands in those soft-looking dark curls, pulled Thorin in for a kiss then he might not be pushed away, but would Thorin agree because he wanted Bilbo, or because he wanted the warrior, the hero?

Just once Bilbo wanted the other person to finally love him. Not what he could give them, not what he could do for them, not what he had done. And he wanted this person to be Thorin, who he already loved more than seemed reasonable. But that want also meant that Bilbo couldn’t trust himself to see if the way Thorin looked at him was in any way significant or if it was just heroworship - and anything other was just a trick played by Bilbo’s own feelings.

The first one to learn of his feelings had been Dwalin, which wasn’t surprising as he often seemed to know Bilbo’s mind as well as Bilbo himself. Dwalin had seemed equally concerned that both Bilbo and the Hobbit would end up getting hurt. Instead of being offended, Bilbo was pleased that Dwalin had so quickly warmed to Thorin, as it was proof that the Hobbit really was as honourable as he appeared. Dwalin had never been one to fall for pretty lies, regardless if they came in words or with actions.

The second to know was Bofur, and again he proved to be a most loyal friend.

"I see how it is," Bofur had said quietly with a teasing smile as he caught Bilbo’s guilty gaze at the sleeping Thorin when he’d showed up with the offer of a tumble.

Bilbo owed nothing to the Hobbit (not yet). But it seemed as though his heart did not agree, and he turned down what he knew from experience would have been a most pleasant time with Bofur and for a night listening to Dwali’ and Balin’s snores while being only a few feet away from their self-refuted burglar who nonetheless had stolen Bilbo’s heart. Just kissing Bofur had felt as betrayal enough.
His frustration must have shown all too clearly on his face because Bofur had laughed at him, not unkindly, and kissed him again.

“That’ll be the last I get, I wager,” Bofur whispered and tugged playfully on one of Bilbo’s braids. “I’ve seen how you look at him, and more than that, I’ve seen how he looks at you. I just didn’t know how far it had gotten.”

Bilbo did not know what to say to that, but he hoped dearly that Bofur was right. At a loss for words Bilbo pulled at the flaps of Bofur’s hat and took his mouth in another kiss, a potentially final kiss.

“No matter how it turns out I hope that’ll do you for a while,” Bilbo murmured when they parted.

Bofur left not long after that, after a bit more teasing, and when Bilbo closed the door behind him he rested his forehead against the cool wood.

If Bofur was right then perhaps the coming days would let Bilbo see the truth in Thorin’s heart for himself. With that wish, the Dwarf silently went back to his bed, daring only the barest of glances at the sleeping Hobbit so as to not do something rash, like kissing away the small frown that marred Thorin’s forehead even in slumber.
The following morning they left Rivendell just as the first sunrays started their descent into the valley. Gandalf was not with them, but as none of the Dwarfs seemed concerned about it, Thorin definitely did not make it a concern of his own. The Wizard could stay with the Elves forever and he would not be missed.

Just before the winding path led them around the side of the mountain Thorin paused to look back at the Elven outpost.

Building anything in the midst of so many waterfalls still seemed like a poor idea – not to mention the idiocy of building bridges so high up above the ground and failing to include railings. Nonetheless, with the sun sparkling in the water and bouncing off of the white stone, Rivendell did make for a pretty sight.

“Just wait until you see Erebor,” Fíli said as he brushed by Thorin on the narrow path. Apparently he had noticed the Hobbit’s admiring glance. “This is nothing.”

“And what would you know about that, my boy?” Balin called and shared an amused glance with Óin.

“Mother has told us everything,” Fíli said loyally. “I know the splendour of even one corridor in Erebor will surpass the whole of Rivendell.”

“Do you have railings?” Thorin asked drily and resumed walking, falling in between Glóin and Dori.

“Railings?” Fíli repeated, twisting his head to give Thorin a confused look.

“I promise to be suitably impressed when we get to Erebor, if your people were not stupid enough to think everyone likes to walk hundreds of feet up in the air and only being one stumble away from being in said air.”

Fíli’s gaze turned towards Bilbo, who was walking just ahead of him, for help. The Dwarven king had obviously been listening to their conversation as he had an answer ready.

“We do have railings,” Bilbo said, and though Thorin could not see his face he could hear the smile. “But I’m afraid they are mostly alongside the staircases. We do have plenty of passageways that you’d do best not to fall off of.”

“Do Dwarfs and Elves never stumble then?” Thorin asked, only half joking, because it was either that or both races were insane. “I seem to remember that certain Dwarfs made an entry into my smial that seemed awfully similar to a fall.”

“It’s different when it’s stone, lad,” Glóin boomed from behind him. “I don’t know how the blasted Elves do it, but give me rock beneath my feet and I will never falter.”

The Dwarf seemed serious enough, so Thorin let the matter drop and walked on in silence. According to the legends, Dwarfs were made from stone, and so perhaps like called to like.
Just a short while later, Thorin found himself walking next to Bilbo. The path had widened, so Dori had moved ahead to walk with his brothers, and Fíli had done the same with Kíli.

“*Your* home was very beautiful,” Bilbo said kindly as he turned to Thorin. “Kíli tells me you built it yourself?”

Thorin nodded and smiled the slightest bit. It had been hard work, but that had been a blessing as it had made sure he’d fallen into bed every night to a sleep without dreams. The end result had been a Hobbit-hole that was really too big for just one, with more than one odd corner and lopsided door, but he was proud of it even so. Therefore he had not taken kindly to Kíli’s and Fíli’s poking and prodding any more than he had to Kíli cleaning his boots on one of the chests in the hallway – and he had not been shy about saying so. To their credit they *had* apologized, but then they had proceeded throw his plates around, so their overall politeness had still been abysmal.

“Erebor will need many hands to make it liveable once again.” Bilbo’s smile turned wry. “Dís, the boys’ mother, was young when we had to leave our home and while her memory of Erebor might be a little glorified by the time gone by, our home truly was a remarkable place. I hope you would consider staying a while?” When Thorin did not answer, Bilbo added, “As my honoured guest, if nothing else.”

As usual around Bilbo, Thorin could not seem to find his words. He had so many of them whirling around in his head, but he knew not a one would come out right.

He was honoured indeed that Bilbo would want him to stay, even for a while. Just being asked was humbling as he’d already known that Dwarfs were very private and didn’t care for outsiders to learn much about their culture. And of course he did not mind being asked to help with the reconstruction of what had been the greatest Kingdom of Middle Earth. He held no illusions of his own value as a craftsman compared to the Dwarfs, and unlike a Hobbit’s home he doubted there was a lot of digging and wooden fixtures involved, but perhaps he could make himself useful in some small way.

Perhaps he would be allowed to remain *longer* if he was useful, perhaps he could even *stay*?

The wish to stay shocked him as much as Bilbo’s offer in the first place, because Thorin had not been aware that he didn’t want to return to his smial. He *should* want to go back to Hobbiton and to the Shire, but he didn’t. Not one bit.

As Thorin’s silence grew longer, a frown appeared on Bilbo’s face.

“I’m sorry; of course you wish to return to your home as soon as possible. I - I’m ashamed I have not asked you this earlier, but is there someone waiting for you?”

Thorin shook his head and cleared his throat to get rid of the rash words that had been gathering there.

“I have no family left except for some distant cousins. We are not very close.”

Even most of the Took thought him too strange to invite for tea these days, or perhaps it was just that he had never accepted their earlier invites and their hospitality had reached the end of its tether.

“And… no family of your own?” Bilbo asked, as if it hadn’t been obvious that Thorin had been living alone in his Hobbit-hole.
Perhaps the Dwarf just couldn’t believe that there were Hobbits who did not marry and spend the following decades raising a score of children. Not that it was a stupid belief, and once upon a time Thorin might have wanted that for himself, but -

“No, no family.”

The silence stretched further and Thorin knew he was being horribly rude by not politely thanking Bilbo for his offer and accepting, but he was afraid his thoughts would just come leaping out of his mouth and he would end up begging to stay. (And perhaps be allowed to see Bilbo, once in a while.)

A Durin never begged (even though he went by Oakenshield these days), and Thorin would not stoop so low. But he would answer; he had to, because he wasn’t a coward either. He drew in a deliberate breath and looked at the ground before his eyes, concentrating on placing one foot before the other.

“I would be honoured if you would allow me to stay. A while,” he hastily put in.

Silently Thorin scolded himself for making it sound like he had expected to be allowed to stay indefinitely, despite his best intentions of asking nothing of the sort.

“As I said, the honour would be mine,” Bilbo responded politely, and a light touch on his arm drew Thorin’s attention away from the rocky path.

Bilbo’s smile and the way it made his eyes shine made Thorin’s heart skip half of a beat. Catching himself beginning to stare, Thorin nodded and then turned his gaze forward again.

He freely admitted that his wish to stay in Erebor did partially stem from his feelings for the Dwarf, but those feelings did not account for the entirety of his longing. Common sense told Thorin that just because he hadn’t been happy anywhere else would that mean he would be happy in Erebor. Hobbits were not meant to live deep inside mountains and he would surely learn that for himself (if he was allowed to try).

But while the larger part of his mind was telling him to stop being a fool, a smaller part was busy repeating the words Dwalin had said shortly before the Wizard Radagast had arrived.

Home is home, whether you’ve been there or not.

- To Thorin’s surprise and pleasure, Bilbo stayed by his side for most of the day, allowing Balin and Dwalin to lead the company towards the Misty Mountains.

They did not talk much, but Thorin liked to think the silence between them was of the comfortable kind. Every now and again he found himself responding to Bilbo’s idle observations of the landscape, and his words had the fortune to prompt an amused smile from the Dwarf often enough that he dared continue let them fall from his lips.

Their surroundings had turned from stark cliffs to grasslands and woods, but there were two constants throughout; they were still going upwards, and – always visible in the distance – there were the snow covered peaks they would have to cross. Thorin’s eyes were persistently drawn to the sight despite his attempts to ignore them. They had been walking towards the mountains for the better part
of the day, but it seemed they were still as far away as they had been that morning. They had to be absolutely giant.

Earlier Bilbo had realised that despite being a Hobbit, Thorin knew next to nothing about the plants and trees they passed so he had taken to sharing his own knowledge of the flora around them. To what purpose Thorin had no idea, but he was not able to protest having Bilbo’s attention even though he knew the names would slip from his mind just as quickly as ice melted in the sun.

“And that’s Belladonna,” Bilbo said and pointed towards a delicate looking purple flower. ”My mother was named after it.”

“Your mother was named after a flower?”

As the words left his mouth Thorin felt his ears flush. By the Valar, why didn’t his treacherous tongue know when it should keep itself from flapping? Just because he’d known a Hobbit or two with the same name didn’t mean Dwarfs couldn’t also use it. It wasn’t as if any Hobbit named Thorin had the right to remark on naming oddities anyway.

“Yes, a bit unusual for a Dwarf, I know,” Bilbo acknowledged gracefully, not appearing to be offended by Thorin’s rudeness. “But it suited her. She was more than a bit unusual herself.”

The memory of his mother had brought out a fond smile on the Dwarf’s face, and Thorin was thankful it had not been painful memories he had helped bring to the surface.

“Another name for the plant Belladonna is, as I’m sure you know, Deadly Nightshade,” Bilbo gently teased.  “And mother took great joy in using arrows coated in the poison made from her namesake.” The Dwarf laughed. “The Orcs did not find it nearly as pleasant, I imagine.”

Thorin kept his mouth firmly shut to avoid remarking on a mother – not to mention a queen – going into battle.

“Kíli takes after her a great deal,” Bilbo said absently, lost in his memories. “Both in looks and manner. I’m sure you would have liked her. She certainly would have liked you.”

The last part caused Thorin to remain silent as a result of sheer amazement. Bilbo had considered what his mother would think of Thorin. For a Hobbit, parental approval was the first step of a courtship.

Even though Bilbo hadn’t meant anything by it –he couldn’t possibly know anything about Hobbit traditions – it still meant everything to Thorin’s unwaveringly foolish heart.

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That evening when they made camp, Thorin looked for further signs of affection between Bilbo and Bofur, but found only the actions of old friends – just as he had when he’d observed them earlier during their travels. The knowledge that they shared more than a friendship apparently did not make him a better observer.

Despite that they seemed just as friendly as everyone else, no more and no less, it did nothing to ease the jealousy he felt when he saw Bilbo sitting next to Bofur, laughing at something the other Dwarf had said. Bilbo’s head was thrown back and his long hair fell down his back while the braids jumped merrily by the force of his laughter. Thorin’s eyes fixed themselves on the pale column of the Dwarf’s throat and he had to close them to be able to turn his gaze away.
Badly in need of a distraction he agreed when Fíli and Kíli asked him to spar with them. And by spar they really meant that he needed more practice, which was a fair point.

“Now you’ve got two blades,” Fíli pointed out as he twirled his own two swords about in a move that made Kíli roll his eyes.

“And if you plan on teaching him how to do that stupid, showy move he’s going to have none at all and two perforated feet. I’ve seen you drop yours and Thorin doesn’t have steel-toed boots, does he?”

Fíli and Kíli both looked down at Thorin’s bare feet and Thorin curled his toes a bit self-consciously.

“Fine,” Fíli said a bit sulkily. “That’s useless against Orcs anyway.”

“It’s pretty good against drunks though,” Kíli said to comfort his brother. “They’re more easily distracted by flashy moves.”

“You usually go around eviscerating drunkards?” Thorin asked, trying to get the feel for the Elven blade in his left hand. It was so much lighter than the one he’d made himself and it kept throwing him off balance. Perhaps he ought to get comfortable with just the smaller blade before he tried to use them both at the same time.

“Eh, just knocking them over the head works well enough.” Fíli shrugged. “No need for anyone’s insides to become outsides just because they’re stupid.”

“It’s Fíli’s greatest burden you see,” Kíli snickered. “He’s so pretty he constantly has to defend his honour from unwanted suitors. Half a pint and they can’t keep their hands away.”

“At least I have honour to defend,” the blond Dwarf shot back. “Unlike someone I know who keeps sneaking off with barmaids, regardless of race.”

Kíli grinned, completely shameless. “They like me, I like them, I don’t see the problem.”

“But you are a prince,” Thorin argued, not really sure what exactly he was arguing for, but feeling that Kíli being a prince surely had to figure into things somewhere.

“Yes, and some ladies find that most impressing,” the young Dwarf said with a smug smile.

“Those are not ladies,” Fíli mumbled.

“How dare you,” Kíli said with mock-outrage. “Although that was that time in Bree, but he sure looked like a woman before the clothes came off.”

Fíli groaned and raised his blades. “Brother, let’s go back to a topic that does not make me want to put one of these through my skull just to stop me from listening to you.”

“So that is what happened to Bifur,” Thorin said blandly.

Fíli and Kíli looked at each other before bursting out laughing and Thorin felt a smile tug at his own lips.

Not long after, though, he had no trouble keeping the amusement off his face. Having two blades really did no favours for his balance or his concentration. Fíli had managed to catch him off guard twice already and Kíli trying to give pointers distracted more than it helped. During the next round,
Thorin ended up on the ground with one of Fíli’s swords pointed at his neck, his own blades lying useless on the ground with him.

“You need to stop thinking about them as two swords and start using them as one, or just take to using one as a shield,” Fíli advised as Thorin got back up again. “You either need to attack with both to catch me off guard, or keep the smaller blade closer to you to deflect my attacks. Right now you’re just focusing on one at the time and leaving yourself open.”

“Maybe we should get you an actual shield,” Kíli mused. “They’re also good for knocking people over the head with.” He turned a speculative glance over at some nearby trees. “Maybe one out of oak, to go with your name, Master Oakenshield.”

“Those are birches, Kíli,” his brother said, shaking his head.

“Are you sure? Aren’t oaks the white ones, and birches are the weird looking ones that have the big leaves?”

“No,” both Fíli and Bilbo said at the same time.

Not for the first time Thorin mused that Bilbo might as well just be the Company’s burglar, as he was remarkably light on his feet.

“Come brother,” Fíli said and pulled a protesting Kíli away. “You’re going to end up making arrows out of something that’ll just splinter unless you learn your trees. Might as well start now.”

“You’re getting quite good,” Bilbo said and nodded at Thorin who snorted and sheathed his blades. He didn’t know why Bilbo would seek to flatter him, but clearly that was what he was doing. Thorin could not compare to even the least skilled of warriors, and he knew it quite well.

“You’ve been practicing for less than two months; your progress is quite remarkable, to be honest,” Bilbo continued, unperturbed by Thorin’s nonverbal denial. “You have a gift. It took years for me to even become decent with a blade, and that’s including more time to practice.”

Thorin looked at Bilbo in surprise. “But the way you wield your sword, it is like you were born holding it.”

Now it was Bilbo’s turn to snort. “If I were born holding anything, it was a pen. As a boy I was more interested in scripts and old books than swords, axes, or hammers – much to the disappointment of my father. Especially since he already despaired over my interest in Elves.”

Now that Thorin thought about it, Bilbo was often found sitting together with Ori, the Company’s scribe, their heads bent together as they discussed something Ori had written. Perhaps there was more to those times than just a leader’s interest in seeing their tale get put to parchment.

Thorin wanted to ask what had made Bilbo change his mind, as he clearly must have found an interest in swords later to become so good then – but the Hobbit thought he already knew. Either way it was no business of his. Instead he asked the other question on his mind.

“If your father was –” Thorin hesitated. “If he did not appreciate your interest in scripts and writing, are scholars then not valued amongst your people?” Amongst Hobbits they definitely were (much more so than those who were fascinated by armour and metals).

Everyone seemed to be treating Ori well enough, though, and the young Dwarf was clearly not cut
out to be a great warrior even if he was brave and surprisingly fierce.

“You can say ‘disappointed’,” Bilbo said instead of answering straightaway, “seeing as I used the word myself – but only because I know how much he cared for me regardless. But to answer your question; yes, we do value our scribes and scholars. Just as we have smiths who forge metals, we appreciate those who work with words. But it’s not quite the same for a prince as it is for someone like our Ori.”

Once again Bilbo’s eyes took on that distant look and they unerringly turned to the east.

“When Smaug attacked and we realised my father was not in the city, I wanted to lead the army. Being their commander is the duty that falls to the prince while the King, as general, handles the strategizing and the vast reaching judgments. My grandfather told me I was too young, which was a kindness as much as it wasn’t the true reason.”

Thorin felt himself frown. “But –”

“Oh, I was too young,” Bilbo interrupted. “But I was also poorly trained and would likely have been killed, and gotten a lot of people killed. During the years following the Desolation, I made sure I would not be put in that situation again.”

“And then you stood with your grandfather at the East-gate of Moria,” Thorin said, only remembering what that battle had brought with it after the words had already been said. He winced.

“I blamed myself for a long time over what happened that day,” Bilbo said, no emotion audible in his voice. “He did not wish for me to be there. I know he was worried for me. If I had already proven myself then perhaps the lack of distraction would have been what was needed for him to live.”

“If you feel that way, why did your bring your sister-sons on this quest?” By the Valar! Was it impossible for him to keep his mouth shut? If Thorin could he would have kicked himself, preferably in the mouth.

But by some miracle it seemed like he had managed not to offend Bilbo, who was actually smiling slightly, the distant look in his eyes fading.

“To keep them from coming I would have had to chain them to a mountain, with chains made of mithril,” Bilbo said with fond exasperation. “But I would have tried it if I really believed that I had the right. They are mature enough to choose for themselves.”

“I still blame myself for my grandfather’s death,” Thorin heard himself say.

Bilbo was quiet for a moment, probably thrown by the abrupt change in their conversation.

“Was it an accident?” Bilbo asked, and carefully put his hand on Thorin’s arm, just as he had when they sat together on the stone bench in Hobbiton. “Know that you don’t owe it to me to tell me anything just because I’ve burdened you with my own woes,” Bilbo continued before Thorin had the chance to say anything. “But as I said before, I’d be glad to listen if you wish to talk.”

“It was an accident, but it wasn’t,” Thorin began, sifting through his mind to find the right words. “My father and I lived with Grandfather, but at the time we were away. I come from a family of merchants,” he explained. “And for the first time Father allowed me to accompany him on his travels.”
“That must have been exciting,” Bilbo said and Thorin nodded. It had been, but not having to stay with his grandfather had also been a relief. Though when they had returned, that relief had splintered into shame and regret.

“There was a fire in our home,” Thorin said slowly. “Grandfather likely knocked over a candle close to something flammable.” Like one of his many bottles of spirits. “The neighbours, who lived some distance away, told us by the time they had noticed the smell of smoke, the flames were blazing brightly enough to turn night into day.”

Thorin let out a breath, and then turned to meet Bilbo’s eyes.

“He came out, but then he ran back in again, into the flames. He was not, he was not *well*. And I should have stayed with him. If I had –”

“How old were you?” Bilbo’s voice was soft, as was the look in his eyes.

“I – old enough,” Thorin said hoarsely.

“How old was that?” Bilbo asked again, and Thorin turned his head away so he wouldn’t have to see the gentleness in Bilbo’s eyes turn into disapproval.

“I had turned twenty earlier that year. I was not a child.”

“And your father, before he left – did he suggest that you should stay with your grandfather?”

“He… no, he didn’t. But he shouldn’t have had to.” They had both known that Thrór wasn’t well. But neither of them had realised just how far the sickness in his mind had spread.

But Thorin *should* have; he had spent a lot more time with Thrór than his father had, on account of his travels. He could hardly remember a day that his grandfather hadn’t spent furtively sipping from hidden bottles or looking at them, or their gold, with a gaze better suited for a lover.

It was just as likely that Thrór had run back into the fiery smial to save his bottles as it was to save his precious coins. But if Thorin had been there he could have restrained him— or he could have made sure that the candle hadn’t fallen in the first place. And if that night hadn’t come to pass, then perhaps Thráin would not have begun to change as well, perhaps he would not have left, would not have –

“You might not have been a child, but you weren’t an adult either,” Bilbo voice interrupted the downward spiral of Thorin’s thoughts. It held no reprimand, and Thorin looked up in surprise to meet the steady gaze of the Dwarf. “You are not to blame any more than I should be blamed for the death of my grandfather, or that of my parents. Looking back, there’s *always* something obvious we could have done to change things for the better. What if I’d just asked Mother not to go to the market that day?”

Again Bilbo touched Thorin’s arm, fingers squeezing slightly and burning like brands through Thorin’s shirt.

“But what-ifs are poison to the mind, because what has passed is not for us to change. We’ve only been given the future, and that is for us to shape as best as we are able.”

“I wish it was that easy,” Thorin managed to say.

“My father used to say that if something was easy then *everyone* would be doing it,” Bilbo said with
a small smile. “It might not be fully applicable for this situation, but it will have to do.” His grip tightens again, once, before he draws away. “Now come; I think Bombur has finished preparing supper quite some time ago.”

Thorin walked sluggishly after Bilbo towards the fire. Fíli shot them both a worried look as they arrived, but settled down after a nod from his uncle. Dwalin shoved bowls of food in their hands as they sat down and Thorin remembered enough of his manners to thank him for it.

The Hobbit ate without thought for what he was shoving in his mouth, and soon after he was done Thorin spread out his bedroll and retired for the night. He hadn’t slept more than a few hours in the last two days and his mind had started to feel like it was made out of clouds.

His last thoughts before succumbing to sleep were of Bilbo’s fingers curled around his wrist and whether what-ifs for the future could be considered just as dangerous as those for the past.

Chapter End Notes

If you know what Belladonna’s portrait looks like you know I’m not just making up her looking like Kíli. Dark messy hair and slightly pointed features, but not in an overly delicate way. Looking like she’s up to some mischief. And she definitely wasn’t your average Hobbit, so why should she have been your average Dwarf?

Head-canon for film!verse. Thorin sees that his Grandfather clearly is becoming too enamoured with his treasure, but doesn’t do anything about it. Perhaps he simply didn’t know what to do. However he knows just where to find him when Smaug attacks, and makes sure he gets to safety.

I think Thorin is the type to carry the weight of his world on his shoulders, and if he had failed to save his grandfather that would have been a heavy burden indeed.
When opening his eyes the next morning the first sight Thorin saw were the Misty Mountains.

It almost seemed as if they had moved closer during the night; they appeared to loom in a way they had not the day before. And it was just not that they appeared bigger, they also seemed more menacing somehow.

Shaking off such silly thoughts the same way he shook off his blanket, Thorin got up and stretched. It was just barely dawn and the rest of the camp was still asleep, except for Bofur and Bifur who had shared the last watch.

“Good morning to you,” Bofur said amicably as Thorin joined them by the fire. “Hope you slept better than I did as I kept dreaming I was a potato that Ori wanted to turn into chips.”

Bifur guffawed and said something Thorin wouldn’t have thought to even be a language if he hadn’t already gotten used to hearing it from Bifur. Compared to Westron it had a lot of guttural sounds and very little vowels.

Whatever the words actually meant, they made Bofur laugh.

“Quite the poet, this one,” Bofur said as he turned back to Thorin. “He asked if I was sure I was not just a potato now dreaming about being a Dwarf.” Bofur lowered his voice and winked at Thorin. “I figure as long as Ori won’t come after me with a vat of boiling oil I’m fine either which way.”

Bifur snickered and pretended to take a bite out of Bofur’s hat, something that made the other Dwarf recoil enough that he fell off the rock they both had been seated on.

Thorin only realised he was smiling when Bofur lobbed a pine cone at this head and demanded that he stop laughing about others’ misfortunes. It was hard to actually dislike Bofur, even if parts of Thorin absolutely detested him for taking Bilbo from him.

*As if he was ever yours to begin with,* Thorin scolded himself. And besides, for two lovers they really did appear to be just friendly with one another. Perhaps this sort of affair was just common amongst the Dwarfs. They did have far less Dwarf-women than they did men. Perhaps…

Thorin’s eyes wandered to where Bilbo still lay sleeping between Nori and Dwalin. The only thing visible of the blond Dwarf was a couple of golden curls peeking out from beneath his blankets.

Dwalin looked at Bilbo with nothing but brotherly love, of that Thorin was certain. But what of *Nori*?

If Thorin couldn’t see more between Bofur and Bilbo than mere friendship even after knowing without a doubt that it wasn’t so, did that mean that there were other entanglements he was also unaware of?

Bilbo and Nori were close, appearing to be very good friends despite the fact that one was a king and one was… well, a thief, to put it bluntly. Not that Nori had been at all hesitant to call himself that when they were properly introduced, despite the annoyed looks Dwalin had given him.
“Never mind that sourpuss,” Nori had said and slapped Thorin on the back, hard enough that the Hobbit had almost fallen off his pony. “He’s just grouchy because he’s never caught me at it. But that’s more a reflection of how good I am than anything else.”

“If you are such a great thief, then why did you come looking for a burglar for your company?” Thorin had replied, deciding to avoid the whole issue of morality for the time being. Though, as the son of a merchant, Thorin had indeed felt the urge to check that he still had his bag of coins safely tucked away inside his coat.

“It’s true enough what the Wizard said about the damnable dragon being wise to the smell of Dwarfs,” Nori had shrugged. “Doesn’t mean I won’t be trying my hand at it, but as I have no desire to be eaten I’ll tread very carefully indeed.” Then the Dwarf had smiled roguishly. “Since you are to be our burglar, perhaps I can offer you lessons? Dori is excellent for practicing your sneaking skills on, unlike Ori. Give the lad a scroll and he’d not notice you stealing the very mountain over his head. In fact he’d just thank you for giving him better light to read by.”

Thorin’s reminiscing was abruptly cut short as Kíli plunked himself down on the ground next to him. The young Dwarf was clearly still half-asleep, eyes heavily lidded and usually sharp gaze still clouded by the dregs of dreams.

“There was a bloody cricket or something inches from my ears all night,” Kíli moaned and wrapped his arms around his knees. ”And when the bastard finally shut up, Fíli started kicking me in his sleep, and it was too bloody cold to move away."

"Why did you just kick back?" Bofur wondered.

"Doesn't make a difference," Kíli said sullenly. "He can sleep through an earthquake; kicking him doesn't work."

Thorin was about to offer Kíli to share his bedroll if Fíli kept disturbing him, but he stilled his tongue when he abruptly realised what his proposal - however innocently meant - would likely sound like. A shame, because the night had been cold indeed and a warm body at his back would not have been a bad thing.

"Any of you lot up for making breakfast?" Bofur asked after a minute had gone by without anyone speaking. "If not I'll just go wake Bombur, he'll be pleased enough to do it."

"I miss your pantry," Kíli said to Thorin instead of answering Bofur. “Hobbits seem to have the right idea about food, unlike Elves.”

Bifur nodded enthusiastically and his hands did something very complicated looking that somehow appeared to make complete sense to Bofur and Kíli.

“Aye,” Bofur said and smiled at Thorin. “I think we all would like to take up residence in Master Oakenshield’s pantry.”

“Bit cramped, don’t you think,” Fíli said and sat down on next to his brother. “I mean, maybe not at the moment, but then we did a pretty good job of cleaning it out.”

Thorin snorted and without thinking about it he stretched out an arm to smack Fíli on the back of the head. It was only after he’d done it that he realised that hitting a prince was perhaps even less proper
than he usually ended up being.

“Hey!” Fíli protested and rubbed his head. “Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“What have my nephews done now?” Bilbo settled down on Thorin’s right side with a yawn wide enough to make his jaw crack. Kíli immediately donned a mock-hurt expression.

“Nephew, uncle,” he sniffed. “I’m completely innocent.”

“Thank you,” Fíli said dryly as he elbowed Kíli hard enough to make the other Dwarf grunt. “Good to see that you always have my back, brother.”

“As if you didn’t try to blame the entire mishap with the ponies on me, brother,” Kíli shot back and reached up a hand to mess with Fíli’s carefully braided hair.

“Mishap?” Fíli protested, and then Thorin had to shuffle a little closer to an amused looking Bilbo as the two brothers suddenly lay wrestling on the ground.

Their argument soon woke the rest of the company, and Bombur indeed had nothing against preparing their breakfast - though he did grow annoyed when it seemed the still grappling duo would upend his pot of porridge. Fíli seemed to blame his hair almost catching fire entirely on Kíli, and their disagreement continued.

Bilbo finally took mercy on the rest of the company and grabbed his nephews by the backs of their coats to pull them off of each other.

“That’s it, you’re done quite done,” Bilbo said sternly even as the twinkle of a smile still touched his eyes. “I’m sure you’ve managed to convince the rest of our companions that you’re actually two overgrown children who should have been left in the Blue Mountains.”

Two pairs of pleading eyes, one brown and one blue, were turned on the king who in turn looked to Thorin as if to say, see what I put up with?

Thorin only realised he was smiling at the trio of Dwarfs when his cheeks started to ache from the strain.

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Going higher up got them closer to the sun, so why did the nights turn colder and colder?

Thorin knew there had to be some sort of logic to it, but damn if he could figure it out. Giving up on sleep for the moment, he debated just how shocked Fíli and Kíli would be if he crawled down between them. But surely they could take pity on a Hobbit who for the first time in his life started to realise why socks and shoes were of use; his toes were absolutely freezing.

The day had been uneventful and they had made good progress. It was likely that by this time tomorrow they’d be well on their way through the pass over the Misty Mountains. They had camped for the night just as the last of the grass had given away to smooth stone, and as the ground kept getting higher the temperature appeared to be dropping at an equal rate.

Grumbling a little Thorin got up with the plan to move his bedroll closer to the fire, but he was distracted when he realised that Bilbo was the one on watch.
He had bothered the Dwarf enough the night before, it would likely be pressing his luck to seek Bilbo’s company again. Except… perhaps he should apologize for his behaviour.

Bilbo had not sought his company at all that day; after breakfast he had instead chosen to walk with Dwalin and Bofur, and if that was due to Thorin not being able to keep his mouth shut concerning things that no one had asked him to share, then Thorin would rather have it undone.

It was possible that Bilbo’s hasty withdrawal the previous night was not as much an eagerness to get supper as much as a reason to get away.

Thorin let out a snort. Wouldn’t that just be typical, that for once the problem would be that he talked too much and not the other way around.

That little huff of air was apparently enough of a noise to draw Bilbo’s attention as the Dwarf turned his head to look directly at Thorin.

“Can’t sleep?” It was asked softly, most likely as to not disturb any of their sleeping companions, but Thorin drew courage from the fact that it wasn’t a dismissal. Grabbing his blanket he joined Bilbo by the fire.

“It’s cold,” Thorin said gruffly, feeling a bit silly for pointing out the obvious, but Bilbo had asked. He busied himself with his blanket, trying to find the best way to sit as to get the warmth of the fire spread evenly across his skin, and using that as a way to not have to meet Bilbo’s eyes. Those eyes… They never seemed to stay the same colour for very long. One minute appearing blue only to seem brown the next, and then back to the greenish blue Thorin had first likened to lakes.

And Thorin had never been the strongest of swimmers...

The randomness of the thought surprised a chuckle out of Thorin which he quickly turned into a cough, but not quickly enough; Bilbo’s mouth quirked in shared amusement despite the Dwarf not knowing the cause of Thorin’s. That gave Thorin the courage needed to meet Bilbo’s eyes (now brown; shadowed and dark despite the light from the fire) and make the apology the Dwarf deserved.

“I would like to apologize for my behaviour the other night.”

To Thorin’s surprise Bilbo looked confused.

“Whatever for?” he asked, tilting his head in curiosity.

“I didn’t - I hope, what I said about my grandfather, I would not wish you to think less of me for it. For dwelling on things that came to pass so many years ago.”

An understanding light was beginning to dawn in Bilbo’s eyes. Thorin relaxed slightly. There, he’d said it. But Bilbo’s next words only served to make Thorin the one who was confused.

“You listened when I told you about my parents.” Bilbo said. “And we both know that was a lot longer ago.”

That wasn’t the acceptance of his apology that Thorin had hoped for, nor was it the censure he’d feared.
“That is not-“

“That is not the same thing?” Bilbo interrupted with a raised eyebrow. “You know of the battle that claimed my grandfather’s life. But that day also cost us so much more, cost me more. I did not only lose a grandfather, I also lost my brother. And both those losses were dealt to me over a hundred and forty years ago.” Bilbo was silent for a moment. “Surely you think me foolish then, for still grieving?”

Thorin opened his mouth, closed it again.

“I’ll say this again,” Bilbo said when Thorin did not speak. “Whenever you wish to talk, I’ll be glad to listen.” His eyes (dark blue now) held Thorin’s, and the Hobbit felt his ears burn again.

Once again falling to his blanket as a way to cover up his awkwardness, Thorin bent to better arrange it around his feet.

“Do Hobbits never wear shoes?” Bilbo asked curiously.

“There is usually little need for them,” Thorin pulled one of his feet out of the blanket to show Bilbo the thickness of his sole, and the curly hair that covered the top.

“Still, we should have gotten you some before we left Rivendell. I’m sorry, I should have thought ahead.”

Thorin shook his head, dismissing Bilbo’s apology as it was not needed. If anyone should have thought ahead, it should have been Thorin.

“I’m not a very good Hobbit, so if I covered them up, how would I remember what I am?” Thorin was only half-joking. If it weren’t for this feet he would suspect himself a changeling, only he did not know from where.

“We have that in common then,” Bilbo smiled. “I’m not a very good Dwarf, you see.”

Thorin looked a little disbelieving.

“Ah, but it’s true. You already know about my wanting to run away to the Elves as a Dwarfing and I must also admit that I have very little fondness for gold and gems; sure signs of a one being a bad Dwarf. “

“You are a great warrior, and brave and honourable. I’d still say that I’m a worse Hobbit than you are a Dwarf.” Thorin felt his ears burn a little hotter, but he met Bilbo’s gaze. “For me, my feet will remain my only redeeming quality.”

“Thank you.” Bilbo smile made Thorin want to duck his head and look away, but he resisted as that would have meant not seeing it anymore. “Thank you, for thinking of me that way. And I think I’ve said this before as well, but by accepting a quest that’s not your own, you have shown even more courage and honour than any other in our company, myself included.”

“That just makes me a worse Hobbit. Hobbits don’t go on adventures.” Thorin shrugged.

“Ah, you must be a figment of my imagination then,” Bilbo said with a nod. “Seeing as this is definitely an adventure, and you couldn’t possibly be here.”

“Other Hobbits, then,” Thorin clarified, but quirked his lips to show he’d not been offended by
Bilbo’s teasing words.

They sat together for some time, enough so that Thorin’s feet thawed completely. However, when he got back to his bedroll they would surely just revert back to ice again. If he moved his bedroll Bilbo could probably make sure no part of him caught fi-

“You should sleep with one of us. I mean - oh bother. For the warmth.” Bilbo scrubbed a hand down his face.

It could just be a trick of the light, but Thorin thought the Dwarf’s cheeks were perhaps tinged a little pinker than they had been only moments before. “What I mean is that I saw you looking at your bedroll, and it’s cold, obviously, and -” Bilbo clamped his mouth shut.

It was… nice, to see that Bilbo didn’t always know what to say. That was something Thorin could most definitely empathise with, but it seemed to him that the king always managed to find the words most appropriate for the situation, starting with his request for Thorin to join them and ending with polite small talk with the Elves in Rivendell.

“No one would mind, is what I’m trying to say,” Bilbo continued and waved at the rest of the company. “Or they might grumble a little if you wake them, but - oh by Mahal can’t you just tell me to shut up.”

The Hobbit laughed at Bilbo’s disgusted tone of voice before remembering that people were actually sleeping all around them.

Thorin sat with Bilbo for a little while longer before giving into the demands of his tired and cold body. Bidding Bilbo a good night he then moved his bedroll next to Dwalin’s as he figured that a seasoned warrior would make little fuss about sharing body heat on a cold night. If he woke Fíli and Kíli they were likely to moan a lot more about it.

True enough, despite the fact that Dwalin rumbled something unhappy sounding as he woke to Thorin fitting himself back to back with the large Dwarf, once he’d realised what was going on he actually rearranged his cloak until part of it also covered Thorin’s body.

And if Thorin had happened to note that there was ample space on Dwalin’s right to fit not only a cold Hobbit, but also a king once his watch was over, well, that was just a happy coincidence and not at all a foolish wish.

Chapter End Notes

A truth that should be universally acknowledge is that Bilbo will always, no matter what universe, act in a way that does not make sense to Thorin. Another is that regardless of who and what Bilbo and Thorin are, they both will fail at communicating more often than not. (Which is why - shameless plug - I have another story that'll soon be 70k words and they still haven't even bloody kissed. Sure, they're not the main pairing, but what the hell?)
Even before Nori first met Bilbo, he’d known who the other Dwarf was. Of course he had. What Dwarf would not know of the prince who had helped lead them to safety after the cursed Dragon had claimed their home? Who would not know the prince turned *king* who had settled them in the Blue Mountains and had given them a place to call their own?

Only… Nori hadn’t actually known what Bilbo looked like. A thief and a king did not mingle in the same social circles, and Bilbo Baggins was not one to make many public appearances, much to the chagrin of some people who took that as a sign of not really caring about the public.

Then there were the ones like Nori’s brother, Dori, who had gotten it into their head that whatever manner of dress that was currently favoured by royals should be considered the highest of fashion and should be mimicked at all costs lest some snooty Dwarf make an equally snooty comment. They also looked upon the infrequent appearance of their lord and king with unkind eyes, albeit for very different reasons.

“At least tell me what colours of cloth he had on,” Dori had pleaded, exasperated that Nori had not been able to answer any of the previous questions about the King’s appearance.

His brother hadn’t been able to attend the ceremony signalling the start of the New Year, being much too busy in his little shop of trinkets and silks to take time off to stare at royalty; too many people wanting to look their best at the festival that would be held in the coming week and too little time to dress them all, it would seem.

But many, many other Dwarfs had joined Nori outside Baggins’ Hall to watch with their king as the last moon of autumn slowly rose in the sky. Though, to be honest, Nori’s reasons for joining the crowd also had to do with the possibility of relieving some of the gawkers from their too-heavy burdens of gold and valuables. Having all those people stare dumbly up into the sky was an opportunity too good to miss.

“It was definitely something blue,” Nori had assured his brother. In truth, it could perhaps have been purple, but purple made Dori look like an eggplant.

All Nori had seen of the king was a small figure in the distance, with light coloured hair (and either blue or purple garments) and then the thief had gotten a little distracted by the melodious tinkling of a purse stuffed fat with gold and lost interest.

Nori, together with most people who had a good head on their shoulders, accepted that the king was busy working for their betterment and that he should be left alone to do so in whatever manner he pleased. He could look like an Elf for all that Nori cared about the details of it.

So a few years down the line, when Nori bumped into a short Dwarf with features a little too delicate to be considered conventionally handsome, but with almost gold-coloured hair (Nori had an appreciation for all forms of gold) his first thought was merely to proposition him. Instead, he ended up stealing his purse instead as the other dwarf certainly looked like he could afford it; clothes of good quality and rich cloth, hair and beard decorated with beads (a couple even looking to be done in mithril), skipping on the offer to buy him a drink as it was bad form to mix business with pleasure.
"Sorry ‘bout that,” he apologised to the blond Dwarf as they untangled themselves. A couple of nearby guards started to make their way over with harried expressions on their faces so Nori slipped away before the redistribution of riches could be noticed.

Later when Nori was sitting in a tavern on the other side of the city he let the purse slide from his sleeve. But instead of opening it to see if it is gold or merely silver hiding inside, Nori stared in something close to horror at the royal seal with two interweaved Bs marking the fabric.

_Bugger this._

Nori might be a thief, but he did not steal from those he respected. Well, except from Dori, but he only respected Dori on average once a month, and the rest of the time his brother was just asking for it. Plus it was good practice.

Despite not being able to tell the king apart from any random Dwarf off the street, Nori had always had nothing but respect for the one who had managed to take a people of paupers and reshape them into the prosperous society they now were. It was just good business sense for a thief to be appreciative of such things after all.

The easiest would be to simply have slipped the purse into a pocket of a guard and hope for a safe return, but if Nori had been the one to always pick the easiest route he’d have allowed Dori to nag him into helping out in the shop instead of helping fools part with their money. So instead Nori decided to return it in person. After all, it was the only way to guarantee a safe return, because who was to say that the guard he’d end up picking wouldn’t have an even looser sense of morals than Nori himself?

Besides, the king was kin, even if Nori’s connection to the line of Baggins had been formed on the wrong side of a marital bed. You did not steal from family – again, unless it was Dori, and even then Nori did always return the trinkets he took. (Eventually, and only because Dori would do nothing but complain about Nori messing up his inventory.)

Breaking into the royal halls the following night was painfully simple. As Nori sneaked through the hallways, sheltered by the shadows lining the walls, he mentally composed a letter to the captain of the guard, starting with the words _This just won’t do._

There were not enough torches and where were the guards? Where was the patrol that should have been circling the eastern corridors just about now? A thief did not go through all the trouble of learning their schedule only for the guards to -

Then Nori caught sight of a boot, sticking out from the shadows gathered in the corner.

Oh.

A quick check revealed the guards to not be dead, merely knocked unconscious, which was lucky for the guards but bad for Nori as there now was no way for him to tell how long they’d been lying there.

Quickly working out the closest path to the royal quarters Nori sprinted off through the hallways, no longer bothering to conceal himself. If there were still any guards around they were more than welcome to notice him.

Not for the first time he bemoaned the fact that Dwarven cities were so unlike Mannish ones. His
progress would have been so much quicker if he could scale walls and roofs instead having to run through endless halls and hallways.

Hopefully the culprit was just another thief who was merely less skilled at sneaking than Nori (kicking guards out was such crude work compared to just remaining unnoticed) but there were several other reasons why someone would want to break into the king’s halls without having to worry about guards interrupting their business, and none of them boded well for the royal family.

Just the other month the king had named his oldest nephew as his heir and it was much too possible that everyone had not taken that decision with as much excited fluttering as Dori had done. (His brother had always had a soft spot for the two young princes as their own baby brother was just a few years older than the oldest prince and would turn ten this coming winter.)

As Nori raced down the halls he decided that he hated politics. At least thieves were honest about their dishonesty. Well he was, anyway - except to his mother, who believed he was helping Dori in the shop, but that was for the good of everyone.

Nori had never been to this part of the city before and could only hope that he was not about to take a wrong turn. There were too many doors and not enough time to waste on guesses, but the furnishings in the halls turned richer and richer which he took as a sign that he was indeed heading the right way.

Still, there was no sign of any guards. The hour was late enough that the lack of servants didn’t come as a surprise, but there should have been guards. Surely whoever that knocked out the other guards can’t have done away with all the guards inside the palace, so where were they?

Nori added a few notes to his mental letter to the guard captain; Dwalin, he believed his name was.

Either the guards had been distracted and lured away from their posts by something like a faked emergency, or they were completely incompetent. Either way, someone needed to fix it so it’d not happen again. He might be a thief but he still considered himself loyal to the crown (just not accountable to all its laws).

A scream rang out from a side passage just as Nori passed it and he crouched out of instinct. Before the person could stop on his or her own, the scream was abruptly cut off.

Silently Nori moved into the dark hallway. There was light spilling out from beneath one of the doors, and he could hear voices.

“Step back and I won’t have to hurt you again,” a whiny male voice said. “We just want to know where the princes are.”

“You are not getting my sons, you filth!”

This had to be the lady Dís and Nori winced a little at her outraged tone of voice. It was the voice of someone who could any moment end up getting themselves hurt, or worse.

We, the other Dwarf had said. So there was more than one. Were they all inside that room? It did make sense to look for the princes in their parents’ room, but apparently the young ones weren’t actually there.

Suddenly a thin whine could be heard.
“So they are here somewhere,” another voice said, this one also male but a lot more rough. “Halur, check the bedroom again.”

“If you lay as much as a finger on them I will gut you like the swine you are,” Dís growled. Nori quite liked this woman. Shame she was married and likely in mortal peril. Where was her husband anyway?

Nori grabbed a couple of throwing knives from his belt and hoped that the door would not end up being locked. It looked a little too thick for him to be able to kick-in in just one go.

Thankfully, it wasn’t locked.

As Nori threw the door open three pairs of eyes turned his way and Nori quickly tried to tell friend from foe.

The princess was lying on the floor, appearing to have been thrown there by the large Dwarf who stood looming over her. A smaller, very poorly dressed Dwarf (Dori would have had a fit) was on his way towards an open doorway; one leading further into the royal living quarters.

Also on the floor lay the crumpled form that could only belong to the princess’ husband. He was bleeding from a wound on his forehead, but Nori thought he was still breathing, though this was not the time to stop and check.

A moment later the Dwarf who stood by the princess had a knife sticking out of his skull. The other one, the one called Halur, made a noise not unlike a rodent and ducked just in time for Nori’s next knife to miss its target. The Dwarf then disappeared into the other room before Nori could throw another.

“My sons,” the lady Dís gasped and scrambled to her feet.

“I’ll protect them,” Nori said already moving towards the doorway. “Check on your husband.” He sent out a prayer that the next minute would not make a liar out of him.

The bedroom looked as if an earthquake had hit it. Someone had taken a knife to the large bed that stood in the centre of the room and most of the furniture had been overturned. All wardrobe doors were thrown wide open; the Dwarf, Halur, was frantically digging through the rightmost one in search of the princes.

“You have to be in here little brats,” he mumbled. “Come out, come out.” Nori didn’t dare throw a knife in case he missed and the instead hit one of the princes should they have hidden beneath the clothes. He wished he’d brought some other weapon along - something with a little longer reach than the knives provided would have been nice - but he’d not exactly counted on this particular situation when he’d set out from his home. Shame and desperation turned even a rat into a beast and from the other Dwarf’s manic sorting through clothes and his wide, blood-shot eyes Nori could see that he was desperate indeed.

Then another small wail sounded, followed by a soft shush. Nori wasted a second wondering how anyone could possibly be hiding inside the bed, because there was no room beneath it for anything more than a mouse to hide in. Then he let two knives fly and watched with satisfaction how they both hit true.
Just as the Dwarf sank down dead to the floor (if one knife to the head was effective, two did the job twice as well) Nori heard a loud noise from behind and he swirled around, knife at the ready. Seeing that it was the guards finally arriving did not exactly relax him, but he put the knife away nonetheless to avoid any confusion.

“About time you showed up,” he said instead to the burly fellow leading the charge. This had to be the Dwalin chap his fellow thieves kept muttering about. Nori had never had the doubtful pleasure of meeting him in person, but how many tall, tattooed captains could there be?

“Whoa there,” Nori exclaimed when two of the guards came into the bedroom only to grab his arms. “I think you’re mixing me up with the two idiots lying dead on the floor.”

“Let him go,” the princess commanded from the doorway in a voice that could make a dragon feel chilly. The guards quickly released Nori’s arms and back away a step for good measure. Dís didn’t spare them a second glance and instead headed straight for the bed, blanching a little when she saw the state of it.

“Fíli, darling, it’s okay to come out now,” she said softly, bending down at the foot of it. “You did so very well, but you can take your brother and come out now.”

There was a soft click, and then a panel on the side of the bed popped open, a little blond head peeking out.

“I tried make ‘im be quiet, mum,” the little one wailed as another head, even smaller and dark-instead of light-haired, also popped out, cheeks streaked with dust and tears.

“You did well, my darling,” the princess soothed and reached out her arms for both her children to crawl into. “Kíli just got a little scared, and that’s okay, because I was a little scared too.”

Kíli sniffed and buried his head into his mother’s dark tresses. “Papa?” he said in a small voice.

“He’s just outside, he hit his head just like Uncle Bilbo did last year so he needed to sit down, remember how silly Uncle Bilbo looked when he couldn’t walk? So why don’t we go join your papa?”

Nori hoped that the prince consort’s injury wasn’t just like ‘Uncle Bilbo’s’ injury or he really needed to have words with the guards. Something like this should never have happened in the first place, and never twice.

As if called by Nori’s thought, the Dwarf Nori now recognized as his king came rushing into the bedchamber followed by some other Dwarf Nori didn’t recognize who had bushy, long white hair and beard.

“Are you okay?” the king asked as he fell to his knees beside Dís. “Did they hurt you?”

The princess tightened her arms around her children and shook her head.

“They knocked Víli over the head as I’m sure you saw already, but we’re okay. Thanks to him.” She nodded at Nori who tried to look like your average upstanding citizen who just happened to be in the royal quarters in the middle of the night. It could have gone better.
“I thought you were with the guard at first,” Dís continued still looking at Nori. “But you’re not, are you?”

Nori snorted, he couldn’t help it. The idea of him as a guardsman was just too funny.

Bilbo had his head tilted to the side, observing Nori with an intensity that made the Dwarf want to shuffle his feet like a naughty Dwarfling.

“I know you from somewhere,” the king said slowly. “But from where?”

“Wanted posters, most likely,” Dwalin huffed and crossed his arms. Insulted, Nori crossed his own arms. He was much too good to end up on a wanted poster, the guards had never been able to catch him in the act, so regardless of what they thought they knew-

“That’s a criminal, Bilbo,” Dwalin went on. "A thief and -”

“And the one who saved the lives of my children,” lady Dís interrupted as she rose to her feet, one child cradled in each arm.

“What were you doing here?” the king asked Nori, ignoring the argument starting between his sister and his captain.

“You, err, lost this,” Nori pulled out the purse from inside his coat. “The other day in the market. I was just… returning it.”

“You’re the one I bumped into,” Bilbo said, a light of recognition coming to this eyes.

“Yeah,” Nori said and held the purse. “Sorry about not recognizing you, Your Majesty.”

“Please, call me Bilbo, and your name..?”

“Nori, at your service, your, um, Bilbo.” Right, when he told Dori about this Nori was skipping this particular bit lest his brother have a meltdown about not following proper protocols when talking to royalty.

“Nori,” Bilbo repeated and took the purse. “Thank you, whatever your reasons were.”

Yeah, Nori hadn’t really thought the king would buy the ‘oh I was in the neighbourhood’ excuse. The guard captain definitely wasn't buying it either going by how his face resembled an angry thundercloud.

“You likely saved the lives of my nephews and the lives of my sister and her husband. If there is anything I can do for you, just say the word, you will be rewarded of course, but -”

“No reward necessary, Your Majesty.” Nori interrupted. He tacked on the title to try and make up for interrupting his king, but he doubted Dori would consider it proper even so. “I was happy to do it, and now I’ll just be on my way -” before the guards got any more bright ideas. “And we can just forget this even happened.”

If the guards ever did manage to pin something on him he could perhaps try and get the king to pardon him, but Nori could see little other use for a kingly reward. Gold? That he could get himself, and he cared little for power and social status.
A thought occurred to him.

“Oh, and better that people hear that it was the guards who stopped this than someone merely passing by. It’ll likely keep more people away in the future.”

“He is right,” the white-haired Dwarf agreed, and if Nori had been any other sort of Dwarf he might have jumped as he’d forgotten the white haired one was even in the room. “If people think they can just walk right in, they will try and do so.”

He smiled at Nori and did a polite bow. “Balin, at your service.”

Before Nori could return the greeting, Dwalin joined them again as Dís had taken her children and gone to check on their groggy father.

“That was where it should have ended. The thief turned accidental hero should have slunk off into the night with a strange tale to share with his brothers, but that wasn’t what happened at all.

“Wait,” Bilbo called when Nori was almost at the door. “If I can’t offer you a reward, can I offer you a job?”

Surprise mingled with curiosity made Nori stop.

“If what Dwalin tells me is true, that is,” Bilbo continued.

The following explanation made Nori question if he was the one who had been knocked over the head. It was either that or accepting that his king was just a little insane.

Bilbo wanted to hire Nori as an informant. Someone who could keep an ear to the ground and who could move unhindered in certain less savoury circles. It was basically a royal command to continue to be a criminal on the off-chance that he’d hear about anyone plotting against the king and his family.

“Bilbo, a word,” Dwalin growled, apparently taking to the idea as well as a cat took to being thrown into a river.

Balin just looked thoughtful.

Nori contemplated if perhaps legging it wasn’t the best option after all.

“Dwalin, I know what you’re going to say, but we don’t even know who hired these two,” Bilbo argued. “Which means they could just hire more. You can’t deny that it would be useful to have someone who could give us notice before assassins and kidnappers starts invading our halls.”

“You can’t trust him,” Dwalin said a bit desperately. “Even if he saved the boys, it doesn’t mean that he can be trusted in the future.”

Nori found himself nodding in agreement. It didn't. He could still have ulterior motives. Not sure what they'd be exactly, but you shouldn't trust someone based on one event. He'd really have expected a king to know this. Perhaps he could make another list for him.
"Can I trust you?"

The question from his king caught Nori completely off balance.

“What kind of question is that?” he sputtered and tried to drag his gaze away from those searching eyes.

“One that would like an honest answer,” Bilbo said calmly. “Can I trust you?”

Damn. Nori contemplated lying but with the way Dwalin was looking at him that could mean a trip straight to the dungeons.

“You can, but you shouldn't,” he said slowly. "You can't know that I'm just not lying to you.”

"I don’t like saying this, but listen to the thief," Dwalin said between clenched teeth.

"I am," Bilbo said and smiled at Nori.

And so it came to pass that Nori swore his oath of allegiance to his king standing in a princess’ bedroom while two guards carried out the body of a dead assassin, with a glowering Dwalin and an amused Balin looking on.

The next week, a guard named Leti (who had been deemed trustworthy by both the king and his two advisors) started finding notes in his pockets about muttered and rumours that might be worth checking into.

Almost seventy years later as they left Hobbiton just as dawn arrived, Dwalin still looked at Nori as if he'd any minute would go running with the crown in one pocket and the crown prince in the other, (although Fíli was much too large for that sort of business these days,) but to be fair Dwalin had indeed spent more than one night chasing him through narrow pathways and shadowed halls.

If Bilbo wanted a thief then Nori had to keep stealing things. Simple as that. And royal pardon available or not, he just couldn’t let himself be caught just to give the guards the satisfaction of a job well done. It’d just lull them into a false sense of security. (Nori ended up writing a pretty long list of possible improvements for the entire city’s security)

Eventually, when Nori’s reputation was good (or rather, bad) enough he was able to mostly skip the actually event of stealing and just say that he did. But he never stopped completely, because there would always be some idiot that needed to be relieved from the burden of having too much money.

The very same night he first came from the royal quarters, he told Dori what had happened. His brother looked torn between the desire to strangle him and the desire to hug, and then strangle him.

"Only you," Dori moaned and thumped his head against the table. “Only you could steal from a king and then end up becoming his bloody Spymaster. If mother knew-”

"You mustn't tell mother anything," Nori said, horrified.

"Of course I won't tell her." Dori rolled his eyes. "Mother can keep thinking that you're a respectable Dwarf. And now you actually are, of sorts.”

When Nori agreed to join Bilbo on the quest to reclaim Erebor, he spread the word that he was just going because Ori had been recruited as a Scribe, which had led to his other idiot brother agreeing to go as well, and he couldn’t just let the two morons go alone, could he?
He also made sure that Dwalin spread the rumour that if Nori joined the quest he’d receive a full pardon from any crimes committed, now or in the future. (Oh, and his share of the treasure, of course.)

After the quest was completed it would likely take a lot of hard work to convince anyone that he had nothing to do with the royals, but it wasn’t as if he would let Bilbo go without him (he was still much too trustworthy), and Ori and Dori would not let him go without them.

But with both those rumours running wild there was at least the possibility that people would not suspect him of anything other than having greed as a primary motive. There were people he’d might need to call on later and if they suspected he’d been feeding their information to the captain of the guards all these years well… the less said about that the better.

“Cheer up,” Nori said to a sullen Dwalin as they set off from the Shire. “At least this way you can keep an eye on me.”

Dwalin merely grunted, but Nori could have sworn that there was a hint of a smile lurking in one corner of the other Dwarf’s eye. Who knew, after another 70 years perhaps they could even manage to have a civil conversation.

Whistling cheerfully Nori made himself comfortable on the pony. He noted the curious look coming from their would-be burglar.

“He disapproves because I’m a thief you see,” he explained to the Hobbit, ignoring the soft snort he could hear coming from Bilbo up ahead. He was a thief, dammit. No matter what else he became, he would remain a thief, if only because it still annoyed the hell out of Dori when he couldn’t explain to his friends what his dear brother’s chosen trade was. And if Dori ever stopped being such a prat, there was always Dwalin to fall back on. The large Dwarf was even shooting him another annoyed look that very second.

“Never mind that sourpuss,” Nori told Thorin and gave him a friendly pat on the back. He had a good feeling about this Hobbit, and certainly that was a good omen for the rest of the quest as well.

Chapter End Notes

Nori didn't start as one of my favourites, but he is now. Still not sure where this interlude came from though.

I figure with Thorin as king instead of Bilbo things would have been a little different. Thorin, I think, would not trust as easily, but in the end I think Nori would join the company out of loyalty, and not just some desire to get away from his shady past. I mean, there's getting away from the guards and there's expecting to come up against a Dragon.

Or, Nori joined because his brothers did. I think he'd not let them go up against said Dragon alone, no matter what.
At the top of the final peak of the Misty Mountains, Thorin stopped and took a moment to look back from where they had come.

Far, far away in the west - so far that all Thorin could see was a faint blue tinged shadow - lay the Shire. The place he had lived in almost all his life and where he had assumed he would remain. Was this really to be last he saw of it? Or would he have to make this journey once again when he realised that he had either outstayed his welcome, or when he had faced the reality of Erebor only to discover it was not to be his home any more than any other place had been?

Shivering in the wind that pulled at his clothes and made his curls tumble, Thorin considered how lucky it undoubtedly was that they’d crossed the mountains in the summer and not during winter. The temperature had quickly gone from cold to freezing during their last day at the tops of the mountains, and he hoped going down would be both warmer and a little quicker.

If he were to make this journey again, he’d best not try it by himself as he would likely freeze to death unless he first found much warmer clothes. If he couldn’t stay in Erebor then perhaps he could go south? Perhaps as far as Rohan, or even Gondor. Good smiths were always needed, even if they were Hobbits in the cities of Men; that much Thorin already knew.

Taking what he now felt sure would be a last glimpse at the Shire, Thorin turned east once again and breathed deeply enough that it felt like ice had settled in his lungs. It was perhaps the height of foolishness to plan for the future when you were going to have to face a dragon, but if he ended up being eaten… well, no one would know what he had been planning anyway. With a shrug, Thorin fell into line again and resumed walking down the winding path.

Going down was indeed a little quicker; and once they left the piles of snow behind it was even a little warmer, but it wasn’t really easier as they constantly had to watch their step for loose rocks and icy spots. Stumbling when going upwards on a hillside was one thing, but another entirely when travelling on narrow footpaths with nothing but air to catch you if you tripped in the wrong direction.

Things did not improve with the sudden arrival of a thunderstorm.

“At least it’s not snowing!” Bofur shouted over the rolling crashes of thunder. “I’d not fancy not being able to see where I put my feet.”

“Please shut up before you tempt fate further,” Dori called back from somewhere behind Thorin. Dwalin; just a step or two behind the Hobbit, grunted in agreement. Thorin also found himself agreeing most ardently. The rain was bad enough, making the rock wet and slippery as well as obscuring his vision unless he constantly blinked the wetness out of his eyes, but snow would be worse still.

The snow did not come, but it was doubtful anyone would agree that being in the middle of a battle of Stone Giants was any better.
At first Thorin could not believe what he was seeing. No stories he had ever heard had prepared him for beings such as these.

*Can they even see us?* Thorin wondered as Dwalin pushed him and Ori flush against the mountainside to shield them from the falling rocks. *We must be no more than ants to them.*

The entire battle between the Giants could not have lasted for more than ten minutes, but to Thorin it felt closer to ten years. Of course, it was hard being objective about time when you found yourself dangling off of a cliff.

Hobbit feet may have been good for walking as well as sturdy enough to withstand sharp rocks and even snow, but compared to Dwarven boots it would seem that they were more slippery. Or perhaps it was just bad luck, but one moment Thorin was shouting as it seemed half of their company was about to be crushed by one of the Giants, and the next he was clinging to the side of the mountain, nothing beneath him but the howling winds. He made the mistake of looking down, and almost missed hearing Dwalin call for him.

“Thorin! Where’s Thorin?”

Gritting his teeth to stop the world from spinning Thorin called back and gave silent thanks for the many days he had spent making metal bend to his will, as he was able to pull himself up enough that Dwalin could drag him the rest of the way back onto the path.

“I thought we lost our burglar,” Dwalin grunted as Thorin collapsed on the ground, his limbs feeling as sturdy as the wet cloth covering them. Not giving himself time to catch his breath Thorin forced his head up.

“Is everyone all right?” he panted. “The Giants-“

“Didn’t crush them, lad,” Dwalin said, clamping a hand on Thorin’s shoulder. “Everyone is still with us.”

Thorin let his forehead sink down against the cold rock, dizzy from both relief and residue fear.

Dwalin’s hand on his shoulder would probably leave him bruised, but the hard grip felt like the only thing keeping him anchored to the cliff so he almost protested when it was removed.

Aided by Dwalin, Thorin stumbled back onto his feet. They had to get out of this storm. They had to-

Then Thorin’s eyes found Bilbo’s and what little breath the Hobbit had recovered was once again lost.

For the first time since they had met, Thorin saw fear in Bilbo’s eyes. Fear, but also relief, and something else. Something that made Thorin’s heart skip a beat. Then the moment was lost and Bilbo shouted over the roaring wind that they needed to keep moving.

The Company continued onwards and Thorin made a silent prayer to whatever deity that might hear that there would be time later to find out for sure what exactly it was that he’d seen in Bilbo’s eyes.
Finding the cave felt like a blessing; a dark, lightly damp blessing, but a blessing nonetheless.

“Make sure you search the back,” Bilbo said to Dwalin as they entered. “We might not be the only ones looking for shelter.”

Thorin spared a thought for bears and mountain lions, but a mere thought was not enough to stop him from sinking down onto the cave floor. The rest of the company appeared to be of a similar mind and when Dwalin called out that the cave was clear, more than one groan of relief echoed of the cave’s walls.

“Right then.” Glóin rubbed his hands. “Let’s get a fire started.”

“No,” Bilbo said and shook his head. “The light will be visible from much too far away, it’s not safe. We’ll get some rest, and then leave at dawn. Sooner if the storm subsides.”

“The plan was to wait in the mountains until Gandalf could join us,” Balin protested. “This doesn’t—”

“And we will,” Bilbo interrupted, which made Thorin raise his head to watch the two Dwarfs. It was rare for Bilbo to be discourteous to anyone in their company, but especially to his old friend. “We will wait, but we should not spend too much time in this place. Something’s not right.”

“The sand,” Dwalin murmured and Bilbo nodded. Thorin looked down in confusion. Sure enough the ground was almost completely covered in fine, pale sand but he could not understand what the problem with that was. Neither could Glóin it seemed.

“What about it then?” he rumbled and scraped his foot through it. “Seems like ordinary sand to me.”

“No tracks,” Dwalin said shortly. “Only the ones just left by us. And no other traces of anything living here either.”

“An empty cave,” Nori murmured as he put the pieces together. “Though caves like these are rarely unoccupied. Empty now could just mean that the beast usually living here was just as surprised by the storm as we were and is at the bottom of a ravine, but always empty…”

“Means there’s something keeping potential lodgers away,” Dwalin agreed grudgingly, apparently annoyed by being of one mind with the company’s resident lawbreaker. Thorin suspected that Nori’s knowledge about caves came from trying to find good places to hide, be that hiding himself or his stolen goods.

“Should we leave then?” Fíli asked from where he was huddled in a corner with Kíli.

“No,” Bilbo shook his head. “There is little sense in braving the storm and the dark when we have a place to rest for a while. But keep your weapons close, just in case. Bofur, you’ve got the first watch.”

Bofur nodded and clapped Bombur and Bifur on their shoulders before relocating to a position closer to the cave’s opening.

- 

Sooner than Thorin would have thought, the cave was filled with the snoring he’d become so used
to, but by the time most of the Company had fallen asleep Thorin had already talked himself out of asking Bilbo about what Thorin had seen on his face. Thought he had seen. Couldn’t have seen.

Because why would Bilbo look at Thorin in much the same way Kili had looked at Fili when the Giants’ movements had separated them? Thorin was not kin, had only known the Dwarf a few months, and Nori was a hundred times the burglar Thorin could ever be, smell or not. There was no reason why Bilbo would look at Thorin as if he was necessary. As if Bilbo would have been the one who would have been lost if Thorin had fallen. So Thorin must have been letting himself read too much into what had only been a leader’s concern for a member of his company. Or that look had probably been for Bilbo’s nephews who almost had been lost, or for Dwalin who could have fallen helping Thorin up. No need to make a bigger fool of himself and mention it. Especially since it appeared Bilbo was already asleep.

This resolution left only the problem of what Thorin would occupy his mind with next, because to him sleep seemed elusive. Every time he closed his eyes he kept seeing Bilbo’s eyes, open so very wide.

An indeterminable time later Thorin got up to move closer to the cave mouth. At least then he’d get a chance to rest his eyes on something other than damp stone. Perhaps he wasn’t suited to a place like Erebor after all.

“Surely you’re not going outside in this -” A flash of lightening illuminated Bofur’s worried face. “Well, in that,” the Dwarf finished as thunder followed on the heels of the lightening.

Thorin shook his head and settled against the wall opposite Bofur.

“Can’t sleep, eh?” Bofur said and leaned in conspiratorially. “I can’t blame you, I can hear my brother snoring all the way from here.”

“I can say that he’s not helping,” Thorin said and stared out at the ink-dark skies.

“But not the root of the problem,” Bofur tapped the side of his nose. “Gotcha. You know,” the Dwarf said and straightened his already straight hat, “I’ll admit I’m waiting for you to be homesick. Would that be why you’re not sleeping? I can imagine that this is quite different indeed from what you’re used to.”

“It’s hard to be homesick without a home,” Thorin said absently to the rain outside.

Bofur made a soft sound and Thorin turned his head to look at the Dwarf. His normally cheerful face was crinkled in a frown.

“You’ll have to forgive me for saying so, Master Oakenshield, but that sounds quite terrible.”

Thorin shrugged and turned back to the storm. Perhaps there were Giants who lived in the clouds and this was their battle. It did seem like something was intent on bringing the heavens down this night.

After a minute or two of silence, Bofur cleared his throat.

“Not all dragons have scales and breathe fire,” he said, and the randomness of the statement made Thorin turn to him, one enquiring eyebrow raised.
“What I mean is that sometimes when you have a home, something can come to take it away. And whatever that something is, it’s not the same for everybody,” Bofur shrugged. “Could be a dragon, could be something else. So maybe a home isn’t the same for everybody either and you just haven’t found yours yet.”

This came a little too close for comfort to Thorin’s own thoughts on the matter, especially when the words were said by the very person who had taken his -

*Bilbo is not yours,* Thorin reminded himself. *He never has been.*

Even so, Thorin no longer felt comfortable sitting with Bofur, so he rose to his feet, inclining his head towards the miner to show there was no ill feelings between them, planning another attempt at sleep.

“I’m sorr- what’s that?” Bofur cut off his own apology and gestured to something half-way hidden by Thorin’s coat.

It was the Elven sword. It was *glowing,* strong enough to let light seep out from the top of the sheath. Thorin’s eyes widened and he slowly pulled it half-way free. The steel-blue light shone like a star in the darkness of the cave, illuminating the place even more than the lightning had done.

From somewhere inside the mountain there was a dull bang, followed by a low grinding noise.

“Wake up,” Thorin shouted as the floor of the cave began to *open* beneath the Dwarfs. “Wake up!”

But it was too late - as Thorin took a step backwards, the stone beneath his and Bofur’s feet also twisted and plunged them into the darkness below.

Chapter End Notes

In the book Bilbo has a dream about how the floor opens up. Could be taken to mean as that he was only dozing and saw it happen, but as Tolkien really did write that Bilbo was asleep I’m interpreting that to mean that Bilbo knew something was wrong before it actually was, even if he didn’t have the words for it due to never before having been in any remotely similar situations. And without anyone calling their attention to it, Dwalin, Nori and the rest are just too tired to think about if the sand is oddly smooth. (I figure the Goblins cover the floor with sand so that no one can see the cracks that otherwise should be visible)
Tumbling down the shaft was a blur of flashing lights and the sound of Dwarfs shouting.

Thorin was one of the last to come crashing down into the cavern and he landed on top of someone who - going by size - he assumed was Bombur. Everyone was groaning and moaning, but there were no sharp shouts of pain and everyone Thorin could see seemed to be moving. He himself could move both his arms and his legs, and slowly Thorin lifted his head to see just what sort of mess they’d gotten themselves into this time.

That was exactly when the Goblins came.

There was not enough time for anyone to go for their weapons, and soon there wasn’t even any room to wield them either. The Goblins crowded in from all sides and shoved and dragged the company along the rickety path. The beasts were disgusting creatures and their beady eyes and pointed faces reminded Thorin of furless rats, though a whole lot larger - and likely a whole lot more dangerous.

“Get your hands off me,” Dwalin roared from somewhere in the front, his voice rising above the rest of the noise.

The call made Thorin realise that none of the creatures were actually touching him. There weren’t even looking at him. The closest Goblins were all rushing ahead to help subdue Bilbo and Nori who were both resisting being dragged with enough fervour that they had succeeded in knocking a few Goblins back. Unfortunately there were more to take their place before they could get their hands on their weapons.

Having already begun to slow his steps Thorin then stopped completely to crouch on the filthy path.

No Goblin took notice. He had been forgotten.

Not by Bilbo, though. The Dwarf happened to look back when he tried to pull lose from the three Goblins clinging to his arms and his eyes grew wide with alarm until he happened to look down and noticed Thorin. Raising a hand to show that he wasn’t hurt, Thorin then gestured towards his sword questioningly. He didn’t know if he’d manage to deal any damage before he was also overwhelmed, but he was willing to try.

Bilbo just had the time to sharply shake his head before he was swept away by the rush of Goblins and Thorin lost sight of him.

Moments later Nori was also dragged away and Thorin found himself alone and without any real notion of what to do. Having one of their numbers free was surely better than all of them being captured, but what could one hobbit do when so grossly outnumbered?

Thorin drew the sword of his own make and reluctantly let the Elven blade remain in its scabbard. It was still glowing and having it unsheathed would be a fine way to alert every Goblin around to the presence of an intruder.
As the Goblins and the struggling Dwarfs moved on, the cavern grew eerily silent. Not knowing what else to do, Thorin crept along the path and followed them. Perhaps it’d been a mistake not to go with the others. Even if he happened to stumble upon a way out, it wasn’t as if he could just leave them to the Goblins anyway.

The matter of what to do soon became academic when a Goblin hurled itself down on the path in front of Thorin. If possible, the thing was even uglier and nastier looking than the ones from before.

Thorin barely had the chance to get his sword up before it launched itself at him, blade and teeth first.

The creature did not move with much skill, but with enough reach and force that Thorin had to constantly duck away from the swiping blade and claws. The amount of noise the Goblin was making was sure to let any others nearby know what was going on anyway, so when he got a moment’s respite Thorin quickly drew the Elven blade. The sudden light staggered the Goblin just long enough for Thorin to thrust his other sword into its chest. With a shriek the creature fell backwards, wrenching the sword out of Thorin’s hand, and slumped down on the ground, its head just hanging out over the edge of the platform.

Cursing silently - because surely that had been enough noise to set the entire mountain running in this direction - Thorin went to pull his sword out. It had gotten stuck between the creature’s ribs and Thorin quickly sheathed the Elven blade again so he could have both hands free (and so he would stop glowing). With a twist and a pull, the sword slid free with a disgusting noise and Thorin frowned at the black blood covering it. But this was not the place to fuss about such things so Thorin quickly wiped it on the Goblin’s belly to get rid of the worst of the blood, and turned to leave.

A sudden grip around his ankle put a stop to that idea. The somehow still-alive Goblin sluggishly raised its head to sneer at Thorin with black stained teeth and before Thorin could put his sword to good use the Goblin had rolled itself over the edge, dragging a shouting Thorin with it.

Falling down a mountain was not any more pleasant the second time you tried it.

Thorin must have hit his head, because when he came to his senses he was curled up in the midst of a patch of very large mushrooms and he no idea how much time had passed. His head ached and his back ached even worse, but again nothing seemed to be broken and he likely had the mushrooms to thank for that. He could see the Goblin between the mushrooms; it had landed on the less forgiving stone and appeared to finally be dead. His first kill - because even if the fall had finished the job Thorin’s intent had definitely been to strike the Goblin dead. He wished he could look upon the corpse with pride, but the feeling in his stomach was more of a sick lurching.

Then something moved in the shadows further into the cave and Thorin’s right hand went to his empty scabbard. Damn. He’d dropped his sword. But the Elven blade was still to be found at his other hip, and appeared to have stopped glowing. How far down had he fallen if the thing could no longer sense any Goblins? Could he get back up, and what would he do if he did? For now all those questions had to wait, though, because the shadows had unfurled to reveal an emaciated creature that Thorin almost would have mistaken for a Goblin had his blade not already proclaimed to be wrong.

“Yessss,” the creature hissed again and again as it crawled closer to the dead Goblin, stopping at times to let out a gurgling cough.

Muttering about how Goblins where better than old bones, the creature then proceeded to drag the
corpse away, leaving Thorin undetected in the mushroom patch. For a moment he just lay there, trying to decide what to do. Trying to go back up would likely just result in him falling down again - and asking for luck to save him from a broken back for a third time might be asking a little too much.

If he couldn’t go up there was only one other way to go and that was the same way that creature had left. Hopefully there was a way out of these caves that wouldn’t require climbing. And once he was away from them… then he would try to figure out what to do next.

Judging that to be a good enough plan for the moment Thorin got to his feet and started to look around for his sword. He almost wished the Elven blade was still glowing as he could have used a little light, but eventually he found his sword half-buried beneath another bunch of mushrooms.

Despite his mixed feelings about taking a life it felt good to have the sword back in his hand again.

From outside the bottom of the shaft he’d landed in, Thorin could hear the creature arguing with itself. And as Thorin drew closer he could see it; sitting on an island in the middle of small lake. Now it was singing to itself, a twisted little song, but Thorin almost felt sorry for it. It was clearly mad - and likely meant him harm, but he wouldn’t wish this kind of existence on anyone or anything.

His distraction made him fail to notice a loose pile of rocks and when he put his foot down it caused them to scatter across the stone with a clattering sound that seemed to echo throughout the cave.

When Thorin dared stick his head up to look for the creature it was no longer crouched on the cliff. Damn it all. If his luck still held then maybe it had just gotten scared and hid, but he doubted it.

Remaining in the same spot where the noise had originated from was a poor idea, and Thorin mentally debated going back to where he’d landed as opposed to continuing on. The creature probably knew every nook and cranny of this place, and there were a lot of them, so it was probably best to go back to the place without any spaces for someone to hide in. As there was only one way in from the caves Thorin would see the thing coming so it couldn’t sneak up on him.

However, once more his plans were stopped by someone suddenly dropping onto the ground in front of him.

“Bless us and splash us, Precious!” the creature exclaimed and stared at Thorin with wide eyes. “That’s a meaty mouthful!”

Definitely meant him harm then, and definitely mad as it didn’t even notice Thorin’s sword until it poked the creature right between its collarbones.

“Stay back,” Thorin ordered as the thing let out more of those gurgling sounds and recoiled. “I won’t hurt you if you show me the way out.” And there probably were a way out, to the actual outside. As Thorin had gone closer to the lake he’d noticed that there was the barest hint of a breeze to the air.

He was no expert on caves, but that should mean that there might not only be a way back up to the Goblins, but also to a place where the air didn’t smell of rot and filth.

“Is it lost?” the creature questioned, crawling backwards to hide behind a rock.

“Yes, and I need to get back to my friends.” Somehow, but one thing at the time.

“Friends!” the creature laughed, only to cut itself off. “Not - the Goblinses?” it asked with a frown.
“No, not the Goblins,” Thorin agreed without bothering to explain himself further.

“What is it, Precious? It’s not a Goblin, no. What is it?”

“I don’t see how it’s any of your business,” Thorin said and didn’t take his eyes off the agitated creature as it scuttled around on the rocks littering the cave floor.

“Doesn’t matter,” it hissed and crawled closer to Thorin once more. “But is it soft? Is it, juicy?”

Again Thorin put the tip of his blade against the creature’s chest. “Just show me the way out of here, and I’ll leave.”

“Oh, we knows!” the creature giggled and backed away again. “We knows safe paths, safe paths in the dark.” It pointed to Thorin’s left, then its face suddenly twisted in anger and Thorin took a careful step back. The mad were often very dangerous as they could not be predicted. “Shut up!” it hissed and ducked behind a rock.

“I don’t have time for a game of hide and seek,” Thorin muttered to himself. He needed to get out of here and -

“Games!”

The creature popped up from behind the rock and smiled a wide smile that showed off all its remaining teeth. “We love games! Doesn’t we, Precious. Does it like games? Does it? Does it like to play?” Not waiting for an answer it continued to rattle off a riddle.

“I don’t have time for riddles either,” Thorin said sternly and his refusal caused the creature to let out a sad wail and crawl away again.

“No time for riddles,” it whined before twisting to glare at Thorin once more. “No riddles, finish him off.” The creature’s tone was filled with menace and loathing and the intensity of it actually surprised Thorin. Though not enough that he didn’t get his sword up in time to deal the creature a shallow cut on its side when it threw itself at him. Clasping a palm to the wound it then looked at Thorin with a hurt expression before scrambling away over the rocks.

“We hates it!” were the parting words Thorin was given before the creature disappeared behind another rock.

Thorin sighed. Perhaps he ought to just try finding his own way out. His guide would evidently not be of much use. Just as he turned to leave in the direction the creature had pointed he saw something glinting on the ground. It was a gold ring and clearly not of Goblin make. Either the creature had dropped it or some other unfortunate soul had done so after getting caught in the Goblins’ trap and then falling in the same way that Thorin had.

Not really thinking about it, Thorin picked it up and put it in his pocket before moving further into the caves (hopefully away from the mad creature).

Mere minutes after entering the tunnels, Thorin heard a howl of anguish come from behind him. He couldn’t make out any words, but the emotion was plain enough to read.

Again Thorin felt something like pity for the thing. Loneliness was probably what had made it start talking to itself, and now it was alone again with only a dead Goblin for company.
The creature let out another howl, but this time it didn’t sound distressed as much as it sounded… angry.

Thorin hurried his steps. At least there was no way it could jump down from above again, he thought as he squeezed himself through a particularly narrow passage. If it was coming after him it would have to take the same path -

The Hobbit slowed his steps. If it was coming after him it would assume he was trying to leave the caves, and then he could perhaps just follow it to the outside after all. And once he knew the way out, he could go back in again to look for the others.

The only problem with that plan was that there seemed to be a lack of places for Thorin to conceal himself. The shadows weren’t dark enough and the crevices weren’t deep enough, so Thorin continued on.

The creature was definitely coming after him though, because too soon for comfort he could make out what it was shouting.

“It’s ours! It’s ours!”

Not really in the mood to find out if that was meant to be about the ring he’d found or about himself, Thorin again sped up his pace. Every now and again he thought he could feel a hint of the breeze and he tried to pick those tunnels over the others.

Unfortunately it was a mixed blessing that Thorin was indeed picking the right path, because that meant that he was that much easier to find for someone who knew all the safe paths in the dark…

Suddenly the cries from behind sounded as they were only seconds from catching up, and with a curse Thorin stopped to wait for the creature.

It was pathetic, but the way the creature talked, the way it seemed to think, it reminded Thorin a little too much of how his father had been towards the end. After Gandalf had brought him to Thorin.

Back then, Thorin hadn’t been able to find it in himself to release his father from his misery, but perhaps he could bring himself to do so for this creature. Perhaps afterwards he would know if his choice ten years ago had been a mistake or not.

He didn’t have to wait long. The creature skidded into the small cave Thorin had picked to wait in and bared its teeth in a snarl.

“It’s ours,” it repeated. “Thief!”

So it was about the ring then.

“Do you mean this?” Thorin asked and pulled the ring from his pocket. While waiting he’d sheathed his sword, but his right hand now hovered over the pommel. “If you mean this, then I didn’t steal it, I just picked it up from the ground.”

“Give it,” the creature hissed and crawled forward. “Give it to us. It’s ours. It’s our present.”

“Come and get it then,” Thorin offered let the ring come to rest in the middle of his left palm. His right he allowed to wrap around the hilt of the sword. The creature started to inch closer, only to freeze.
“But it’s ours,” it wailed. “It’s a tricks, it is,” it spat immediately afterwards with a glance towards Thorin’s right hand. “It is trying to trick us.” The creature lifted its hand to cover the scrape Thorin had dealt it earlier.

Out of all the moments for it to start making sense, Thorin thought, torn between shame and annoyance, and then his annoyance over being ashamed to kill a being (mad or not) that had - no less than three times - threatened his life. Steeling himself, he drew his sword.

For a while they just stared at each other. Then with a screech the creature leapt towards Thorin who took a step back out of sheer surprise at the rage on its face. His foot found a loose rock and suddenly Thorin found himself falling backwards. And the strangest of things then happened.

As he fell Thorin instinctively kept his grip on the sword, but the ring went flying… up and up in the air, only to fall and slip right onto his finger. The creature completed his jump, and barely avoided impaling itself on Thorin’s raised sword. Instead it landed just to the side of Thorin, looking around as if it no longer could see him.

“Tricks,” it howled and Thorin scrambled back just in time to avoid being hit in the face by the creature’s flailing arms. “Thief! It knows what the present does. It stole our Precious. But it can’t have gone far.”

To Thorin the words seemed almost to echo, and he could have sworn the cave had been darker only a moment ago. He must have hit his head again when he fell; maybe he just hadn’t felt it yet.

It was clear now to him that the creature indeed was mad beyond any hope of salvation and Thorin slowly got to his feet as the thing scampered off to the other side of the cave. He looked at his sword, black and filthy from the Goblin blood and sheathed it with a sigh.

The noise seemed to draw the creature’s attention and it twisted around to stare blindly at the corner Thorin stood in. As silently as possible Thorin walked towards the sad and insane being, drawing the Elven blade as he did so.

The sword was sharp and it cut cleanly into the creature’s throat. Thorin made himself watch until it had stopped moving and then he threw the blade aside with a grimace of distaste.

He hadn’t been good at dual-wielding anyway, so perhaps he ought to take Kíli up on his promise to make him a shield. If his brother had managed to teach him the difference between birches and oaks.

Before he moved on Thorin took one last glance at the poor creature. Even in death it appeared to not have found peace, but Thorin hoped that it still had. He hoped it wouldn’t be lonely, angry and afraid anymore.

- 

He had to double-back a couple of times, but finally Thorin could see daylight up ahead. There still seemed to be something wrong with his vision though, because the light seemed oddly pale and wan, but still much too sharp to be moonlight.

Óin definitely would need to check on his head, Thorin decided as he finally stepped outside the mountain. The landscaped appeared bleached of colour; perhaps the caves had been too, but as there was so little colour to them to start with Thorin couldn’t really say. However before Thorin could offer himself for their healer’s appraisal there was still the issue of how he would ever find Óin, or
any of the others.

Judging by setting sun it seemed as if he’d exited the mountain on entirely the wrong side. Or, the correct side in terms of their quest as it was indeed the East side, but what help was that when he was alone? He had to go back to look for them.

From behind him there was suddenly a shout and the sound of many running feet and Thorin hurriedly moved a bit further down the hillside, hiding behind a wide spruce. He’d heard that Goblins did not particularly enjoy the light of day, but Thorin wasn’t taken any chances that they might not have heard it.

Seeing the Dwarfs run out of the cave, together with none other than the Wizard, Thorin could not have been more surprised or more relieved. Even Gandalf was something of a welcome sight. Smiling widely, Thorin stepped out from behind the tree and lifted his arm in greeting.

Moments later he stared at the Dwarfs’ backs as they had simply run past him, as if they hadn’t even seen him. Feeling the beginning of a suspicion in the back of his head Thorin looked down on the golden band which circled his middle finger.

As a child he’d read stories about magic rings. Could it - could it really be..?

Feeling a little as if in a dream Thorin continued down the hillside and soon enough he could hear his friends’ raised voices.

“We have to go back and look for him,” Kíli protested. “We can’t leave him in there.”

“Why did he slip away in the first place?” Glóin rumbled darkly. “He should have just –”

“It was my fault.”

Thorin almost took a tumble over a root. He was closer now, close enough to see the company standing in a rough circle. It had been Bilbo who had spoken and his voice had held so much defeat that Thorin had felt something twist inside.

“It was my fault,” he repeated. “Thorin somehow managed to get away from the Goblins. He wanted to - he wanted to help us, attack the Goblins, and I -,” Bilbo looked up towards the mountain, almost looking directly at Thorin who stood frozen in shock. “I thought that with one of us free we’d have a better chance of escaping later.”

“So we’ll go back,” Fíli said and put his hand on his uncle’s shoulder.

“We can’t,” Bilbo said quietly. “I looked for him, when we ran. Called for him. If he had been near he would have come. Now the way we went is gone, and we can’t go back on it any more than he could use it to get out. And even if we could - I can’t risk all your lives -”

This caused a roar of protests and that was enough to knock Thorin out of his stupor. Quickly he removed the ring and shoved it deep into his pocket.

“We must continue on,” Bilbo said, voice raised to be heard over the ruckus. “We must -”

“Seems I made it just in time then.” As the words left his mouth Thorin would have done anything to take them back. In his head they had seemed light-hearted, a joke, but they came out almost
accusing. Quickly he scrambled for something else to say but Gandalf – the confounded Wizard - got there first.

“Thorin Oakenshield,” Gandalf breathed. “I have never been so glad to see anyone in my life.”

Then Fili and Kili rushed to Thorin side and Dwalin came to slap Thorin on the back and everything seemed a blur of greetings and questions Thorin didn’t have time to answer before another was asked - until the howl of a Warg, then two, echoed down the hillside and made all the Dwarfs fall silent.

And then there was no time to say anything at all, just time to run.

Chapter End Notes

And we have the first major change in the storyline and end up with a dead Gollum.
Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

I should be saying this every chapter, but I suck:
Immense thanks to diemarysues for cleaning up this story. Any stupidity still left is completely my fault.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Again they ran from Wargs and the Orcs that were sure to follow, but this time there would be no hidden passage to Rivendell and no Elven arrows to come to their aid. Night arrived much too quickly with a moon mostly veiled by heavy clouds. Beneath the cover of the trees it was at times dark enough that there was no way to actually see where it was safe to tread. More than once Thorin almost stumbled as he missed seeing a tree root or a dip in the earth. Full circle, he mused as he ran on, thinking back to the morning of the day before when icy spots and a sudden stumble seemed like the biggest threat the company would face.

Thorin saw the others mostly like shadows, or in short flashes when the moonlight would find its way down past heavy branches. It seemed like more than one of the Dwarfs ran with the hint of a limp and the stiff way Bilbo held his shoulders indicated that he too had been injured. Thorin wished there had been time earlier to ask what had happened after they had been separated – after you abandoned them, a little voice inside of him said.

Ignoring the voice Thorin kept running - lungs and legs beginning to burn from the effort - and did his best to make sure every Warg within reach got a taste of his blade. But then there was nowhere left to run; the hill they had been sprinting down ended with a cliff and a sheer drop.

Gandalf’s suggestion that they’d climb into the trees seemed fairly pointless – did he think the Wargs would just tire of the game and go home? And what about the Orcs that would be coming? In the trees the Company was nothing more than waiting targets. But since Bilbo went along with it Thorin did too, albeit with a muttered protest.

And then, when it seemed that their situation could not get any worse, it got worse still.

“Azog,” Bilbo breathed as a pale Orc riding a white Warg came into view. Part of Thorin absently noted that Bilbo had turned almost white himself, likely from shock or rage. Despite that the Orc should by all rights be dead, there was no doubt that it indeed was the Defiler – if the missing arm was not enough then his calling Bilbo out by name and lineage certainly did the trick.

The Wargs had fallen back when their master arrived but they were soon snarling below the trees once more. When the beasts had ascertained that they would not succeed in dragging any of the company down they instead turned their attention towards bringing down the trees.

As two of the beasts pushed against the tree Thorin had picked he was almost knocked off balance and had to scramble to find a better hand-hold. Bilbo, sitting a few branches below him did not even appear to notice the movement; his gaze had not left Azog ever since the Orc had appeared.

Thankfully Thorin saw the Dwarf pay attention when their tree began to fall and they both were able
to jump safely onto the next, only to have the repeat the jump as the Wargs quickly felled the second
tree. It only took minutes before the entire Company was gathered together in the only tree that
remained standing.

The Wizard’s trick with the pinecones forced the Wargs to retreat and gave them all time to find
better positions in the tree. Thorin looked at Kili who was cheering and shook his head. What use
was time when there was nowhere to go but down? If the Orcs had bows, then they would all be
dead as soon as the creatures tired of waiting.

When the final tree began to fall Thorin looked down, expecting to see Wargs that had overcome
their fear of fire, but it was just the roots that had begun to give way due to the unexpected burden of
thirteen Dwarfs, one Hobbit, and a Wizard. With a creak and a stagger the tree stopped its descent
when it was about parallel to the ground, but it was likely just be a matter of time before the rest of
roots gave way.

Thorin could hear Ori and Dori scream, and some of the others curse, and he hoped that the very fact
that he could hear them so clearly meant that they hadn’t actually fallen. The branches obscured his
view and as Thorin pulled himself up to crouch on the tree trunk he realised he couldn’t actually see
any of the Dwarfs except for Balin and Bilbo.

Bilbo was just pulling himself up as well and Thorin could see that he was indeed injured as the
Dwarf winced every time he had to use his left arm. Not bothering to offer first Thorin grasped
Bilbo’s right arm and helped pull him the rest of the way up.

“Thank you,” the king said in a distant voice and Thorin would have laughed at the use of courtesy
in a situation like this if it wasn’t for the look in Bilbo’s eyes. The fire reflecting in the Dwarf’s eyes
should have made them burn, but instead they appeared colder than the Misty Mountains. As soon as
the he had gotten his feet on the trunk, Bilbo had unsheathed Orcrist and turned to face Azog who
sat on top of his Warg, looking straight at Bilbo.

“Don’t.” Thorin reached out to grab Bilbo’s arm as he took the first step.

Thorin knew he had no right to forbid Bilbo to do anything, and he didn’t even know how he
wanted to end his sentence. Don’t die was a fool’s command. Don’t go equally so because what use
was it if Bilbo stayed?

Nevertheless, Bilbo’s eyes lost a little of the chill that had entered them. He put his left hand over
Thorin’s where it rested on his arm – mouth thinning just slightly when the movement pulled at his
shoulder.

"I have to," Bilbo said and squeezed Thorin’s fingers. “I have to.”

And to that there was only one thing Thorin could say.

"Then I’m going too." Bilbo’s grip on his hand tightened until the point of pain but nothing else was
said. Thorin drew his blade and they walked, and then ran along the trunk of the tree.

Thorin had already resigned himself to dying; he had more or less accepted this as the inevitable end
for him when he signed the contract. It hadn’t bothered him overly much - which probably should
have been a concern - everyone had to die sooner or later, after all. But now, now Thorin’s heart
clenched with fear. While he would gladly die with Bilbo by his side he would give anything to
spare the Dwarf from meeting the same fate.
Before they could even get off of the tree Thorin was tackled to the side by a Warg.

“Thorin!” Bilbo shouted as Thorin landed hard on the ground in a clank of metal, the back of his armour knocking against stone. But the Dwarf could not follow as three more Wargs came from the side and put themselves between them, teeth bared.

Winded, Thorin still managed to hold on to his sword and when the beast attacked again it impaled itself on the blade; head first. The position sparked a memory in Thorin’s mind and suddenly he remembered the ring. Why hadn’t he told the others - told Bilbo about it before?

Another Warg had started closing in on him, but what was worse was how Thorin saw the pale Orc grin and start drawing closer to the distracted Bilbo. Cursing himself for his stupidity Thorin thrust his hand down his pocket. At first his fingers found nothing and Thorin’s heart skipped a beat at the thought of having lost the ring during the run or when leaping from tree to tree, but then one digit found cold metal instead of cloth and he quickly curled his fist around it.

Pulling it out Thorin looked up to see if Bilbo’s gaze were still on him, and as their eyes locked he tried to smile; tried to convey that what was about to happen was okay. Then he slipped the ring onto his finger and saw Bilbo’s eyes widen in shock.

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As before all the colour was leeched from the world when he put on the ring. The golden flames turned watery and the already bluish moonlight now turned the world into a shadow land.

Swiftly Thorin rolled to the side and scrambled to his feet. The Warg that had been coming for him had stopped in confusion when he disappeared, and it still held that look of confusion when Thorin’s sword sank into its belly. Unfortunately it was not the only one overly distracted by Thorin’s disappearance.

Azog, not really caring about why Bilbo had stopped, wasted no time upon finding his enemy at a disadvantage.

Thorin screamed when Azog’s mace struck Bilbo square in his chest and made him crash to the ground, making the Dwarf lose his sword in the process.

At the yell Azog turned his head in Thorin’s direction, but seeing nothing he turned back to Bilbo – and Thorin prayed to whatever deity that was listening that the reason Bilbo was so still was because the Dwarf had lost his breath when hitting the ground.

When Azog’s white Warg closed its jaws on Bilbo’s left side Thorin had to bite his lip until it bled to stop from screaming again.

If they didn’t know he was here then he should make sure not to give himself away until he was actually in a position to do some damage.

When the Warg shook Bilbo, the Dwarf was the one who screamed. Thorin tried to be relieved as that meant Bilbo was not dead or hurt enough to be unconscious. Oh, he still wanted to cleave the Orc’s smirking head from the rest of his body, but it was good to know Bilbo was alive. Alive, and not even close to giving up it would seem as the king produced a dagger from somewhere and stabbed it into the Warg’s eye.
With a howl the beast flung Bilbo aside and he landed heavily on the rocky ground - again unmov- ing.

Seeing as the Orc was distracted by the way his mount was thrashing Thorin rushed to Bilbo. One of the Wargs he passed sniffed at the air but then sneezed and lost interest; Thorin was suddenly and painfully glad Gandalf had come up with his idiot plan to set fire to the entire mountainside because apparently the smoke masked all other scents.

As silently as possible, he knelt down by Bilbo’s side and carefully turned the Dwarf’s head to face him.

“Bilbo, wake up. Please wake up.” Thorin whispered as he stroked his fingers down into Bilbo’s cheek and down into his beard. The ring’s strange light turned Bilbo’s hair silver instead of gold and Thorin hoped the ring was also the reason as to why Bilbo’s face seemed much too pale. The Dwarf was breathing though, and Thorin forced himself to let go and stand back up again. He’d be no good to any of them if he stayed where he was.

As if from a great distance away he could hear Azog - now standing on the ground with the White Warg dead at his feet - growl in the horrible tongue Orcs called their language. In response, one of the other Orcs jumped down from his mount and drew a nasty looking blade which was then offered to Azog.

Seeing where Orcrist had fallen after Bilbo had dropped it, Thorin darted to pick up the sword, sheathing his own in the process. Considering that it was Bilbo’s foe that he intended to kill, it seemed right to use Orcrist for the purpose and he hoped Bilbo would approve.

Thorin waited until Azog had put some distance between himself and the other Orcs before striking.

Unlike when he’d ended the life of the wretched creature in the cave; letting Orcrist sink into Azog’s chest filled Thorin’s with a horrible fierce joy. With the blade deep inside the Orc’s body, Thorin snarled and made sure to twist it. The monster might have survived when Bilbo had claimed its arm, but now it would die.

Thorin didn’t know if Orcs even had hearts; or if their hearts where in the usual place, but he was sure if he made a big enough hole it shouldn't matter.

With a grunt Thorin twisted the blade again before pulling it out. Azog looked down it his chest in what seemed like confusion. His back was still turned towards the other Orcs so there was a fair chance none of the others had even caught on to what was happening.

Taking advantage of this, Thorin let Orcrist slide into Azog’s belly once more and moved the blade sharply upward as he drew it back. As the blade came out, gleaming dully with dark blood, Azog collapsed to the ground.

Of course having Azog topple lifeless to the ground made it all too clear to the other Orcs and the Wargs that something was wrong. They did not yet understand what had happened, but they would come to check on their leader, would turn him over and see the wound, and that was not a good thing. Azog had fallen much too close to Bilbo and Thorin figured the Orcs would likely blame the nearest person around for the monster’s death, even if said person was unconscious.

While wearing the ring his sword obviously turned invisible as well, so there was a chance that if he picked Bilbo up they both would be invisible. However Bilbo was a little too big for Thorin to carry
for very long and while Thorin held him he would be unable to wield the sword very efficiently. All it would take was for the wind to turn and the Wargs and Orcs would catch their scent again and they would only be a little better off than if they’d remained in the tree.

Torn between going to Bilbo’s side to better protect him and getting as many of the Orcs as he could before they could come any closer, Thorin froze for a second - and that’s when Fíli, Kíli, and Dwalin came roaring into the clearing and drove the beasts back a couple of paces.

“Thorin!” Dwalin roared as he sank one of axes into a Warg’s skull. “Where the blazes are you, lad?”

“Is Uncle all right?” Fíli yelled as his blades flashed through the air too fast to really be seen.

Thorin couldn’t answer; there were too many Wargs, too many Orcs, and shouting would call their attention in his direction. Towards Bilbo. Soon the three Dwarfs were surrounded, and this time Thorin had to choose between staying with Bilbo – who still hadn’t moved – and trying to help his friends. In the end he had little choice; he knew Bilbo would rather die than seeing his nephews and Dwalin killed. If Thorin could help them he would, he must. Not just for Bilbo’s sake, but for the boys’ and Dwalin’s own sake.

Two more Wargs met their end and left their riders without mounts before the rest of the pack realised that there was again something suspicious going on. Needing to distract the Orcs from the three Dwarfs, Thorin ran a couple of paces back – making sure his steps took him away from Bilbo – and then pulled off the ring.

Shouting to get their attention Thorin waved Orcrist which was glowing with a bright blue light. “It was not a Dwarf that killed your leader, filth. Or have you forgotten him so easily?”

The Wargs growled and several of the Orcs started to steer their beasts his way, but there were still too many left surrounding Fíli, Kíli and Dwalin.

Thorin waited for the space of three heartbeats before letting the ring slip onto his finger once more.

One more Warg met its end with the help of Orcrist, quickly followed by its rider and Thorin smiled mirthlessly. If the creatures continued to be this dumb and allowed him to pick them off one by one it was possible they would make it out of this after all.

He’d only taken a couple of steps towards the opposite edge of the clearing when a high screech pierced the night and caused his smile to slip away.

What now? After Giants, Goblins, Orcs, Wargs, and whatever that wretched creature had been, what more beasts were left to be thrown at them?

Eagles, as turned out. Giant Eagles. When one of the huge birds picked up an Orc in its massive claws and dropped it of the edge of the cliff Thorin’s mind just barely registered it. He had heard the flutter of wings coming from the side as well and he when turned his head it was to see one of the Eagles curl its claws around the still unconscious Bilbo.

“NO!” Thorin screamed and took a step forward, thinking that the bird meant to throw Bilbo off the side of the cliff like the other had done with the Orc. “You will not touch him!”

But he was too far away. With a cry the Eagle beat its huge wings and took off, Bilbo hanging limply in its grasp.
“Nooo!” Thorin roared. More Eagles kept swooping down and growling Thorin moved towards the closest one.

“Thorin!” Dwalin shouted again, but Thorin paid him no mind. A Warg got in his way and he cut it down without a second thought. This called Dwalin’s attention and the large Dwarf hurriedly moved towards the fallen Warg. “The Eagles are not our enemies!” Dwalin called and looked around. “Damn it boy, where are you.”

“It took Bilbo,” Thorin snarled and did not pause. One of them took Bilbo so they would all die.

“It did not drop him,” Fili shouted from across the clearing and Thorin stopped. “And I saw one of the birds save Dori and Ori from falling to their deaths.”

Suddenly arms closed around Thorin’s waist and he kicked and twisted - and almost dropped Orcrist - until he realised that it was Dwalin.

“Gotcha,” the Dwarf grumbled just as an Eagle swept them away.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so now we're down one Gollum and one Azog. Um, woops?
The Eagle that had taken Dwalin and him had dropped them after all, but only for the purpose of settling them on the back of another Eagle. As they’d fallen through the air Dwalin’s grip around his middle had tightened until Thorin couldn’t breathe - or perhaps the air had been rushing by too fast. And even when they’d settled on the other Eagle (miraculously without Thorin stabbing them or the Eagle with Orcrist) Dwalin had refused to completely release his grip on Thorin until the Hobbit had removed the ring.

“I’m not letting you go until I can see you,” he’d said with a forced calm when Thorin had demanded to be released. “Because if you fall they won’t be able to see you either.” This actually surprised Thorin, who had almost forgotten that he was wearing the ring. In his mind there was only the question of Bilbo; where he was, how he was, and how long it would be before Thorin could get to him.

“You have to let go of my arm first,” Thorin said and shook it impatiently. Huffing, Dwalin simply moved his grip to Thorin’s shoulder.

“There,” Thorin said as he pulled off the ring and curled his first around it. “Now let go of me.”

“He’ll be fine, lad,” Dwalin said quietly and squeezed Thorin’s shoulder before dropping his arm. “I promise. He’s too stubborn not to be.”

“Where is he?” Thorin asked instead of commenting on the idiocy of that statement. “Your eyes are better than mine in the dark, can you see him?”

“See the one flying over there to the left and above?” Dwalin said and pointed. “That’s the one.”

Thorin couldn’t see it. It was too dark.

Bowing his head he let out a slow breath and when Dwalin’s hand came back up to cup his shoulder he did not complain.

They flew throughout the seemingly endless night. The ring clutched in his right hand, Thorin traced the runes running along the side of Orcrist with his left. The sword, no longer glowing, lay across his lap and he took a grim comfort in seeing the stains of dark blood upon it.

Finally, dawn came but the approximate hour between it and when they were able to get their feet back on the ground was even more torturous for Thorin. He could now see Bilbo, head and hand hanging limply down, but he couldn’t go to him.

Unbidden, a sob rose in Thorin’s throat and he pushed it down just as he finally pushed the ring into his pocket. What good was it if he had not been able to protect Bilbo with it?

Dwalin was still a warm, comforting presence at his back. Without him, Thorin didn’t know what he would have done. Probably thrown himself off the Eagle again and again until they got tired of catching him or agreed to take him to Bilbo. But every time the notion came upon the Hobbit, Dwalin had seemed to know and either clasped his shoulder again, or promised that Bilbo would be
all right, that they were all going to be just fine. And as foolish as the words had sounded, they had helped.

It was obvious that Dwalin knew of Thorin’s feelings for his friend and king, but he did not say a word about the inappropriateness of it all, just repeated that Bilbo’s head was much too thick to let a bit of rock dent it.

“Thank you,” Thorin said hoarsely and reached back to touch Dwalin’s arm. His hand was folded into a larger, rougher one.

“No, thank you,” Dwalin rumbled and squeezed his hand. “If you hadn’t - No one is good enough with a sword to fight off that many Orcs and Wargs on their own. Worst moment of my life being stuck in that damned tree and not able to get to him. Without you, he’d’ve been dead before me and lads could have even gotten close to him.”

“If I hadn’t distracted him -” Thorin began but Dwalin did not let him finish.

“I saw it; the Orc would not have made it a fair fight even so. If Bilbo had even looked like he was winning, the worthless piece of slag would have had him surrounded in moments. Bilbo couldn’t win that fight. Not alone.” Dwalin was silent for a while before speaking again. “I don’t know how you did it exactly, what magic it was, but it saved him and it killed Azog, so I thank you. Unless you want to tell me, that is all I need to know.”

Stunned, Thorin let Dwalin squeeze his hand once more and before pulling it back.

“Seems like we’ll be landing soon,” Dwalin rumbled and a thick finger was thrust in front of Thorin’s face. “Looks they’ll drop us on that thing.”

The thing was a large rock formation in the middle of a fairly large river, and it did appear as if they were heading for it.

When Thorin and Dwalin were able to get down from their Eagle, Gandalf was already kneeling beside Bilbo who lay outstretched on the ground. And Thorin could have wept because Bilbo was actually stirring.

“Thorin?” Bilbo gasped as he sat up and Thorin pressed Orcrist into Dwalin’s hands and ran the last few metres separating him from Bilbo.

“As you can see, Thorin is just fine,” Gandalf comforted as Thorin let himself fall to his knees beside Bilbo. Thorin could not help it; he snorted, because none of them were just fine, were they?

But what came out was more like a sob and Thorin bent his head and buried it in Bilbo’s hair, arms creeping up to wrap around the Dwarf. His hair smelt like smoke and ash, and Thorin was afraid he was hurting Bilbo, but he couldn’t make himself let go.

“For such a good king you make the most idiotic decisions,” Thorin rasped out when he could breathe again. “What were you doing? You nearly got yourself killed.”

The ‘because of me’ was left unsaid.

When Bilbo’s shoulders started to shake Thorin first thought the Dwarf was crying; surprised and concerned he forced his himself to release Bilbo so that he could pull back enough to see his face.
He was laughing.

Hurt, Thorin made to get up, but Bilbo quickly grasped his arms.

“No, no,” he hiccupped. “I’m sorry, I’m - it’s just, oh Mahal, help me. How many times have you almost died since you left the Shire – and left because I asked you to join us? I feel like I should apologise for that. I am so sorry I asked but so very, very glad you said yes.”

Thorin, who had attempted to pull away again when Bilbo expressed regret at asking him to join the quest allowed himself to be pulled into a second embrace, stunned into pliancy by Bilbo’s words.

They broke apart only when Bilbo groaned and clutched at his left side.

“Sorry, but I have to get up properly, my ribs are not very happy with me.”

Fíli and Dwalin were suddenly on either side of Bilbo and helped him stand even as Kíli did the same for Thorin.

“The Defiler is dead,” Dwalin grunted as he returned Orcrist to Bilbo. When Bilbo’s eyes widened he lifted his shoulder in Thorin’s direction. “Don’t look at me.”

“It seems our burglar has a few tricks up his sleeves,” Glóin said and let out a rumbling laugh.

“You vanished,” Bilbo said, turning towards Thorin again. “How did you do it?”

“There is a ring,” Thorin began haltingly. “I have not kept it from you; I have not had it since the beginning. I found it inside the Goblins’ caves. It seems to have the ability to make the wearer invisible.”

“There are many magic rings,” Gandalf said slowly. “But none of them are to be used frivolously, and all can be dangerous.”

Dwalin scoffed. “I’d say the lad has used it in the best possible way so far.” There were murmurs of agreement coming from the other Dwarfs and Gandalf held up his hands in a bid for peace.

“It’s something worth remembering,” the Wizard said.

Just then, one of the Eagles cried out and all gazes were drawn towards the large birds as they departed. The screech still unnerved Thorin, but he was grateful to them for the rescue and a little saddened that he had not thanked them.

“Look,” Bilbo breathed and walked towards the edge of the cliff. Ignoring his instinct to grab the Dwarf and push him a little further away from the drop Thorin curled his hands into fists and lifted his gaze to seek what Bilbo had already found. When he saw it his feet moved of their own accord and he did not stop until he too stood just at the edge.

“Is that -?”


“Our home,” Bilbo said almost too softly to be heard.
Home, Thorin wished silently.

Óin would not move on until he’d made sure no one was hurt more than they let on and since no one had really gotten much sleep in the last two days it was decided that they would stay a while on the ait, or the Carrock as Gandalf called it. After everyone was sorted out and Bilbo was proclaimed to be the one in the worst shape with a couple of cracked ribs, Gandalf offered to stand guard.

“I don’t think we need one, but I’m sure you’ll sleep better knowing that someone is watching.”

Surprisingly, or perhaps not, sleep would not come for Thorin.

He knew Dwalin was still awake as well; the Dwarf had gone a little further down on the steps leading down to the river and was busy sharpening one of his axes when Thorin found him.

“Damned Warg skulls,” Dwalin muttered as he ran the whetstone along the blade. “I can’t sleep knowing the edge is dull. Did the noise keep you up?”

“I wasn’t asleep.” Thorin took a seat next to Dwalin on the stone step.

Just as in the cave before the Goblins’ trap was sprung it thoughts of Bilbo kept him up, but now it was images of the Dwarf’s lifeless body that crowded in every time Thorin closed his eyes.

Wanting to shift the subject from sleep, Thorin asked something that had been in the back of his mind ever since Dwalin had done it.

“How did you know where I was when you seized me before, on the cliff?”

“Your shadow,” Dwalin said and dragged his thumb along the blade. Not happy with what he found, he went back to sharpening. “You weren’t there but your shadow still was. Or at least something of it. When you got close to the fire it was just like a flash, but dark instead of bright. It’ll be something for you to remember the next time you use the thing.”

“You think I need to use it again?”

“I hope not,” Dwalin grunted. “Don’t trust magic and I never will, but for a burglar going up against a dragon, being unseen is quite an advantage.”

The second test of the edge resulted in a bloody thumb and a grin, and Dwalin rose to his feet.

“Now laddie, off to bed with you,” he said and Thorin snorted.

“The last time you said those words a Wizard with bird droppings in his hair showed up, and if we end up running from Orcs two times in one day I’m blaming you for jinxing us.”

Dwalin looked confused for a second before catching on.

“Thought it sounded familiar,” he chuckled and slapped Thorin’s shoulder. “My apologies then. But I hope to see you topside soon enough for all of that.”

After Dwalin had left Thorin remained seated and stared out at the landscape. It was quite beautiful,
but he was seated on the wrong side of the ait to see Erebor. Thorin was just getting up when he heard the sound of steps coming from up the path.

“Oh, were you just leaving?” Bilbo asked as he came into view.

“I was just going a little further down,” Thorin said. “To sit in the sun.” And that was true enough.

Erebor was not directly East from wherever this place was, but going around the bend would allow the rising sun to be visible as much as it would Erebor to be.

“Mind if I join you?” Bilbo asked and Thorin shook his head. Together they made their way down several more large steps until the shadows gave way for the rising sun and Erebor came into view.

Bilbo winced a little as he sat down but waved off Thorin’s attempt to help him.

“Nothing to do about it,” he said. “I’ve had cracked ribs before and the only thing to do is grin and bear it until they heal.” Nodding towards Erebor Bilbo continued, “Of course, part of me wants to say that the worst has to be behind us now, so my ribs will have plenty of time to stop complaining, but a voice that sounds suspiciously like my father’s is telling me that I can’t afford that kind of optimism.”

Despite the graveness of the subject, Thorin smiled a little at Bilbo’s lofty tone. As Dwalin had reminded him, at the end of all of this there was a Dragon that awaited them. With that in mind it was hard to say that the worst had to be behind them. But he liked that Bilbo did not let it weigh on him.

“All kidding aside, I do feel more hopeful than I’ve done in a long time,” Bilbo said and turned to face Thorin. “And for that I thank you. Not only for killing Azog, though for that particular act I owe you a great debt.”

Thorin shook his head. “You owe me nothing.”

“But I do.” Bilbo’s eyes were very earnest. “I said before that you are welcome to stay as my guest in Erebor. I would like to amend that invitation a little.”

Suddenly tense, Thorin looked away from Bilbo’s face.

“Not because you are owed it,” the Dwarf continued. “But because I hope - What I mean is that you will always have a home in Erebor. And if you chose to leave you will always be welcome to return, to stay how long, or as little, as you want.”

Thorin opened his mouth to reply, but there were no words and instead he gave into temptation and shuffled close enough to Bilbo to embrace the Dwarf for the second time that day, being careful not to put any strain on Bilbo’s ribs.

This was more than he hoped for, truly. Being allowed to stay was one thing, this… This was something else entirely.

When they parted Thorin did not take his hands off Bilbo right away. He wanted, he wanted. But to keep this moment as long as possible that would be enough.

Bilbo had a smile on his face and his eyes had turned the softest shade of blue that Thorin had ever seen. They were both alive, both safe, and he had just been offered a home.
Thorin felt a wild laugh bubbling up inside of himself and when he gave in it only made Bilbo smile more widely, all white teeth and stretched pink lips. What happen next might not have happened if Thorin hadn’t been awake for the last two days – not counting when he’d been knocked unconscious – but before Thorin really knew what he was doing he’d leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Bilbo’s grinning mouth.

For a moment it was perfect. But a moment was all it took for Thorin to notice that Bilbo was not responding, that the muscles beneath his hands had gone tense.

"I'm sorry," Thorin said and drew back. He was painfully aware that the excuse was lacking, but he did not think that explaining how long he had been dreaming about kissing Bilbo would be much better. And he would not insult them both by blaming it on a lapse in judgement. He knew he should not have kissed Bilbo, but there was no denying that he’d wished to do it for a long time.

"There’s no need for that," Bilbo said, frowning and Thorin looked away in shame.

"I'm sorry," he said again, getting to his feet. He would have dashed back up the stairs if Bilbo’s hand had not wrapped around his arm with a steel-like grip.

"No," Bilbo said and pulled him down again. "I mean - Did you kiss me because you wanted to? Because you don’t need to. Kiss me, that is."

Thorin stared a little blankly at Bilbo who sighed and pulled at one of his braids. "Sorry, I’m making a mess of this. But you don’t have to kiss me just because I offered you to stay in Erebor. It’s not even like you can move in until we’re rid of the Dragon." Bilbo’s grin was wry.

"If Dwalin had offered me a - to stay, I would not have kissed him," Thorin said, something like hope beginning to stir inside of him. “I did it because it was what I wanted and -"" 

Damn it all, if he could slay Orcs he could be brave enough to complete one miserable sentence.

“IT’s what I wanted to do, for a long time.”

"Really?"

To Thorin it felt as if Bilbo’s eyes were looking into his very core and he could just nod mutely. “So if I were to kiss you now, it would be… wanted?” Bilbo’s hands came up to cup Thorin’s face.

There was nothing Thorin could say to that that would express just how very wanted it would be, so instead he just leaned forward again and tried to let his mouth convey what his voice could not. One of Bilbo’s hands curled into his hair and held him in place as the kiss turned deep enough that Thorin felt he was drowning in it. He had been wrong before, this was perfection. Even the strange tickle of Bilbo’s beard was something he hadn’t even known he was missing.

Thorin’s arms had wrapped themselves around Bilbo without really asking for permission and Bilbo suddenly flinched and pulled back. Thorin quickly snatched back his hands, horrified. How could he have forgotten about Bilbo’s ribs?

"Not your fault," Bilbo said and quieted Thorin’s apologies with another kiss. Keeping his hands curled at his sides Thorin returned the kiss, because how could he have forgotten about Bilbo’s ribs?

“Not your fault,” Bilbo said and quieted Thorin’s apologies with another kiss. Keeping his hands curled at his sides Thorin returned the kiss, because how could he not? “Very much not your fault,” Bilbo continued when they parted. “But maybe it’s for the best. We should stop. It’s - there’s a formal way to do this and I'm mucking it all up.”
"There's a formal way to kiss someone?" Thorin asked and tried to keep his eyes from straying to Bilbo’s lips, now slightly reddened.


Sitting back slightly Bilbo reached into the neckline of his tunic and lifted out a thin silver chain. No, not silver Thorin realised; mithril. He’d never seen the metal before, but that was what it had to be. Silver did not shine like that.

“All Dwarfs are greedy,” Bilbo said and unhooked the chain from around his throat. “Some of us care little about gold and gems, but when we decide something is ours we will not let it go lightly.”

Holding the chain in his right hand Bilbo caught Thorin’s hand with his left and let the necklace coil in the middle of his palm. Thorin then allowed his fingers to be curled around it.

The metal almost felt hot from having rested against the skin of Bilbo’s neck.

“In a week's time, if you've put this on, then you've accepted my offer to court you,” Bilbo said and squeezed his fingers around Thorin’s fist before letting it go. “But I want you to know that if you already know that you don’t want that - or if you change your mind later, then I won’t let greed cloud my mind and -”

“Put it on me,” Thorin interrupted, his voice hoarse. When Bilbo hesitated Thorin opened his hand to expose the glittering metal and held it out. “Please.”

“If Dwalin yells at me, I’m blaming you,” Bilbo said and smiled a little shakily, but the hand that plucked the chain from Thorin’s palm was steady enough. “He’s already very protective of you and this is not really proper. You should have a week to think about it. To be sure.”

“I’ve thought about nothing but you for long enough,” Thorin breathed as he lowered his head to give Bilbo access to the back of his neck. Despite the warmth of Bilbo’s fingers the Hobbit shivered as they grazed his skin. “I’m sure,” he said as the lock clicked quietly.

“I love you,” Bilbo said quietly and Thorin’s head snapped up. “I just want you to know that.” Bilbo almost looked sad and Thorin lifted his hand to gently brush his thumb along the Dwarf’s cheek.

“I could say those words a thousand times,” Thorin said slowly. “And it would not even come close to how I felt when I thought I had lost you. I love you, Bilbo Baggins.”

Bilbo took his hand and Thorin’s fingers slotted neatly between the Dwarf’s. As Thorin had first noticed all those months ago - when Bilbo had sat down beside him on the bench in Hobbiton - their hands were remarkably similar. Scarred and calloused, and almost the same size.

Thorin lifted Bilbo’s hand to press a kiss to bruised knuckles and the smile he got in return melted something inside of him that he had not even noticed was frozen; a chill that had settled inside his bones sometime in the last few days but which had now been replaced by a radiant glow.

“There are things I need you to know about me,” Thorin said quietly, lips a hair’s breadth away from Bilbo’s hand. “About me, and about my family.”

“I promise I will always listen,” Bilbo said and Thorin turned his head into the hand that carded through his hair. “But you only need to tell me what you want me to know, not what you think I
ought to hear.”

Thorin smiled.

“I love you, then,” he said. “Because I want you to know that, but I will tell you the rest of it as well. When I have found the words. I promise you.”

“For now maybe we should get some sleep,” Bilbo suggested. “Gandalf told me there is a place for us to stay the night, but it is several hours away. We should rest before we have to leave.”

“My bedroll appears to have been misplaced,” Thorin teased as he helped Bilbo rise so the Dwarf would not strain his ribs.

“Mine as well!” Bilbo said in mock-surprise. “But luckily my coat is thick and large enough to share. Just for sleep, mind you. Dwalin will scold me enough as it is, I’m sure.”

Thorin snorted. “Tell him I kissed you first if it will help. But despite what he thinks I’m old enough to know what I’m doing.”

“I wish you the best of luck convincing him of that,” Bilbo said and wound their fingers together again. “I’m older than he is and his king but from time to time I swear he is about to make me go sit in a corner.”

Laughing Thorin squeezed Bilbo’s hand and followed his love back up the Carrock.

Chapter End Notes

It's not really my headcanon, but I think using necklaces instead of rings just makes sense for Dwarfs.

Rings, or anything worn close to the hands (like bracelets) could be getting in the way when fighting/smithing/whatevs.

A necklace can be tucked away, one size fits all, it's easy to carry it on you while you wait for the one you want to give it to, making a beautiful necklace isn't exactly easy (proof that you're an awesome Dwarf), it's possible to add something like a locket (looks at Glóin) or a pendant to it to symbolize... different things.

Also, it's possible to lose a finger or a hand fighting, but you're not really going to lose your neck are you? (or, if you do, you won't care much about your necklace)

Piercings is also a possibility but it's just not as practical for proposing. Though I can totally see that as part of a wedding ceremony.
Interlude Four - Gandalf

Chapter Notes

For those of you reading my other WIP, you already one that life kidnapped me last week. For those of you who don’t, well, life kidnapped me last week. But you never need to worry that I'll abandon this story (or any other).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first time Gandalf met Thorin Oakenshield was back when the Hobbit had still only been known as Thorin Durin, or, more often than not ‘Thorin Durin Get Down From There, No Don’t Touch That!’

It had been late spring and Gandalf had been in Michel Delving to visit his old friend Gerontius Took who was celebrating his 110th birthday. It had been a grand party and after setting of his fireworks Gandalf had settled down beneath a large Elm tree to have a smoke. He had been given a pouch of Longbottom Leaf as his present and was quite determined to enjoy it in peace.

It seemed as if every Hobbit in the town was intent on celebrating their Thain to the fullest of their abilities and from his vantage point beneath the tree Gandalf had a clear view of the busy marketplace and the town square which were milling with merry making people. Several large pavilions had been raised for the occasion and as night had fallen lanterns had been lit. It was quite a beautiful sight; the lanterns shining like fireflies beneath and between the brightly coloured fabric roofs of the pavilions. Laughter and the soft notes from a lute snaked their way up to the Wizard every so often but otherwise he was left alone as he stuffed his pipe and lit it with a touch of a finger.

For much of the festivities he had been entertaining Hobbitlings with stories about adventures, some true, some made-up; and while he had enjoyed himself, the peace and quiet of being alone was also quite welcome. It was entirely possible that Gandalf had used a smidge of magic to suggest to any passers-by that the spot beneath the Elm was not taken but even so they might as well go on to seek a better tree just a little further up the path.

Letting out a contented sigh Gandalf removed his hat and leaned back against the thick trunk of the tree, curling his fingers around the bowl of his pipe.

“The Wizard is probably talking with the Old Took somewhere, darling. Maybe you’ll see him again tomorrow,” the blonde said and plucked the little one from the ground to settle him on her hip. “His fireworks were very nice, weren’t they?”

“No, no, yes, Wizadd!” the child persisted and pointed to where Gandalf was sitting beneath the tree.
Said Wizard smiled and blew a smoke ring in the form of a swallow which flew to the boy and playfully picked him on his nose, making the child laugh and bury his face into his mother’s chest. As the mother walked directly by the tree bright blue eyes peeked back up again and a chubby little hand waved enthusiastically at Gandalf. The mother did not notice the Wizard at all and kept walking, telling the child that in the morning they would go to the market again and visit Papa and Grandpa again while they worked.

Lifting a hand Gandalf waved back and chuckled at the disappointed wail the child let out when his mother did not stop. Young children were always less fooled by illusions and tricks as they saw what they saw and didn’t care one bit for suggestions that they might have been mistaken.

“Are you very tired, Thorin-love?” the blonde said and carded her free hand through the boy’s messy curls. “It was a big day wasn’t it?”

“Wizadd,” the child complained sulkily and patted at his mother’s chin to get her to turn around, but the little hand was just caught and kissed before she changed her grip on the boy and hoisted him up into the air, making him laugh brightly.

“Not that tired, eh?” his mother laughed back and lifted him above her head again, prompting another tinkling laugh. “I’m no Wizard, but what about a story before sleepy time tonight?”

“Story!” the boy cheered and an amused Gandalf found himself suddenly forgotten.

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The following day Gandalf decided to take a stroll through the market. No reason in particular, but something told him that he should make an appearance there before leaving Michel Delving again.

Gerontius had asked him to stay a while, a week, a month, but as he’d had told his old friend, it wasn’t possible to miss someone unless they left. And besides, Gandalf had already left plenty of fireworks to be used next month during the midsummer celebrations. Gerontius would be the exception, but Gandalf rather thought that more people would have missed those than their creator.

It was a lovely day with a blue sky dotted pleasantly with fluffy white clouds. A hint of the coming summer was in the air which smelled sweetly of lilacs and grass.

It wasn’t particularly early but the market was mostly empty, lacking in both shoppers and merchants. Many of yesterday’s partygoers were likely still catching up on the sleep they didn’t get last night.

After meandering down the street without really feeling the need to take a closer look at any of the small shops, Gandalf found himself standing outside a round wooden door with a discreet sign proclaiming it to be ‘Durin and Son’. As anyone who had spent time around Hobbits, Gandalf had of course heard of the Durins before. They were amongst the oldest Hobbit clans - though clan might be a bad word to use as they seemed to have the family tradition of only having one or two children, unlike most Hobbits. So, unlike the Tooks or the Proudfoots they could all fit quite comfortably beneath the roof of one Hobbit-hole, and have a business sign that read ‘son’ and not ‘sons’.

Gandalf did not think that he’d met anyone in the current generation of Durins, but perhaps he would do so today. It seemed as fine an idea as any other.

The Durins were well-respected merchants - even if some Hobbits did frown upon their habit of occasionally leaving the Shire on trips to do business with the Men in Bree and the Dwarfs in the Blue Mountains - and the pouch of Longbottom Leaf that he’d been gifted could perhaps use a little
bit of company…

Ducking his head, Gandalf opened the door and entered the store.

The Hobbit behind the counter was a little past his prime. There was ample grey in his dark curly hair and pure white in his impressive sideburns which trailed far enough down his face to almost be counted as a beard. But his shoulders were still wide and strong and his back unbent by age. Definitely some Stoor blood in him, Gandalf decided. If the sideburns was not enough of a clue, the Hobbit’s height filled in the rest.

Clear blue eyes met Gandalf’s as the Wizard walked further into the room, just barely avoiding hitting his head on a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. Not counting the distance from floor to ceiling, the shop was of a decent size with a large room filled with all sorts of wares. Everything from silks, jewellery and books to toys and small jars of jam. Beyond the room Gandalf had entered there was at least one more chamber as he could see the open doorway just to the left of the counter, and from it came the noise of an unseen person moving things around.

“May I help you, Master Wizard?” the Hobbit asked, and Gandalf tried to remember what said Hobbit might be called. He knew he had heard it mentioned in passing. It was something beginning with a T, of that he was sure.

“Please, I am just Gandalf, and Gandalf, that is me,” Gandalf said and inclined his head.

“Welcome then, Gandalf,” the Hobbit said and nodded. “I am Thrór. How may I be of service to you?”

“Thrór,” Gandalf repeated and smiled. “I believe I knew your grandfather; Thráin.”

“That would be my great, great-grandfather,” Thrór said and one corner of his mouth quirked up.

“Ah,” Gandalf mumbled. “Has it really been that long…”

“I’m afraid so,” Thrór and pulled at a greying curl. “The years do seem to pass, but it is more noticeable to some than others it would seem.”

Gandalf hummed and stroked his beard.

“So it would seem,” he agreed. “The years can be difficult like that.”

“My father often spoke fondly of your fireworks, Gandalf,” Thrór said and steeped his fingers together over the counter. “And I have pleasant memories as well, some as recent as last night. Pardon a forward question, but would you perhaps be willing to sell or trade me some?”

“At the moment I fear I’m all out,” Gandalf said and leaned on his staff as the ceiling was just a little too low for him to be standing completely upright. “Those I brought with me are either last night’s memory or they will remain in the care of your Thain until the festivities of midsummer.”

“Pity,” Thrór murmured. “The next time you grace us with your presence my offer will still stand. But let’s now discuss what brought you to my door today. Were you looking for something in particular?”

“I would not mind knowing what you could offer of pipe-weed,” Gandalf said. “You do carry some I hope?”

“Of course we do,” Thrór huffed. He turned towards the doorway. “Thráin!”
“Yes, father?” a voice called back.

“A family name,” Gandalf noted, nodding. Thrór nodded back, smiling slightly.

“I would say you look to be the type to go for Longbottom Leaf,” Thrór said and turned to give instructions to his son to bring out a pouch of the pipe-weed.

“And you would be right,” Gandalf agreed. “Though I wonder how you would describe that type?”

“Much kinder than those who go for Stonecrop.” Thrór regarded Gandalf thoughtfully. “We do have some Wizard’s Fire Pipe-weed somewhere around here. It would seem like the obvious match, though I think you are more fond of Longbottom.”

“It is excellent for smoke rings,” Gandalf said as a second Hobbit entered the room.

The newcomer was young, almost young enough to be taken for the merchant’s grandson. He could not have been many years past his maturity. Like his father he had a head full of dark curls and broad shoulders. There was a clear family resemblance in the way they held themselves, and in the bright blue eyes that curiously examined Gandalf.

“Bring it here,” Thrór commanded and Thráin walked up to the counter, nodding at Gandalf as he handed his father the pouch.

“Master Wizard,” he greeted and nodded politely at Gandalf.

“Gandalf,” the Wizard corrected and watched as Thrór placed the pouch on the scales he had on the counter.

“I’m partial to Dragon’s Breath, myself,” Thrór said as he adjusted the weights. “Not all would agree with me, but I-“

The entrance door opened but before Gandalf could turn it became quite obvious just who had entered.

“Papa, papa, papa- Wizzadd!”

It was the little boy from the night before. When Gandalf did turn around it was to find the little Hobbit squirming in the arms of his mother, eager to get down. After young Thorin (perhaps the name should have been a clue, Gandalf thought to himself. All those T’s, and Thorin was quite an unusual name, just like Thrór and Thráin) had been lowered to the floor he clapped his hands in glee and started trotting towards Gandalf.

The Wizard noted, amused, that the boy’s pace slowed as he got closer. It would seem that the idea of investigating a Wizard held more appeal before one realised that one only reached as high as the Wizard’s knee.

Stopping a few feet away Thorin turned back to his mother.

“Mama?” He glanced back at Gandalf and slowly tilted his head back to try and look at Gandalf’s face. He would likely have tipped over had not his mother appeared behind him to place a steadying hand at his back.

“Good morning,” she offered to Gandalf and did a passable attempt at a courtesy – not the easiest of things to do when one was half-crouched on the floor.
“Would you say that it is a good morning?” Gandalf asked. “Or is it perhaps just a morning to be good on?”

“If it is the latter—” Thrór said from behind them. “I do hope someone has informed my grandson. I’m still finding small sticky handprints every so often. Do make sure Thorin keeps away from the honey this time.”

“Ganpa!” the boy exclaimed and scampered over to cling to the older Hobbit’s leg. “Ganpa, Wizadd!”

“Yes, I’ve noticed,” Thrór said dryly as he carefully carded a hand through his grandson’s unruly curls. “But thank you for telling me.”

The blonde girl walked over to what Gandalf assumed to be her husband and greeted him with a kiss on the cheek, giggling when he kissed her firmly on the mouth before lifting her up on the counter.

“Mama, Papa, Wizadd!” the boy persisted as he toddled over, having already come to the conclusion that his grandfather was not properly awed by Gandalf’s presence.

“Yes, darling,” his mother said as Thráin lifted his son up to sit on the counter as well. “He is a Wizard.”

Being a little higher up seemed to bolster the little one’s spirit and Thorin crawled over to Gandalf’s part of the counter before standing up. The boy observed the Wizard quite calmly and with seriousness Gandalf had not often seen in so young children.

“Hello, young Thorin,” Gandalf offered and nodded at the boy. The Hobbit tilted his head to the left, then to the right.

“Wizadd,” he stated, and with that it seemed the matter was settled. Perhaps it was the lack of any smoke rings, or the absence of a good story, but after determining that Gandalf was indeed a Wizard he seemed to lose interest and his attention was soon caught by a shiny brooch lying on the counter and he quickly went to snatch it up. As Gandalf concluded his business with Thrór the boy’s parents busied themselves with trying to save the store from Thorin, as well as saving Thorin from the store (on his way to claim the brooch he almost took a tumble off the counter).

“Keep my proposal about the fireworks in mind,” Thrór reminded as he gave Gandalf his change. “I can draw a contract for you if you are interested.”

“Thank you, but I must be on my way,” Gandalf said and tucked the coins and the pouch of pipe-weed away in his robes. “Perhaps another time. Perhaps not. I feel that fireworks that are given away seem to sparkle a little brighter.”

“Nothing in life is ever free,” Thrór said and crossed his arms over his chest.

“But some things are beyond a price,” Gandalf answered and inclined his head. “Good day.”

“Is it a day to be good on?” the blonde teased from where she was trying to keep her son from falling head first into a bag of seeds. Gandalf smiled at the pair, both because of the happy glitter in the girl’s eyes and the sullen look on her son’s face as he was not allowed to throw seeds around the shop.

“I do believe it is,” the Wizard said and left.
Through the years Gandalf spent many more days in Michel Delving, perhaps not as many as he would have wished, but wasn’t that always the case? When one looked back, the time somehow always slipped by unnoticed. Even so, most of them were definitely good days, even if there were exceptions.

The second, third and many of the other times Gandalf met Thorin went by without much excitement. Thrór became more and more persistent about the fireworks and as a result Gandalf’s visits to the shop became less frequent. But maybe once a year he would stop by to stock up on pipe-weed, because Thrór did carry an excellent Longbottom Leaf.

Sometimes a curly haired boy would be found playing in a corner of the store, sometimes the corner would be empty. It seemed that Thorin’s fascination with Wizards had not survived that first meeting, and if Gandalf had been a lesser man he might have taken offence. As it was, he was mostly intrigued. There was something about that young Hobbit that was a little… different.

Ten or so years after that first meeting Gandalf heard that the lovely Feris - that had been the name of Thráin’s wife and Thorin’s mother - had unexpectedly passed away.

Michel Delving might not have been a small town, but in some aspects it was certainly a small town. It required absolutely no effort to hear the whispers about how she had died in child birth, and that the young babe had not survived either.

After that there was never any more glimpses of the happy, lively child Gandalf had first met, and had the Wizard not known that such a boy had once existed he would never had believed that the serious boy Thorin grew up to be would have once been the one to giggle madly as he let a carved horse gallop across the wooden floor.

Not long after, Thráin replaced his father in the store. The older Hobbit was still in good health, but it seemed he was content to let his son handle the busier sides of running a business.

Like his son, Thráin had also changed with the death of Feris. He had never been a Hobbit of many words, but he’d become one of even fewer still. When his hands were idle he constantly twisted the ring he carried on the middle finger of his left hand, a nervous habit that Gandalf had never before noticed. But he seemed to be taking good care of his son who grew leaps and bounds between the times that Gandalf was elsewhere.

Elsewhere was for the most part in the East.

A shadow had fallen upon Greenwood many years before, and it had been no ordinary darkness. With the presence of Sauron in the forest, it was little wonder that its current name Mirkwood seemed very apt indeed.

Saruman thought that there was little cause to worry, that Sauron was too diminished to pose a threat, but as much as much as Gandalf wished for that to be the case he knew in his heart that it was not the truth. The question was just how long Sauron would wait before striking.

For a few years the wanderlust settled in Gandalf’s bones and he again wandered the lands of Middle-Earth without staying more than a night in the same place, if even that. His travels took him south from Mirkwood, down to Gondor and then back up north to Lothlórien. Unlike Mirkwood, the Golden Wood was filled with life and light. It seemed that this was the one place that Sauron’s shadow could not touch. And it seemed equally unaffected by the evil that lurked in nearby Moria.

Gandalf did not seek the Elves and kept mostly to the outskirts of the forest, but he had little doubt that they were aware of his presence. Lothlórien had not sought visitors for half an Age, and while
Gandalf thought that *Mithrandir* might be welcome, he was content to just wander the forest and keep the company of his own mind.

Later, when he had returned to the Shire once more it was to find that Gerontius had finally fallen victim to the effects of aging and had passed away at the impressive - but still too young - age of 130.

As the saying went, bad news seldom travelled alone and a cynical part of Gandalf that he did not often allow himself to acknowledge claimed to not be at all surprised when he was told that the very same month the Old Took had passed, the Durins’ house had burnt down with Thrór still in it.

Later still, when more than a decade had passed, the day came when Gandalf’s path crossed with the shell of what once had been Thráin Durin. The Wizard would not even have recognized the Hobbit had it not been for two things; the ring he was still wearing on his finger, and the bright blue eyes that Thráin had shared with his father, and still shared with his son.

He had heard of Thráin going missing of course, of Thorin searching for him and then taking over the business when no traces of his father could be found. But he could not understand what events could have led to the pitiful form Gandalf found drifting aimlessly in the Old Forest. Thráin’s hair was almost completely white and his collarbones and ribs were clearly visible through the rags that had once been a shirt. He would not speak; except in disjointed nonsensical sentences, and did not seem to understand when Gandalf spoke to him. He did not seem hostile, though, and did not object when Gandalf carried him out of the forest - just as Thorin did not object when Gandalf arrived in Michel Delving late in the evening three days later with Thráin held in his arms.

Thorin was no longer a boy but it was quite possible that Gandalf had never seen him look younger than he did when he realised just who it was that Gandalf had brought. It was a look of so much fear and grief and anger that it stayed with Gandalf for a long, long time after he had left.

He did not want to believe that the return of Thráin would be what finally killed that happy young boy inside of Thorin, but the possibility could not be denied.

Again time passed, as time was always wont to do whether you wished it or not. On Gandalf’s next return to Michel Delving there were no longer any Durins living in the town. But as it would later be revealed, there was an Oakenshield who had just started the construction of a smial in Hobbiton.

Gandalf was no fool, and knew that Thorin would likely not welcome his presence in the new life he tried to build for himself, but even so he felt responsible for the young Hobbit. Perhaps it would have been kinder to never return Thráin to him, perhaps not. Perhaps he would have felt less responsible if it had not been for how Thorin’s new life did not actually seem to include *living*.

The Hobbit was alive, for sure, but he did not live so much as merely existed. Of the giggling boy there was nothing to be found, but even so Gandalf knew that somewhere beneath the surface lay the possibility for greater things. Durin or Oakenshield, *Thorin* had a purpose. But it was not until a certain map and key came into Gandalf’s possession that he started to realise just what that purpose might be…

Chapter End Notes

And in the next bit we will delve a little deeper into Thorin's family history. Though not too deep, we don't want any Balrogs showing up.
Pipe-weed names taken from The Lord of The Rings Online.
Thorin was on a quest. To a Hobbit, this was unusual enough on its own.

This quest was far from over, but he already needed both hands to count all the times he had almost died… and his hands would no longer enough if he also wanted to count all the times he had almost lost Bilbo.

But despite that, Thorin was still the happiest that he could ever remember being.

Perhaps it was very fortunate indeed that he had no plans to return to the Shire, Thorin mused as he walked amongst grass almost as tall as he was, on his way to a Man who could change his form into that of a bear. (Never let it be said that the Wizard kept boring company).

If his neighbours had thought him strange before it would be nothing compared to what they would think now. If he told them just half of everything that had happened to him since he left they would likely call him a liar, or make sure to keep their children a safe distance away out of fear that his crazy would be contagious. Or both.

Not that Thorin really spent much time thinking about what he had left behind. For the first time in a very long time he was happy, and if he had a quest with almost-certain death at the end of it to thank for that happiness, then Thorin would thank it gladly. The alternative of not being on the quest, of never having met Bilbo, did not really bear thinking about.

Yes, their journey had been dangerous, and would likely become more dangerous in the months to come. There was no guarantee that he’d even make it to Erebor alive and if he did, then there was the Dragon…

One Hobbit and 13 Dwarfs against a Dragon… no those were not odds that he favoured. But to die while fighting the monster that had killed Bilbo’s grandfather would be a good death – and to live every moment he could by Bilbo’s side, that would be a good life. The best life.

They would be lacking one Wizard, because when they had set off from the Carrock Gandalf had revealed that he would accompany them as they entered Mirkwood. As Thorin watched the Dwarfs groan and lament that they would no longer have a Wizard amongst them, he realised that he was not quite as happy to see Gandalf go as he might have had expected.

Maybe it was the fact that Thorin had realised that he did owe Gandalf some thanks for bringing Bilbo to his door or maybe it was just knowing that Gandalf had saved the Dwarfs from the Goblins when Thorin was not around to even try; whatever it was, he would not smile on seeing the Wizard leave. He would not cry either, but to his surprise he found that at least part of him wished that Gandalf would stay with the Company.

Bilbo had not taken very kindly to Gandalf’s approaching departure. And when he’d figured out that Gandalf had never intended to see the quest through to its end the look on the Dwarf’s face had made Thorin expect to be treated to the sight of Gandalf getting a deserved earful. (While Thorin might possibly no longer dislike Gandalf as much, that still didn’t mean that he liked the Wizard.) But Bilbo had kept his silence; though it was a silence that came at the price of a tightly clenched jaw and a mouth thinned to a mere line.

Thorin hadn’t known if he should try and say something to break Bilbo’s bad mood, or if that would
just make things worse, so he said nothing. Instead he’d just walked close to Bilbo in the hope that his presence would at least remind Bilbo that there were certain people that would *never* leave him. Dwalin did pretty much the same thing, so Thorin took that as a sign that he’d taken the right course of action.

After an hour Bilbo’s jaw unclenched; another hour later the Dwarf smiled at Thorin when the latter casually brushed their shoulders together as they walked. Deciding that the worst of it was over Thorin nonchalantly inquired if the red flowers that grew by the hundreds in the field they were walking through were daisies or daffodils.

“They’re clovers,” Bilbo said and looked at Thorin with a vaguely horrified expression on his face. “I did not think it possible that someone would know even less about plants than Fili, but apparently I was mistaken.”

“Hey!” Kili protested, then paused. “Or was that actually a compliment?”

Fili snickered and ruffled his brother’s hair. “Don’t ever change, brother.”

“Clovers you say,” Thorin said thoughtfully and tried not to smile. Bilbo looked at him suspiciously and Thorin tried to look innocent. Of course he knew the flowers were clovers. But it would not do to give the game away so quickly.

“I thought clovers where white,” Dwalin rumbled and deliberately stepped on a patch of flowers.

“Daisies are the white ones.” Fili smiled as he picked one of the clovers. “These are *definitely* clovers.”

Bilbo and Fili traded a long suffering glance and Thorin had to hastily cover up a snort with a cough.

When they finally arrived at Beorn’s - the shape shifter’s - gate and Gandalf explained that it would be best if they didn’t arrive all at once Bilbo merely nodded and allowed Gandalf to divvy up the party as he saw fit.

But that evening, after supper and the sudden disappearance of their host, Thorin realised that he had not heard Bilbo say a single word to Gandalf since that morning.

When the time came to turn in for the night, Thorin naturally chose the mattress closest to Bilbo’s. While it appeared that Bilbo intended for them to stay on their respective beds Thorin’s plans were a little different.

“You’re really out to get me into trouble with Dwalin, aren’t you,” Bilbo huffed when Thorin dragged his mattress to lie flushed against Bilbo’s.

“Please, behave yourselves,” Kili called from across the room. “I’m too young to be bii-” The rest of the young Dwarf’s words were muffled as Fili put his hand over his brother’s mouth.

“Good night,” the blond said firmly and pulled Kili down onto the floor. It might just have been a coincidence, but the rest of the company had all chosen to bed down some distance away from Bilbo and Thorin, giving the pair at least the pretence of privacy.

Thorin knelt down on the woollen blankets that covered the straw mattress. He stayed there, silent, until Bilbo huffed again and reached out for him.
“I’m starting to think you have no sense at all for what’s proper,” Bilbo murmured into Thorin’s ear after they’d sorted out whose limbs went where. “And what is worse is that I think I won’t be able to protest if you keep looking at me with those eyes.”

Thorin frowned. His eyes were blue. Just blue. Nothing special about that really. Not like Bilbo’s eyes that refused to stay the same colour.

Wanting to change the subject Thorin curled a little closer still and lowered his voice so that it would not travel.

“I’m glad your nephews are all right with us.”

“Of course they are,” Bilbo whispered. “They adore you. I was almost getting worried one of them would snap you away right beneath my nose.”

Thorin grunted in protest, disturbed without really knowing why. He knew both Fíli and Kíli were older than himself, but still, it seemed extremely inappropriate to think of - no. Thorin shuddered. Just no. This seemed to amuse Bilbo because Thorin could feel his lips stretch into a smile.

“Really,” Bilbo teased softly. “I’m told Fíli looks quite a bit like me; it’s the hair I suspect. And you do seem quite fond of my hair.”

As Thorin currently had one hand tangled in Bilbo’s tresses there wasn’t much he could say to that. Bilbo seemed to take his silence as acknowledgement, because the Dwarf laughed softly and pressed a soft kiss to Thorin’s jaw, the scratch of beard making Thorin shiver.

“At any rate, there is no one in the Company who would say a word against us. Perhaps with the exception of Dwalin if he feels I’m taking advantage of you. But -”

Thorin snorted and twisted his head to give Bilbo a proper kiss.

As he did so, he remembered another kiss. The kiss he’d seen while they stayed with the Elves. **Bofur.**

Bofur who had some sort of claim on Bilbo, but who had still made no protest when Thorin and Bilbo had shared Bilbo’s coat on the Carrock, and who had still yet to utter a single negative word even though it must be obvious to all that their relationship was no longer merely friendly. Bofur who was in the same room as them this very minute. Jealousy drove Thorin to deepen the kiss a little more than was strictly suitable with the lack of privacy they had, but he could not help feeling that he best make his claim known.

“That is exactly what I mean,” Bilbo hissed when they parted. “No, no, don’t look at me with your big blue eyes. I’m putting my foot down.” Despite his words Bilbo’s hand kept stroking along Thorin’s back in a motion the very opposite of pushing the Hobbit away.

“Could we - I would like to talk to you in the morning,” Thorin murmured. “When we can be alone.”

Because while he might be to make himself talk about Bilbo’s relationship with Bofur - or preferably the lack of it - he would not be able to do so with the Dwarf in question just a bit more than twenty
feet away.

“Are you sure this is not just a trick to get me alone so I can take advantage of you?” Bilbo teased.

And despite the jealousy Thorin could feel crawling inside his skin he couldn’t help but smile and press a kiss to Bilbo’s nose. The Dwarf went cross-eyed as he tried to look at Thorin, who laughed softly.

“Good night,” he said and lifted a hand to stroke over Bilbo’s bearded cheek. Bilbo captured the hand and pressed a kiss to Thorin’s knuckles.

“Good night.”

- 

When Thorin woke it was still night. The moon cast a pale splash of white on the floor, shining down through the smoke hole. It seemed that everyone was asleep; the hall was quiet except for the noises that Thorin had long since come to associate with sleeping Dwarfs (which weren’t very quiet at all).

A sound that was not familiar in the least was the growls he could hear coming from the outside. And there was also the sound of someone, or something, scratching at the front door. If that was Beorn in his animal form, Thorin hoped that the Man had spoken true before when he’d told them that they’d be safe as long as they stayed inside the house.

Thorin would have preferred it if he could have moved to position himself between Bilbo and the source of the growls, but he did not think he would be able to move too much without Bilbo waking.

Burying his head in the space between Bilbo’s neck and shoulder Thorin closed his eyes and, lulled by the sound of Bilbo’s breaths and the thumping of his heart, the Hobbit fell asleep again.

When Thorin next woke it was full morning, and the first thing he saw were Bilbo’s smiling eyes. After gazing sleepily into them for longer than was probably proper, but somehow not nearly long enough, Thorin thought that he still might have finally worked out the mystery of Bilbo’s eyes.

In the sparse light spilling in from the smoke hole, and the many small windows high up on the walls, Bilbo’s eyes were mostly a dark greyish-blue, but they were filled with flecks of brown and even gold. And around the black pupil there was what almost looked to be a star of leafy green.

When Thorin reached out to stroke a hand through Bilbo’s hair the Dwarf’s eyes appeared to darken still as the black expanded to cover most of the green.

“Good morning,” Thorin said quietly and it was echoed by Bilbo. “Where are the others?”

“Out on the veranda, likely eating our host out of house and home.” Bilbo smiled and leaned in to press his lips to Thorin’s. Thorin didn’t try to deepen it, sure in the knowledge that Bilbo would start talking about what was proper or not again if he did try.

“It is the morning now,” Bilbo murmured against Thorin’s lips. “And while this is not the most private of privacies, I expect we have five minutes before Kili comes bounding inside and drags us out to have breakfast.”
“Ah, is this the part where you take advantage of me?” Thorin grinned. Bilbo snorted and touched their foreheads together. “I could take advantage of you, if you prefer that,” Thorin offered. “Maybe there is another contract I can sign, if you persist in being worried about what Dwalin will think.”

“Nice try,” Bilbo said. “But you wanted to talk.”

Thorin looked away. Maybe it wasn’t necessary to say anything. Bofur hadn’t said anything either after all. More fool him if it was that easy for him to let Bilbo go, but perhaps it would be stupid to bring Bilbo’s attention to it.

“I don’t hear any talking.” Bilbo poked Thorin’s side when he didn’t receive an answer. When Thorin still didn’t speak Bilbo sighed. “I hope you know that you can share anything that is on your mind with me. Now even more so than before.” He curled a finger in the thin chain that Thorin now carried around his neck, lifting it up from inside Thorin’s shirt. “This doesn’t mean that you owe me anything, but hopefully it means that you trust me.”

Thorin took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He closed his eyes.

“I know about - that you and Bofur were… involved.” He used the past tense because he really hoped that whatever their involvement was, it was not something that Bilbo would want to continue.

Bilbo’s hand came to stroke slowly along the path of Thorin’s spine.

“Please, look at me,” the Dwarf said. And, powerless to deny Bilbo anything, Thorin opened his eyes.

“You need to worry about me and Bofur about as much as I need to worry about you and Fíli,” Bilbo said softly. “We are friends, and that is all. I would never betray your trust. Nor would I want to.”

“You did not seem to be mere friends when you kissed him in Rivendell,” Thorin muttered, knowing he sounded childish but finding that he could not help it. “Nor did you seem to worry about what was proper or not.”

“I thought you were sleeping,” Bilbo said then winced. “No, I’m sorry, that came out wrong.” He smiled wryly. “I was already in love with you in Rivendell. What you saw was what I hoped to be the last kiss I would -” Bilbo frowned. “That also sounds horrible, like I never wanted to kiss him in the first place.”

Thorin pointedly cleared his throat. “I’m not sure where you are going with this, but I’m starting to feel less and less reassured.”

Bilbo chuckled, a bit helplessly, and pressed his forehead to Thorin’s again.

“I wish I knew the perfect words to convince you that you truly have nothing to worry about. Bofur would tell you much the same thing if you spoke to him. In Rivendell, he knew of my feelings for you even before I was able to tell him. And as the good friend he is, he was happy for me.”

“You have not… not since then?”

Despite the subject at hand, and despite sharing the same bed through the night, Thorin almost felt overwhelmed by having Bilbo close enough to feel his words as warm puffs of air against his own
lips. More and more of his thoughts came to revolve around how it had felt to kiss Bilbo, and how it 
would feel to try it again in a hopefully not so distant future. But he couldn’t quite allow himself to 
lose focus. He could still see the image of Bilbo holding onto the flaps of Bofur’s hat and kissing him 
as if it was… oh. As if it was the last time.

The realisation made it better and worse at the same time.

“I have not, we have not,” Bilbo said firmly, cutting into Thorin’s thoughts. “I love you.”

The way Bilbo said those words seemed to Thorin like the Dwarf expected them to explain 
everything, and perhaps they did. Yet Thorin still felt torn between very conflicting emotions.

Part of him wanted to grin smugly and cheer for the reason that Bilbo had chosen him long before 
their first kiss on the Carrock. Part of him was still deeply jealous of Bofur and another part was 
ashamed of his jealousy. A larger part than Thorin really wanted to admit just couldn’t understand 
how someone, and someone like Bilbo nonetheless, could choose him over anyone else.

The only thing that all those parts agreed on was that they loved Bilbo.

“I love you too,” Thorin said hoarsely.

“Can you trust me?” Bilbo asked, eyes now a stormy grey.

And to that question there was only ever going to be one answer.

“Always,” Thorin said and fitted their lips together.
“There is something I have been wondering about,” Bilbo said when they were finishing up breakfast.

Despite the increasing complaints from his stomach, Thorin would have been content to spend the rest of the day in bed with Bilbo, even if all they’d do was kissing. However, when the growls from his gut had grown loud enough for even Bilbo to hear, Thorin had been forced to admit that he was rather hungry. He figured that not really being able to say no to Bilbo was going to become a problem sooner or later. But as long as the Dwarf was just bullying him to breakfast, it was still a pretty manageable problem.

Thorin had never really been the sort of Hobbit that ate seven square meals every day. He’d have breakfast before going to the smithy, take a break for lunch some hours later, and then either have supper when he got back to his smial or first tea and then supper if he was feeling particularly hungry. It seemed that Dwarfs usually contented themselves with three meals every day and that was fine. It was basically what Thorin was used to after all. However, before Beorn had offered them supper the previous evening Thorin hadn’t actually eaten anything since before they started their descent from the peaks of the Misty Mountains and it seemed that this sort of abstinence had not at all been appreciate by his stomach.

Luckily, the rest of the Company had shown admirable restraint during breakfast and had actually saved food for their king and Thorin. (With the state they had left his pantry in, Thorin had rather expected to see only empty pots and plates when he and Bilbo entered the deserted veranda.)

“Would that be how either sheep or dogs manage to bake?” Thorin asked, smiling across the table at Bilbo before casting a suspicious look down at the piece of bread he was holding.

A sheep had carried in a fresh loaf on its back just shortly after he and Bilbo had sat down at the table and while the bread seemed very much like any other bread he’d had, Thorin just couldn’t figure out how anything with paws or hooves could bake. It could of course have been their host, but when they’d met Fíli on their way to breakfast the blond had told them that no one had seen Beorn all morning. The Wizard had also been missing but he had left word with Balin that he’d be back that evening, so no one was overly concerned about his whereabouts.

“No,” Bilbo smiled. “Though you raise a valid point. No, I was thinking about how you said that you came from a family of merchants. It rather sounded like it went further back than just your father?”

“Indeed,” Thorin said and tried not to stiffen his shoulders. There was precious little he could tell about his past that would make for a pleasant meal time conversation, and which would not make regret or shame start to crawl down his spine. But he had promised himself he would let Bilbo know everything. Maybe it would be easier to start by answering an innocently put question instead of trying by himself to find the words needed.

“My family have been merchants for as long as anyone remembers.” Thorin shrugged. “But as you know, I’m not.”

To his surprise Bilbo did not proceed to ask why exactly he was a smith and not a merchant.
“See, that is what has me a little confused. I’ve never heard of a family of merchants by the name of Oakenshield. While the distance from the Shire to Dale is a little long for me to expect that someone from your family would have visited its markets, the distance between the Shire and Ered Luin is not that great.” Bilbo actually looked a little embarrassed. “While few non-Dwarven merchants are actually let inside our gates there are several cities of Men near-by, and for a while I was a fairly frequent visitor to their markets. Or perhaps your family did not trade with Men?”

Thorin licked his suddenly dry lips. For the briefest of moments he was tempted to lie, to take the out that Bilbo had given him and say that his family had never traded outside the Shire, and then to his surprise he felt the touch of cool metal against his hand. When had it crept down to hide in his pocket to curl around the ring?

The Hobbit felt the tips of his ears heat. Such bravery he showed; wanting to lie and disappear if that meant he would not have to talk about uncomfortable things.

He didn’t even know where the impulse had come from. Even if Bilbo had heard of his family he could not be overly familiar with the more recent parts of it or he would have been able to connect the death of Thorin’s grandfather to his real name. And besides, had Thorin not wanted to tell Bilbo? There was absolutely no reason to lie and the ring could just stay in his pocket.

“If Oakenshield is not familiar to you, then perhaps you've heard of the Durins.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened slightly in surprise. “Yes, yes of course. I think I actually heard that name once or twice in Dale even. But only in passing.”

Thorin braced himself. Surely now Bilbo would ask what in the world had happened that would have made him a smith and not a merchant; what would have made him go back on what Bilbo would know to be hundreds of years of tradition.

“May I ask,” Bilbo began and Thorin forced himself to unclench his fists. Thankfully Bilbo couldn’t see this because the furniture in Beorn’s house was all oversized and the table reached half-way up Thorin’s chest.

“If Oakenshield is not your family’s name, then how did you come by it? Is it because of the oak that grow on the hill over your smial? I wish Gandalf could have mentioned it when he gave us the directions, would have spared me getting lost.”

The dread that had filled Thorin’s chest was instantly replaced with so much love he thought he’d burst with it.

Not only did Bilbo word his question in such a way that did not require Thorin to tell him why he had taken another name, Bilbo also was again giving him a way out. Thorin could tell Bilbo that the name Oakenshield had only to do with the oak that grew just by his smial, and he didn’t doubt that Bilbo would accept that as the truth. He could tell the Dwarf that, and no more; but somehow just knowing that Bilbo wouldn’t question it made Thorin want to tell him everything.

“It is not completely unrelated to that oak, but it mostly served as a reminder.” Thorin surprised himself by smiling slightly. “As a child I was scared of thunder. Though the word ‘scared’ does not really do justice to what I felt. It would be enough that the clouds gathered and the sky darkened to make me run inside and hide beneath my bed. It was terrifying.”

“My father told me that thunder is just Mahal using his hammer,” Bilbo said. “And the lightning is just the sparks that fly from his forge.”
“I don’t think that explanation would have helped me,” Thorin said with a wry smile. “But who knows, maybe having someone to blame would have been comforting.”

“Such cheek,” Bilbo grinned. “But I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt. Please continue your story.”

Thorin thought for a moment. “I think I must have been five or six, maybe even seven. I had been playing outside and somehow I had missed seeing the clouds that had begun to crowd the sky. The first roll of thunder scared the breath right out of me, but as soon as I got it back I ran. Unfortunately, I did not run inside. When my mother rushed out to collect me I was already out of sight.”

He shook his head. “I don’t really remember everything that happened then, but hours later they found me beneath an old oak tree. Not the safest place in a storm but I was mostly dry, and sound asleep. After that Mother took to calling me Master Oakenshield when she teased.”

“I think this is the first time you’ve mentioned your mother,” Bilbo remarked, then flushed. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry.”

Thorin smiled to show that nothing needed to be forgiven. Perhaps the smile was a little wobbly, but Bilbo didn’t mention it.

“She died a few years after. She - I was going to have a sibling, a little brother. But both he and mother died. I – it was long ago.”

As they were seated on opposite sides of the table, the distance between them was too big for Bilbo to be able to reach across to Thorin, but Thorin saw the aborted moment of Bilbo’s arm and that was almost as good as a touch.

“Okay, this isn’t going to work,” Bilbo stated and without further ado he rose up to stand on the bench he’d been sitting on and stepped up on the table. Almost nonchalantly he walked over to Thorin and hopped down to his bench. However, Thorin did not miss the way Bilbo’s hand came up as if to clutch at his ribs before the Dwarf stopped himself.

“I now understand who taught his sister-sons such excellent table manners,” Thorin murmured as Bilbo sat down and wrapped his arm around Thorin’s waist.

“Oh shush,” Bilbo said and pressed a quick kiss to Thorin’s jaw. “You were too far away, I made it better, end of story.” Bilbo’s face then turned more sombre. “Would you tell me of your mother? What was she like?”

“She was…” Thorin huffed out a laugh. “A good way to describe her is to tell you that she was everything that I am not. She always smiled, always went around singing songs or whistling. She couldn’t whistle,” Thorin added. “Sing, yes - she had a lovely singing voice - but when she whistled it was impossible to know what sort of melody it was supposed to be.”

“But that didn’t stop her, I take it,” Bilbo said and shuffled closer to Thorin, close enough that their thighs touched.

“Indeed it did not. She was kind, all our neighbours loved her and constantly invited themselves in on tea which I hated because -” Thorin paused. “I do not wish to alarm you, but I’m not sure if you’ve noticed that I’m not the most social of Hobbits. I never have been.”

“I’m shocked and appalled,” Bilbo said with a mock-gasp. He tightened his arm around Thorin
slightly. “Though you seem to be doing just fine to me.”

Thorin didn’t know what to say to that, so he continued to describe his mother. It was good, to talk about her. It wasn’t nice exactly, because despite so many years having passed, it still ached a little to think about her - but it was still good. Because now Bilbo who had never met her knew a little bit about her, and it was right that he should know her.

“She was very beautiful. I know my father was the envy of many.”

“Do you look like her?”

“No, not at all. I take after my father,” Thorin said and tried to ignore the heat coming off Bilbo and the heat that was beginning to burn inside his own stomach. When talking about one’s mother it wasn’t very appropriate to lapse into such thoughts as those Thorin was currently struggling not to have about the Dwarf by his side. “Mother’s hair was like sunlight on wheat, she had brown eyes, freckles.” Thorin fell silent for a few seconds. “So many years have gone by, I don’t know if I still remember what she looked like or if I just think I do. But I know I remember her eyes, her hair, her smile…”

“What was her name?” Bilbo asked quietly.

“Feris,” Thorin answered. “After the -”

“Flower,” Bilbo filled in and Thorin turned to give him an unimpressed glance. He might have ruined it, though, with the way his mouth wanted to quirk up in a smile at the sight of Bilbo’s embarrassed expression.

“I’m sorry,” the Dwarf moaned and hid his face into Thorin’s neck. Thorin shivered at the feel of Bilbo’s beard and hair tickling his throat. At the first touch of Bilbo’s mouth to the side of his neck Thorin stiffened, partially from surprise and partially because he was afraid to move; afraid to do anything that might cause Bilbo to pull away.

It started as a barely-there kiss but then Bilbo opened his mouth and lightly touched his teeth to Thorin’s skin.

The Hobbit surprised them both by groaning loudly and if Thorin had thought he knew what Bilbo looked like when embarrassed, it was nothing compared to the expression on the Dwarf’s face when he shuffled away to put some space between them.

“I am truly sorry,” Bilbo said and the bright red spots on his cheeks seemed to agree with him. “I - that was entirely inappropriate. First with the - and then - But you smell really good and I don’t even understand how that is possible after -” Mortified, Bilbo put a hand over his eyes. “Right, so I’m just going to go back to that river we crossed to get here and throw myself in.”

“If you do that I’m sure Dwalin will be looking to have a word with me,” Thorin said drily and tried to shift his legs unnoticeably. He was too damned old to figure out that his neck and his cock were apparently connected.

The Dwarf noticed that Thorin spread his legs slightly and he flushed a little pinker still, but at the same time his eyes turned a deep smoky blue and Thorin could have groaned again; he might actually have done so when Bilbo’s tongue came out to flick over his lips.
“I cannot talk about my mother if you look at me like that,” Thorin growled and leaned over to kiss the now glistening lips.

“Dwalin is going to kill me,” Bilbo complained when he broke away to press another kiss to Thorin’s throat and Thorin’s heart thudded, because that sounded like Bilbo was saying -

“No I’m not, because you are stopping that right now.”

Thorin drew back to glare daggers at Dwalin who stood with his arms crossed and regarding them with an unimpressed expression.

“Lad, that is not going to work,” Dwalin said and tapped the fingers of his left hand against his arm. “I’ve been glared at by much scarier things then you. Now, I’d like to see some air between you until you cool off. Get to it.”

- 

It wasn’t until several hours later that Thorin finally managed to be alone with Bilbo again, and the way that came about rather led him to believing that he owed Nori a favour. Though alone might not technically be the right word.

The entire company was gathered outside in the courtyard outside Beorn’s house; Bilbo and Thorin were sitting together on the grass, shaded from the sun by a holt of lilacs.

Their host was still missing and the general consensus seemed to be that it was not polite to spend too much time in his house until he was back. Where this sense of propriety had been when they emptied his hobbit-hole of every scrap of food Thorin would likely never know. He was getting very tired of the uneven distribution of propriety on the whole. Respectability had never been his cup of tea, and to have Dwalin looming over him had gotten old fast.

Arguing with him had not worked, ignoring him had not worked, and Thorin would be damned before he resorted to pleading (which likely would not work either).

If it hadn’t been for Nori carelessly wandering past smoking what Thorin assumed to be Dwalin’s pipe (what with the way a vein in Dwalin’s forehead had started throbbing – not to mention the growl of “Thief!” and the way Dwalin had run after the auburn haired Dwarf), Dwalin would probably still be hovering over them.

“I think we owe Nori a favour,” Bilbo said, unknowingly echoing Thorin’s thoughts.

“Can’t you order him to just be somewhere else?” Thorin said a bit peevishly.

“Nori? He’s really bad at taking orders,” Bilbo teased and despite himself Thorin’s lips twitched.

“You know very well who I am talking about,” the Hobbit said, aiming for stern. “But while on the subject of Nori, should I be upset that Dwalin values my non-existing virtue less than the importance of his pipe?”

Bilbo snorted. “Do not worry, the moment you and I try to sneak away from here he’d appear right behind us. But if we stay here he can play with Nori and keep an eye on us at the same time.”

“Play?” Thorin raised an eyebrow.
“I don’t know what else to call it,” Bilbo shrugged. “It’s got rules and everything. See, now Nori is going to say that he just found the pipe lying on the ground, and Dwalin will look unimpressed.”

They were too far away for Thorin to hear what they were saying, but Nori did indeed look innocent and gestured down at the ground. Dwalin’s default expression was probably unimpressed though, so that didn’t prove much.

“And now Nori will offer him the pipe, but also imply that Dwalin needs to take better care of his things.”

Sure enough, Nori held out the pipe to Dwalin and whatever he was saying while doing so made Dwalin’s face turn a rather alarming shade of red. Dwalin still took the pipe and tucked it inside his belt while saying something that – going by his expression – didn’t look to be particularly humorous, but made Nori bark out a laugh.

“Now we’re getting close to the end,” Bilbo said in a stage whisper. “This is the part where Nori goes to do something particularly innocently looking and Dwalin - huh.”

What had made Bilbo cut himself off was the sight of Nori reaching up to whisper something into Dwalin’s ear. The height difference wasn’t that large, but the thief still casually supported himself by resting one hand on Dwalin’s arm as he leaned in. Unbeknownst to Dwalin, who appeared to be distracted by whatever Nori was saying, the thief’s other hand was carefully extracting Dwalin’s pipe from his belt.

“Huh,” Bilbo said again. “Nori usually isn’t so blatant when he takes things from Dwalin.”

Still looking as innocent as a new-born babe Nori drew back from Dwalin and with a smile he strolled away to join Ori where he was sitting together with Fíli and Kíli beneath a huge oak that stood in the middle of the courtyard.

Dwalin glowered after him as he went when suddenly his eyes widened and he quickly uncrossed his arms to feel for his pipe which obviously was no longer to be found in his belt. Thorin, who had been watching Dwalin, was just as surprised as the large Dwarf when it then turned out that Nori was no longer to be found sitting next to Ori. Back to glowering, Dwalin stomped off to the three young Dwarfs, likely to press them for details on Nori’s disappearance.

Bilbo snickered and nudged Thorin’s shoulder with his own. “Look up.”

Half-way up the tree, seated on a thick branch, was Nori; calmly smoking Dwalin’s pipe again.

Fíli and Kíli appeared to find it immensely pleasing to have Dwalin looming over them as a big bald thundercloud because the brothers’ grins were wide enough to almost reach their ears. Ori, on the other hand, did his best to avoid looking Dwalin in the eye and instead focused on the papers he was holding in his lap as if they held the answer to all life’s questions.

Blowing a perfect smoke ring, Nori plucked an acorn and let it drop on Dwalin’s head.

“Does he have a death wish?” Thorin asked, shaking his head.

“You only catch Nori when he wants to be caught,” Bilbo said and wrapped his arm around Thorin. “I’d say we have at least half an hour before Dwalin gives up or Nori does something to placate
him.”

Thorin looked contemplatively at the grin on Nori’s face and the murderous rage on Dwalin’s.

“If you say so,” he said sceptically. “But if one of them breaks his neck falling out of that tree we’re all going to be sorry.”

“Don’t worry; I don’t think Nori is going to stay there for very long. That’d take all the fun out of it.”

“Are they… involved?” Thorin asked, not really having considered it before, but maybe…

“It is a lot like pulling someone’s pigtails,” Bilbo agreed. “But no, and I do not know if either of them even wishes it. They are friends, even if they’d both tell you differently. They know each other down to the very bones. Sometimes I think they know each other better than they know themselves.”

“How did you even meet Nori?” Thorin asked. “A King and a thief make for even more unlikely friends than a warrior and a thief.”

“Nori stole my purse and then most likely saved Fíli’s and Kíli’s lives,” Bilbo said and chuckled. “Managing to annoy Dwalin with both those actions of course. First Dwalin was upset that the idiot guards – his words, not mine – that he had commanded to follow me around the market had been careless enough to allow someone to pick-pocket me. And his mood did not improve when he realised that the same thief had managed to break into the royal quarters. But the fact that Nori did it on the same night as two kidnappers, possibly hired killers, did count as a point in his favour when he ended up taking care of them.”

“Was he going to steal from you?” Thorin asked and cast a glance at Nori who had relocated to a branch slightly higher up. Dwalin had finally managed to climb up the bare trunk of the tree and had reached the first branches.

“No, he was actually trying to return my purse.” Bilbo smiled fondly over in the thief’s direction and Thorin sternly told himself that he was not going to feel jealous of that smile.

“Not that I’ve ever been able to convince Dwalin of that,” Bilbo added with a sigh. “I thought steam would come out of his ears when I asked Nori to work for me.”

“As a thief?”

“Well, in a way. Having someone keep an ear to the stone and let me know in advance the next time someone was muttering about how the sons of a miner were not fit to take the crown seemed like a good way to try and tackle the problem. And even Dwalin has to admit that it worked. He doesn’t have to admit that he thinks it was a good idea, but you can’t really argue with the results.”

Nori made sure the pipe was no longer burning before carefully tucking it away inside his shirt. Dwalin’s ascent had been swift and he was now just a couple of branches below the thief. Thorin was glad that the three young Dwarfs had moved away from beneath the tree almost as soon as Dwalin had begun climbing. At least none of them would end up being flattened, because it certainly seemed that someone would be. Having secured the pipe Nori stood up on the branch and proceeded to jump off it.

With the grace of a cat he landed on the same branch as Dwalin was currently pulling himself up to, but before the warrior had the chance to even reach out, Nori dropped to another branch and with a
speed that was hard to believe he was soon standing on the ground again.

“What did I tell you,” Bilbo murmured and Thorin shook his head disbelievingly. Up in the tree Dwalin did the same thing – albeit with a lot more cursing - and proceeded to climb down again.

“I really don’t know why asked me to join the quest. What do you think I’ll be able to do as a burglar that Nori can’t?”

“Nori wasn’t the one to kill Azog,” Bilbo said quietly and cupped Thorin’s cheek with a warm and calloused hand. “However annoyed with a certain Wizard I might be at the moment I will always be grateful that he brought me to you. For such a multitude of reasons,” Bilbo added and brushed his thumb over Thorin’s lips.

“I - the same is also true,” Thorin said and covered Bilbo’s hand with his own.

“Would you smile for me?” Bilbo asked and laughed softly when his question just made Thorin frown in confusion. “I’m going to kiss you, and I’d like a kiss when you smile.”

The smile Thorin tried out might have been more of a grimace, at least at first, but it turned more genuine when he was distracted by the way Bilbo’s eyes crinkled at the corners as the Dwarf smiled back at him.

“And you are beautiful,” Bilbo murmured as their lips were just an inch apart. “I would not claim to know your mother, but I’m confident you are more like her than you think. For one, I have never laid eyes on anyone more lovely.”

‘Do the others know that their king is blind?’ That was what Thorin would have said if Bilbo had not kissed him into silence.

“Hands where I can see them!” Dwalin called a much too brief time later.

“Why does he insist on being involved anyway?” Thorin muttered, disgruntled, and pulled back. “He can’t really think that you’d something I do not wish.”

“He’s looking out for you.” Bilbo tucked some of Thorin’s curls behind his ear. “I can hardly be upset about that.”

“I can,” Thorin said wryly and glared over at Dwalin who was currently trying to figure out how to get up on the roof of the house, where Nori was currently sitting cross-legged. Bilbo shrugged.

“Courting is not an uncomplicated thing amongst Dwarfs.” He paused. “Of course circumstances are rather unusual, considering, not least because of the fact that you are not a Dwarf.”

“Am I missing the secret handshake?” Thorin asked, raising one eyebrow.

“Is that what Hobbits call it?” Bilbo smirked. “No, normally, there would be the declaration of intent. Then after a week the acceptance or refusal. A week. Seven days, not seven seconds.”

Now it was Thorin’s turn to shrug. Bilbo shook his head, but he was smiling so Thorin chose to take that as proof that waiting a week was indeed a silly custom.

“As the initiator; the suitor, I would then present you with seven gifts. One every week. And at the end of those seven weeks you’d either present me with the chain I gave you if you did not want to
Thorin just barely managed to stop himself from lifting a hand to touch the chain. “Let me guess, and then there are seven months of nothing but holding hands while Dwalin glares at us?”

“Not exactly. But a courtship puts a greater emphasis on whether we are suited to one another in terms of making a life together. Especially since we’ve not known each other for very long, it’s considered inappropriate to sleep together before I prove that I know you.”

“Prove that you know me?”

“That is what the gifts will show,” Bilbo explained. “Or what they would have shown, hopefully,” he added a little morosely. “You’ll have to forgive me, but I don’t really expect to keep with this part of tradition. At least not until we arrive at Erebor.”

“I don’t mean to insult your traditions,” Thorin said carefully. “But you could give me seven pieces of string and I would sincerely tell you that I love them. I do not wish for anything.” A thought occurred to him. “Besides, you already gave me a sword.” As soon as he’d said the words Thorin winced. Of course, he didn’t have the sword anymore. If it could be counted as a courtship gift it was probably very inappropriate to just leave it as he’d done, regardless of what he’d used it for. “Never mind,” he continued. “I had forgotten that I do not have it any longer.”

“You really must tell me what happened after we were separated inside the mountain,” Bilbo said. “But I’m sure the others also want to hear. Perhaps you could tell the story over dinner?”

“It is not very interesting,” Thorin said and looked away. Seeing that Thorin was uncomfortable Bilbo changed the subject. Unfortunately it was to another one that Thorin would prefer to leave alone.

“Would you think me hopelessly nosy if I told you that there is something else I have been wondering about?”

Thorin tilted his head in a silent question.

“Even someone who is truly blind could not have missed that you dislike Gandalf. But I can’t figure out why. He told me that he was an old friend to your family, though when he was about to introduce me to you, you almost looked… alarmed. It was obvious that you didn’t trust him.”

Thorin swallowed. This was not going to be easy to answer.

The reason Thorin had looked alarmed hadn’t really been connected to the Wizard as such. But when Gandalf had referred to him as Thorin Oakenshield… The only way Gandalf could know about that name was if he had been talking to Thorin’s neighbours. And if he had been talking to them, had he told them anything in return?

After the death of his father he had left Michel Delving because he couldn’t stand to be around so many people who all knew the story of his life, down to the very last sordid detail. While waiting for the waggling tongues to settle Thorin had left his fellow Hobbits and instead gone to find obscurity on the cities of Men. Money had been no problem; before he’d left Thorin had sold the family company to an ecstatic competitor. Even if he hadn’t, he would have been well off just on what his grandfather and father had saved throughout the years. However using that money somehow seemed a foul prospect. Thorin remembered the look in his grandfather’s eyes when he’d stared down at the filled coffers, and before his father’s disappearance he’d begun to notice the same behaviour in
Thráin as well. Not wanting anything to do with that money Thorin had left it to the new Thain, trusting that Isumbras would put it to good use but not really caring if that was not the case.

Thorin soon discovered that being idle was not something he did particularly enjoy and took an apprenticeship with a smith. The Man had laughed at him first, but Thorin’s coin was good and after a year had passed and Thorin deemed it safe to go back to his own kind, the smith even expressed regret to see him go and offered him to stay as a partner.

During his life the Hobbit had seen a lot of things made by skilled hands, but he’d never let himself go beyond the point of admiration. Not until the day he’d found himself drifting aimlessly through the streets of an unfamiliar city, winding up in the market district. What would have once been appreciation over a masterfully wrought chandelier had instead turned into a curious thought: would it be possible for him to make something worthy of equal admiration?

Thorin had always been strong, especially for a Hobbit, and either by chance or fate he had been blessed with a true affinity for the art of metalsmithing.

The year had passed by quickly and Thorin had gone back to the Shire believing that he had put the past behind him. But the past is not forgotten as quickly as all that. Being back in the Shire was a constant reminder of his old life and old memories and to avoid thinking, Thorin had thrown himself in the construction of his hobbit-hole; hoping that by the time he was finished, the past would once again have tired of him and would leave him in peace.

He’d chosen not to go back to Michel Delving, instead settling in Hobbiton. For a long time he couldn’t have given a true answer of why he’d chosen to go back to the Shire at all. Why could he not answer? Because he simply didn’t know. It had just seemed like something he should do.

Now though, now Thorin wondered if it had not been fate that had guided his choices. If he hadn’t gone back to the Shire, would Gandalf have known where to find him? Would he have been able to arrange for a company of Dwarves to knock on his door?

Could it be possible that Thorin had gone to Hobbiton to wait for fate to come knocking on his door in the shape of a Dwarf with honey-coloured braids and lake-coloured eyes? If that was the case Thorin wished that he’d known about it from the start.

“Your question requires an answer that is not simple to give,” Thorin said haltingly. “And it’s private.”


“No, that’s not what I meant.” Thorin sighed. “I just meant that perhaps it would be possible for us to go somewhere where we can be alone before I answer.”

“Are you sure?” Bilbo asked. “Just tell me to mind my own business when I overstep a line.”

“I’m sure. I want to tell you - but more than that, I think I need to tell you.”

Bilbo nodded and rose fluidly to his feet, reaching down to offer Thorin a hand up.

“We can go back outside the hedge to the field that we passed. No one will be around there.”

As they walked past the house Dwalin took a pause from his Nori-watching. He raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms, but when Bilbo gave a sharp shake of his head the warrior merely nodded and
allowed them to leave without further comment.

“Couldn’t you have done that before?” Thorin wondered.

“As I said, he is looking out for you. In this he has turned his loyalty to you, and while he would likely listen to me if I did give him an order, it would not be right of me to do so. Just now though, he could see that we’re not running off to go have a snog in the grass.”

Despite the seriousness of the piece of his past that he was going to share with Bilbo, Thorin still felt a smile tug at his lips.

“Maybe we can fit that in after?” he asked and took Bilbo’s hand in his.

“Incorrigible,” Bilbo scolded gently and twined his fingers with Thorin’s. “Have Hobbits no sense of what is proper?”

“Wanting to be with the one you love is considered very proper,” Thorin said and rather enjoyed the look that earned him from Bilbo. Perhaps a snog in the grass was not out of the question after all.
Interlude Five - Dwalin

Chapter Notes

Okay, so this is really long. You have been warned.

As Bilbo and Thorin disappeared behind the corner of the house, Dwalin uncrossed his arms and his stance relaxed. He took a few steps back, enough so that he could see Nori, still sitting crossed-legged on the roof.

“Whenever you feel like coming down, returning my pipe better be the first thing you do.”

Nori blinked at him and Dwalin hid a smirk. It wasn’t often he managed to catch the thief off-guard. However much he hated to admit it, it was usually the other way around.

“You’re not angry anymore?” Nori asked cautiously.

“Or perhaps this is a trick.” Dwalin shrugged. “To bait you into feeling safe.” He turned his back to Nori and started walking towards the oak that he’d so recently found himself climbing. Behind him came the soft sound of someone who was used to being quiet jumping down from a roof.

“You never use tricks,” Nori told him as he came up to walk by Dwalin’s side. The auburn haired Dwarf made a face. “Though you’d do well to consider starting. It’s not cheating, it’s getting an advantage.”

“My pipe?” was all Dwalin asked as he continued towards the tree.

“What pipe?” Nori said innocently, but before Dwalin could chase him back up on the roof again on general principle, the thief nodded towards Dwalin’s belt; lo and behold, there was the pipe, as if it had never been taken in the first – or second – place.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Nori added when Dwalin didn’t acknowledge the returned pipe beyond a small nod. “But I expected to have to stay on the roof a little while longer.”

“You are free to return,” Dwalin said and lowered himself to sit against the rough, sturdy trunk of the old tree.

“Rather not, if it’s all the same to you.”

Much like their earlier descents from the tree had been very different, there was a grace to Nori’s movements as he too sat down on the ground that Dwalin knew couldn’t be found in his own. Grace and elegance was never something he had strived to achieve. No one, especially not an Orc, would thank you for being graceful as you bashed their head in, so why waste time on it?

Dwalin snorted, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Nori tilt his head. The thief made no comment though, and for a few minutes they simply sat together in what was almost companionable silence. Dwalin snorted again when he thought about what his men back in Ered Luin would think
of their captain sitting next to the infamous Nori. No other Dwarf was as well known by the guards of the Blue Mountains, and considering that Nori hadn’t spent a single night behind bars, that was impressive indeed. No one had ever been able to catch Nori in the act of stealing anything, and more than once Dwalin had been forced to reprimand guards that had considered planting evidence to get Nori inside a cell.

Even if he hadn’t known about Nori’s deal - and friendship - with Bilbo, that kind of behaviour was not something Dwalin would have turned a blind eye to. A principle of his life was that two wrongs did not make a right. If you allowed yourself to think that it was right to do something you truly knew was wrong you’d wake up one day only to find that you could no longer look yourself in the eyes.

When Bilbo had offered Nori what amounted to a position as a Spymaster, it would have been an understatement to say that Dwalin had been displeased. Where Bilbo saw someone who had saved his nephews’ lives, and possibly those of Dís and Víli as well, Dwalin saw a criminal who would force him to look the other way as he broke the law again and again – in return for whatever scraps of information he’d deign to throw their way. After all, it had been no more than luck that had led the thief to intervene in the first place.

Balin hadn’t shared this opinion. Dwalin’s brother was unfortunately at least a partial supporter of the idea that the ends justified the means. Oh, there were still plenty of lines that Balin was never going to cross, but there was a lot more grey in his world. A thief could be a weapon if he or she could be controlled. Simple as that.

As for Bilbo, his problem was that he truly believed that there was good in just about everyone. For all that he was King, Bilbo still lived in a world where a thief’s honour meant something.

If asked, Dwalin would have placed a substantial bet that before the next moon Nori would have gotten himself caught doing something entirely outrageous and Dwalin would be forced to release him.

But nothing like that ever happened.

Oh, Nori broke the law plenty of times, of that Dwalin had no doubt. More than once he’d chased someone with a very distinctive hairstyle - someone who moved like they were made of smoke - but despite all that chasing, he’d never been able to catch Nori. Dwalin had never been forced to meet his own eyes in the mirror and see the gaze of someone who had looked the other way because he’d always done his very best to catch the thief; it just had never been enough.

He wasn’t sure if this really justified it, or if he just wanted to believe that it did, and he knew it was strange that he was actually secretly pleased that he was not good enough to catch a criminal. Still, the very fact that Nori had never been caught… that helped. It meant that nothing would have changed even if there had been no deal between Bilbo and Nori.

Nothing, except for everything.

What had started as mere tips about the current rumours in the lower town evolved into a golden seam of information concerning all sorts of plots and plays going on in the entire mountain.

About ten years after that night when they could have lost Fíli and Kíli, Dwalin received a note. And for once it wasn’t passed to him by whatever guard Nori had decided was suitable to work as a
It had been a long day, and as Dwalin entered his chambers he looked forward to nothing more than collapsing into his bed and ignoring the world for however long it took for his head to stop pounding.

This headache had not at all been helped when he’d found a note placed neatly on his pillow; a note held shut by a very familiar seal in the shape of a fox. Resisting the urge to check on his valuables, a grumbling Dwalin went to pluck the note from his bed. Whatever Nori wanted, it’d better be damned important for him to break into Dwalin’s private quarters.

It was, even if Dwalin could barely believe the truth of it at first.

Corrupt guards, innocent prisoners, blackmailed merchants, and in the middle of it all, an insane plot to kill Bilbo and Víli in order to marry Dís and thereby claim the crown. It was so convoluted and absurd that Dwalin hadn’t believed a single word of it until two nights later when he’d observed two of his guards placing the latest guard roosters in a chest, in return picking up a purse filled with clinking coins. Dwalin had hidden in the shadows behind a large statute in the eastern parts of the Bakers Guild Hall after a tip from yet another note placed on his pillow, but even when Nori’s latest information proved to be correct Dwalin still couldn’t believe that the rest of the thief’s original note had really been the truth. If an arm hadn’t wrapped itself around his chest to pull him further into the shadows he probably would have marched right out of his hiding spot and arrested the two criminals where they’d stood.

“After all the trouble I had finding out about this you are not going to do something stupid,” a voice hissed into his ear and it took a few embarrassingly long seconds for Dwalin to connect that voice with the Dwarf it belong to; Nori.

“Where in the blazes did you come from?” Dwalin whispered back, furious with Nori for surprising him, with himself for being surprised, and most of all, with the guards for being such moronic traitors.

“I need to talk to you, and to Bilbo,” Nori hissed instead of replying. “About what was in my letter, I thought we’d have more time, but we don’t - and if you tip them off we might have no time at all.”

They both froze when one of the guards turned his head to gaze in their general direction, and Dwalin didn’t dare as much as breathe until the scum had left the hall an eternity of a minute later.

“I need to speak to you,” Nori repeated and Dwalin sighed. Bilbo was always snappish as a fishwife after being disturbed in the middle of the night. This better be worth it.

Nori claimed not to know which guards could be trusted so he suggested it was best if Dwalin wasn’t seen entering Bilbo’s room this time of the night, just in case someone became suspicious.

“No, it's fine. It wouldn't be the first time I go to him this late,” Dwalin said, lost in thoughts about which of his men could still be trusted. He came back to himself when he realised that the silence coming from the thief was distinctly intrigued.

“Oh for-” Dwalin bit his tongue. He owed no explanations about how difficult it was to have the bloody king as your best friend. And add to that how much time Dwalin’s own work took and -

“I understand completely,” Nori said, even though his smirk clearly said that he didn’t.
sighed heavily.

“Never mind that. You know what would be really damned suspicious?” Dwalin growled. “Me sneaking around in the shadows like a thief. Good luck explaining that to any of my men, criminals or not.”

Nori blinked. “Fair point. Fine. I’ll meet you there then.”

Quick as lightening Nori scaled the statue up to the second floor of the Guild hall and was soon out of sight.

“Mahal fucking wept,” Dwalin grumbled as he strode towards the nearest exit.

Arriving at the Royal quarters only a few minutes later Dwalin was relieved to see who one of the guards on duty was. Havin would rather throw himself down a mineshaft than betray the king who had personally saved his father’s life at Azanulbizar.

What a single candle was compared to the flames of a forge, that was what hero worship was compared to what Havin felt for his king. And if Dwalin wasn’t mistaken it wasn't just hero worship that prompted the stars in the lad’s eyes when he saw Bilbo. At the moment though, the young guard didn’t wear a love-struck expression as much as a deeply suspicious one, and he was too far away from the gates he should be guarding for Dwalin’s comfort.

“Havin,” Dwalin acknowledged as he came close. “Where is your partner?”

“Sir!” Havin pulled himself upright and attempted a salute before he remembered that Dwalin didn’t much like that kind of frippery. The result was a sad little wave and Dwalin swallowed his snort before it could slip free. “Sir, Baldar is investigating a noise.”

“A noise,” Dwalin said and raised an eyebrow.

Apparently, not even the most loyal of guards were foolproof and when Dwalin entered Bilbo’s quarters he was sadly unsurprised to find Bilbo already awake and Nori draped over one of the armchairs in the sitting room.

Bilbo looked tired. Nori looked smug. But beneath the smirk there was a nervous edge.

“You need to tell your boys that no matter how interesting the shadows are, at least one would do best to remain at his post no matter what. You are lucky I’m such an upstanding citizen.”

This pulled a smile from Bilbo and Dwalin could have sworn he felt a couple of his hairs go grey out of frustration.

“Might we get to the point?” he asked and crossed his arms.

- 

Dwalin snapped back to the present when Nori hummed and stretched his legs. The thief appeared to be mulling something over, so Dwalin was not very surprised when a question came.

“I’m guessing that you weren’t as distracted by my little act earlier as I assumed?” Nori even sounded disappointed, and this time Dwalin didn’t bother hiding his smirk.

“Enough of a trick for you?”
“But why?” Nori asked. “You were doing such a good job of playing chaperone. I thought it best to intervene before our Hobbit had steam coming out of his ears.”

“Did you know Thorin is only in his forties?” Dwalin asked, avoiding the question.

Nori shrugged. “I figured it’d be close enough to that. Hobbits don’t live as long as Dwarfs after all. However, I don’t see why that really matters. He’s not a child. And don’t change the subject. You can’t really expect them to follow proper courting considering our circumstances.”

“If I wanted everything to be proper I hardly would have left them alone together in bed this morning, would I?”

“So why hover over them in the first place?”

“Why did you let me catch you stealing my pipe?”

“No cells around here for you to throw me in, stop avoiding the damned question.”

Dwalin sighed heavily. “Because someone needs to. Because Thorin is only in his forties. Because I know Bilbo has never really been in love before. Because going by the look in Thorin’s eyes he’d throw himself off a cliff if Bilbo asked him. Because the last one I saw this enamoured of Bilbo actually ended up dead. Pick one.”

“Havin…” Nori said slowly. “Been a while since I thought about that one.”

Dwalin was surprised that Nori even remembered the name, and it must have shown because the thief went on speaking.

“Bilbo used to talk about him sometimes. When he was drunk. He’s always been a morose drunk, you should know that. But it’s been years since the last time that name was mentioned.” Nori snorted. “And I can’t believe I’m actually managing to hold a civil conversation with you.”

“Bilbo goes drinking with you,” Dwalin stated flatly.

“Yeah, I knew the civility wouldn’t last,” Nori said and smirked. “What of it? It’s obviously hasn’t done either of us any harm, unless you count, quite literally, the contents of my purse.”

Dwalin raised an eyebrow and Nori shrugged. “It’s not like I’d let him pay. That’d just be strange. The King, buying me ale. Strange.”

Dwalin ran a hand over his face. “And you buying the King ale is not strange? Never mind. You’re not going drinking together again without a guard.” What he really wanted was to completely forbid any future drinking what so ever, but he knew better than to try and go against Bilbo and Nori at the same time.

“You could have just asked to come along in the first place,” Nori beamed, but his grin quickly turned into a frown. “Though we’re going to get a disguise for you or you’ll ruin my reputation. It’s not going to be easy, how d’you feel about a wig?”

“Your reputation,” Dwalin said incredulously.
“Thief,” Nori said and gestured at himself. “Captain of the guards,” he added and pointed at Dwalin. “I’m going to have a hard enough time as it is after this quest when it comes to getting certain people to trust me again. I dread to say it, but you might actually have to arrest me a couple of times. Which is rather the opposite of being seen drinking with you.”

“You’ll let me arrest you?” He’d no sooner spoken the words than he wanted to take them back.

“Don’t think you can do it without me letting you?” Nori smirked. “How sweet of you to say. Though I feel we’re getting quite some distance away from our previous subject. I don’t see how you looming over them will stop Thorin from making questionable decisions in the name of love. Besides, Havin was young; much younger than I think our would-be burglar has ever been, if you know what I mean.”

“Azog-” Dwalin began but Nori shook his head.

“That wasn’t a questionable decision. I’d’ve joined Bilbo too if I hadn’t been hanging upside down in a tree at the time.” The thief seemed a little embarrassed. “My foot got wedged between two branches somehow, and one of them creaked very alarmingly every time I tried to get lose. Besides, Thorin killed the beast, can’t argue with results.” Nori glanced away. “Yes, Havin’s death was unnecessary, even stupid, but none of us can change that. And in the end he died for something he believed in. Isn’t that what any one of us could hope for?”

Dwalin wanted to protest, but the words simply wouldn’t come.

That night when the three of them had sat together in Bilbo’s quarters, Nori had told them all he knew about the plot he'd stumbled over. The thief had paced back and forth over the stone floor, clearly agitated.

"At first I thought none of it was connected. But everything is connected to the plan to kill Bilbo and the prince consort. Someone's been getting a lot of money out of the merchants and that's all gone towards bribing the guards so they'd share sensitive information and get rid of certain unwanted people. Oh, some are ardent supporters of our dear friend here,” Nori had nodded at Bilbo. “But the guards have also been used to quiet those from the Merchants Guild who'd dare speak up against the extortion. Having family placed behind metal bars is a good way to demand silence. And of course, the guards also get paid to look the other way when the merchants actually get pressed for money. And then it loops.”

“How many are involved in this?” Dwalin growled. “I’ll have their beards for it, at the very least.”

“I don’t know,” Nori said and at his sides his fists clenched in frustration. “Certainly not all, but I only know about the ones I’ve been able to catch in the act. The merchants are not talking. Not after the death of Faron, son of Feron, just last month.”

“Not a burglary gone wrong then,” Bilbo said resignedly. “Which mind you, was bad enough on its own merits.”

“He was prepared to go to the guards,” Nori said and slumped down on the same armchair as he’d been seated in earlier. “But unfortunately it seems he went to the wrong ones.” The thief sighed. “I think most of the guards involved don’t even see the political angle. They just think their schedules are asked for in regard to the merchant extortion, not realising that knowing when someone will be in
the markets also means knowing when they won't be somewhere else. So that leaves us with our opponents knowing where any given guard will be at any given time as the schedules are set a week in advance.”

“Not anymore,” Dwalin rumbled, but Nori shook his head.

“You can’t change anything now, or they’ll know something is up and if they change their plans there is a chance I won’t be able to learn of their next attempt. It was sheer luck that led me to hear of this most recent development.”

“What is their plan?” Bilbo asked. “They can’t think that they’ll manage to kill me, kill Víli, and then attempt to claim the throne without causing a civil war.”

“Their plan is to kill you, and make it seem like Víli did it. Driven by greed and pride stemming from the fear that you would withdraw your naming of Fíli as your heir.” Nori sighed. “There is actually a rumour being spread that you’re thinking about naming Dáin’s son as your heir instead of Fíli. So someone has certainly prepared this well. Once you and Víli are dead the idea is to force Lady Dís into marrying one of the traitors behind the plot. Your sister is well-loved by the people; upon your death many would be happy to accept her as Queen.”

“But by claiming that Víli has killed me, won’t that cast guilt on Dís as well? He is her husband.”

“Her association with the killer will be unfortunate,” Nori said with a wry smile. “As such, it's only likely that she'll manage to claim the throne if she has a strong supporter on the council who can help her convince the others that she had no part of the plot. But I don’t expect that to be too hard. Your sister loves you, very few people doubt that.”

“One of the traitors has a place on the council then?” Dwalin couldn’t believe his ears.

“Everything points to that, or at least that the plotters have a prime piece of blackmail material to use, but I do not know who it is. And I've now discovered that I don't have the time anymore for further investigation. They are planning to kill you during your trip to northern ranges.”

“I leave in only five days,” Bilbo said flatly and Nori nodded, jaw clenched.

“If my information is correct, one of your loyal guards will be witness to Víli pushing you down a mineshaft. And upon being discovered, Víli will attack the guard who kills him in self-defence. Back in Ered Luin someone will grab one or both of the young princes to ensure lady Dís’ cooperation.”

“No one will believe that Víli killed Bilbo,” Dwalin argued. “It's absurd. They are family. Víli and Bilbo are as close as Bilbo and Dís.”

“Ah, yes that is what people will think. But that's before the letters are found.”


“The very same letters that allowed me to become aware of this plot in the first place,” Nori said tiredly. “An associate of mine was asked to produce a set of letters, from un-named conspirators to the prince consort. The letters make it all too clear that he has been sending letters in return to those who would like to see new blood claim the throne. She was killed after completing them, but that led her lover to find me as per her instructions, to tell me about it and ask for revenge.”

“She was your friend,” Bilbo said and his eyes were grieved. “I am sorry for your loss.”
“Was it one of mine that killed her?” Dwalin demanded.

“I don’t think so,” Nori said after accepting Bilbo’s condolences with a nod. “But if it was, they weren’t really one of yours, eh? We’ve had our difference of opinion but I’ve never considered you to be a cold-blooded killer. Even if I didn’t know you were unwaveringly loyal to Bilbo I wouldn’t have believed you were involved in this.”

Nori’s green eyes were uncommonly earnest and Dwalin was the first one to look away.

“Anyway,” Nori continued. “I’m sorry for not telling you everything straight away, but I thought I’d have time to get more answers. The original plan seems to have been to wait until the Midsummer celebrations and take advantage of the general chaos that is inevitable to come during such a large feast, but your trip was apparently too good not to take advantage of.”

“You are not going,” Dwalin glared at his friend and king and crossed his arms. “And neither is Víli. It’s three months to Midsummer. That’s plenty of time for me to root out the traitors and knock some names out of their wooden skulls.”

“Or it’s enough time for them to think of a plan that I won’t hear about,” Nori argued. “The only reason I know so much about this one is because one of the guards we saw tonight seems to be involved beyond simple extortion and apparently, he likes to brag when he fucks. No, not me, I’ve got better taste than that.” The latter was said to Bilbo who had an inquiring eyebrow raised. “But unfortunately he doesn’t know everything.”

Dwalin rubbed his temples; the same blasted headache from earlier this week was back with a vengeance.

“So what you’re telling me is that I’ve four days to find out which of the guards are loyal and which are not. And then what? Hope that one of them will know enough so we can topple the entire lot of them, all the way up to whoever is pulling the strings?” He looked towards Bilbo. “Don’t go on the trip. There are guards I know are loyal. I’ll arrange for a -”

“We have four days,” Nori interrupted, the thief also looked to Bilbo. “I wouldn’t say this if I didn’t believe it, you know that. Waiting is not the best option.”

Just like that night all those years ago Bilbo looked searchingly at Nori and Dwalin wanted to hit something, or someone. He knew what that look meant.

“Can you find out who is behind this in four days?” Bilbo asked. “Or is there something else you suggest we do?”

Between one second and the next, a knife appeared in Nori’s right hand and he twirled it around with a careless grace. “The way I see it there is just one option,” he said. “Find whoever is behind this, and explain to them why it is a very bad idea.”

“You know you have actually arrested me a couple of times already. Well, not you, but I think there’s been at least five occasions when one of your men has done so.” Apparently Nori had grown bored with Dwalin’s silence and decided to take matters into his own hands, and the results were
immediate.

“What?!” Dwalin stared at Nori in disbelief, shocked out of his memories. There was so much wrong with what he’d just heard that he didn’t even know where to begin.

“Does it help if I add that I wanted to get arrested?” Nori said and arched a braided eyebrow teasingly. “Or if I say I didn’t actually spend more than a few hours locked up each time? Or does that make it worse?”

“Someone arrested you, didn’t tell me about it, and then let you out? Without telling me about it?” Dwalin thumped his head against the oak a couple of times. It didn’t help.

“Easy there or you’ll dent the tree,” Nori smirked. “And no one let me out, but your lads did tell you about me being gone. Every time. At least I assume so.”

“Start with telling me why you wanted to get arrested,” Dwalin growled. “This sounds very unlike you.”

“How do you think I could tell you when one of your guards were willing to take a little bribe if I didn’t test it every now and again? Not that I did all the testing myself, but I’m not sure most of the others called it testing. Getting caught I think is their term for it.” Nori nudged his shoulder against Dwalin’s. “Unfortunately I seem to be the only one to consider that those of your guards who are crap at catching people might also be inclined to be crooked. So someone had to test them personally. ‘S not like I can ask someone else to get caught on purpose.”

“How come I don’t know about it?”

Dwalin felt a little calmer now that he knew that Nori had let himself get caught on purpose. After all these years he wasn’t really afraid that Nori would abuse Bilbo’s kindness - much - but that didn’t mean that he liked the idea that someone else had succeeded where he himself had failed. The thought rankled.

“But you do know, only, no one ever mentioned my name. I can see how that would get confusing. Think, surely you remember your men talking about a prisoner that just seemed to be unable to stay behind the bars he’s been placed behind.” By this point Nori radiated smugness and the look on his face was that of a cat who had managed to bring down an ox, never mind a puny bird. He was obviously greatly pleased to return the table back to the normality of him being the one who sprung surprises on Dwalin.

The large Dwarf thought it over. Nori has been caught, or let himself get caught. Only, no one knew it was him, or they would have told Dwalin. That means that he had been in disguise. And if he had only stayed a few hours in the dungeons that meant that either someone had let him out, which wasn’t likely, or it meant...

“You are the thrice-cursed Shadow!? “

As if it wasn’t enough that Nori was Nori, a thorn in every guard’s side and the most annoying Dwarf Dwalin had ever met, Nori was also what amounted to a fairy tale that senior guards told rookies before their first shifts to watch over the prisoners. Don’t let your guard down or one of them might just end up being the Shadow, and that one will slip away if you as much as blink.

“Not so damned loud, or Dori will come running,” Nori hissed. “He doesn’t know, nor will he find
out. If he find out I’ve actually been in prison he’ll never let me hear the end of it.”

“You are the Shadow,” Dwalin hissed back. Of course Nori was the Shadow. Who else could be the criminal who was second in infamy to only Nori of Ri? Of course it was him.

No one really knew what the Shadow looked like, and he never gave the same name twice. The descriptions of him had also varied enough that Dwalin had assumed that if the Shadow was real, it wasn’t really just one thief, but several. Though it could just have been something a few lazy guards had made up to excuse their own failures. It wasn’t easy to escape from behind iron bars after all. Nor was it easy to get out of the prison without anyone noticing you. But when had Nori ever done anything the easy way?

“At your service,” Nori laughed and inclined his head. “You of all people should know how easy it is for people to forget who I am when my hair is less… distinct.”

- 

Nori hadn’t known who the mastermind behind the plot was, but he’d had a few suggestions.

“Are we assuming that whoever this council member is, he is the one directly behind the plot, as well as the one who will marry my sister?” Bilbo asked.

“It’s likely,” Nori said as he tipped his chair backwards and balanced it on two legs. They’d moved from the sitting room into Bilbo’s private chambers since their planning had moved on to require the use of a table, paper and ink. “Bit risky to blackmail someone into doing your bidding and then making them king. Bit risky to make anyone else but yourself the king on the whole. And I don’t see how they’d get away with someone marrying Lady Dís if the person wasn’t on the council already. It has to be someone she knows so they can sell the marriage as genuine, and it has to be someone with influence, so the people won’t think she was part of the plot.”

Dwalin stared down at the list of councillors. It was better than looking at the list he’d made of his guards. Looking at that made him want to scrunch it up into a ball and lob it into the fire.

“This entire thing is being set up to make the prince consort the bad guy,” Nori told them with a thoughtful frown on his face. “Which means that what the people behind this want is likely the opposite of what they claim that he wants.”

“Dáin is not involved,” Bilbo said firmly. “But I think I understand what you mean. If my people think Víli is the figurehead of those who think it’s time for the line of Baggins to step down, then they are likely to be a lot less sympathetic to that way of thinking after he kills me.” Bilbo huffed out a laugh. “At least I hope so. I’d hope someone would have told me if I was doing such a bad job that a majority of my people want to get rid of me.”

“You are a good king,” Dwalin said and put his hand on Bilbo’s arm. “But there will always be those who want power for the sake of having it.”

“I think it’s going to be someone with conservative opinions, yes,” Nori said. “If we do not count Dáin there’s still twelve people on the council, if any of them have been making noise about the good old days not always being the good old days, I think you can cross them out on the list. Likewise if they’ve got no connection whatsoever to the line of Baggins.”

“That’s only two gone,” Dwalin said as he ran the quill over the names. “I will ask Balin if he knows
something we’ve overlooked, he’s got a good mind for things like this, but we need more to go on.”

“They seem to be in need of money, I think that allows us to get rid of six more,” Bilbo said and counted off the names of the councillors who had more than enough money to not have to complicate matters by extorting merchants. “If they didn’t need the money there are a lot of easier ways to produce a cover story to feed to the guards. One that doesn’t involve upsetting a whole guild. Getting rid of me won’t do them much good in that respect.”

“Four left,” Nori said and let his chair fall heavily back to the stone floor. “I abhor politics, just thought you might like to know.”

“Get rid of Relgrim and Dolim as well,” Bilbo said. “Not only are Relgrim’s views conservative enough that I think he’d frown on the idea of murdering me, but he is… close to 300, I would think? The idea of him and Dís falling in love is about as unlikely story as it can get. And Dolim is married, quite happily as I understand it.”

“Two then,” Dwalin said and circled the names on the list. “At least that’s manageable.”

“Can you get enough trustworthy guards together to cover things here?” Nori asked and Dwalin resisted the urge to snarl at the thief on general principle. They were on the same side after all. Instead he nodded. It would work, because the alternative was not acceptable.

The days leading up to Bilbo’s and Víli’s departure - and Dwalin’s too, because he would turn into an Elf before letting them go off on their own - were hectic. Dwalin’s temper was short due to stress and a lack of sleep, and when finding a note from Nori announcing that he’d go with them as well Dwalin might just have ripped it to shreds. It didn’t make him feel any better.

“If the guards take one look at you they’ll damned well know something is wrong.”

“If I say, trust me, it’ll be fine, is there any chance that’ll actually work?”

Dwalin must have looked as unimpressed as he felt, because Nori sighed.

“Yeah, thought so. For the record, I wouldn’t do anything that I knew would harm Bilbo. But sure, we’ll do it your way.”

This didn’t mean that Nori agreed to stay in the city. What it meant was that the next morning Dwalin stalked to the Eastern gate in order to see if he could pick a disguised Nori out of the crowd. The deal was that if he could do that Nori, wouldn’t come. Nori had promised not to cheat and hide, and Dwalin had agreed that an hour was plenty of time to find the thief. After all, finding had never been the problem, only the part where finding should lead to catching.

An hour after the time they’d set someone tapped a frustrated Dwalin on the back and he turned to find a dark-haired Dwarf dressed in leather armour. The Dwarf didn’t say anything at first, and Dwalin crossed his arms and looked impatiently into… amused green eyes that were too damned
familiar by half.

“I win,” Nori declared and stroked a hand through the beard that was not only as dark as soot, but also reached halfway down his chest, and so did his hair now that it wasn’t made up in the three points that Dwalin had become used to.

The day after, Dwalin, Bilbo, Vili, and Nori, together with three guards, started their journey towards the northern ranges of the Blue Mountains. Officially they would pass judgement on whether the ancestral dwellings in the north were possible to make habitable again; the reports given by the scouts had seemed promising but it would take an expert’s eye to know for sure.

Vili – whose stone sense was practically unparalleled, had introduced Nori as a fellow miner, and an expert in telling if a ledge or a tunnel would collapse beneath your feet or not.

During the planning it had quickly been decided that Dwalin shouldn’t change which guards would accompany them on the trip as that might cause the traitors to abandon their plot. One out of the three had to be a traitor or there would be none to go ahead with the plan to kill Bilbo and Vili. But regretfully the only thing Dwalin knew for sure was that the traitor wasn’t Havin, who by a stroke of good luck had been one of the guards to be assigned. The others he didn’t know well enough to be able to tell one way or the other, and regretfully Nori wasn’t sure about any of them either. Theri and Heli were their names and all Dwalin knew was that they’d he’d never been forced to reprimand them for anything. Could be a good thing, or it could be a traitor laying low.

It would take their group two days to get to the ancient city and already by the first nightfall Dwalin felt as if he would crawl out of his skin. Not being able to trust those around him was a horrible feeling and it was with a foul mood Dwalin joined Nori; or rather Ovar, by the small fire they’d made.

Ovar the miner was checking on his gear and casting suspicious glances into the shadows that surrounded them. But the Dwarf that met Dwalin’s eyes was definitely Nori. And it was Nori who leaned closer to Dwalin when Havin, Their, and Heli had gone to scout the tunnels up ahead.

“Now you know why I hate politics; imagine never being able to trust anyone not to stab you in the back,” the thief said beneath his breath.

The next day they arrived at their destination and Dwalin’s had to constantly tell himself to act normally and not as if he expected the stones themselves to start attacking him. Nori had disappeared into the mines as soon as they’d arrived, claiming that he needed to investigate. What he really was doing was giving Bilbo and Vili a reason to go looking for him later, as well as making sure that he’d have the advantage of being unseen when the traitor planned to make his move.

If all went well they would manage to disarm the traitor as soon as he’d made the attempt on Bilbo’s life. They’d make him reveal who he was working for, and back in the city some of Dwalin’s most trusted guards would make sure that no one would be able to get to Dis or her boys, and also round up those amongst the guards that Nori had sworn were dirty.

But of course plans never went as well as they really should.

Twenty minutes after Bilbo and Vili had told the rest of the group that they would go check on ‘Ovar’, Heli rose to his feet and casually declared that he would go check that everything was all right with the King and prince consort. To say nothing and just nod in agreement was one of the hardest things Dwalin had ever done. So this was the traitor. It had to be. But then Theri stretched
and said that he’d come too. Two traitors? Was this perhaps why they’d been so eager to take this opportunity? If it was indeed the both of them, then it had to have seemed as a golden chance.

“I’ll go as well,” Havin said and grunted as he climbed to his feet. “Oh, it’s no bother,” he added when the other two protested (but did both of them protest because of the same reasons?). “It’s not like I’m doing anything more important at the moment.”

“Havin!” Dwalin called. “A word please. You two go along,” he added and nodded towards the guards. He had to trust that Bilbo and Víli – and Nori - would be prepared. They had to wait until there was evidence that one, or both, of the guards were indeed in on the plot or it’d be too easy for them to deny everything.

“Keep your voice down,” Dwalin murmured when Havin came close. “Quickly now, how well do you know those two?”

“Not very well, sir,” Havin said softly with a confused look on his face. “Why?”

“Are they friends, have you seen them talk much before this trip?”

Now Havin looked even more confused. “Don’t you know? They’re brothers. Seem like decent enough fellas, good with their axes at least. But -”

Brothers. Dwalin cursed. He should have known that. So it was very likely both of them then. This changed things.

“Listen very carefully,” Dwalin said and rose to his feet. “There are people who are plotting to kill Bilbo and Víli. There’s a good chance that those two guards are in on it. What we’re going to do -”

But Havin had stopped listening. Face pale as wax, the guard looked over his shoulder to the tunnel the rest of their group had disappeared into. “Bilbo,” he breathed, before taking off at a run.

Cursing again Dwalin ran after him. He hadn’t liked this part of the plan in the first place as it meant that too much relied on Nori being reliable. But whatever his feelings on it he didn’t think it would improve by having a panicked guard go tearing into the thick of it. Especially not as there’d be not just one traitor, but two.

He caught up with Havin just as the tunnel split up into a three paths. The mines were to the west of the living quarters, but it seemed that the young guard had forgotten that in his alarm as he stood frozen before the three gateways without seeming to know which one to pick.

“You will listen!” Dwalin snarled and grabbed Havin’s coat collar to give him a shake. “You won’t help either of them if you fly into there like a deranged bat.”

“The King,” Havin objected. “We have to -”

It was possible that Dwalin would have managed to shake some sense into Havin if he’d had a little more time, but just as the lad had begun to speak someone cried out in pain and Dwalin was suddenly left holding an empty coat as Havin ran in the direction of the scream; towards the mines.

Dwalin’s legs were longer, but Havin was frantic and the lad beat him to the mines by more than a minute. Not wanting to reveal his own presence, Dwalin forced himself to stop running as he came close enough that his steps would be heard.
“- them go,” he heard Havin demand from inside the mine.

“Isn’t that endearing,” one of the traitors laughed. “He thinks he can stop us.”

“Yeah, yeah,” the other one said. “But what I want to know is how far that scream was heard. Will our esteemed captain come running into here in as well?”

“Better be quick about it in either case. If Your Majesty would be so kind to go to the edge of the cliff over there,” the first one said mockingly and Dwalin cursed silently. Oh, if Nori had been next to him Dwalin could have wrung the bastard’s neck. This wasn’t supposed to have happened.

Realising that he couldn’t really make matter much worse Dwalin slowly poked his head out of the tunnel to try and take a look at what was happening.

“The least you can do before you kill us is to tell us why,” Bilbo demanded as he knelt beside Víli who appeared to be unconscious and had a dagger sticking out of his shoulder. Havin was standing in front of them both and Dwalin grimaced when he noticed that the boy wasn’t even armed. He must have left his sword back where they’d made camp. Out of all the moronic -

“You are not going to die,” Havin protested and the traitors laughed.

“He is cute,” Heli said. “Shame he is so stupid.”

“They are going to die,” Theri said matter-of-factly. “Good news though, you won’t be around to see it.”

“Havin!” Bilbo shouted as Theri swung his axe at the young guard’s neck.

To his credit Havin side-stepped both the first and second attack, and just as Theri went for his third a knife came flying out of the dark and struck the traitor in this thigh. Nori. Finally.

Theri fell to his knees with a yell which caused his brother to raise his own axe and whirl around to try and see where this new threat originated from. Taking advantage of the situation Havin scrambled to get to Theri’s axe since the other Dwarf had dropped it on the ground. Seeing the end of the fight, Dwalin drew his own axe, ready to burst in and help Havin.

But Havin had misjudged Theri. As the young guard bent down, the wounded Dwarf snaked an arm around his throat and pulled him to the ground. With his other hand he drew the twin to the dagger that was lodged into Víli’s shoulder.

Bilbo had risen to his feet, his blade raised, but he stopped as Theri put the edge of the dagger to Havin’s throat.

“That’s right,” the traitor said. “You move and he dies. But your friend hiding in the shadows might as well come out. Slowly. And without any more surprises for us.”

It took Dwalin a moment to realise that the scum meant Nori and not him.

“No,” Havin protested. “Your Majesty, don’t listen to him, he’ll kill you. You can’t -”

“It’s all right,” Bilbo said and smiled comfortingly at Havin. A small trickle of blood had just started
running down the young Dwarf’s throat from where Theri’s dagger had bit into it. “It’ll be all right.” Bilbo raised his voice. “Ovar, come.”

Dwalin shook his head, this was all going wrong. He would have to wait and see if Nori could distract -

“No,” Havin said again. “I won’t let you do this.” When the Havin grabbed Theri’s arm, Dwalin first assumed he was going to try and wrest the dagger from him but instead he clamped his hand over the other Dwarf’s and wrenched it closer. Dwalin looked on in horror as the knife tore into Havin’s throat. Quick as lightning two more knives came flying out of the shadows to hit Heli in the arm and leg. Shaking off his stupor Dwalin roared and raised his axe. It was definitely time to end this now.

Without a hostage the two conspirators was no match for Nori’s throwing knives and Dwalin’s axe and once they were disarmed Nori crept out of the shadows to truss them up tightly. After checking on Víli, who had only pretended to be unconscious and was now awake enough to complain about how Dís would never let him go on adventures again, Dwalin made sure that none of the traitors would bleed out from their knife wounds. Dead men didn’t talk after all.

But for Havin it was already too late. The young Dwarf lay slumped like a discarded doll, limbs going every which way and the front of his shirt and gambeson dark with blood.

All his life Bilbo had been quick to smile and quick to forgive, but when the King rose from Havin’s side, hands stained with blood, both the traitors blanched at the expression on his face.

Still, it would seem even traitors had some twisted sense of loyalty, because it wasn’t until Nori threatened to cut Heli’s feet off and leave him in the mines - they needed only one of them alive after all - that Theri confessed everything he knew about the plot, naming one of the two councillors that remained on their list as the one behind the plot, offering to give all the names they knew of the guards involved.

It should have been a happy ending, if it hadn’t been for the death of someone whose only fault was that he’d let love and loyalty win over common sense.

A month later when the guilty were hanged for their crimes – a slow and painful death - Dwalin watched Bilbo watch the proceedings. Neither of them looked the other way.

- “I better go find Ori before the princes manage to talk him into something stupid,” Nori sighed. Before he rose he turned to Dwalin and smirked. “Should I expect to see steam coming out of Thorin’s ears later today, or will you leave them alone?”

“We’ll see,” Dwalin said and smirked back.

After Nori had left Dwalin closed his eyes and for a few moments he was at peace. It pained him to admit it, but Nori was at least partially right. Thorin was no Havin, and no one could change the past. The only thing anyone could do was make sure that history didn’t repeat itself. But perhaps that could be done while still giving the lovebirds a bit more time to themselves. They deserved it for finally managing to stop tip-toeing around each other.

Still, that didn’t mean he wanted to sleep in the same room as them while they went at it.
Suddenly in the mood for a smoke Dwalin’s hand fumbled for his pipe. A pipe that was no longer tucked into his belt.

“Thief!”

Chapter End Notes

Both Nori’s interlude and Dwalin's interlude now turned out a lot different than I thought. Which is awesome for me because I get to discover more about this universe, and I hope you like it too!

If you are still looking to read something else after this monster, and are perhaps in the mood for more Dwalin and Bilbo, head over to Advantage by diemarysues

lol, she is also the only reason this Interlude makes sense, so if you liked it, tell her thanks ;}

It was quite a beautiful day. Thorin didn’t really know exactly how much time had passed since they left the Shire, but he was fairly sure it was just over two months, which would put them somewhere towards the end of July. Ori or Balin could probably tell him if he asked. But at the moment the exact date mattered little. It was enough to be in a place where the summer was a lot more obvious compared to what it had been on the snow covered peaks of the Misty Mountains.

Hand in hand Thorin and Bilbo continued to the field they had passed upon their arrival the day before. Unsurprisingly it looked very much the same; green grass, an abundance of vibrant flowers and several overly large bees which thankfully seemed too involved with their own errands to pay them any mind. The insects were a good inch larger than Thorin’s thumb, and the Hobbit caught Bilbo sending them a wary glance as they sat down at the edge of the field.

“Leave them alone and they should leave us alone,” Thorin said and squeezed Bilbo’s fingers.

“I certainly hope so,” Bilbo said and smiled a little self-consciously. He put his free hand on Orcrist’s scabbard which he had unfastened from his back and placed on the ground. “I don’t think Orcrist will be much use against bees, and not even Nori would have daggers enough to throw at all of them.”

Thorin snorted. “I take it Dwarfs are not exactly avid beekeepers?”

Back in the Shire it was not an uncommon practice, even if the bees in question were a great deal smaller than these. Young children quickly learnt that the buzzing insects would do you no harm if you just avoided provoking them. Not to say that it wasn’t sometimes a more painful lesson, but it was usually only one child every year who dared to try and steal honey from the beehives. The rest were satisfied to learn from his or her mistake.

Bilbo shook his head. “We trade for the majority of our food, something of a tactical disadvantage I know, but it can’t be helped. We can’t grow much inside our mountains, and even if we had fields, or hives, outside we couldn’t protect them if we were attacked by an enemy.”

Thorin was a little taken-aback by the sudden jump from beekeeping to wartime strategy. The last thing Hobbts thought about when they built their homes and towns was if they would hold up against an attack. Even Michel Delving had no walls, no gates, and while there were guards posted where such gates would have stood their purpose was mostly to welcome people to the town and provide directions when needed.

The cities of Men that Thorin had seen had been more fortified; even Bree was surrounded by high stone walls, but despite that, he’d never really felt the walls was anything more than a way of defining just where the village begun and ended. Bree might have durable walls, but all the gates
were just wood and not exactly sturdy at that. If someone really wanted in they would not find much opposing them, and the same was true for most of the other Mannish settlements Thorin had seen.

“Are you often attacked then?” Thorin asked and thought back on what Bilbo had told him earlier about not allowing merchants within their gates. “Is that why you distrust those who are not your own kind?”

“Yes, and no,” Bilbo replied and brushed his thumb over Thorin’s knuckles. “Before Smaug, Erebor had not been attacked for centuries. We were allied with both the Men and Elves around us, as well as with our cousins in the Iron Hills. What Orc and Goblin activity there were was sporadic and easily dealt with.” The Dwarf sighed. “But just because someone says that they are your friend, doesn’t mean that you can trust them. And I’m not only talking about the aid that didn’t come from the Elvenking after the Desolation. Treasure has the tendency to work a magic of its own upon the minds of certain people, and Dwarfs are unfortunately not exempt from that.”

“I’m not sure I understand,” Thorin said slowly. Did Bilbo mean that Dwarfs really didn’t trust anyone, not even their own people? But before he could explain himself Bilbo chuckled.

“No, I’m sorry, I imagine that it’s hard for a Hobbit to understand. And I mean no insult by this, I swear. But from what I know - and have seen - of your people, you do not really care for gold and gems at all do you?”

Thorin blanched. Bilbo’s words were said lightly and they were not exactly wrong. Most Hobbits did not care for money at all, they had no real sense of what was valuable, and preferred to trade instead of paying with coins.

But most Hobbits were not like Thorin’s grandfather and father.

“Thorin?”

Distantly Thorin felt Bilbo’s thumb brush over his knuckles again, and the touch made him realise that he was clutching the Dwarf’s hand hard enough to probably hurt. Thorin immediately relaxed his grip and would have pulled his hand away if Bilbo hadn’t placed his other hand on top of it; cupping Thorin’s hand in both of his. Worried eyes met his when the Hobbit looked up again.

“Thorin, what’s wrong?”

Thorin’s laugh was not a happy sound. “I find that I do not know where to begin answering that. But it’s part of what I came here to tell you about. What I need to you to know about me.”

“You can tell me anything.” Bilbo still looked worried, but the smile Thorin received was warm. “Anything, everything, or nothing.”

Thorin sighed. “You asked me why I do not trust Gandalf. And I don’t really trust him, but that’s not why -” Thorin sighed again and looked away. “Gandalf used to be a friend of my family. Except friend is not the right word because every time he stopped by for a visit it would upset my grandfather. I know now that that was not really Gandalf’s fault. I already told you that my grandfather was not well, but none of us really understood that until it was too late.”

“Your grandfather did not care for Gandalf?” Bilbo asked.

“My grandfather didn’t appreciate that Gandalf wouldn’t help him earn more money,” Thorin smiled wryly. “Yes, most Hobbits hold gold in complete disregard. It would seem that my family was set to
be the exception from that rule. And while it is skipping ahead, that’s what ultimately led me to become a smith instead of a merchant. I would not let metal rule me.”

“Oh,” Bilbo eyes widened. “I’m so -”

“There is no need for you to apologize,” Thorin shook his head. “It’s not anyone’s fault, least of all yours.”

They were both sitting crossed-legged on the ground, opposite each other and close enough that their knees touched and bumped with every little movement, and Thorin reached out to absently trace the pattern that was etched into Bilbo’s leather armguards.

“I grew up, not understanding why, but knowing that when Gandalf arrived it meant that grandfather would be in a horrible mood for weeks. Then the Wizard stopped coming, and for a while things seemed to get better. Of course this was a few years after my mother had died, so perhaps I just thought things could not get any worse. But I was wrong. Things can always get worse.”

“And better,” Bilbo cut in, hand coming up to Thorin’s face. “Definitely better too.”

“Yes,” Thorin agreed and turned his face into Bilbo’s palm. “But to be perfectly honest, I think you are the only ‘better’ that my life has seen for a long time.”

Bilbo huffed and shook his head. “I catch myself thinking that there is nothing I would like more than to change that, and then I remember I’m dragging you along on a quest where I intend to shove you up against a dragon. But then again, I also bring my sister-sons, as well as my oldest and dearest friends, so why not you as well?” He groaned. “Mahal’s beard, I am so sorry.”

“I’m not,” Thorin stated simply. “I’d rather be made to ashes by a dragon then be turned to dust from a life without meaning. And if I had never met you - if I had never been able to kill Azog for you, then my life would have had no meaning. And you’re not ‘dragging’ me,” he added and turned to press a kiss to Bilbo’s palm. “I’m exactly where I want to be. I know Erebor is important to you. How important it is. Whatever the outcome, I will never regret signing that contract.” He snorted. “Reading it on the other hand. Evisceration? Really? I could almost think that you didn’t wish for me to sign it.”

Bilbo looked a little embarrassed. “I let Balin write it, and he wanted to be sure that our would-be burglar knew what he was getting into. And I can’t say I disagree with him on the principle of it.”

“I’d still say that specifying what sort of coffin you would provide for me was probably unnecessary,” Thorin said and raised an eyebrow. “But the part in the fine print about the plaque in my honour was a nice gesture. At least, it was until I got to the even finer print and realised that you could mount said plaque in the privy if you so choose to.”

“You are quite horrible to tease me about such a terrible thing,” Bilbo murmured and let his fingers move up to tangle into Thorin’s hair. “Wasn’t there also some sort of clause asking you to respect the leader of the Company.”

“Not that I can remember,” Thorin smiled and leaned to press his forehead against Bilbo’s.

“I’ll have to ask Balin to include one,” Bilbo said, but he couldn’t keep his lips from quirking upwards.
For a minute they just sat together, quiet except the soft sounds of their breaths.

“If I had to choose between you and Erebor,” Bilbo began and Thorin instinctively shook his head in denial, because he would never ask—“I would have to choose Erebor. In fact I have chosen Erebor already or I would have not asked you to come.”

This didn’t come as a surprise, so Thorin merely nodded and traced his palm up and down Bilbo’s spine to show that he wasn’t offended. How could he be?

“Erebor is not just my home, it belongs to my people. It’s my nephews’ birth right. It’s -”

“I understand,” Thorin said, aiming for soothing. “I -”

“No you don’t. You don’t understand,” Bilbo protested. “Because if it was just up to me, if I wasn’t king, if I could take something just for me. Then I’d end this quest right here and bring you and Fíli and Kíli and everyone else back to Ered Luin where no one is going to get hurt!” The Dwarf deflated. “But I am king, and I also know that that’s not how it works. People still get hurt, even without Dragons, Orcs and Goblins to blame.”

There wasn’t really anything Thorin could say to that. First of all, he was a little stunned by Bilbo’s declaration. And secondly, he also knew very well that people did get hurt, get sick, and get killed. He wasn’t fatalistic enough to say that it was inevitable, but in a way it was, because it was just part of life.

“But I want to choose you.” Bilbo continued sincerely and again grasped Thorin’s hand, twining their fingers together. “Not because it is what my father would have wanted, or because of what I owe to my people. But because I love you, unlike I have ever loved anyone.”

“And I you,” Thorin said hoarsely and bent his head to kiss Bilbo’s hand. He looked up into Bilbo’s eyes and tried to find the words. “I - you make me afraid.”

Thorin had no more spoken the last word before Bilbo turned a shade paler than the cream they had been served that morning, and the hand Thorin held stiffened.

“No, no, no,” Thorin rushed to explain himself. “It's not - Before you, I wasn't afraid. Not of anything. Not of the thunder, not - not even of dying.” Seeing that his words had so far done little to calm Bilbo Thorin brought the Dwarf’s hand up to press another kiss to it, hoping to reassure by actions if not by his clumsy words. “I didn’t realise it at the time, but when the Trolls captured us, that was the first time I had been afraid in years. The first time since -” Thorin hesitated. “The first time since after my father died. But even when the Trolls held me up in the air, I wasn’t afraid to die. I was more afraid for you. For all of you. But mostly I was angry. I had just realised that I was falling in love with you, and then it looked like we all would die because of my stupidity. Then, when the Stone Giants fought, I was afraid. I didn’t want to die.”

Bilbo’s hand had relaxed again, but the Dwarf still looked a little too pale. Deciding to ignore such trivial matters as propriety and respectability Thorin crawled to straddle Bilbo’s lap. He was a little too big for it to work properly, and Bilbo’s legs would probably fall asleep right away, but he didn’t much care. He needed to be closer.

“Before you, I was waiting for something. I wouldn’t call what I was doing ‘living’. I was waiting and if you, all of you, hadn't come I think I would be waiting still. I think I would have kept waiting until I died.” Thorin kissed a small bruise that flowered high up on Bilbo’s cheekbone. “You can’t be afraid if you have nothing to lose. Even if I die now, this very moment, I have accomplished more
than I would have in another sixty years and I won’t regret a single moment that has passed since we left Hobbiton if the alternative is not being here, now, with you.”

“Not even Dwalin interrupting us this morning?” Bilbo asked, with a voice not entirely steady, arms coming up to wrap tightly around Thorin.

“Not even that,” Thorin said solemnly and gently knocked their foreheads together. He had closed his eyes, so when Bilbo’s lips pressed against his own he was startled for half of a second before moving his hands up to curl into Bilbo’s hair and kissing back.

“Whatever I did to deserve you,” Bilbo murmured. “I am so very grateful I did it.”

“Probably putting up with Fíli and Kíli,” Thorin teased and Bilbo snorted before kissing him again.

“I’ll tell them you’d said so.”

When Thorin made to move away from Bilbo’s lap the Dwarf would not uncurl his arms from around his waist.

“No, I think I like you there,” Bilbo smiled. “And don’t fret, you’re not too heavy. The number of times Dwalin has sat on me during weapons training is beyond my ability to count. Compared to him your weight is negligible. Just try and keep yourself from leaning into me too much, my ribs would not appreciate that.”

“And your arm?” Thorin questioned and poked at Bilbo’s left shoulder.

“Is completely fine,” Bilbo said, as if he hadn’t just winced. “It’s just a little strained. Nothing to worry about. Óin had a look and he agrees.”

Thorin muttered something unpleasant about the stubbornness of Dwarves but relented and settled back down in Bilbo’s embrace.

“I would tell you the rest of my history now,” he said slowly. “Before I talk myself out of it.”

Bilbo didn’t say anything, but the arms around Thorin tightened the slightest bit.

“You know about how my grandfather died. The fire. How he could have survived, but then he ran back inside again.”

“You said he was sick,” Bilbo prompted gently when Thorin hadn’t spoken for a few seconds.

“Indeed he was. At least, I would at least call it a sickness.” Thorin sighed. “My grandmother died only a year after I was born. I don’t even remember her. Father said that Grandfather was never the same after that. He turned all of his attention to the business. And then he began to drink. Not immediately after of course. Nothing was immediate.” Thorin turned his gaze away. “I - maybe that is why my parents didn’t notice anything. And then Mother died. And after that… ” Thorin smiled wryly. “Like father like son.”

“So your father…” Bilbo trailed off.

“My father also found great interest in the family business,” Thorin said and tried not to let the familiar bitterness creep into his mind. “Though not in the bottle. Not that -” He cleared his throat.
“Not that it mattered in the end.”

Turning his head to meet Bilbo’s concerned gaze Thorin allowed himself to lean in and claim a kiss. “For strength,” he murmured against the thin curves of Bilbo’s upper lip.

“You are strong already.” Bilbo’s hand had come up to cup Thorin’s face and for a second the Hobbit was distracted into wondering if the lack of beard was horribly strange to a Dwarf. “But if I can help I am more than willing.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “I will remember that the next time you protest that something is not proper.”

“I’m considering asking Balin to make a new contract considering your virtue, or the lack of it,” Bilbo said loftily. “Though I fear he will just shake his head and sigh if I ask.”

Thorin was amazed to learn that he could laugh; even when about to tell Bilbo about the darkest period in his life he could laugh as long as he had Bilbo. This gave him more than enough strength to go on with his story.

“When I was 32 my father disappeared.”

“So young,” Bilbo murmured.

“Not so young for a Hobbit,” Thorin corrected. “Just one year away from my maturity.”

“That is still young,” Bilbo said, shaking his head. “But don’t let me interrupt.”

Thorin took a deep breath, taking in the smell of Bilbo’s skin and hair and letting it fill his lungs.

“He disappeared,” the Hobbit continued. “I had actually been running the company for a good few years. Father had become… odd. He had problems trusting people, thinking that everyone was going to steal from him. That people actually were stealing from him. He would talk to himself, or just sit for hours staring at nothing. And just like Grandfather he became obsessed with gold and riches.”

Thorin sighed. “He had a true sickness of the mind. In hindsight it is so clear. But at the time I thought… I don’t know what I thought. That he would become better again perhaps. That he was just missing Mother, that he was lonely. And then one evening as I came back from the shop he wasn’t at the house. He was gone for a year, and then Gandalf - then Gandalf brought him back.”

“You don’t sound like that was a happy thing,” Bilbo stated softly.

“It - I,” Thorin bit the inside of his cheek, not enough to draw blood but enough that the pain cleared his mind a little. “I have always been strong, large. For a Hobbit,” he added and waited a breath for any ridicule, even though he already knew none would come from Bilbo. “It is a family trait, my father was larger still. But what Gandalf returned was a shell, so thin and frail; something a Mannish child could have lifted in their arms as a toy. I almost didn’t believe it at first, but it was him, or at least what remained.”

Thorin drew in another deep breath which to his shame was markedly unsteady.

“I owe Gandalf because he brought my father back. I owe him, and I hate him because what he brought was not my father. He - Father didn’t know his own name, much less mine. And by then he was sick in body as well as in mind.”
Thorin might want to tell Bilbo everything, but just thinking about how close he had come to killing his own father made all words shrivel and die on his tongue.

Whatever Thráin had been doing for the year he had been gone had not left him sound of health. Under the more obvious things like malnutrition and untreated scrapes and bruises, there was also something wrong with his heart. Before leaving Gandalf had told Thorin that the shortness of breath and the pallor was related to a weakening of the heart, and the Wizard had also given advice on what herbs could be used to help. He had also made sure to warn Thorin what would happen if he used too much of the innocently looking plants. How it would be just as bad, worse even, than using none at all and could easily lead to death.

In his darker moments Thorin felt sure that Gandalf had informed him of the lethal qualities of the medicine just to torment him. Because it was torment, seeing his father so lost and so in pain, while knowing that he could end it. End his misery, bring him peace and let him reunite with Mother. But in the end Thorin could not bring himself to do it and if was another long year before Thráin died; the body finally giving up on what the mind had long since left.

When Thorin spoke again his voice was hoarse.

“I hate him.”

Even to Thorin himself it was not clear if he was talking about Gandalf or if he was talking about his father. But it was easier at least, to hate the Wizard who returned a broken shade of what once had been Thorin’s father, compared to hating the father who left him long before his disappearance.

“There was a plant, medicine.” Thorin’s mouth twisted. “Or poison. I - I -”

“You don’t need to say anything.”

Bilbo’s eyes were not judging him. They were not disgusted. They were just sad, and kind, and above all they were understanding, and inside Thorin’s chest his heart felt like it was the one that was damaged beyond repair.

“I didn’t,” he burst out. “I didn’t do it, but I wanted to. I couldn’t. But I wanted to.”

Something wet slowly trailed down his cheek and when Bilbo tightened his arms Thorin sank into the warm embrace and let himself cry for the first time since his mother died.

Chapter End Notes

The bits about the contract are actually true
http://thorinoakenshield.net/2012/10/02/the-hobbit-deciphering-dwarf-documents-part-ii/
“We call it gold-fever,” Bilbo said softly.

Thorin opened his eyes; they now felt much too dry, but he did not lift his head from where he'd hid it against Bilbo’s neck. A warm strong hand was still stroking through his curls and a part of Thorin wished to shy away from the touch – didn’t want to show himself weak enough to need it. But every time he had tried to pull away, Bilbo had just held him a little tighter and asked that he would be allowed to keep holding him. (Please let me have this. Please let me help in whatever way that you would need me to). As if Thorin would be doing him an act of kindness by not moving away. He was no longer straddling Bilbo’s lap; at some point Bilbo had moved them to lie on the soft green grass, because it was there Thorin now found himself, limbs and hair tangled up in Bilbo’s and his face buried against Bilbo’s neck. While Thorin didn’t object to the position as such, he would have preferred to find himself in it after they had taken advantage of the lack of a certain large, bald Dwarf –not because he had been weeping into Bilbo’s beard.

“But let me start by saying that I truly am sorry about my hasty words. As I’ve seen Dwarfs, Elves, and Men get caught in the thrall of treasure, I should have not presumed to know about Hobbits.”

Thorin grunted something incomprehensible. His throat felt raw, almost as if he’d been screaming.

“Gold-fever is our name for it, that and Dragon-sickness, though I guess the former would be more apt to describe the sickness for anyone unlikely to even have seen a dragon.

“It's not common, but nor is it uncommon, at least not amongst Dwarfs,” Bilbo continued. “It can make people betray their closest friends, their families, all for the love of gold and precious stones.”

“If you call it a sickness,” Thorin said hoarsely, and still not able to meet Bilbo’s eyes. “Do you also have a cure?”

“Not a cure in any of the usual meanings for that word,” Bilbo said apologetically. “Not something Óin can mix together and pour down your throat. He would scold me for telling you fairy tales if I told you that there was a cure.”

“Does that mean that you believe that there is one?”

Bilbo’s hand moved down from Thorin’s hair to the back of his neck and gently - but insistently - the Dwarf coaxed Thorin into meeting his gaze. Too his surprise Thorin saw the traces of tears on Bilbo’s cheeks, and without asking for permission his hand moved to brush away the lingering wetness.

“You should never cry because of me,” Thorin murmured, appalled that something he’d done had affected Bilbo in such a way. “I’m sorry.”
“I would tell you to not be sorry,” Bilbo smiled and took Thorin’s hand to cradle it against his chest, his right still warm at the back of Thorin’s neck. “Except I have my doubts that you will listen. I didn’t shed tears because of you; I rather would like to think I did it for you.”

Tongue a lead weight in his mouth, Thorin could just squeeze Bilbo’s hand and stretch so that he could press his forehead against the Dwarf’s. Bilbo’s arm came to wrap around Thorin’s middle and for several moments they just breathed together.

“Now,” Bilbo murmured. “Regarding the subject of a cure, I’ll have to admit I’m not sure. I’ve seen people get better, but… few where I’ve actually seen what I would call a happy ending.”

“Then what is the cure?” Thorin asked, unconsciously tensing as if expecting a blow. If there had been something he could have done to help his father and grandfather, would that have made things better, or have made them worse?

With a sigh Bilbo tightened his grip on Thorin slightly before lifting his hand to the Hobbit’s face. Almost delicately he stroked his thumb over Thorin’s cheek bone. “Let’s sit up; I expect this is a conversation I would rather have without being distracted by things that would have Dwalin scold me most severely.”

It took a bit of shuffling and some winces from Bilbo as his ribs protested the change in position, but soon enough they were sitting side by side, shoulders and thighs pressed together and their hands entwined.

“A dragon will guard his plunder as long as he lives,” Bilbo began and the words made Thorin frown. He could not see what this had to do with the subject at hand. Surely this gold-sickness wasn’t actually a sickness that you got from an actual dragon; why did it matter what dragons did? However, after soaking Bilbo with his tears for far longer than he was comfortable admitting, Thorin didn’t really feel that he had the right to interrupt. “My people knew this as the truth long before Smaug came to Erebor.” Bilbo heaved a sigh. “Unfortunately, I might add, because it is knowledge learned at a great cost. My own grandfather’s father was slain by a cold-drake; named such because it breathes frost instead of fire. But like their more hot-blooded cousins they have a strong lust for gold.”

Thorin turned his gaze away. It was hard to think about his family sharing traits with such fell beasts.

“If you would ask why that is; where exactly the lust for gold comes from, you would get a different answer depending on whom you ask. Some would say its sheer greed. Or if you ask a silversmith he might tell you that it’s the dragon’s envy of those who can create that drives them to collect treasure after treasure. If you ask another she’d tell you that it is the dragon who wants to be envied, and that is why they are depriving all others of the treasure. Some would tell you that the beasts do it simply because they can.”

Unexpectedly Bilbo chuckled. “And now you are probably wondering if I’m ever going to get to the point of this. Bear with me. You see, if you ask a storyteller why Dragons will never give up their treasure they would tell you that you can only give something up if you gain something of greater value in return.” He paused, frowning. “…only, the storyteller wouldn’t phrase it like that.”

“Something with greater value than gold,” Thorin repeated, still feeling as if he didn’t understand what Bilbo was telling him.

“It has to do with another truth we know about dragons,” Bilbo said. “And that truth is that they
cannot love. To be able to give up something up there must be something of an even greater value in return. Of course, this thing can be something as simple as peace of mind, but the point the story tellers would make is that without love there is nothing more valuable for a dragon than their treasure."

The Dwarf sighed again and turned his gaze into the distance. “Not long after we’d settled in Ered Luin there was a miner, Fargur Stonefist, who fell victim to the gold-fever. He spent day and night in the mines, neglecting his family - a wife and a young daughter. I had him detained for his own good as much as for the safety of the rest of his mining crew, but even in his own home he wouldn’t rest. He wouldn’t sleep, wouldn’t eat. He could think about nothing except the gold that he was now separated from. The gold that everyone was keeping him from.”

“What happened?”

“His daughter took ill – a bad case of whooping cough. His wife, Malin, told Dís that she’d fallen asleep one holding their daughter, with Fargur pacing back and forward in their rooms, muttering about gold. But only a few hours later she had woken to find her arms empty. She rushed out of bed, only to finally register that the sound of her husband’s voice. She had grown so used to hearing it at all hours of the day as he cursed the ones keeping him trapped – but it no longer sounded angry and bitter. Turning back to the bed she had found her husband curled around their daughter, pleading with any deity that would listen that he’d give up all the gold in the world as long as their child would get better. And she did. And as she got better her father also returned to his old self.”

“What changed his mind?” Thorin asked, though he rather thought that he already knew and he answered his own question. “His love for his daughter was stronger than his love for gold.”

“The only one who can change someone’s mind is the owner of said mind,” Bilbo said with a shrug. “Not to say that it’s the fault of the sick person when they do not get better. There have been too many other times when the ending wasn’t happy; several similar occasions when someone - often the afflicted Dwarf - had been the one close to death. Just before they passed they would regain their senses.” Bilbo looked sadly at Thorin. “To die filled with regret, that is not a fate I would wish on anyone. Or imagine waking up from a bad dream where your child has died, only to realise that it was not a dream. The miner got a happy ending, his mind cleared, his daughter lived. But his end is not the common one.”

“My - Could I have - if I had -” Thorin tried to find the words, but he fell silent when Bilbo shook his head.

“At the core, greed is always selfish and it’s rare for it to listen to someone else. It is not by any fault of yours that your father and grandfather fell ill, nor is it your fault that they didn’t get better. I’m sure they cared for you just as much as Fargur cared for his daughter. But when the sickness has sunk its claws into a mind it is like a dragon, loathe to let go.”

Thorin closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Bilbo’s waist, leaning his head against a strong chest. Thankfully he had no more tears to cry, but inside his own chest there had settled an ache that burned in his throat. It only lessened a little as Bilbo’s arms settled around his shoulders, one hand cupping the back of his head and tangling with dark curls.

“I told you before,” Bilbo murmured into his ear. “That it is not a wise decision to dwell on the past and what-ifs. And that is because the only thing worse than a death filled with regrets, is a life filled with the same. After Erebor was lost, I feared that we would all be lost as well. And for a while I was almost certain that I would lose my grandfather to regret and guilt.”
“Guilt?”

“We thought we were invincible,” Bilbo said and his voice was distant, his mind in a place and time long ago. “We had no real enemies and many allies, but even so, our walls were impenetrable, our army was great and well trained, and our stocks and supplies were ample. And so was our treasure.”

“Was it the treasure that called Smaug to you?” Thorin leaned back a little so he could see Bilbo’s eyes, dark and clouded with memories.

“Father had warned that keeping so much treasure was dangerous.” Bilbo looked at Thorin earnestly. “Understand, our line has never been afflicted with gold-sickness, it wasn’t greed that drove Grandfather, but pride really was not a better motivation. He wanted to have such a kingdom as we had before we lost Khazad-dûm, now known as Moria. But for all its power and might, Erebor was and is no Moria, and it was dangerous to amass such wealth, for a multitude of reasons. If Smaug hadn’t been called to us by the piles and piles of gold that we kept inside the mountain something or someone else would have been.” Bilbo shrugged one shoulder, a gesture that would have appeared almost careless if it hadn’t been for the heavy look in his eyes. “But he was, and the rest of that story you know.”

“I do not yet know the ending,” Thorin said softly. “Though I have faith that we will get your kingdom back.”

“It’s trite,” Bilbo smiled. “But I’ve always liked the stories where the hero lives happily ever after to the end of his or her days. Though I guess no one is ever meant to be a hero. We are all destined for the ordinary, and only a quirk of faith will lead our paths into other directions.”

“On that I do not agree with you,” Thorin argued. “I look at you and see a light inside you. You burn too brightly to ever be ordinary. I saw it the very moment I laid eyes on you.”

To Thorin’s delight his words caused a pink flush to rise to Bilbo’s cheeks.

“I think you are as blind as Óin is deaf,” The Dwarf muttered. “Though I guess I shall thank my lucky stars that it is so, or else you would have been swept away long ago by any of the doubtless dozens of Hobbits that was vying for your favour.”

Thorin snorted. “Haven’t I already told you that I make for a very poor Hobbit? I do not think my neighbors know of my history, some might suspect - but either way I am about as far as possible from what a Hobbit would seek in a husband. In Hobbiton there was only one -”

Thorin cut himself off when he saw an unfamiliar emotion flash over Bilbo’s face.

“Are you jealous?” he said, a bit dumbfounded. “Regardless of what could have happened, I would hardly think you would have cause for that considering that I am practically sitting in your lap, and the young miss Toadfoot – someone whom I have never exchanged anything other than stilted conversation – is half a world away. And especially considering that one of your former lovers is no more than a few hundred yards away.”

The blush on Bilbo’s cheek darkened further, spreading down until the edges of it disappeared into his beard.

“I offer my apologies,” he said, a bit stilted and Thorin surprised himself by bursting out laughing.
“You are horrid,” Bilbo complained half-heartedly as Thorin’s laughter died down again. A bit sullenly he tugged at one of Thorin’s curls, reeling the willing Hobbit in for a kiss. “Horrid and absolutely lovely.”

“I love you,” Thorin said, words muffled against Bilbo’s lips and the Dwarf huffed.

“See,” he complained. “It is just not fair.”

“My apologies, Master Dwarf,” Thorin smirked. “To make up for my slight, I offer myself up to you. Just give me the appropriate contract to sign and—”

It was quite nice to be silenced by kisses, Thorin mused. Though he rather supposed that it was only true for kisses from Bilbo, which was rather fortunate because those were the only ones he would want to receive.

“Do you think we ever would have met? If you weren’t a king and I wasn’t a smith?” Thorin asked when they parted. “Regardless of the past and all the paths we have walked to get to where we are now, do you think there would have been other ways for us to meet? If Erebor hadn’t fallen, if my family—” Thorin couldn’t quite finish the sentence. Apparently it would take him some time yet to come to terms with things. Thankfully Bilbo did not seem to mind his lapse.

“I don’t know,” the Dwarf said wistfully. “Maybe, maybe not. But I would certainly hope so.” Bilbo chuckled. “Even if I’d been the Hobbit and you the Dwarf, I would hope we would have met.”

“Yes,” Thorin agreed and finally the ache in his chest subsided. “That would be my wish as well.”
Chapter Notes

Unbetaed because the lovely diemarysues is taking some time off the net.

In other words, here there likely be grammar errors and other weirdness. You have been warned ;); See any glaring errors feel free to shout at me.

EDIT! NOW BETAED! But of course, feel free to shout at me ;)

It was evening before Gandalf returned to Beorn’s house, and by that time Bilbo had quite managed to talk himself out of the irritation he’d felt when the Wizard had shared the news of his upcoming departure. That is to say, while the anger (and childish urge to rip Gandalf’s scruffy hat off his head) had passed, Bilbo could still not be said to be at peace with the Wizard’s decision. But as there was nothing he could do about it he was forced to accept it nonetheless.

So when Gandalf walked into Beorn’s hall just before sunset, as the Dwarfs and Hobbit had just sat down to have supper, it was with mixed feelings that the King greeted him.

The supper had been served by the wonderful animals their host either employed or was on friendly terms with. Or maybe both. They had seen neither hide nor hair of the Man all day; consequently, Bilbo had not really learnt anything more about the shape shifter than what he had been able to recognise upon their arrival the other night.

Gandalf had told them very little aside from the very fact that their host was able to change his shape into that of a bear. Well, that and warning them that Beorn (and Bilbo wondered if that was truly his name, it seemed to fit just a little too perfectly) was not really one who appreciated unexpected visitors.

All in all, Bilbo felt more than a bit weary as they arrived at the Man’s door, but at the time they had had little choice. They had no supplies as everything that they had not carried on their persons when they fell into the Goblins’ trap had been lost.

The fact that Beorn offered to let them stay spoke well of him, as did the fact that he’d not been unduly annoyed by Gandalf’s gradually increasing company. While that plan had undoubtedly worked, Bilbo had definitely had his doubts, or perhaps it was just his irritation with Gandalf that had done the thinking for him.

Beorn seemed knowledgeable and generous, having shared both his information about the land on this side of the Anduin as well as his food during last night’s supper. While it might be necessary to revaluate his opinion later, Bilbo’s first impression of the Man was that he was the type of person who could be a good friend, and a fierce enemy.

Though they would not stay long, so really it did not much matter what kind of person their host was. Mirkwood was just a day’s ride ahead. And beyond the woods… Erebor.
There were still months until the New Year, and Baggins’ Day, would be upon them, but Bilbo still felt a forceful sense of urgency to hurry. This troubled him a fair bit because he could not exactly pinpoint where this insistence to keep moving stemmed from. It was not just the need to finally go home, even if that was part of it. Bilbo hadn’t lied to Thorin when he’d said that if he could chose completely freely he’d end the quest and go back to Ered Luin.

The Blue Mountains had proved themselves as a good place to live, and his people had been able to prosper again inside those ancient halls. But those halls were still not home to a great many of his people, and it was hardly fair of him to deny them their rightful home - to deny Fíli and Kíli their birthright, just because he, their king, had found another kind of home in the arms of a Hobbit from the Shire.

Bilbo was convinced he could live anywhere with Thorin and be content. Maybe in another life they lived together in the green hills of the Shire, beneath earth and grass and not beneath stone. But not in this one as it seemed that Thorin had little urge at all to return to what had been his home.

Also, part of Bilbo, the greedy part of him, wanted to have it all. He wanted to have both Thorin and Erebor. He wanted to show Thorin the splendour of her mighty halls; the beauty that, while not being green and lush, still could be found deep beneath the mountain. He wanted to give his sister-sons the kingdom they deserved, and he wanted to give his sister back at least one of the things she had lost.

But those wishes were not the only reasons behind the itch that had begun when he had again laid eyes on the Lonely Mountain. For some reason it was important that they did not dally in getting to Erebor, and Bilbo trusted his instincts well enough to take that as the truth.

They would wait another day and then, regardless of whether their host had returned or not, they would leave for Mirkwood.

“Bilbo, a word if I may.”

The Dwarf looked up to find the Wizard standing next to the bench quite a few members of the Company were seated on. Just like their host, most of his furniture were immensely oversized to the Dwarfs and Hobbit. The table that the benches flanked was high enough to reach their chests and the benches themselves were high enough that climbing was required to earn a seat.

“Of course,” Bilbo agreed easily, hiding a smile at Thorin’s disapproving grunt. The king jumped down from the bench and walked with Gandalf into a quieter corner of the large hall where they sat down on a thick woven rug. “Though I would have thought that any talking could have waited until after supper. I can’t imagine that you’ve eaten much today as we’ve not seen you.”

“I would have us part as friends,” Gandalf said, removing his hat with a sigh. “And if I’ve learnt anything over the last few months it is that things are better not left unsaid. We never know when we will next get a chance to say them.” The Wizard looked earnestly at Bilbo. “My friend, because I still consider you as one, I will not depart because I wish to leave. I will go because I must.”

“It’s not that you are leaving.” Bilbo glanced towards the table where his youngest nephew was trying to cheer up a brooding Thorin. “Though of course that is also part of my concern. There is no denying that your help so far has been invaluable. But how can I continue to trust you as I have done before when you did not tell me right from the start that you were never planning on finishing this quest with us?”
Gandalf sighed again, more heavily, as if the air was driven from his lungs by a force greater than himself.

“Perhaps it is that I did not want to leave,” he said slowly. “But I have come to realise that I truly must.”

The Wizard leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “There is something dark in Mirkwood. This was known already long before Erebor was lost. It is the very reason why the Greenwood now goes under such a gloomy name.”

“I know,” Bilbo said and tilted his head. “There was more than one reason behind my father’s fretting when I tried to run away to the Elves as a child, even though I did not understand it at the time. The attempt when I did get as far as to the edge of the forest Father was furious. Mostly with the guards who had not seen me leave, but I think that is the closest he ever got to striking any of his children.”

“I only met your father once.” Gandalf’s blue eyes - so grey and cloudy compared to those belonging to a certain Hobbit Bilbo could still see casting sidelong glances at them – looked straight into Bilbo’s own hazel ones. “But he seemed like someone I would have enjoyed meeting again. And your mother, she I am sure about. Belladonna was a remarkable Dwarf, and I can see much of her in you.”

“You never did share how the map and key came to be in your possession…” Bilbo looked searchingly at the Wizard. “The map I knew about, but I thought it lost. And the key -” Bilbo put his hand over the iron key which he had kept on a sturdy chain around his neck ever since Gandalf had given it to him. “I always knew that our mountain held more secrets than my parents and grandfather had yet thought fit to share with me, but I do not understand why it seems that you know about them. As you said, you met my parents only the once, and while Tharkûn is a known friend to us, I can’t say that you have visited our halls in Ered Luin overly often either. Before we met in Bree, you and I had talked perhaps twice before by my reckoning.”

“I did meet your grandfather a few more times.” Gandalf smiled slightly. “He was King Under the Mountain for a great many years before he met your grandmother and before your father was born, and during that time I spent quite some time in the East. We were discussing the very reason why I will soon depart from this Company. Or I was discussing it, he preferred not to listen.”

“You talked about Mirkwood.”

“Indeed we did.” Gandalf put a large wrinkled hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and squeezed gently. “I greatly respected your grandfather. I would say that we were friends. But he would not see eye to eye with me on this issue. In fact he desired to see it as if there was no issue at all.”

“But -” Bilbo protested and Gandalf nodded and patted Bilbo’s arm once before pulling his hand back.

“Yes, by the time you were born Mirkwood was a problem no longer to be denied.” The Wizard shook his head. “Though somehow, that is still what we managed to do for well over another century,” he continued, and his voice was both annoyed and grieved at the same time.

“We?”

“We who are supposed to know better,” Gandalf said and Bilbo tried not to be bothered by the
Wizard’s inability to provide straight answers for a simple questions.

“The Elves did not always live north of the mountains of Mirkwood,” Gandalf went on to tell. “Long before your time they lived far south, but they were driven away from their homes by many dark and savage things that was not supposed to be in such a happy place as the Greenwood.”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. He had never heard anyone speak of the forest as a happy place.

“Indeed,” Gandalf nodded. “It’s hard to see it now, but once Mirkwood was just as peaceful and fair as the forest of Lórien - only green instead of golden. You have merely seen the shadow of what it once was, and sadly, that shadow has only grown in the last century.”

A crash from the table made them both turn their heads. Surprisingly it was neither Fíli nor Kíli who seemed to be in the middle of the chaos, instead it was Dori who was apologizing to one of the dogs and the broken plates at his feet seemed to be the cause of his distress.

“I hope our host was not overly fond of his tableware,” Bilbo said, mindful of the warning Gandalf had given them on their way to the house, and Gandalf laughed.

“Do not worry; Beorn is not one to concern himself with such inconsequentialities. As long as you do not treat his friends badly, or abuse his trust, he will not mind. And judging by our dear Dori’s flustered appearance he is well on his way to offer to do the dishes as compensation for the mishap. It will be fine.” The Wizard then turned solemn again. “Now, where were we? Ah, yes, Mirkwood. Thranduil appealed to your grandfather’s grandfather that they together would take arms against the darkness that haunted the forest, but he was refused. After getting over the rejection he tried again with your grandfather, but again, he was denied. And it was then well over another century before relations between the woodland Elves and the Dwarfs of the Lonely Mountain became congenial once more.”

Dwarfs and Elves did not have an uncomplicated history, but perhaps the waters were even more murky than Bilbo had believed.

“So he was going to wait, and then ask my father?”

“Or perhaps your grandfather once more,” Gandalf said and shrugged one shoulder. “It is my belief that Mungo grew wiser as his beard grew longer. Bungo on the other hand was still a little too young, too caught up in old grudges and past wrong-doings. But I think that if Smaug had not arrived, a true alliance between your people would not have been out of the question.” Looking down Gandalf fumbled with his robes for his pipe and lit it with a burning finger. “Perhaps it was for the best though. We did not know then what the shadow in Mirkwood really was. An army may have been of little use.”

“Gandalf, if you would please stop referencing a ‘we’ that I do not know, as well as shadows without name or substance.” Bilbo huffed. “I would thank you for being frank.”

Gandalf chuckled tiredly, but still with genuine amusement. “You are indeed the very image of your mother, Bilbo Baggins. Maybe not on the outside, but very much so for the rest of it. The ‘we’ of whom I speak is myself and those who like me are sworn to protect the people of Middle-Earth from those who seek to do them harm. You have already met two of the others in Lord Elrond and Radagast the Brown. But who we are is not really of much importance. What we do is, and consequently; what we’ve failed to do.”
The Wizard took a long drag on his pipe. “The darkness in Mirkwood… At first we thought it to be a sorcerer. A necromancer to be more precise. In and of itself that would have been dire enough, but the truth of it was even worse.”

“Tell me,” Bilbo said, half command, half request.

“The evil that dwells in that forest is a shade of Sauron himself.” Gandalf abruptly extinguished his pipe; placing his hand over the bowl and sucking hard. When he continued speaking it was with an irate note in his voice. “His shade has made a home in Dol Goldur. It was decided that he posed no threat. I do not know how we could have been so blind.”

“And now you will be going alone, to face him?” To Bilbo that did not seem as the best of plans. Sauron. Trust Gandalf to abandon the quest to hunt down a Dragon only to find an even worse opponent for himself.

“I will not be alone. But thank you, for thinking of me.”

“Will you succeed?”

“Will you?” Gandalf smiled kindly at the Dwarf. “We all do what we must, Bilbo. Call it fate or call it free will; it makes no exceptions for Kings, Wizards or even smiths.”

Bilbo looked for Thorin, who chose that same moment to look back. The Hobbit looked worried and Bilbo smiled at him in what he hoped would be a comforting manner before turning back to Gandalf.

“He told me about his family, what happened with his grandfather. And his father.”

Gandalf looked surprised, and a little saddened. “I see.”

“Understand that he blames himself a thousand more times than he blames you, but the next time you return a half-dead father to his grieving son, please be so kind as to not point out to said son how to go about making the father completely dead. The herbs,” Bilbo clarified when Gandalf’s face continued to be void of understanding.

The wizard inhaled sharply. “I never meant -”

“No, we never do, do we;” Bilbo sighed and now it was his turn to give a comforting pat on the arm. “But good intentions can still turn out for the worst.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. Thorin didn’t -?”

“No, but he thought about it. And he has thought about whether he did the right thing or not too many times since his father finally passed.”

Not wanting to dwell on a subject that would only continue to make them both miserable Bilbo turned the conversation to another topic.

“You still haven’t told me about the map and the key, how you came in possession of them.”

“I’m afraid this isn’t a much more pleasant topic,” Gandalf said wryly, having seen through Bilbo’s diversion.
Bilbo snorted. “What else is new then? Please, I do wish to know.”

“The map is not exactly the same as you knew your father to have. The parts in red ink were added by your grandfather after the Desolation.”

“Considering that Father hardly could have known a Dragon would attack us, I had assumed someone else had drawn that dragon, yes.” The Dwarf shook his head tiredly. “But why would Grandfather use moon runes? And how did it come into your hands?”

“As for the moon runes, I do not know. But long ago he showed me a similar map, and an iron key made to fit into a secret door into the Lonely Mountain. It was a proof of our friendship, that he would trust me with such knowledge. Before the battle of Azanulbizar, he sent the map now in your possession to me, with the request that I would guard it. And he also sent the key. I would either return them to him after the battle, or I would make sure they found their way to either of his grandchildren.”

“Then you’ve had them all this time without giving them to me or my sister?” Bilbo was too shocked to be angry, but that was sure to follow within shortly.

“I have not.” Gandalf sighed. “Your father trusted that I would keep the map and key safe, and I have, but I have only been in possession of them for a little over a year. Last spring I was travelling along the Old South Road and I happened to stumble upon a dungeon. It was long since deserted but it had likely been used as a dwelling for Trolls, similar to the cave we came across before Rivendell. Many bones littered the floor and the stink still lingered. As I was leaving, my eyes were drawn to a piece of parchment sticking out from beneath a rock. Imagine my surprise when I realised that it was a letter, addressed to none other than myself.”

“The trolls captured the messenger,” Bilbo said slowly, having added two and two together.

Gandalf nodded. “I believe so. Once I realised what it was that I held in my hand I tried to find you.”

“And then we stumbled into each other in Bree.” Bilbo rubbed a hand down his face. “Say what you want about Oín and his portents, but this sounds even more unlikely.”

They sat together in silence for a few minutes. At least, no words were said between them; back at the table the rest of the company seemed in fairly high spirits and as a result, the room could not exactly be called quiet.

“Do you think that Thranduil refused to help us because my family had previously denied aid to him?” It was a thought that had refused to leave Bilbo’s mind ever since Gandalf had told him about the Elvenking’s audience with his great-great-grandfather.

To the Dwarf’s surprise Gandalf actually chuckled. “Whatever you do, friend, do not say such a thing should you happen upon him in the forest.”

“Because the truth hurts or because it is a lie?” Bilbo persisted.

“I cannot speak for Thranduil, he has not given me the right, but you yourself are a king. Can you place blame on a ruler who does not want to get his people killed in vain? Arrows and Elven-made blades would not have made a bigger dent in Dragon scales than your Dwarven axes did.”

Bilbo inclined his head, not really in acceptance, but at least in agreement that whatever Thranduil’s
reasons were, no one but the Elvenking himself could explain them.

“Now,” Gandalf said and put the hat back on his head. “I think it’s time for me to have a bite to eat, before all food has already been eaten. And I will tell you all about why I have been gone all day.”

“I am glad we talked, Tharkûn,” Bilbo said when they had risen from the floor.

Gandalf smiled warmly at him. “As am I, my friend. As am I.”

Chapter End Notes

I don't think I've seen this suggested in another story before, that the very fact that no one cared about the Elves being driven from larger and larger parts of their forest - no one coming to *their* aid - could have something to do with the fact that Thranduil did not see it fit to offer his aid to the Dwarfs.

I don't believe the Thranduil in this story holds such grudges, but it's worth thinking about. He and canon!Thorin are more alike than first glance would have you believe. They could both bond over the feeling of helplessness when your home is being taken from you (yeah, when hell freezes over, but kingly bonding is at least theoretically possible!)

In the next chapter we head towards Mirkwood.
The next day their host returned, and the rest of that morning was spent in preparation to leave.

Delighted to have learnt that their story was indeed true and that the Goblin King was dead, Beorn eagerly provided them with plenty of supplies as well as invaluable advice for their continued journey to and through Mirkwood. The Man was in splendidly good humour, but that was not a disposition Thorin shared.

The Hobbit did not at all approve of how their host constantly seemed to find a reason to talk to or touch Bilbo, who seemed to be endlessly fascinating to Beorn now that he had seen that Gandalf’s story had not been mere fiction. The Man went on and on about how he never could have believed that someone so small was such a fierce warrior, and Bilbo’s protests that he was neither small nor the only warrior in the Company did not really seem to make much difference.

The entire thing left a tight, hollow numbness in Thorin’s chest. The Hobbit was well aware that Bilbo only held his tongue to avoid causing offence just before they left, but it was still aggravating.

Dwalin had taken one look at him as he’d been glaring daggers into Beorn’s back and declared that they had the time to spare for a bout of ‘friendly wrestling’. Eager for anything to take his mind of the memory of Beorn’s hideously large hand on Bilbo’s back, Thorin agreed readily.

After repeatedly sending Thorin sprawling to the ground Dwalin crouched down beside him and poked him in the side.

“I hope you know you’re being an idiot,” the large Dwarf stated as Thorin gasped and coughed, trying to get his breath back.

“Yes,” he was finally able to choke out. “I know.” It just didn’t do him any good.

“Well, that’s something I guess,” Dwalin murmured and rose to his feet. “Again. And don’t throw your weight against me. I’m bigger than you; it won’t do you any good. Find another way.”

Soon after midday they ate one final meal with Beorn, and after Bilbo had offered him their deepest thanks, they mounted the ponies and horse that had been provided for them and left.

Curiously, the tight feeling around Thorin’s chest did not disappear as they left Beorn’s home behind them. The only thing that seemed to help a little was to curl his fingers around the chain of mithril Bilbo had given him. The ring he’d found in the mountains now resided on that very chain. Having it in his pocket just didn’t seem like the best way of keeping a magic ring safe - especially not since...
Nori kept sending Thorin yearning glances. Glances that even an idiot would have figured out were not really directed towards the Hobbit himself.

Running his finger idly around the edges of the ring Thorin absently tucked it back beneath his shirt and armour and grabbed the reins of the pony with both hands again.

It would take them about three days to get to the edge of forest. Beorn’s estimate had been that they’d come across the forest gate, a gate to a little known path-way through the forest, on their third morning away from his roof. Gandalf would stay with them until that point, then he would go south; towards whatever it was that he deemed of greater importance than their quest.

As they started out no one seemed to be in the mood for conversation. Not all of Beorn’s words had been mere friendly tips and advice. There had also been plenty of cautions and warnings, and in more than one’s mind there were now fairly gruesome images of what awaited them in the forest. A forest where nothing much lived except for dark and savage things. And Elves of course. Which to your average Dwarf wasn’t really much of an improvement.

Bilbo was not someone Thorin would ever call *average*, but even he had seemed in a strange mood all morning. A thin, irrational little voice from deep inside of Thorin had whispered that perhaps it was that the King did not wish to leave Beorn’s grand wooden halls, did not wish to leave their host. But as that was several kinds of ridiculous, Thorin had paid it little mind. Bilbo was undoubtedly just eager to finally reach Erebor again, as well as still slightly sore of Gandalf’s decision not to accompany them. He was also likely to be thinking about what possibly awaited them inside Erebor. A Dragon was enough to sour anyone’s thoughts.

Thorin had already made his peace with the entire thing - live or die, he would gladly do both by Bilbo’s side. He would follow his Dwarf to the end of the earth if that was asked of him. Compared to that, what was the inside of a Dragon’s lair?

As the day went on the Dwarfs’ true natures made themselves known again, and as the miles between them and Beorn’s home rose, their spirits also seemed to rally.

Bofur was the first one to break out into song; a cheerful little tune about a Dwarven lass who had misplaced her lover’s jewels. It was well into the third verse of it that Thorin caught on to the hidden meaning behind the words.

“‘Last week she held his stones in her hands as she gave his hammer a good rub’?” Thorin repeated incredulously.

Bilbo laughed at the uncomfortable look on his face, and the Hobbit again thanked the stars for only allowing his ears to blush a bright red.

“Just you wait until he gets to the end of it,” Bilbo chuckled. “I don’t want to spoil it for you, but her love will be *very* happy to have his jewels back.”

“He’s going to offer to polish her pearl,” Kíli filled in with a smirk.

“And those jugs Bofur mentioned before, they’re not really jugs,” Fíli added helpfully.

“They’re her breasts,” Kíli whispered loudly. “And it’s not really a pearl either.”

Bilbo rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Thank you, boys. I’m sure that’s very helpful for Thorin to know. But what would be even more helpful is if the pair of you would ride ahead and scout. It’s
going to be dark in a couple of hours and I’d like to have a place to spend the night which won’t be crawling with Goblins, or worse, in the morning.”

“We won’t let you down, Uncle,” Kíli chirped, and then they were off.

“I love them both dearly,” Bilbo said once they were well out of earshot. “But sometimes I wish that they were just a little - a smidge even - more like Ori. At least once a month or so. Is that really too much to ask for? For them to sit quietly for a while?”

“If they were suddenly quiet, wouldn’t you worry that they were planning something you probably would want to know about?” Thorin suggested.

“Yes, you are probably right,” Bilbo sighed. “Though on this subject -” Bilbo lowered his voice and steered his pony a little closer to Thorin’s. “I wouldn’t mind seeing either of the boys enter a courtship with Ori - if both parties were so inclined of course.”

Thorin looked over to where Ori was riding. The young Dwarf was not at all concerned over just where his pony was going; instead he was bent over the notebook he'd balanced on his knees. Luckily - though Thorin figured that luck had little to do with it - Nori rode right next to his brother, and in his hands was not just a single set of reins.

“Isn’t he a little too…” ‘Meek’ was the word Thorin wanted to use, but that seemed rude. “Quiet?” he settled on instead, after turning several other possibilities around in his head and discarding them.

“Nothing is wrong with quiet,” Bilbo argued. “I myself quickly developed a soft spot for a certain Hobbit who barely said two words to any of us for the first couple of weeks.” The fondness in Bilbo’s smile took any sting out of his words. “And Ori certainly fierce enough when it’s required. You should have seen him when we were fighting the Goblins. But he is also very sensible and level headed for someone so young.” Thorin looked again towards Ori, wondering if he was the only one seeing a rider who did not even seem to notice he was on a pony. “But I don’t want to create pressure where there should be none,” Bilbo continued. ”So don’t tell anyone, especially not Dori.”

Thorin hadn’t really spent much time with Dori, but the Dwarf hardly seemed the type to try and pressure his brother into a relationship with a prince just for the benefits that would bring.

“Surely you don’t think Dori would make Ori do something he did not wish to?” Thorin asked, careful to keep his voice low so that his words would not carry.

“What? No, that wasn’t what I meant at all.” Bilbo tugged at one of his braids and sighed. “What I meant was that if Dori got the idea that Fíli or Kíli was interested in Ori, the next time either of the boys would be alone with our young scribe would probably be sometime in the next Age.”

“And here I thought you were such a stickler for courting rules,” Thorin murmured with a glance towards Dwalin.

“Once there actually is a courtship, yes,” Bilbo replied. “But having Dori constantly hanging over their shoulders would make it a bit needlessly complicated for them to get to know each other.”

“So they didn’t know each other before the start of the quest?”

“Not really. Nori needs to be able to talk to people who would not want to talk to him if they knew of his friendship with the King,” Bilbo smiled wryly. “Having a brother who spends times with the
two princes would not help either. Officially, Ori is an apprentice to a close friend of Balin’s, nothing else.”

“And unofficially?”

“They’ve met a few times, but this was the first time they would have the chance to spend any time alone.” The Dwarf shrugged. “Maybe nothing will happen except for them being good friends. That’s more than good enough. But something more... I would not be against it.”

Truly amused, the tight feeling in his chest finally forgotten, Thorin couldn't stop himself from smiling.

“What?” Bilbo asked a little self-consciously.

“A King who is also a matchmaker,” Thorin teased. “It’s an interesting combination.”

“Hardly a matchmaker,” Bilbo sniffed. “After all, I’m not really doing anything.”

Up ahead, Bofur had started on another song, this one more innocent than the last. Or so Thorin hoped... because this one seemed to be about two Dwarven children getting lost in the forest. Thankfully, or perhaps not, the second verse revealed the purpose of the song well enough.

“Caught in a net, the girl didn't fret, she just threw a dagger, and the Elf then did stagger.”

“I promise we have songs that are not about bed sport and the maiming of Elves,” Bilbo apologised with a wince.

“Yes, I know,” Thorin said drily. “You also have songs about coming to a Hobbit’s home and devouring his pantry and his dinner.”

“They didn’t?” Bilbo asked, eyes growing wide. "And then sang about it?"

“They did,” Thorin confirmed with a shrug, it wasn't like he was still upset about it. Not much anyway. "You were lucky you came when you did or all you would have had to eat would be crumbs."

“I guess it’s much too late to apologize on their behalf,” Bilbo said a bit glumly. “I thought- never mind. Though really, what must you have thought of us. Showing up uninvited and acting like ruffians. And Gandalf was no help at all, I imagine.”

To Thorin’s absolute horror, he heard himself say: “I thought you had very pretty eyes.” Immediately afterwards he wanted to throw himself in front of his pony. What in the heavens forced him to say an inane thing like that?

“My - my eyes?” Bilbo repeated slowly. “13 Dwarfs and a Wizard shows up to ask you on a quest which could involve a Dragon, and you thought my eyes were pretty?”

Mortified, Thorin nodded.

“Please,” Bilbo said in a choked tone of voice. “Do not tell me that you came on this quest for that reason.”
“I am not a simpleton,” Thorin replied with a glare. “Nor am I a tween who would jump into a lake just for a smile from their sweetheart.”

“Whereas fighting a Dragon is another thing entirely,” Bilbo murmured, forehead creased in a heavy frown. “No, please, I don’t mean to cause offence. If you say that’s not the reason then of course I believe you.”

Thorin wondered if explaining that he hadn’t actually fallen in love with Bilbo until several weeks later would make things better or worse. The ‘later’ part was a pretty strong argument in his favour, but the part of his defence where the word ‘weeks’ cropped up was less so.

Deciding that his tongue had put him in enough trouble for one day, Thorin decided it was best to say nothing at all. Bilbo also seemed lost in thought, brow still furrowed, and for a while they rode on in silence. Well, silence peppered with the occasional song lyric from the other Dwarfs. By this point Thorin did his best to ignore Bofur as the song had turned just a little too macabre for his taste.

“This is not the time nor the place for this, so I'll be brief.” When Bilbo spoke the suddenness of it almost jostled Thorin right out of his saddle. “There was a, well just a boy really,” Bilbo continued. The Dwarf's shoulders were very tense and Thorin noticed that his grip on the reins was tight enough to whiten his knuckles. “And he was killed because of me, because he loved me. Because he thought that his death would benefit me. The very notion that you would go towards a Dragon because I have pretty eyes…” the Dwarf drew a shuddering sigh. “It's, it doesn't bear thinking about. It's like a joke in the poorest taste.”

If Thorin hadn’t been sorry enough already about the slip of his tongue, he was certainly regretting it now.

“You have to know that I’m not - that I did not join you on this quest because of a thing like that,” Thorin said without daring to look over at the Dwarf. “I am here, with you, because this is where I am meant to be. As I told you yesterday, I was waiting for you.” He sighed, all of a sudden feeling endlessly tired and glanced towards Bilbo. “I did not say those words in anything like jest.”

“I know,” Bilbo said regretfully. “I did not mean -” He sighed and his mouth twisted unhappily. “I don’t even know what I meant.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin said, his voice almost too quiet to be heard over the clip-clop from the ponies hooves. “This is not something I ever thought I’d feel, much less say. And obviously I have no gift of foresight, but, this quest... I truly believe that this is how things are meant to be. We were both meant to come. A thousand things could have kept us from ever meeting, but they did not. A thousand other choices could have been made but they were not.”

“Fate,” Bilbo murmured, his eyes cloudy like a pond after a sudden rainstorm.

“Call it that if you wish,” Thorin said and shrugged one shoulder. “What matters is that it's right. It's right that I should be here with you. And if I were to die -”

“Thorin, no!” Bilbo’s protest seemed involuntary, and it was loud enough to cause most of the Company to turn their way before a pointedly cleared throat from Dwalin made them all remember that they had much more pressing business.

“If I were to die,” Thorin repeated firmly. “Die, so that you may live, so that Erebor would be reclaimed, that would also be right.”
“I know what I said yesterday,” Bilbo said and briefly closed his eyes. “But I don’t think I can accept that.”

“My love,” Thorin said with the smallest hint of a smile playing around his lips just because he had the right to call Bilbo that. “It is not your choice.” Thorin held out a hand, silently asking Bilbo to take it. The distance between their ponies was not particularly large, and with a sigh Bilbo twined their fingers together. “Just know,” Thorin murmured. “That whatever the outcome I will not regret this quest, because it is how I met you.”

“I thought we agreed that we would have met anyway,” Bilbo protested half-heartedly, rubbing his thumb over the point in Thorin’s wrist where his pulse beat the strongest. Not knowing what to say Thorin just shrugged again and held Bilbo’s hand more tightly.

-In the evening when dusk had started to fall and the light of the setting sun painted everything in gold, they made camp beneath a large beech tree discovered by Fíli and Kíli.

The trunk of the tree was easily three times as wide as Bombur and its branches stretched above and around them like a leafy dome. They could not light a fire without risking having the tree go up in flames, but in the dark they would hardly be visible as the tree would shield them from view. Still feeling tired Thorin sank down on the ground once he’d gotten his pony settled. The slightly yellowed grass was soft and dry, and surprisingly free of prickly dead leaves.

Thorin was fairly sure that if Dwarfs had been born with tails the boys’ would have been wagging as their uncle complimented them on their excellent find.

After a quick but satisfying meal - Beorn had not been stingy and the ponies’ saddle-bags had been stuffed full of all kinds of non-perishable food - Bofur and Bombur offered to take the first watch. The rest of the Company unrolled the bedrolls and blankets they had also been provided with and all but the two guards settled down to try and get some rest. As always it wasn’t long before Glóin’s snores echoed across their little camp site.

Thorin sighed in annoyed acceptance - thinking unkind thoughts about what good it did them to be unseen when they were hardly unheard - and rolled to bury his head in what had become his favourite spot between Bilbo’s neck and shoulder. As they were both clad in all of their clothes and armour, having only removed their coats, his goal proved to be impossible. Instead of warm and surprisingly silky skin Thorin only found cold metal. The realisation might very well have prompted him to mutter a most unpolite phrase.

“What are you doing?” Bilbo asked, already more than half asleep.

“You made a better pillow the other night,” Thorin stated brusquely. He knew it was a stupid complaint, but it was still true and he was tired, so there.

“King, matchmaker, and now pillow.” Bilbo chuckled softly. “And a bad one at that. Mahal save me from falling any further in your grace, your Hobbitness.”

Too worn-out for banter Thorin simply grunted and rolled onto his back again. His mood sank further when Bilbo sighed and turned so that his back was facing Thorin. He hadn’t really meant to cause offence and make Bilbo annoyed with him, he was just so tired.
“Come on then,” Bilbo prompted and Thorin blinked in surprise. “Don’t think I’ve failed to notice that you spent the last couple of nights like a particularly large limpet. Make yourself comfortable. If you are behind me you at least shouldn’t hit your head on anything.”

“Not a limpet,” Thorin groused to hide his relief, immediately making a liar of himself by moving over and wrapping an arm around Bilbo’s chest. A lack of armour would certainly have been more comfortable, but until the next time they did not risk being attacked in the night it was what it was. And despite not being able to feel Bilbo’s heartbeat, Thorin could at least now feel the steady rise and fall of the Dwarf’s breathing.

“Barnacle?” Bilbo suggested, ending the word with a huge yawn.

Thorin snorted and pushed his nose into the hair on the back of Bilbo’s head, pressing himself all along the strong line of Bilbo’s back. “Good night,” he said firmly and closed his eyes.

“’night,” Bilbo echoed, his hand coming up to curl around the one Thorin held pressed against the Dwarf’s breastplate. “Sweet dreams.”

Unfortunately, that did not come to pass.

Not too long after he’d fallen asleep Thorin woke with a scream wanting to claw its way out of his throat. His heart thundering, Thorin just stared out into the darkness for a few moments. He was amazed to realise that no one in the camp seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. Not much time could have passed because Bofur and Bombur were still on watch. The brothers sat together talking quietly, the pair of them just barely visible in the shadows beneath the tree. And by Thorin’s side Bilbo was still sleeping peacefully.

Thorin had learnt fairly early on their journey that it did not take much to wake Bilbo, or the other Dwarfs, so amazingly enough his nightmare must not have caused him to cry out, or move around too much or someone would have noticed.

Drawing a shuddering breath Thorin became aware of a dull ache in his left hand. Looking down he discovered that the hand that previously had held Bilbo’s was wrapped around the ring on the mithril chain; holding it tightly enough that it actually took effort for him to unclench his fist. At the first glimpse of gold between his fingers the memories of his dream came flooding back into Thorin’s mind like a tidal wave onto the shore.

He had been back beneath the Goblins’ mountain, down in the darkness of the caves where that creature had lived. Just like the last time, Thorin had been trying to find his way out, only in his dream the Elven blade that Bilbo had given him had been glowing with a sickly blue light, and the Hobbit had used it to light his way in the dark tunnels. He had been running from something. Something that wanted to catch him and take the ring which he had been clutching in his hand. He had almost been at the end of the tunnels when a hand had grabbed his shoulder.

Whirling around Thorin had sunk the glowing Elven blade deep into the chest of the bony, pale creature that had been chasing him. Only, it hadn’t been the creature.

It had been Bilbo.

“Fate,” the skewered Dwarf had whispered before his eyes had rolled back into his head, leaving only whiteness and the ring had burned Thorin’s palm.
The memory almost made Thorin physically ill and he dropped the ring to clutch at his stomach as he slowly drew in a lungful of air through his nose.

“Thorin,” Bilbo murmured and the Hobbit flinched, stomach lurching. He waited tensely for Bilbo to turn around, but it seemed that the Dwarf hadn’t really been awake after all; instead of speaking again Bilbo just let out a quiet snuffle on his next exhale.

It wasn’t until the dawn had started to announce its way across the sky with a gradually increasing belt of light at the horizon that Thorin finally fell into an uneasy slumber again.

Chapter End Notes

I think I should just accept that the chapters in this story lives a life of their own. This was not what I had planned, at all.
Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

Not betaed yet, but the last two chapters are, so if you want to know how they would have been without grammar errors, I recommend re-reading ;) 

EDIT: NOW WITH AWESOME BETA

The rising sun chased away the white mist that had covered the ground during the night, but it did little to chase away the shadows inside Thorin's heart. Maybe it was lucky that he woke up just as tired as when he’d fallen asleep; that at least guaranteed that his mind was too slow to dwell much on unpleasant things.

When the time to leave the camp came Thorin barely remembered having eaten breakfast. He barely remembered anything that had happened between being woken by Bilbo and getting on his pony.

He thought that the feeling would clear after a few hours of being up and about, but if anything the fog in his head grew thicker as the day went on.

Mentally apologising to Ori for his unkind thoughts yesterday Thorin allowed his mount to do as she pleased, trusting that she would follow along with the rest of the group. There were no cliffs to fall off of, or rivers to walk into, so surely it wouldn’t hurt if he just rested his eyes a little, just enough to make them stop feeling like he’d poured a whole bucket of sand in them.

He tried to smile comfortingly at Bilbo every time the Dwarf looked at him in concern; something that became more frequent as the morning turned into day, but Thorin had the feeling that he wasn’t really fooling anyone, least of all Bilbo.

“You look like you are about to fall off your pony,” the Dwarf said and reached out to briefly touch Thorin’s forehead and cheek. “At least you don’t seem to have a fever.”

“I’m not sick,” Thorin said slowly. “Just a little tired. It’s fine.”

“Didn’t you sleep?”

“Not much,” Thorin admitted. He considered adding something about bad dreams, but he didn’t want to risk Bilbo asking about them. “Blame Glóin’s snoring,” he said instead and tacked on a smile for good measure. Or he tried to, but his lips wouldn’t quite do as he told them. Still, Bilbo’s frown lessened and the Dwarf’s lips curled upwards.

“If you think that is bad, you should hear Dwalin after he had one too many ales. One minute he’s fine, the next he’s on the ground, snoring loud enough to make even Óin’s ears hurt.”

“I’d thought you’d be used to it by now,” Nori said, surprising Thorin who hadn’t even heard the Dwarf’s pony trot its way to his side. “Glóin’s snoring I mean, but Dwalin’s too for that matter, if not the ale soaked version.” The thief’s keen green eyes regarded Thorin searchingly as if sensing a lie and Thorin had to fight the urge to look away. It wasn’t like Nori could see his dreams after all, and
even if he could what did it matter? Horrible and unpleasant as it had been it was only a dream.

“Perhaps it was something else then,” Thorin agreed ambiguously.

“For my part I had a rock digging my back the whole night,” Nori said and grimaced. “Didn’t matter how many times I shifted, I swear that the bloody rock moved with me every time. And when I tried to look for it so I could get rid of it I swear it was nowhere to be found. It’s like it disappeared. Like the thing turned… invisible.”

The Hobbit barely repressed a sigh when the auburn haired Dwarf hastily swept his eyes over him; halting briefly at Thorin’s trouser pocket, where the ring had indeed been kept up until Thorin had moved it to Bilbo’s chain. It seemed that the Nori hadn’t yet caught on to the transfer.

Maybe he should just give the ring to Nori. A thief would find better use for it than a smith, not much to argue about there. Although, Thorin frowned. Without the ring he never would have been able to save Bilbo from Azog. Best to keep it, for the time being at least.

“Nori!” Dwalin bellowed and the thief’s eyes widened in surprise.

“That’s my name,” he yelled back. “Just didn’t think he actually knew it,” he added in a normal tone of voice and winked at Bilbo who chuckled.

“Come here,” Dwalin demanded, and surprise flashed over Nori’s face again, before realisation settled.

“I didn’t take anything!” he called. “If you’ve lost something, I’m not to blame.”

“Then he would have called you thief,” Bilbo murmured. “Best you go see what he wants.”

“Just get here!” Dwalin called back and Nori shrugged and urged his pony to move up ahead to where a glaring Dwalin was waiting.

Bilbo looked after them, a considering frown on his face, but Thorin couldn’t really find the energy to care about what the pair was up to now. He was fairly sure that he would normally have been more interested in what was going on, but as it stood, he was still on the verge of falling asleep in the saddle. The Hobbit’s head dropped forward before he caught himself and sat up straight once more. But not before Bilbo had noticed.

"Thorin, please stop for a moment."

Thorin shook his head in denial. "I'm fine," he protested. "We do not need to stop."

"Please, it will not take long."

Still having trouble to deny Bilbo anything he'd outright asked for Thorin halted his pony. Anticipating being ordered - or knowing Bilbo; politely asked - to get down before he fell off, Thorin was surprised when Bilbo instead requested that he’d take his feet out of the stirrups and move as far back into the saddle as possible. Not really understanding what was going on Thorin nonetheless did as Bilbo had asked.

Puzzled he watched how Bilbo got down from his own pony, and his confusion didn’t really lessen when Bilbo started moving most of the packs on Thorin’s pony to his own. It wasn’t until Bilbo had pulled himself up in front of Thorin that the Hobbit truly caught on to what had happened. Mind still
feeling like fog and cotton Thorin was still about to protest when he noticed that he had already wound his arms around Bilbo’s middle. So instead of arguing that he could ride on his own, Thorin instead blinked and wondered just exactly when that had happened.

“Hold on to my belt,” Bilbo advised as he gathered up the reins Thorin could not remember dropping. A soft whistle brought the pony Bilbo had ridden close enough for the Dwarf to snag its reins as well.

“Thorin, my belt?” Bilbo prompted again.

“This isn’t really necessary,” Thorin argued, even though the very fact that he’d not really registered the meaning of Bilbo’s words the first time around pointed towards a very different conclusion.

“Neither is getting a concussion from falling off of a horse,” Bilbo said amiably, and though Thorin could not see his face he could hear the smile. “Please, humour me,” the Dwarf added and with a sigh Thorin complied.

“We’re lucky I’m not built like Dwalin or Glóin,” Bilbo remarked as he prompted the ponies into motion again. “Or this pony would have had a few choice words for me. Neighs, rather.”

“I’m fine,” Thorin murmured, because it seemed like Bilbo hadn’t quite realised that. The Dwarf just hummed something non-committedly and moved a hand to briefly stroke over Thorin’s knuckles. More or less giving up Thorin allowed himself to lean even more against Bilbo, not daring to close his eyes, but very much wanting to.

“Don’t let go,” Bilbo said softly and Thorin felt another caress pass over his knuckles. “Whatever Nori is saying it appears that it is not doing much to cool Dwalin’s temper, and I don’t dare to think what he’d say if I let you fall off your pony.”

“Not your fault,” Thorin murmured into Bilbo’s hair. He didn’t know if he’d been heard, because Bilbo didn’t reply. Sighing again Thorin forced his eyes open (when had he closed them?) and looked over Bilbo’s shoulder to where he’d last seen Nori and Dwalin. For some reason they were both looking back at him and Bilbo, and completely out of the blue Nori burst out into violent laughter and almost ended up being the one falling off of his pony.

“Oh dear,” Bilbo said, sounding torn between worried and amused. “I’m sure I don’t want to know what they are talking about.”

Thorin grunted in agreement. Whatever it was, they just better keep him out of it.

The day, like the morning, passed in somewhat of a blur. To Thorin it felt a bit like in the winter, when you looked out the window and your breath fogged up the glass. It was possible to wipe it away, but unless you moved it would just come back. And at the moment he was just too tired to move.

He just couldn’t understand why he was so tired. One night of disturbed sleep should not leave him in such a state, expect clearly it had. After Thorin had finished his supper he found himself slumped against Bilbo’s side, eyes starting to slide close now that he was no longer riding or eating.
“Maybe you are getting sick,” Bilbo murmured and brushed a stray curl away from Thorin’s cheek. “But still no fever.”

“I’m just tired,” Thorin said with a weary sigh. He jumped when another hand came to rest over his forehead.

“Cough,” Óin demanded, and when Thorin didn’t immediately comply he poked him in the side with a thick finger.

“He’s merely exhausted,” the healer declared after another few minutes of poking and prodding.

“I believe I said I was.” Thorin began.

“It’s not that strange,” Óin cut in. “Sure you had a couple nights of rest now, but from what I know of Hobbits you are not really made for climbing mountains, or falling down mountains and certainly not made for not sleeping for days on end.”

“It’s because I slept poorly last night!” Thorin raised his voice in an attempt to get Óin to listen. “Nothing to be concerned about.”

“If you retire now you should feel better in the morning,” nodded Óin, and Thorin sighed.

“I’ll join you shortly,” Bilbo said and brushed his thumb along Thorin’s cheekbone. “I just need to talk to Dwalin.”

It was a true testament to Thorin’s fatigue that he could not greet the first half of Bilbo’s comment with more enthusiasm than a weak smile. And also that he actually went along with the suggestion of going to bed at such a comparatively early hour.

Just as Thorin passed the fire on his way to where they’d stored their packs, he surprised himself with a yawn almost big enough to crack his jaw.

“That’s impressive,” Kíli said from the Hobbit’s left, nudging Fíli with his elbow. “I think I could see right into Thorin’s stomach.”

The blond Dwarf chuckled, and Bofur who was sitting to Fíli’s right joined in the merriment.

“Very funny,” Thorin said with a half-hearted glare at the trio. As he walked by them Fíli placed a hand on his arm.

“Sit while I get your bedroll and blanket,” he offered. “It’s no bother, and you do look like you’re about to topple over at any given moment.”

Fíli didn’t give him any time to argue and before Thorin knew it he was seated between Kíli and Bofur on a fallen tree trunk. They sat together in silence, unusual considering the nature of the two Dwarfs playing his bookends. Though it was not very long until Bofur chuckled.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he said with a laugh lurking around the edges of his voice and when Thorin opened his eyes which had mysteriously fallen closed, he realised that he’d been leaning his head against the miner’s shoulder.

“My apologies,” he murmured, attempting straightening himself. It did not work entirely according to
plan because he overbalanced and ended up leaning fairly heavily against Kíli. Not that the young Dwarf seemed to even notice his weight. Instead he just slung his arm around Thorin’s shoulder and stopped him when he would have pulled away.

“It’s no bother,” he said, echoing Fíli’s earlier words. “Just relax, Uncle.”

“Uncle?” Thorin questioned, wondering if it was perhaps Kíli who needed a good night’s sleep.

But if it hadn’t been for his own weariness, Thorin probably would not have said what he said next. “I don’t even have any siblings, much less one who is a Dwarf.”

Kíli snorted.

“Well, that’s rather fortunate, don’t you think? If my mother was your sister then Bilbo would be your brother and that would be a tale for the ages.”

Thorin was still trying to make sense of Kíli’s words when the young Dwarf squeezed his shoulder and continued speaking.

“But you’re practically family now anyway,” the dark-haired Dwarf said with an unexpectedly sweet smile. “What with that chain around your neck and cuddling up with my actual uncle.”

Thorin glanced towards Bofur, wanting to see if Kíli’s words upset him as he had been the one ‘cuddling up’ with Bilbo for quite some time before Thorin entered the picture. But when Bofur met his eyes they were void of anything even remotely close to jealousy, and the Dwarf even winked at him.

“Besides,” Kíli continued, unperturbed by Thorin’s lack of attention. “I think you’d make a good uncle. So it suits you.”

Thorin doubted that. He had spent very little of his life around children and what little interaction there had been had never felt entirely comfortable to him. They were just so... small. But on the other hand he rather appreciated children, because unlike adults they were usually very clear and open about what they thought. If they didn’t like him, they’d be sure to let him know. If they thought that smithing was a strange thing for a Hobbit to be doing, they’d tell him. Likewise if they rather thought that making spades and cutlery looked rather interesting and may we please watch Mister Oakenshield?

“Come now, Mister Oakenshield,” Fíli prompted and it took Thorin a moment to separate Fíli’s words from his own thoughts. He was not back in Hobbiton, or in one of the cities of Men he’d lived in before. He was in the middle of nowhere, on a quest to Erebor.

With a groan Thorin sat back up again and ran a hand through his hair.

“Thorin,” the Hobbit murmured. “That’s what you’ll call me. Unless you want me to call you Prince Fíli?”

“Let’s not,” the Dwarf agreed amiably enough and reach out a hand for Thorin to pull himself up with. “Titles are good for one thing and that’s the ability to make those who care about them shut up.”

“My brother is, as always, forgetting the appreciation certain ladies have for one of royal-“
“For the last time, those aren't ladies,” Fili said and rolled his eyes.

Kili grinned unrepentantly at his brother. “How would you know, you never-“

“The two of you, stop squabbling and get him to bed before he falls down,” Bofur interrupted when Thorin wavered slightly where he stood next to Fili.

The Hobbit did his best to summon a glare, but it rather was destroyed by another yawn.

“I've put your bedroll by the left side of the fire, just next to the large rock,” Fili said as Kili again threw his arm over Thorin’s shoulders.

“Let’s get you to bed, uncle Thorin.”

And despite his tiredness, Thorin couldn’t help the small smile that came to his lips.

- 

It felt like mere seconds passed between Thorin lying down and Bilbo joining him. The Dwarf was clearly trying not to wake him; making the least amount of noise possible, and actually not even touching him as he laid down. But regardless, Thorin stirred as he sensed Bilbo’s presence.

Mumbling something incoherent Thorin rolled over to gather Bilbo in his arms, beyond caring about whether their armours made the position uncomfortable or not. He just needed to have him close; feel him be alive and well.

“I didn’t mean to wake you,” Bilbo said guiltily.

“No ‘wake,” Thorin slurred and buried his nose in Bilbo’s hair.

A sharp intake of breath from beneath him caused him to swim a little further up into consciousness. That sounded like-

“Your ribs,” Thorin said and quickly raised himself off of Bilbo, deeply appalled with himself. “I forgot- that’s why you said to hold your belt- I’m so-“

“Shhh,” Bilbo whispered softly. “It’s all right, it was just a twinge. If anyone should apologize it’s me. I hadn’t realised that we might be pushing you a little harder than-”

“I do not need to be coddled,” Thorin said as firmly as he could, blinking rapidly to avoid having his eyes fall closed again.

“Shame,” Bilbo replied with mock-regret. “The boys are getting too big now for me to spoil them, so I was rather hoping that-“

“You are not particularly amusing,” Thorin informed the grinning Dwarf.

“Let’s hope am dull enough to put you to sleep then,” Bilbo agreed and turned to press his back against Thorin’s chest. “Good night, love.”

Grumbling Thorin nonetheless let his hand come to rest on Bilbo’s chest, where it was covered by Bilbo’s own hand.
“G’night,” the Hobbit said and almost instantly fell asleep again.
Chapter Notes

This was supposed to be shorter, but then Nori had thoughts he wanted to share. I don’t even know.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was only natural to be concerned when a thief started making eyes at someone else’s betrothed. Especially when that someone was his king - not to mention practically his brother, and in particular when the thief was Nori.

It wasn’t that Dwalin didn’t trust Thorin; it was that he didn’t trust Nori. Not that he really would have thought that the thief would be the type to try and get between two lovers, or that he would try and take one from Bilbo of all people. Because as much as Dwalin didn’t like to admit it, Bilbo and the thief were good friends. However there was no denying the looks Nori had been sending Thorin all day, and when Dwalin had thought about it, those looks had been around for longer than that. Though not for more than perhaps a week, so there was still time to choke the flames in Nori’s smouldering looks before the fire started.

If the looks had not been proof enough, the very circumstance that Nori had only looked at Thorin that way when he thought no one else was looking certainly seemed to be reason enough to suspect something unsavoury was going on.

Dwalin frowned as a thought had just occurred to him, and his pony grumbled when he accidentally pulled on its reins. It was quite possible that the looks had been going on for a lot longer than a week after all, perhaps he’d only started seeing them because Nori had grown less cautious, or worse, if the thief was affected enough to become sloppy. (Dwalin very carefully did not think about exactly why that would be worse.)

He could remember Nori looking at Thorin with a peculiar expression on his face several times before they had even left the Shire. At the time he thought that the thief was either trying to find out where the Hobbit had hidden his purse, or perhaps that he was wondering if Thorin was safe enough to be allowed close to his brothers and Bilbo. But perhaps that had not been the case after all. Perhaps that had just been the beginning.

And all in all, it led Dwalin to one conclusion, and it was not one he much appreciated.

When he’d seen Nori blatantly eying Thorin’s crotch it had been the drop that filled the bucket and Dwalin had called out before he was fully aware that he planned to do so.

“I want you to stop doing what you were doing,” Dwalin said firmly when Nori had caught up with him.

“Talking to Bilbo and Thorin?” Nori asked innocently. Why he bothered with the act Dwalin didn’t know, Nori was rarely – if ever – innocent.

“I saw you looking,” he said and forced his hands to unclench from the tight grip they had on the
reins.

“It’s just in good fun,” Nori protested, innocence melting into sulkiness. “I wouldn’t actually do anything. I don’t take from friends.” He paused. “Unless you count all the things I take and give back, but that’s hardly fair of you if that’s the case. That’s just for practice.” The thief waggled the fingers on his right hand. “These don’t keep so nimble out of sheer talent alone.”

“Don’t play the fool,” Dwalin growled. “I’m not talking about you stealing.” And he damned well hoped they weren’t actually talking about other things that required nimble hands, because if the thief meant that he would take Thorin for practice…

Though not so, because the thief’s braided eyebrows rose in what seemed like honest surprise, although Dwalin figured that ‘seemed’ was as usually the key word in a situation like this. Especially when coupled with the word ‘honest’.

“If we are not talking about me stealing, and might I add that it is very pleasant to talk to you about such matters without risking being thrown in jail, what are we talking about?”

“I’m not blind,” Dwalin said. “I-“

“Well, if you were, I have to say that my job would be a lot easier,” Nori said with a crooked grin.

“Stealing is not a job.” Dwalin glared at the thief. “It’s a disgrace.”

Nori shrugged. “Everyone is a thief in some way. Some of us are just more honest about it, and the fact that we enjoy it.”

“I haven’t stolen a thing in my life,” Dwalin protested.

“You’ve killed, that’s stealing a life.” Nori smirked at him. “And throwing people into jail is stealing someone’s freedom. Lying is stealing someone else’s truth. If we take throwing people into jail for an example since you’re so good at it; you might not have done it just for the fun of it, but don’t tell me you’ve not taken pleasure in it.”

“This is not what I intended to speak to you about,” Dwalin growled, angry that Nori had managed to distract him. He glanced back at Bilbo and Thorin who were now riding together on the same horse; the one Thorin had previously been riding trotting along beside them. Good.

Thorin never was very talkative in the mornings, but this particular morning the Hobbit had moved around as if in another world entirely. It was just as well that Bilbo would keep a close eye on him, for more than one reason.

Seeing Dwalin’s look, Nori also turned around.

“So what did you want to speak about?” Nori asked and nodded towards the pair. “Something to do with them?“

Dwalin gritted his teeth. The innocent act was back. “I want you to stop looking at Thorin like he is something that should belong to you,” he growled. “Is this the kind of loyalty you feel you owe your King?”

Nori’s eyes flitted briefly over to Dwalin before returning to Bilbo and Thorin. Dwalin only saw the
look out of the corner of his eyes as he kept his gaze fixed on the two to avoid looking at Nori. Another innocent look at this point and he didn’t know what he would do, but it would end with someone bleeding.

Since Dwalin wasn’t looking, he was startled when Nori suddenly burst out into laughter. And not just chuckles, no, it was the kind of laughter that stole your breath and turned your limbs into wet string.

Aghast Dwalin stared at the other Dwarf. This was certainly no laughing matter.

“Oh, Mahal,” Nori moaned when he could breathe again. The thief clutching at his stomach and drew in another shaky breath. “I- you think-“

“Is he all right?” Ori asked, a concerned look on his face. He had halted his pony when he’d heard Nori gasp for breath.

Dwalin just barely resisted the urge to say ‘he won’t be all right for long’. Ori was a sweet lad, and a good brother. It wasn’t his fault that one of his brothers was Nori.

“Just, just a misunderstanding,” Nori hiccupped. “Go and ride with Dori, it’s fine.”

Trying his best to look like someone who would not like to strangle Nori, Dwalin nodded at the young scribe. Ori looked a bit sceptical, but he left, and then it was just Dwalin and Nori again.

Nori hiccupped again and wiped a stray tear from his eyes. “I don’t know when I’ve last laughed this much. I don’t know if I’ve ever laughed this much. Perhaps that time Dori bought that robe that ended up being a dress, but-”

“How fortunate that one of us is finding it amusing,” Dwalin said sarcastically. “Do you think our king would too?”

Nori’s mouth twitched. “Oh, I’m sure he would. At least if I get to be the one to tell him. I have a feeling you’ll muck up the details.”

Dwalin stared at Nori. Nori looked back and maybe for the first time ever Dwalin found himself on the receiving end of an honest smile from the thief. Not a smirk, not a leer, not a grin. A smile. To Dwalin this was a greater shock than Nori pulling a knife on him would have been.

“I do not wish to bed Thorin,” Nori said, the smile still playing on his lips. “Well, I probably wouldn’t have said no if he’d been unattached and offered. If you overlook the lack of beard he’s fairly handsome. And I’ve always favoured the idea that someone who works with his hands-“

“Get to the point,” Dwalin growled.

“I think I actually started with it,” Nori said, and now the more familiar smirk was back. “I’m not interested in our burglar. I have not been sending him looks to try and tear the clothes from his body, if that’s what you’ve been imagining.”

“I’ve not been ‘imagining’ anything,” Dwalin said. “But I know what I have seen.”

“I think not,” Nori smirked. “Or you would know that the only thing I’ve been lusting after is a certain ring our dear Hobbit managed to stumble upon. Does that ring any bells?”
Oh.

“And may I remind you that I was the one helping them distract you the other day so they could have some private time. Not that you apparently needed much distracting,” The thief added a bit sullenly.

Oh.

If Dwalin had been the type to blush he would have been doing a fairly decent ruby impression. As it was he awkwardly pulled at his beard and looked away. “Oh,” he said quietly, because it was all he could think to say.

“Oh, indeed,” Nori said smugly. “And no, before you think about it, I’m not going to steal the ring. As I said I don’t steal from friends unless I give whatever it is back.” The auburn haired Dwarf sighed deeply. “And I don’t rightly know if I could give that ring back if I had it. Imagine would I could do with it.”

Dwalin did, and consequently he made a sour face. Nori just snickered.

“So can I be the one to tell Bilbo about this?” he asked.

“No,” Dwalin stated flatly.

“So you want to be the one to do it then? I guess that’s fair.”

“We’re not telling him,” Dwalin said, glaring over at Nori. His glared was quickly changed for concern when the thief gasped and pressed a hand over his chest.

“Oh,” Nori said, sounding short of breath. “My heart skips a beat every time you refer to the two of us as a ‘we’.” The thief fluttered his eyelashes in an exaggerated manner and just as quickly as Dwalin’s concerned had arrived it was again replaced by annoyance. Still, he was the one who had been in the wrong, so he straightened his back and briefly inclined his head in Nori’s direction.

“My apologies for the mistake,” he said stiffly. “I was wrong to accuse you.” When he looked back up again Nori was looking at him with a weird expression on his face. “What?” Dwalin asked when it became clear that Nori would not speak.

“Nothing, I’m sure,” Nori murmured, then shook his head. Pasting on a bright grin he winked at Dwalin. “Can I at least tell Ori about this? He’s gotten this notion into his head that you know everything worth knowing, don’t ask me where he’s getting ideas like this from, and I think this would be a valuable learning experience for him. Dori is always telling me that those are good to have.”


“Fine?” Nori echoed, visibly surprised.

“Why not,” Dwalin shrugged. “If the lad thinks I’m without fault it might to him good to learn otherwise.”

“Oh, he knows much too much about you failing to catch me to think you faultless,” Nori smirked. At Dwalin’s dark glare the thief just laughed; loud enough to cause Ori to turn back and look at
them, which of course only prompted Nori to laugh louder.

“Oh, before I forget,” Nori said when his laughter had passed. “I forgive you. Not that there was much to forgive, but still.” Again that same smile was lurking at the corner of Nori’s mouth and eyes.

Dwalin looked away and grunted, feeling embarrassed without knowing why.

“Besides,” Nori continued. “Even if I was interested you can’t really think that Thorin would stray.”

“Don’t tell me that you don’t enjoy a challenge,” Dwalin said drily, lifting an eyebrow. He wondered if Nori would take insult, but the thief merely looked contemplative.

“I do enjoy challenges,” he admitted. “But not impossible ones.”

They both looked back at Bilbo and Thorin again. This time Thorin was barely visible behind their friend; nothing but his dark curly hair sticking up from behind Bilbo’s shoulder.

“He better not fall off,” Dwalin muttered.

“If I didn’t know better I’d almost say that you are the ones with inappropriate feelings,” Nori drawled. “When Bilbo and Bofur first started sharing a bed you pretty much threatened to skin the poor bastard if he hurt Bilbo in any way. Tell me, what’s so different about Thorin?”

Dwalin glared at him. “I did no such thing.” And he hadn’t. He had merely suggested that for the wellbeing of everyone involved there better be no ulterior motives for the miner’s actions. Bifur had not appreciated the slight against his cousin’s honour, though Bofur himself had taken the entire thing with admirable calm.

“That is not what I heard,” Nori said with a sly wink. “And you know my information is always good.”

“Unlike your methods,” Dwalin grumbled.

“I do believe we’re getting away from the subject at hand. What’s different about Thorin?”

“You tell me,” Dwalin said defensively, thinking back to the looks that came before the more smouldering ones. “I did not think you were looking to bed him purely on a few days behaviour. We were almost still in sight of his home when you offered to teach him how to steal. Are you telling me that you’d offer that to anyone?”

“It’s only common sense to have a burglar who knows how to burgle,” Nori said loftily.

“I’m sure, but that was not an answer to my question.”

“Because I don’t know,” Nori admitted after a few moments of silence.

“You’re not telling the truth.” Dwalin squinted over at the thief. He wasn’t sure how he knew, but he would bet his beard that Nori knew damned well why he’d sought Thorin out. If not out of desire… then what?

Nori glanced behind them again before sighing and prompting his pony a little closer to Dwalin’s.
“The first time I met Bilbo I—"

“Stole his purse,” Dwalin muttered.

“Accidentally stole his purse,” Nori corrected as if that made all the difference in the world.

Dwalin shook his head. “I don't think that word means what you think it means.”

“Pfft,” Nori denied. “I thought I was taking the coin of some lazy noble, thusly it was a complete accident that it happened to belong to the King. You see, when I first met Bilbo I didn't recognise him.”

“So what?” Dwalin asked with a shrug. He already knew that, and he couldn’t understand why that was important, or what it had to do with Thorin.

“But something about him...” The thief's green eyes turned distant. “I convinced myself I wanted to return the purse in person because of all sorts of stupid reasons. Really, I don't know what I was thinking,” he added with a snort. Then he turned to look at Dwalin. “But I wanted to meet Bilbo again.”

Perhaps it was not Thorin that Nori wanted to bed. But Dwalin had not the time to point this about before Nori snorted and shook his head.

“Eh, wipe that look off your face,” the thief said. “I’m not out to bed Bilbo any more than I’m out to bed Thorin. Again, once upon a time I would not have minded. But I’m not fool enough to get into bed with royalty.” He shuddered. “Politics. I wish Thorin all the luck in the world with that.”

Dwalin snorted. “If you want to avoid politics you are keeping strange company, bed mates or not.”

“The hazard of actually finding your king likeable I guess,” Nori said a bit ruefully. “Except... if I may get back to the explanation you demanded?”

Dwalin rolled his eyes and gestured for him to go on.

“When we all fell into Thorin's hall and I got myself a first look at our would-be burglar, I could have sworn I knew him from somewhere. Only,” Nori seemed to fumble for words, how unusual. “That's not entirely correct. It's not that I recognised him. Because how could I? More as if he was the final piece to a puzzle. And Bilbo was the first.”

“You're not making sense,” Dwalin said.

“There is something about those two,” Nori said quietly. “It's like they're lodestones, and the rest of us the iron. This quest, I don’t think anyone of us thought seriously about not coming, even though that would probably had been the sensible decision. But that is not too strange; after all, there is little I would not do for Bilbo. What is strange is that I’ve felt this way ever since that day when the lads were almost taken. And what is even stranger is that I feel that there is little I would not do for Thorin. Someone I have only known for a few months and who is not kin. Not even of our people.”

Nori glanced back again and Dwalin followed his gaze as it sought out their burglar. “When he got captured by the Trolls we let ourselves get captured for him. When we thought him lost inside the mountain we were willing to go back for him.” Nori gazed intently at Dwalin. “Do not tell me that you don’t know what I’m talking about. You feel it too; I have never seen you this protective of anyone who is not Balin or Bilbo. Just as I’ve never been this protective of anyone who is not my brothers.”
“Perhaps the Wizard cast a spell on him?” Dwalin suggested half-heartedly, not bothering to deny what Nori was saying because he heard the truth in the words.

“Now it is you who are lying,” Nori scoffed. “To yourself if to no one else.”

“So what are you saying then?” Dwalin asked scornfully. “That it is fate? That is what you meant about the lodestones isn’t it. That we are drawn together for some reason beyond our control.”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Nori said evenly.

For a while they rode on in silence, and just when that silence began to feel too heavy, too expectant with things not said, Nori spoke again.

“All I know is that whatever will happen, they’re part of something bigger. I can feel it. And I’m content to be here by their side. Even by yours.”

Dwalin turned to Nori expecting another cheeky grin, but instead there was the small smile from before. It made something in him clench.

"Better by your side than chasing you, eh?" He offered since he needed to say something.

"Do I really have to pick just one?" Nori asked with a pout, reaching into his pocket and bringing out his- no Dwalin's pipe.

"How did you-?"

Nori wiggled his fingers, as well as his eyebrows. "As I said, a Dwarf's got to keep himself in shape."

Dwalin half-expected him to race away on his pony, cackling in glee as he made his escape; however temporary that might be, but it seemed Nori was getting his own back for the couple of times Dwalin had managed to surprise that day, because the auburn haired Dwarf merely stretched out his hand holding the pipe.

"I'm not thanking you for giving me back my pipe," Dwalin said gruffly after taking the pipe. The thief was looking at him in a rather expectant way.

Something flashed over Nori’s face, too quick for Dwalin to catch it. Then the familiar smirk settled again.

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” he said loftily to Dwalin. “Ori, wait up!” he then called and left Dwalin riding his pony, cackling in glee as he made his escape; however temporary that might be, but it seemed Nori was getting his own back for the couple of times Dwalin had managed to surprise that day, because the auburn haired Dwarf merely stretched out his hand holding the pipe.

That evening Bilbo sought him out. Not that he had been avoiding his friend or anything… It was just that Bilbo had clearly been occupied with more important things. Ever since they made halt for the day, his King had been sitting with a mostly asleep Thorin (was it a Hobbit trait to be able to eat even though your eyes were mostly closed?) leaning against him, and as they had finished up supper Óin had decided to come to poke at their burglar. It was not Dwalin’s place to disturb. Of course,
Bilbo had never cared about what anyone’s place was.

“I couldn’t help seeing that you entertained Nori today,” Bilbo said behind his back as Dwalin was making sure the packs were still tightly secured to his pony. The warrior turned around to look down at his king, as always being a bit surprised that Bilbo really was that much shorter than him. It was easy to forget when they were not standing right next to each other as Bilbo’s presence was much larger than his height. Lodestone. “Care to share?” Bilbo asked mildly and Dwalin almost shook his head to clear his mind before he realised that it would be taken as refusal. Not that the intended to share exactly what had happened, but outright denying it would to him no good.

“I made a mistake, the thief found it hilarious,” Dwalin said shortly. “Nothing else is new beneath the sun.”

Bilbo snorted. “With the way you were calling for him before that that had to have been some mistake. But I can see that you do not wish to share,” he added when Dwalin remained silent. Mulishly silent some might have said.

“You know,” Bilbo continued. “I had hoped that one of the outcomes of this quest would be to bring the two of you closer. You are both my friends, and I had hoped you would finally find the same companionship in each other as well.”

It was Dwalin’s turn to snort. “Don’t get your hopes up,” he said and crossed his arms.

“I don’t know,” his friend said. “Half the battle has been won since quite some time ago. I’m just waiting for the end result to catch up to the both of you.”

“It’s like everyone woke up today with the idea in mind to not make sense,” Dwalin growled.

“Have you noticed that he only gives back what he's taken to those he considers friends?” Bilbo said with a deceptively bland voice. “And are you likewise aware that it’s been years and years since he’s taken something from you that has not been returned?”

The large dwarf blinked. Well, Nori had said that he would not take from a friend, Dwalin just hadn’t put it in connection to himself. Not even when he'd gotten his pipe back right after the words had been said.

“And you can tell yourself all you want that you do not trust him, but you’ve trusted him with my life. That can’t be denied.”

It could. But that would be a lie, Dwalin realised.

“And also.” Dwalin watched as Bilbo’s lips quirked in a smile. “Did you know that Thorin asked if you and Nori were courting?”

With that his king and best friend slapped him on the back and left, leaving Dwalin with a mind again occupied by thoughts and troubling notions. Perhaps the thing about lodestones had not been so wearisome after all. At least not compared to this.

Chapter End Notes
As always I appreciate comments *looks hopeful*

I think Dwalin is rather cute. He starts off the chapter by thinking "I don't trust Nori." but immediately after thinking that, he still backtracks and is like "but I didn't think he'd do something like this." Dwalin you big lump...
A lot of you will surely have already seen it, but for those of you who haven't, check this out:

Isn't it the prettiest thing ever?

To write something that has been illustrated by dwalinroxxx feels like... I just can't. I
mean, look at it. It's gorgeous. Wow.

Any and all illustrations of my fics are more than awesome, but dwalinroxxx is probably one of the best artists in the Hobbit fandom and may I just stare stupidly at the picture for a while?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Good morning,” Bilbo murmured as Thorin opened his eyes. The Hobbit blinked a couple of times to banish the remnants of sleep and unlike his attempts the other day this time it actually worked.

Bilbo was kneeling by his side, and Thorin had a brief moment where the most proper parts of him were shocked by the very fact that a king should be on his knees, much less in front of a mere Hobbit smith.

“Good morning,” he replied and moved a hand to cup the smiling face hovering above his own. The Dwarf willingly allowed himself to be pulled down for a kiss.

“You’re feeling better?” Bilbo asked and brushed away a dark curl that wanted to fall into Thorin’s eyes. “Not going to go falling off any ponies today?”

“I do not recall that happening yesterday either, but I distinctly recall telling you that you are not amusing,” Thorin said flatly. Though he rather ruined any impression of grumpiness he’d been trying to make by lifting his head up and taking another quick kiss.

He didn’t feel like he’d want to greet the morning with a bright smile, but then again he never felt that way. There was a reason why he’d built his smial with absolutely no windows facing east.

The Hobbit was surprised to feel the slightest tug in his heart when he thought about his former home. He knew that the Gamgees would take care of it and not just the garden, even though that would be the focus of young Hamfast. Perhaps they might even move in eventually, once it became obvious that he was not coming back. He hoped that they would be the ones who moved in, it would be nice to have people he was fond of living in something he had made.

“I guess I won’t be giving up being king after all then,” Bilbo said with a smile. “And here I was, planning on becoming a wandering entertainer; roaming across the country side with just the clothes on my back and the wish to make people laugh.”

Thorin gave him a very unimpressed look.

“Yes, I can see it’s hopeless,” Bilbo said and the look on his face was so tragically overwrought with exaggerated grief that Thorin couldn’t help but smile.

“Aha!” Bilbo held up a finger triumphantly.

“I think I want to get up now,” Thorin interrupted, but his smile was fond.

“Good,” Dwalin grumbled as he went passed. Thorin looked after him, wondering what had the Dwarf in such a foul mood this early in the day. Dawn had just barely broken, and while Thorin seemed to be the last one up and about, the day hadn’t even begun yet.
“Don’t mind him,” Bilbo said lightly. “He’s just has a lot on his mind. Like whether or not he’s in love with Nori,” he added in a much lower tone of voice.

Thorin blinked.

“Yes,” Bilbo said with a shrug. “I might have been mistaken before when I said that none of them wished to become involved. With each other,” he added a bit unnecessarily. “Unexpected, but at the same time, not. And I think it would do them both good. Not that they have admitted to anything yet. I tried to talk to Nori this morning, but-”

“Matchmaker,” Thorin said shaking his head, sighing when Bilbo only gave him a bright smile in return.

“They are both my friends and I would see them happy. If that happiness can be found with one another, all the better.”

“I’m definitely going to get up now,” Thorin stated and sat up. “It’s much too early to be talking about things like this.”

“But you are feeling better?” Bilbo rose to his feet and held out a hand to the Hobbit. “I was thinking that perhaps Gandalf should have a look at you.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Thorin said firmly, and then bit down on a groan as his muscles protested the change in position as Bilbo pulled him to his feet. It felt like he’d been asleep for far longer than just one night. Still, there was none of the woolliness left from the day before, and he would not need to have the Wizard examine him. In fact he would have to be unconscious on the ground before allowing that. “And I can ride on my own today. If I would ride with you I think it would be Dwalin who fell off of his mount.”

Bilbo looked confused and Thorin took a step closer, close enough that the fur of Bilbo’s cloak brushed against his chest.

“If I’m not falling asleep,” Thorin said in a low voice. “Or actually sleeping, I do not think I can spend several hours pressed up against you without acting on it. And I’ve been led to believe that that would not be very… appropriate in Dwalin’s opinion. Especially if we’re still on a pony.”

He was expecting Bilbo to joke it off; so far they had done little more than kissing and despite his words Thorin was not intending to have their first time be on a pony. Or if his words would not cause a joke and a sly glance, he imagined that they would make Bilbo flush in that way that never failed to make Thorin want to do something wholly inappropriate.

Instead the Dwarf’s eyes darkened and grew heavy lidded.

“I can assure you that I was not asleep yesterday and as a result I was completely aware of the hours you spent rubbing up against me, with your hands basically at my crotch. If I hadn’t been worried about you then the ride would have been even more uncomfortable than it actually ended up being.”

Thorin felt his ears burn.

“There was no rubbing,” he protested. “And you were the one who told me to put my hands there.”

But Bilbo wasn't listening. The Dwarf lifted a hand to stroke his fingers along the point of Thorin's left ear which to Thorin’s horror, was not actually covered by his curls.
"How did I not know that your ears blushed?" Bilbo asked, sounding all too fascinated. Thorin would have objected – because red ears was not something that should be considered interesting – but he was a little busy trying to understand his body’s response to Bilbo’s fingers. The light touch of calloused fingertips tracing along the shell made his toes curl and his skin prickle. Forget how Bilbo hadn’t known about the blushing, how could Thorin have not known about this? Had none of his past lovers actually touched his ears? Not that he’d had many, but still –

"If you are quite done whispering sweet nothings to each other…” Dwalin growled suddenly from behind them, making Thorin take a step back out of surprise.

"Want me to whisper sweet nothings to someone else?" Bilbo asked, raising his brows in mock-surprise. "Or perhaps we can ask Thorin to do it. To Nori perhaps?"

"Breakfast?" Thorin asked hopefully when neither Bilbo nor Dwalin had paid him any attention for almost a full minute; Dwalin too busy glaring and Bilbo too busy grinning. It was without out a doubt too early for this kind of thing. Besides, Bilbo wasn’t the only reason as to why his stomach was doing strange flips; he couldn’t even remember what they’d had for supper the previous evening.

When they rode out, Thorin was at something of a loss. He wanted to stay away from Dwalin and Nori just in case… well, just in case. Matters of the heart (though judging by Dwalin’s expression it was more of a problem of the bowels; Thorin had never seen him look that constipated before) were best left to the people who held those hearts. Aside from those two, he also needed to keep some distance from Bilbo lest he just throw himself from his pony to do the rubbing the Dwarf had talked about earlier. Breakfast had begun as a pretty good distraction, but like all Dwarfs, Bilbo enjoyed food just a little too much. Thorin would almost have preferred it if Bilbo had done it just to tease him, but he had the feeling that the pleased little moans the Dwarf did as he ate one of Beorn’s seed cakes were quite genuine and that of course made them all that more difficult to ignore. He also felt quite ridiculous for being jealous of a baked good, but that was another story entirely.

With Bilbo, Dwalin and Nori out of the question, Thorin would normally have ridden with Fíli and Kíli, except that the boys were out scouting again. They were now only a day’s ride away from the forest, and consequently all that much closer to Goblin territory. The Shapeshifter had said that he believed any Goblins who had heard about the death of the Goblin King would have gone south and towards the Misty Mountains; thus leaving them free to enter Mirkwood at the spot Beorn had suggested. Still, Bilbo had asked his nephews to make sure there were no nasty surprises waiting for them.

The absence of the two young Dwarfs was unfortunate; the two of them would surely have kept him busy enough to stop him from thinking about other things. Like Bilbo. And Bilbo’s hands. And his hair. And the way his eyes looked when he smiled. How they would look if- Thorin forced himself to look away before his first time making love with Bilbo really would be on top of a pony. Or perhaps on the grass next to it. If Dwalin did not approve he could just avert his eyes.

The large Dwarf was riding in the back, doing a fairly good impression of a constipated thundercloud.

Bilbo was riding in the front together with Gandalf, Bofur and Nori. This left Thorin the middle, and with the choice of either riding with just his own thoughts for company (which wasn’t really a good option considering that all his thoughts seemed very occupied with the things not even a remotely
respectable person should want to do to a Dwarf in bright daylight), or to strike up a conversation with one of the remaining members of the company. Unfortunately he hadn’t really spent that much time alone with anyone except those he was now unable to join.

After a few moments consideration Thorin moved his pony in the direction of Glóin. While he didn’t really know the Dwarf better than any of the others, the Hobbit knew he could count on him to be a good distraction.

A few hours later of hearing Glóin talk about his wife and son (and little else), Thorin was debating the cleverness of his decision. There were only so many times a Hobbit could bear hearing about all the ways in which little Gimli was the most incredible little tyke who had ever picked up an axe. The very fact that Gimli, who Thorin judged to be the Dwarf equivalent of a tween, was at all allowed anywhere near an axe to begin with made him once again question the sanity of the average Dwarf. He could just imagine the look the old biddies in Hobbiton would be sporting if he went about making and handing out axes to all the younglings, and for once Thorin would agree that such a look would have been warranted.

The third time Glóin began the tale of how happy Gimli had been when he received his very first axe (thankfully one made out of wood as he had only been two years old at the time) Thorin excused himself and made his escape to Bifur. If there was one Dwarf that would not talk his ears off, Bifur was that Dwarf. Such was the beauty of not really sharing a common language.

Strangely enough, Bifur seemed unusually chatty that day. He rumbled something friendly soundly when Thorin joined him, and after a few minutes of silence he waved his hand to catch Thorin’s attention.

“Can I help you with something, Master Bifur?” Thorin asked.

Bifur pointed to the pony he was riding and said… something.

“I’m sorry,” Thorin said. “I don’t understand.” Which Bifur knew of course since no one but the Dwarfs spoke the Dwarven language, and Bifur was not able to speak Westron. He hadn’t asked what had caused Bifur to cause his tongue to forget it, but then again the Hobbit figured it had something to do with the Orc axe sticking out from the Dwarf’s forehead.

“Fuzl,” Bifur said more slowly, placing emphasis on the first syllable.

“Speaking slower will not make me understand,” Thorin said gruffly, wondering silently to himself if perhaps if Dori and Ori would be a better choices for companions. Or why not Balin - except that he hadn’t really talked to Balin since accepting Bilbo’s chain.

Thorin did not think the scholar was opposed to it per se, if so he would have already said something, but that did not mean that he was in favour of it either. And for some reason Thorin didn’t want to disappoint him.

Bifur heaved a sigh and snapped his fingers to catch Thorin’s attention again.

“Tho-rin,” he said, levelling a finger at the Hobbit’s chest before pointing at himself. “Bifur.” With a meaningful glance at the Hobbit he then pointed again to the pony. “Fuzl.”

“The pony’s name is Fussel?”
The badger-haired Dwarf groaned and shook his head. Pointing at his own pony, Thorin’s pony and over towards Dori’s and Ori’s ponies where they rode some distance ahead, he again repeated that same word. Thorin’s eyes widened.

“Fussel means pony?”

“Fuzl,” Bifur agreed with an encouraging smile and nod.

“I- should you really be telling me this?”

Bifur grinned, the glee of it was mildly disturbing, and then shook his head.

“But you are still going to,” Thorin said with a sigh, just because it had to be said. He was sure this was going to end up with him getting scolded by Dori. The Dwarf would have fit in very well in the Shire, always considering what was proper and what was not. And sharing their language with an outsider was probably not proper at all considering the rather pinched look the Dwarf got every time Bifur spoke when Thorin was around to listen. Especially when Bofur ended up translating parts of it so that Thorin could actually understand what Bifur was saying.

Still grinning Bifur nodded and said something that to Thorin’s ears sounded very complicated. The Hobbit shrugged one shoulder. Dwarfs were contrary beings, it was one of the first things he’d learnt as they had laid waste to his pantry, and then neatly done the washing up afterwards. Perhaps this was why Bifur would want to face Dori’s wrath. Or more than one bit of his mind had become addled when the axe hit it.

Bifur sighed. "Bilbo,” he said. "Tho-rin.” Then he made some fairly rude kissing noises, fished up a gold chain from where it’d been hiding beneath his clothes and waved it pointedly. The hand he held the reins with weaved strange forms in the air, but even without understanding those Thorin got the picture. Or at least he thought he did.

“You want to teach me your language because I’m… involved with Bilbo?”

Bifur nodded again and carefully tucked back the gold chain beneath his shirt. Thorin spared a thought to wonder if the chain meant that Bifur was being courted by someone, or if the chain was his, waiting for someone to come and claim it.

“But Bilbo speaks Westron, and I’m a Hobbit, why would I need to know it?” Belatedly Thorin realised that asking a question that required a much more complicated answer than yes, no, or a bit of charades, might not be that intelligent. From the frustrated look on Bifur’s face, he rather agreed.

“Because Bilbo is our king,” Dori said from behind them. Thorin managed not to sigh as the Dwarf rode up beside his pony.

How wonderful, here came the scolding he had been missing. Perhaps he could also throw in the disappointment Thorin hadn’t yet been seeing from Balin as well.

“I am well aware that Bilbo is your king,” he said, perhaps with a tad more attitude then really had been needed. “I promise, even without the crown I’ve not forgotten it.”

“You can’t forget what you’ve never truly understood,” Dori said and pursed his lips.

“I know what a king is,” Thorin said coolly. “We might not have them in the Shire, but I assure you that that does not leave us ignorant of the outside world.” True, he knew that there were plenty of
Hobbits who thought that all kings were like the heroes in the stories; handsome and brave, and able to prevail and do the right thing even again insurmountable odds. Utterly ridiculous, but - Thorin glanced ahead to Bilbo whose hair gleamed brightly golden in the morning light. Perhaps they were not as mistaken as he previously would have believed.

“Perhaps you do,” Dori agreed. “Perhaps you even understand part of what being a king entails, but it is clear that you do not understand what marrying a king would mean for you.”

“Marriage?” Thorin asked, because he and Bilbo had been courting for only a few days. Was the Dwarven way to marry before the end of the first week or what was Dori on about?

“He gave you his chain, what did you think that such a gesture meant?”

“I…”

Bifur interrupted Thorin before he had a chance to even finish his thought, much less his sentence.

Thorin could of course still not understand what the Dwarf was saying, but judging by Dori’s frown it was not something he appreciated. The silver haired Dwarf also answered in the guttural Dwarven language and Thorin frowned.

“If you are speaking about me, I’ll thank you to use a language I can understand.”

Dori ignored him and then made it abundantly clear that he was indeed talking about Thorin by gesturing towards him and saying something that made Bifur glower.

“The Lady save me from the stubbornness of Dwarfs,” Thorin muttered.

“Will you be saying that when you are the consort to the king?” Dori asked, abruptly turning back to Thorin again. “You do not speak our language, and while incredibly inappropriate that at least can be learnt. But you do not know our culture, or ways. When he will lead an entire kingdom, and not just twelve Dwarfs, what will you do then? Ask that everyone arrange themselves to suit your taste? A consort to the King needs to be able to help him with his efforts, and stand by the King’s side no matter what.” The look Thorin received more than hinted that Dori had his doubts that Thorin would be able to live up to that. And his next words made his opinion crystal clear. “Our king may want you, but can you be what he needs?”

For one, two, three moments none of the three said a word. Then Thorin drew in a breath.

“Yes,” he said, voice quiet but sure. “For Bilbo I can be anything he needs.” Thorin had killed for him already, and would do so again. He would face a Dragon for his king, and – though he would never say the words out loud, much less to someone like Dori, Thorin would lower himself to be Bilbo’s whore if that was what was necessary to stay by his side. He would do all those things and more, so how could Dori possibly think that he would not do anything to deserve to become Bilbo’s husband?

Quiet conviction was clearly not a response Dori had been expecting, but Bifur seemed to approve; leaning over to slap Thorin on the back. It wasn’t quite hard enough to knock him off his pony, but only because he’d seen Bifur move and had had the time to brace himself. Whatever Bifur then said to Dori sounded very smug indeed.

“We’ll see about that,” Dori said with his head held high, and then he clicked his tongue and urged
his pony ahead.

“Do I even want to know what that was about?” Thorin asked Bifur once they were alone again. The Dwarf shrugged and made a flip-flopping motion with his hand.

“I assumed so,” Thorin murmured.

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Bifur rode with him for maybe an hour or so after Dori had left them, and by the time he too decided to catch up with the ones riding ahead; probably to ride with his cousins, he had taught the Hobbit maybe two dozen words in the language Thorin had learnt was called Khuzdul. It was not a lot, but Bifur seemed pleased enough.

Quite prepared to spend some time alone Thorin was surprised when, just shortly after Bifur had left him, Nori ended up riding by his side. The thief had slowed the pace of his pony until Thorin had caught up with him.

“Don't worry,” Nori said when Thorin sent him a sidelong glance. “I won't be bursting out crying and wailing about how Dwalin doesn't love me.”

“Good for you,” Thorin said wryly. The thief shrugged.

“I'm not even sure what I feel for him, so that would be rather unfair of me, don’t you think? Well, never mind that,” he said before Thorin could reply. “Bifur said I should come explain a thing or two, about my brother.”

“I do not see why you would need to,” Thorin said coolly. “I think he explained himself well enough before.”

“He likes you well enough.”

Thorin snorted.

“Well, he doesn’t dislike you,” Nori said and waved his hand in a there-you-have-it kind of gesture. “He’s just concerned; he’s always been a bit too good at that. As well as a tad too conservative. Not to mention I think he has a crush on Bilbo.”

Ignoring the way Thorin’s face had darkened Nori winked at the Hobbit.

“My brother is quite the catch you know. Well, unless you go for slightly scrawny -” Thorin’s glare intensified, “- Hobbits without beards. If I had a coin for every time Dori has talked my ear off on a subject related to Bilbo I wouldn’t need my share of the treasure.

“You know,” Nori added casually, “if you clench your jaw any harder you might end up needing a new one. It’s just a passing fancy, and Dori was never going to do anything about it anyway. It’s not ‘proper’ you see.” Nori rolled his eyes. “Of course he never realised that Bilbo couldn’t care less about what is or isn’t proper. Our king can be the very image of politeness when he wants to, but just the fact that he names one such as myself as friend does make it rather clear that proper courtly protocol is not something he adheres to. The courting a Hobbit bit is just the latest impropriety, but albeit one he will have to tell the council about sooner or later.”
“Your enthusiasm leaves me almost breathless,” Thorin said, voice thick with sarcasm. “As does being referred to as an ‘impropriety’.”

“People will be saying worse things,” Nori warned. “If you do not think you can handle it, you best let Bilbo know now. There are plenty of nobles who will be crying themselves to sleep once they realise that they can no longer marry off their sons and daughters to the king. Or themselves. And I do not envy our two young princes, because I will bet you that they are going to be the ones the vultures turn their gazes to next.”

“And would your brother be one of the vultures?” Thorin raised an eyebrow, thinking about what Bilbo had said about Fíli and Kíli and the possible match with Ori. Perhaps Dori would push Ori’s decision after all.

Nori snickered. “Dori would never be anything as crass as a vulture. He is more like an owl. Looks rather harmless and fluffy and then the claws come out. But judging by your question I assume Bilbo has been on about his idea that Ori should marry one of the princes?”

Thorin admitted as much and Nori grinned at him.

“Well, that would certainly give the vultures something else to talk about than you and Bilbo. But I’m not sure Ori is cut out to be married to royalty. The first time he ignores a council meeting because he just had to finish reading a scroll I’m pretty sure a lot of those stuffy old bores would take offence.”

“And are there a lot of meetings?” Thorin asked, feeling a little apprehensive. Going up against a Dragon was perhaps to place oneself in mortal peril, but at least there was no chance of dying out of boredom.

“By their very nature it’s impossible to not have too many meetings.” Nori scratched at one of his eyebrows. “Politics, my dear burglar, it never fails to make my skin itch. Dori on the other hand thrives in such circumstances. Unless someone would make him absolutely livid because then I think he’d just throw them through the nearest wall. Though Dori would still have fun I guess.”

Thorin was still digesting that when Nori sighed and fixed his gaze on his brother’s back. “Dori is the only one of us who has ever lived in Erebor,” he explained. “He wasn’t very old when Erebor was lost, but perhaps 15 summers or so. Before the Desolation our family was quite well off - not nobility, no, we’re only part of the Baggins’ line on the wrong side of a marital bed, but Mother and Father were more than comfortable and Dori was raised to rub elbows with the ‘better’ part of society. Whatever that means. Then the Dragon came.” The thief sighed again and absentmindedly scratched the side of his pony’s neck.

“Everyone lost pretty much everything that they had to lose. Except that beasts may claim lives, and riches, but they can’t claim titles and family lines, and that’s what many of the nobility ended up clinging to after the Desolation.” Nori shrugged one shoulder in a manner that was part apologetic, part frustrated. “I guess we allowed them to do so. Once our people settled in Ered Luin I think they found it comforting to go back to what had been. At least the majority did, and majority rules, even over the king. If anything having the right name became even more important than it ever was before. Still is. Bilbo does not like it, but he is a Baggins and that is a name to respect. Unlike some, he actually tries to earn it.”

“What happened to your parents and Dori after they left Erebor?” Thorin asked.
“They got by,” Nori answered. “But the loss of Erebor meant the loss of the ties they had to the upper strata.” The auburn haired Dwarf chuckled slightly. “At least until I quite literally ran into Bilbo. Has he perhaps mentioned what happened on the day we met?”

“Apart from you stealing his purse?”

“I wish he would leave that part out,” Nori said beneath his breath. “The people who wanted to take, possibly kill the lads, wanted to do so because of who their father was. Or rather: who he wasn’t.” The Dwarf met Thorin’s eyes. “The ones behind that scheme were executed, but unfortunately there are always people with more coin and more stupid ideals and ideas than they have common sense. Assassins are something you would have to look out for if, or when, you’ll marry Bilbo. Though I’ll likely be doing the looking out for you.”

“I’m not sure if you are trying to be helpful, or if you are warning me off,” Thorin said and shook his head. “But answer me this; if the nobility do not approve of Fíli’s and Kíli’s father, why would they want to marry off their children to one or both of them?”

“Not all nobles are prejudiced. If they were I think Bilbo would abdicate or just dissolve the council, whichever seemed less messy. And not all who are prejudiced are stupid. Getting a child as consort to a prince, possibly a future king, isn’t something to spit at. And neither is the possibility of a grandchild on the throne someday for those with daughters.”

“I can see why you dislike politics.” Thorin rubbed the bridge of his nose between two fingers.

“I knew there was a reason I liked you,” Nori said, a small smile tilting the corners of his mouth.

Chapter End Notes

To all new readers, because yeah, I've noticed a sudden increase in hits since a certain gorgeous piece of art was posted on-line, I hope you like the story and decide to stick around.
To all readers who has already decided to stick around, you are awesome, glad to have you here.

Also awesome, as always, is diemarysues
When they made camp that evening it was with Mirkwood stretched out on the horizon like a black ink stain.

Perhaps it was just a trick played by the setting sun, but Thorin had never before seen a forest that wasn’t the slightest bit green. Even the Old Forest back in the Shire with its strange whispers and noises appeared at first glance much like any other forest. Of course this was part of why it was considered so dangerous, so perhaps the sinister appearance of Mirkwood could be considered a good sign, but Thorin wasn’t too sure about that. Not too sure at all…

It wasn’t just that Beorn had warned them that there were dark things living beneath the tree-tops, there were already other signs as well to mark the forest as a place of darkness. Thorin didn’t know if anyone else had noticed, but there were no longer any birds around. No one had mentioned it - though it was quite possible Dwarfs cared very little about whether there were birds around or not unless they were grilled and served with roasted potatoes - but Thorin knew better.

No birds meant that there was something else around. Something that made the birds decide to be elsewhere. This undefined ’something else’ wasn’t necessarily very close, as birds often had large territories, but perhaps about as close to them as a certain forest…

Mirkwood was still at about an hour’s ride away as Bilbo hadn’t wanted them to arrive there in the middle of the night. In the morning they would leave before dawn broke.

Thorin tensed when someone touched his shoulder; he’d settled some distance away from the fire because he wanted a moment alone to sort his thoughts, but he relaxed the instant he realised who it was.

“I missed you today,” Bilbo said as he sat down. Smiling, he nudged his shoulder against Thorin’s. “You’re not asleep, but is it safe for me to sit here?”

“That depends,” Thorin said even as he leaned into Bilbo’s side. “On how much you are going to talk about rubbing.”

“That depends,” Thorin said even as he leaned into Bilbo’s side. “On how much you are going to talk about rubbing.”

“Perhaps we can pick another subject then,” Bilbo said. “Because I would like to spend at least a little time with you today.” The Dwarf sighed. “I didn’t mean for you to avoid me based on what we talked about this morning. I hope it wasn’t because I upset you.”

Thorin looked at Bilbo with something close to disbelief. The words appeared casual enough, at least if you ignored how Bilbo’s voice had sounded almost stiff at the edges as he finished the last sentence, like he was formally apologising.

“The thought of touching you makes me many things, but upset is not one of them. I -” Thorin began, then his eyes widened in surprise as a tenseness he hadn’t even noticed suddenly fled from Bilbo’s shoulders. “You were actually worried about this.” It wasn’t a question.

Bilbo looked embarrassed. “I was merely concerned that you regretted what we talked about, that it was the reason why you were avoiding me.”
“Do you doubt what I feel for you?” Thorin asked bluntly. “Because I would think I’ve said it plain enough that you would not have to worry about it.” And consequently Bilbo should not have to worry about Thorin’s feelings on this matter. Bilbo hadn’t even been the one to bring up the subject. It was Thorin who had made it quite clear that he could barely keep his hands under control when he was near his Dwarf.

“No,” Bilbo protested and his hands twitched as if he wanted to twist them but just barely managed to refrain. “It’s just, I didn’t mean - Oh, curse it all, why do I always have to make a mess out of things?”

Thorin made a decision. He rose to his feet and held out his hand for Bilbo to take, which the Dwarf did without question.

“I really didn’t mean to imply anything of the sort,” Bilbo said as he pulled himself up. “I know in here -” he gestured towards his head, “- and in here,” a hand placed over his chest, above his heart, “and even in my guts, I know that you’re not just humouring me. But knowing and understanding is sometimes very different. Perhaps I just don’t understand why you -”

Thorin’s look of disbelief was back, with a vengeance. Humouring him?

“Right,” he interrupted when he just couldn’t stand to hear anymore.

Thorin would gladly push whoever it was who had made Bilbo this apprehensive about someone loving him into a Goblin infested mountain. Because there had to be someone. Why else would Bilbo; beautiful, brave, kind Bilbo doubt that someone would want him?

Come to think of it, it had been the same when Thorin first kissed him on the steps of the Carrock, and as he’d told Thorin that it would be all right if he changed his mind, when he didn’t mind Dwalin stopping them from going beyond kissing because he was only looking out for Thorin and on several other occasions… “Right,” Thorin said again, shaking his head. “We are going to go for a short walk, but far enough to be out of sight from the others.”

“I really didn’t mean -” Bilbo lifted a hand to cup Thorin’s cheek, but the Hobbit caught it and bent to press a kiss to the palm of it instead.

“I’m not upset,” he said quietly. “But I think I need to show you that I’m yours, and that you’re mine, and since we’ve been told that it’s not safe to leave the path once we’ve entered the forest I doubt that we will see much privacy tomorrow. And if Dwalin objects he can just -”

As Thorin had already noticed, being silenced by Bilbo’s kisses was a quite pleasant way to be told to be quiet. Someone, most likely Kíli, whistled in the background, but that was of little concern compared to the almost feverish kisses Bilbo pressed against his lips and the still quite new sensation of his beard dragging along Thorin’s skin.

“I am yours,” Thorin said hoarsely when they parted and Bilbo shuddered. “I want you, and I wish to have you in any way you would allow. And if this also would soothe your mind, that is a fortunate side effect. Except I would preferably not continue in the middle of camp,” he added when Bilbo leaned forward again.

“Oh,” Bilbo said, and judging by the way he glanced behind them he’d just remembered where they were. To Thorin’s delight a slight flush rose to the Dwarf’s cheeks.
“I’ve already said that I trust you,” Thorin said in a voice barely louder than a whisper. He reached up to cup Bilbo’s face and turn his gaze away from the rest of the company once more. “But can you trust me to know my mind and heart?”

“Okay, someone please make them go away before they start - Ouch!” They both looked back to see Kíli rubbing the back of his head and beside him Fíli was actually looking honestly innocent. Instead it was Nori who was tossing a pine cone from hand to hand.

“As far as I am concerned you are more than welcome to carry on right here,” the Thief smirked, and his grin only widened when Dwalin made a sound that was rather reminiscent of a bleating sheep. But regardless of species it was clearly a protest and Thorin wondered absently just what part of Nori’s statement Dwalin opposed most fervently.

Not deigning to remark on Nori’s statement Thorin merely shook his head and took Bilbo’s hand. “Do you trust me?” he asked, ribbing his thumb gently over Bilbo’s knuckles.

“For the rest of my days, and far longer than that,” Bilbo said and brought his forehead to rest against Thorin’s. “Which is also how long I will love you.”

Thorin smiled. It was almost ironic that Dori had talked about marriage earlier that day, because as far as Hobbit traditions went what had just happened was as good as any marriage ceremony.

It didn’t count of course, since Bilbo couldn’t have known, but to promise yourself to another in front of your friends and family; that was how it usually happened. Perhaps with a little more formality - not to mention flowers - but Thorin was just as happy not to have a field’s worth of daisies in his hair.

Someone whistled again as Thorin began to lead Bilbo away from the camp, and the Hobbit thought he heard Nori say something that sounded a lot like: “Everyone, pay up.” The groans coming from several members of the company were, on the other hand, unmistakable.

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When they’d walked a respectable distance away from the camp – out of sight as they walked behind a copse of trees, but not out of earshot because that was just not a very bright idea if something happened - he stopped and turned to wrap his arms around Bilbo’s waist. If Thorin listened he could still hear the low murmur of voices coming from the camp, but they were too far away for him to make out even a single word.

“If you want to, you can ask me again if I am sure,” he said with a teasing smile. “I promise I will not be offended.”

“No, I trust you,” Bilbo said and the smile Thorin received made him surprised that it didn’t light up the entire landscape around them. “I do.”

Again Thorin was reminded of a Shire marriage ceremony and he couldn’t help but chuckle.

“And what is so funny?” Bilbo asked, his hands stroking up and down Thorin’s back in a manner that might appear quite soothing but to Thorin felt anything but. “Had we not agreed that I wasn’t particularly amusing? May I actually take to the road as an entertainer after all?”
The Hobbit shook his head at Bilbo’s mock-delighted expression and twinkling eyes. “It’s just, for a Dwarf you are doing a very good job at following Hobbit customs.”

“How so?” Bilbo asked, curious. Thorin moved his hands up to tangle in Bilbo’s hair, stroking along the braids and tracing the pattern on one of the beads.

“To start, the day - or night I should say - that we met you ate a meal I had prepared for you.” It was petty, but learning that Dori held a more personal interest in his king made Thorin doubly glad that he had made the Dwarf stay out of his pantry and kitchen that night. The soup Thorin had made for Bilbo hadn’t been anything spectacular - spectacular was hard to achieve with an almost bare pantry - but at least it was something he’d made himself. “To share a meal like that is a common practice when beginning a courtship, even if we were not doing anything of the sort at that time.”

“You were so beautiful when you sat on your bench,” Bilbo said with a soft smile. “Even if you were fretting something fierce, and even if I barely allowed myself to consider such things at that time. But go on, the meal was just to start?”

“I think a little fretting can be allowed when over a dozen unexpected visitors show up and you’re suddenly faced with an empty pantry as well as the possibility of Dragons,” Thorin protested.

“I note that you mention the pantry first,” Bilbo murmured and Thorin pulled on one of his braids.

“Silence,” he demanded haughtily, though when Bilbo laughed it was all he could do not to join in.

“Another common event in a courtship is the giving of gifts, even if it’s not nearly as formal as I understand it to be for Dwarfs.”

Bilbo’s easy grin turned into something more possessive as his fingers found the chain around Thorin’s neck, pulling it out of his shirt. The look melted into surprise as he noticed the ring.

“Is this the ring that made you invisible?” he asked, running a finger around the edges of it.

“I don’t make a habit of carrying trinkets around,” Thorin said and clamped down on an annoying urge to snatch the ring back from Bilbo’s hands. He really needed to have words with Nori if this was how nervous the Thief’s pining looks had made him. “So yes, it is.”

“This isn’t a mere trinket,” Bilbo said before he to Thorin’s relief let the ring settle against his shirt. “It’s plain, but also clearly the work of a talented craftsman. I thought a talented smith would notice that,” he added teasingly.

“I’ll gladly admit that I do not possess the skill to forge something that can grant the power of invisibility,” Thorin said drily. “So perhaps I’m not as skilled as you believe.”

Bilbo chuckled and this time Thorin’s eyes were drawn to his mouth, already slightly reddened from their previous kisses.

“I still haven’t told you what I found amusing,” Thorin continued, thinking that his explanation would bring forth another laugh, perhaps one large enough to cause the chest that was pressed against his to rumble most pleasingly. “If you were a Hobbit, we’d be as good as married. Because aside from what I mentioned, just mere minutes ago we promised ourselves to the other, in front of witnesses, and unlike some people with the most convoluted customs -” Seven weeks of gift giving was clearly an indication that there was something wrong with Dwarfs, or at least with their rituals “-
that would be considered quite enough for most Hobbits. Especially if you -”

Perhaps Thorin should have learnt by now, with that morning as the most recent example, that Bilbo was not one to be easily predicted because he did not get that laugh he’d been aiming for.

One second they both had been standing up, the next Thorin was lying on his back in the grass with Bilbo straddling his lap, and the sudden impact against the ground was not the only thing stealing the Hobbit’s breath. Still, when Bilbo pulled back Thorin mindlessly followed his lips even though they both were gasping for air.

“This is not how I had planned this,” Bilbo huffed even as his clever fingers worked on the buckles of Thorin’s armour. Thorin dazedly tried to help but when it seemed he was only delaying the process he instead starting to get rid of the heavy coat Bilbo was wearing. “I distinctly recall there being a bed for one. You deserve a bed. You deserve beautiful things like silks and -”

“I just want you,” Thorin rasped. “Only you. Always you.” And Thorin couldn’t imagine anything or anyone more beautiful than Bilbo, so that worked out quite well.

Bilbo shuddered again and Thorin surged up to claim his mouth.

There was a rush to discard armour and clothes, and there was very little, if any, concern for the rest of the company who was still just a short distance and a copse away. A little more thought went into making sure that they knew where their swords were discarded, but belts were still unbuckled and the blades left on the ground, albeit within easy reach.

Armour had never felt like a stupider idea, clothes never more unnecessary, and the first touch of skin-on-skin made Thorin moan out loud and arch himself even close to Bilbo. He wanted, he wanted so much and all of it was Bilbo.

“My love. My lover. My husband.”

“I’ll be anything,” Thorin promised as Bilbo’s tongue followed the mithril chain down to his chest. “Anything.”

“And by your laws you already are?” Bilbo asked. It took Thorin a moment to hear the words, and another to understand their meaning as he was distracted by the feel of beard and rough stubble and Bilbo’s soft lips. Not to mention the feel of smooth skin, springy hair, and hard muscle beneath his hands. The difference between Bilbo’s body and those Thorin had previously tumbled with was fascinating and Thorin’s hands ached to explore all of it.

The most correct answer to Bilbo’s question was that they weren’t laws as much as traditions, nevertheless what left Thorin’s lips was still a rough: “Yes.” But what difference did it make? In most cases Hobbits did consider their traditions as good as laws, and even beside all that, he wanted to be Bilbo’s, and so he was.

“Good,” Bilbo replied and his smile was fierce and joyous at the same time and Thorin blindly stretched up to taste it.

Nothing about their coupling was smooth or practiced, but how could it be? While it might not have been either’s first time, it still was in all ways that counted, and first times are rarely flawless. It almost ended too quickly because once Bilbo had remembered his fascination with Thorin’s ears the
Hobbit had to scramble to find the words to warn Bilbo that things would come to an abrupt end unless he found something else to hold his attention.

They were both too rough. Thorin knew that he was leaving finger sized bruises as he gripped Bilbo’s hips to pull him even impossibly closer, but he also knew that he wanted the bruises there as proof that he was allowed to have this. Bilbo tried his best to keep his touches on Thorin’s skin gentle, and for most part he succeeded well enough. However, it seemed that the Dwarf could not stop himself from marking Thorin in other ways. Thorin pushed his hips even harder against Bilbo’s, throwing his head back as another bruise was brought to the surface of his throat.

But as Thorin tumbled over his peak – a sensation that that almost felt secondary compared to the look in Bilbo’s eyes as he reached his – there was nothing but perfection between them.

Chapter End Notes

I know I've said it before, but I now officially admit that I have no control of this story. They were supposed to talk about Bifur teaching Thorin Khuzdul and well, that didn't happen did it? Nope. *sigh*

While I'm kinda in favour of them getting it on, I'm starting to be nervous about what I've planned for the rest of the plot. We'll see if they'll cooperate...
Interlude Eight - Bofur

Chapter Notes

I just have to plug Pacific Rim in this story too. It's an awesome film, and everyone who is the least bit interested in awesome films should go see it ;)
Just to be able to read the amazing AUs that's popping up across all fandoms if for nothing else. There's already several just for the Hobbit and LOTR.
But really it's awesome.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bofur chuckled as he watched Bilbo be led away like a meek little lamb. Though lamb was perhaps not the best likeness as nothing about his friend’s expression had been particularly innocent, or meek for that matter.

Bofur recognized that look very well, though perhaps not its intensity, and it was quite a relief to realise that he really wasn’t envious of Thorin for being on the receiving end of it. He hadn’t expected to be, because smouldering looks aside, it was hardly the first time Bilbo openly showed his affection for their burglar, but one never knew about these things before push came to shove.

“Are we going to pretend that they are not fucking over there?” Dwalin said and the crude words made Ori blush and Dori glare. Well, Dori was already glaring; it just caused him to turn said from the fire (that Bofur felt fairly sure had not done anything to cause offence) to Dwalin.

Fíli and Kíli both groaned and the younger of the two melodramatically plugged his ears with his fingers. “No need to phrase it like that, Master Dwalin,” he complained. “I was doing quite well at keeping those particular images out of my head.”

“Indeed,” Fíli agreed. “I vote that we merely say that they’ve gone to have a bit of private time. And what they get up to during that time I’m more than happy to stay well out of.”

“But we are in the middle of the wilderness.” Nori had schooled his face into a look of outmost concern. “Don’t you think we should have someone watch over them? And if so, volunteer myself. For their own protection of course.”

“How selfless,” Bofur remarked with a grin because Nori hadn’t quite been able to hide his smirk as he’d finished offering his services. “Only looking out for their best interests are you?”

“What else?” the thief replied with what could only be described as a wolfish leer. “After all, who would have any interest in how those two would look like beneath all those layers of clothes and armour? I imagine that the pale skin of our burglar will look most awful if he would happen to lose his clothes and stretch out on top of Bilbo. Because who likes creamy thighs and a pert arse anyway? And as for our king -”

By that point poor Ori was red as a tomato and Fíli and Kíli was humming, off key no less, in an attempt to drown out Nori’s words.
Dwalin was also sporting a most interesting colour in his face, but it tended more towards purple than anything else. That combined with a pulsing vein which had appeared in the warrior’s forehead made Bofur rather wish that Nori would tone down his teasing a bit; preferably before anyone got hurt, and he meant that in every sense of the word.

It was fairly obvious that Bilbo and Thorin weren’t the only ones who would benefit from some time alone together. What was going on, or not going on as it happened, between Dwalin and Nori was plain to see for everyone who stopped to look.

Dwalin had been in a horrible mood all day; the cause of it being clear as he resolutely stayed as far away from Nori as possible, trying to not even look in the auburn haired Dwarf’s direction. And while Nori might act like he didn’t care, he too had not been himself. Or rather, he’d been too much of himself, making every effort to act like everything was normal. It might fool someone who did not know better, but Bofur saw right through it since he had a pretty good idea of what Nori was like when he was honestly cheerful and not merely pretending. He knew Dwalin better of course, as Dwalin was someone he was expected to know through Bilbo, and Nori was someone he really was expected not to know, but Bofur would still stay he knew Nori better than most.

It probably would have been less painful for everyone involved if Dwalin hadn’t skipped the part where he figured out that he and Nori were actually friends before realising that he potentially wanted them to be something else, but what could you do. It would obviously take them some time to catch up, and until then things were as they were.

“They are already quite safe, Master Nori,” Gandalf said, cutting into the Bofur’s internal musings as well as Nori’s not nearly as quiet speculations concerning how Bilbo looked like without clothes. Bofur could of course have helped him there, but he did not particularly fancy Dori turning his glower on him. No, better Nori have his turn with it. “But it is kind of you to concern yourself so,” Gandalf continued with a frankly admirable serenity, not to mention sincerity.

Nori looked doubtful. “No offence, but I know you Wizards are not really interested in -”

“Nori!” Dori hissed. “If you finish that sentence like I think you will I swear on my beard I will wash your mouth out with soap even if I have to go back to Master Beorn’s home to get enough to finish the job.”

“- in all the things that the rest of us are interested in,” Nori continued smoothly with a barbed glare in his brother’s direction. “So if you think that they are going to be able to keep one eye on their surroundings while otherwise… occupied, I do believe that you are mistaken.”

“Ah,” Gandalf said and thoughtfully stroked his beard. “It is fortunate then that they have someone else to do it.”

Everyone looked towards the Wizard as the meaning of his words sunk in.

“Did you, magic something up?” Kíli asked tentatively, seeming torn between awe at the Wizard’s power and horror that he would use it in such a way. Bofur would have to admit that he was not far behind.

“No, no,” Gandalf demurred, puffing out a great big ball of smoke. “Have none of you actually noticed that we are not alone out here?”

Bofur hid a chuckle in a cough. He couldn’t help it.
Did Gandalf say things like that on purpose, he wondered. Because if the Wizard wanted to keep company with a bunch of paranoid Dwarfs he was certainly going the right way about it. Dwalin and Dori even stopped glaring long enough to cast weary glances at their surroundings.

“Dwarfs,” Gandalf muttered, so apparently not on purpose, before raising his voice once more. “Since you have not noticed, let me inform you that Beorn has been following us ever since we left his home. He will -”

“Beorn is watching them shag?” Nori hooted. “That is, oh please let me be the one to tell Thorin, he’ll probably have steam coming out of his ears.”

“That is very inappropriate.” Dori sniffed and Bofur spared a second to wonder if he meant the part where Beorn would be playing the role of a peeping Tom or the part where Nori found it so terribly amusing.

“I believe I said that he would be watching the surroundings,” Gandalf said mildly.

“I think not,” Nori snorted. “I saw the looks he gave Bilbo. He is at least going to sneak a peek. Hey.” Nori held up his hands when Gandalf gave him a disapproving look. “I don’t blame him, I would too.”

“So why don’t you,” Dwalin growled arms crossed and fingers biting hard into the opposite arm to leave his knuckles white.

“A little something called self-control,” Nori snapped back. “I’m sure you’ve heard about that before.”

Dwalin looked like he was spoiling for a fight so Bofur decided that it was time for a change of subject.

“So Beorn’s been with us the entire time?” he asked, and at Gandalf’s nod: “Why didn’t he just travel with us then?”

“Beorn loves his animals like his children,” Gandalf explained. “That is the reason why he didn’t stay in his home while they were journeying with us. And I think he wanted to be sure that you would treat them well regardless of if he was around or not. Beorn would want to -”

A cut-off moan came from the direction Bilbo and Thorin had disappeared in and in the awkward silence that ensued everyone could clearly hear the next, which wasn’t cut off at all.

“This is extremely inappropriate,” Dori said, but Bofur couldn’t help but wonder if the flush on his cheeks was solely because of embarrassment. While the thought of Beorn peeking out from behind a bush was an uncomfortable one, Nori had a point when he said that Bilbo and Thorin would make a pretty sight. Inappropriate, sure, but still…

“Actually,” Gandalf remarked. “If Bilbo was a Hobbit you would just have witnessed their wedding. And I understand that after a wedding, a wedding night is considered to be the appropriate thing.”

The Wizard blew a smoke ring which calmly floated away even as eleven Dwarfs turned to gape at him. It would have been twelve, but Nori was too busy imploding from sheer glee to look surprised.
“Hang on,” Fíli said. “Why would they be married if Uncle Bilbo was a Hobbit? Do two Hobbits have to get married before...” He trailed off with an embarrassed look on his face. “I’m sure you know what I mean.”

“There was a wedding?” Kíli asked with a slow blink.

“There was a not-wedding?” Glóin added and scratched his head.

“Hobbit weddings are not complicated affairs,” the Wizard explained. “It’s usually enough if two people stand together and state their intentions to love and honour each other for as long as they both shall live. And, unless my old ears deceived me, that was just what transpired before our friends took their leave from us.”

Bofur snorted, feeling amused and exasperated all at once as the shock subsided. While it had been clear from their expressions that Bilbo and Thorin had not merely been discussing a quick romp in the grass, Bofur hadn’t really heard more than a murmur from their actual conversation, and he would bet that none of the others hadn’t heard much more either. Oh, he didn’t doubt Gandalf, but ‘old ears’ indeed.

“So our burglar has pretty much married a king, without asking for permission? Perhaps not even Bilbo’s?” Nori had recovered his words again, but the grin on his face was still wide enough to practically split it in two. “That is the best thing I’ve ever heard.” The thief laughed and slapped his knees. “Oh, to be a fly on the wall would this information reach the old mothballs on the council.”

Dori’s pretty face twisted in a most unbecoming scowl over his brother’s lack of respect, but in a more surprising turn of events Dwalin’s look of annoyance had faded into quiet contemplation. Balin, Óin, Glóin, and Ori also looked thoughtful, and Fíli was hissing what seemed to be an explanation into his brother’s ear. Clearly there was something Bofur and the rest of them were missing.

“You are not going to be spreading this story,” Balin said sternly. “Ah, I don’t want to hear it,” he continued when Nori opened his mouth, likely to protest his future innocence. “This is exactly the sort of information we do not want to reach most, if not all, of the council members.”

“But why not?” Nori whined. “It’s hilarious, and it would make Relgrim faint. And that would just do him good. Might shake loose the stick he’s got shoved up -”

“Or it would simply horrify him that his king has been tricked and trapped into marriage by a common smith, and a Hobbit at that.” Dwalin sighed and ran a palm down his face. All the anger he’d been carrying around all day was suddenly gone and instead he just looked weary. “And Bilbo would of course be honourable enough to stand by such an atrocity. And him Relgrim entertaining such ideas would not be good. Particularly not for Thorin.”

“But that’s not what happened,” Nori blinked. “Thorin hasn’t, he would never -”

“Because truth and politics have so much in common?” Glóin scoffed. “Aye, I agree with Dwalin. You give them any reason to oppose to a marriage between Bilbo and Thorin and they’ll take it and bite into it hard enough that you’ll never get their teeth out.”

“It needs to be like in the stories,” Ori observed quietly, colouring a bit when he realised that he suddenly held everyone’s attention.
“Go on, lad,” Balin said kindly. “What do you mean by that?”

“Since Thorin is a Hobbit that can always be used as a reason to speak against a marriage,” their young scribe said with a quick glance in Dori’s direction, who had the grace to look a little guilty by the unspoken accusation.

Bofur privately thought that Thorin being a Hobbit wasn’t really what had Dori in a tiff, but perhaps that was easier to focus on instead of the real reason.

“But few would dare to oppose a union dictated by Mahal. Like in the old tales,” Ori said with a soft smile. “Like the tale of Lord Doghan and Tuli Earthbreaker.”

“Destined lovers,” Balin said thoughtfully stroking his beard. “That could work indeed.”

“Is it really necessary though?” Kíli argued. “You just have to look at them to see that no one’s been tricked into anything. All destinies aside they are still very obvious in their affections. And Thorin is wearing Uncle’s necklace besides. Or was he supposed to have schemed his way to that as well?”

“No, but they have a point, Kíli,” Nori admitted with a sigh. “Thrice-cursed political wish-wash it may be, but it’s true enough that there are people who would try anything to get a union between Bilbo and Thorin declared invalid. And say something enough times and someone is bound to start believing it. While I know that I was skipping ahead to the more hands-on approaches - but never mind.”

Nori sighed and the look he now sported was a neat match for the weary one on Dwalin’s face.

“I’m not sure Thorin will make a particularly good Tuli,” Bofur said with a wink to Ori. “ Doesn’t the tale speak of her easy smile and her laugh like silver chimes? That’s a lot to live up to for our rather serious burglar.”

“Yes, but Tuli also managed to keep Lord Doghan from being executed by an Eastern warlord,” Ori smiled. “And that was after he'd saved her when the giants held her prisoner, and after he had taken her away from a peaceful life as a weaver.”

“Oh,” Bofur grinned. “So that’s why you picked those two as your example. I bow before the master because that sounds familiar indeed. Except for the bits when we’ve all just been running around like chickens without heads, but perhaps Lord Doghan and the Lady Tuli had that too and it just didn’t make it into the legend.”

“I’ll speak to Bilbo in the morning,” Balin said when no one else seemed inclined to add something to the conversation. “Just to let him know what we have discussed. There is little use after all to decide these things here and now when we are still far away from any courtly schemes and plots. There will be time enough for such things later,” Balin added with a sigh. “Mahal willing however ridiculous I feel for wishing for more time to devote to scheming and polite lies.”

“Something to look forward to indeed,” Nori said with a wry grin. “At least that’d be the upside to being eaten by a dragon, no more bloody politics. And I do mean the bloody part quite literally.”

“I’m going to check on the ponies,” Dwalin said abruptly, not bothering to wait for any reply before stomping off.

“I’m going to check on Dwalin checking on the ponies,” Nori said almost as soon as Dwalin’s
footsteps had faded.

“Is that wise?” Balin asked.

“When did I ever do something because it was wise?” Nori shrugged, and then he too was on his feet and away.

The rest of the company sat together a while longer, making sure to keep the noise level high enough to provide a cover for any more moans that would float their way over to them, be that from any direction.

“I’ll help Bifur teach Thorin our language.”

Bofur felt his eyebrows disappear behind the brim of his hat as that statement came from completely out of the blue.

“As I told Bifur yesterday, it wouldn’t do to have a royal consort who does not speak Khuzdul,” Dori said, ignoring how his words made Bifur beam. At least he ignored it until Bofur’s cousin leaned over to give him a friendly clout on the back, and when Dori grudgingly smiled back it only made Bifur grin harder.

“Thorin will come to be the consort of our king, and he is certainly his most treasured,” Bifur said as proudly as if he was the one to suggest such a thing as a wedding in the first place. “Tis merely fitting that he would be acquainted with our tongue. I think -” Bifur frowned when he couldn’t find the word he was looking for. It happened less and less these days. At the beginning he’d been forced to resort to Iglishmêk in basically every sentence, and even that had sometimes failed him.

“I am most pleased to not be the only one who will teach,” Bofur’s cousin settled on, adding in a wink for Dori who harrumphed but did not argue.

“I’d help too,” Bofur said cheerfully. “But I’ve been told that my pronunciation can be, what was it you said Bifur, about as smooth as a troll’s hairy arse?”

“Thou woundst me most gravely, cousin,” Bifur said with a sad expression.

“Notice how he’s not denying it,” Bofur whispered loudly to Fíli.

They should not have worried about Dwalin and Nori. Or perhaps they should have, because not long after everyone that had remained by the fire had retired for the night – except Fíli who had first watch - Dwalin and Nori joined them once more, and it was clear that the chasm between them was still unresolved.

Dwalin did not say a word as he unrolled his bedroll next to his brother, and neither did Nori as he curled up around Ori, but the shuddering sigh Nori let out when Dori rolled over to touch his shoulder said enough, and so did the tense muscles of Dwalin’s shoulders as he pretended not to hear it.

Bofur desperately wanted to say something that would make things better for them both, but he just didn’t know what that something would be.
And now I apologise to anyone who is upset over Nori and Dwalin. The last word is not said, and don't be upset with Dwalin, he has his reasons. (More about that later as to not spoil it)
Just before they had untangled their bodies from each other, while they were still about as close as two people can be and still remain two people, Bilbo whispered something to Thorin.

True, it was just one out many things whispered between the two as their hearts again began to beat in a more normal rhythm and as breath became just breaths and not moans and gasps, but unlike the other whispers this made Thorin’s eyes widen in bewilderment.

“I want to tell you my true name.”

“I - I don’t know what to say to that,” Thorin admitted into Bilbo’s hair after a few moments silence. “Do you mean to say that Bilbo is not really your name?”

The Hobbit vaguely remembered reading a story as a tween where one of the characters suddenly revealed himself to be long-thought dead brother of who he had claimed to be. While it was highly unlikely that Bilbo had concealed something like that, Thorin’s mind still persisted in presenting that as one of the options.

His puzzlement must have been plain to hear because Bilbo laughed softly; a sound which resonated also in Thorin’s chest as it was pressed to the Dwarf’s back. He then turned his head to press his lips to Thorin’s jaw.

“When we are born, each Dwarf is given two names,” Bilbo murmured and his breath was hot against Thorin’s skin. “One name to use in the outside world; this is the one we will be known by. Friends, history, and strangers will use it to refer to us. An outer-name -” Still managing to keep within the circle of Thorin’s arms Bilbo managed to turn himself so they once more could meet each other’s gaze.

The hour was late and the sky was dark velvet strewn with diamonds, though none shining brighter to Thorin than the ever-changing eyes of Bilbo which at the moment looked like Thorin imagined the ocean would; dark and deep and strangely inviting. Because oceans must be, or no one would ever want to place themselves in a rickety shell of wood and hope for the best.

“But it is not a false name,” Bilbo continued. “I am Bilbo Baggins, son of Bungo and Belladonna Baggins. But it is not all I am.”

“You have a second name,” Thorin said slowly, trying understand and not get distracted by his own thoughts and all the squirming around Bilbo had just done. It was easy to get lost in the sensation of skin against skin, even though they both had just managed to find their way back.

“Our second name is given to us in our sacred language,” Bilbo explained as he reached up a hand to pluck a stray leaf from Thorin’s curls. Once done with its task the hand then returned to brush over Thorin’s cheek and the Hobbit turned his face into it. “It’s a secret to be guarded, to be known by no one except those who are as much part of ourselves as the blood in our veins, or as essential to us as the breath in our lungs.” Bilbo smiled and the quiet sincerity of it did make the breath in Thorin’s lungs catch. “And I would have you know mine.”

“I am honoured,” Thorin said solemnly, but his brows quickly furrowed when Bilbo chuckled.
“No, dear-heart, the honour is mine. As I’ve said before, I must have done something right in my life to be blessed with you.”

Thorin snorted. “There are many who would offer their condolences.”

“Oh hush you,” Bilbo admonished, tapping the tip of Thorin’s nose. “No one insults my husband and gets away with it.”

“Funny how I apparently do not know the name of my husband,” Thorin said, nipping after Bilbo’s finger.

“I was getting to that, but someone was sullying your honour, I felt obliged to make them stop.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow and pointedly looked down at their naked, entwined bodies. “I rather liked that part actually. Though I’m not sure how much honour I still had left.”

“Perhaps you could be the travelling entertainer,” Bilbo mused. “Do you play any instruments by chance?”

Annoyingly Thorin felt his ears heat and it only got worse when Bilbo crowed in delight as he noticed.

“The harp,” the Hobbit muttered after Bilbo had asked a second time.

For some reason his father had requested that he should learn an instrument, and out of all the ones his teacher had made him try, the harp was the only thing not to instantly make the teacher wrest it from his hands. The fiddle had been particularly memorable…. Before Thorin had gotten the bow in his hands he’d thought that such sounds could only come from deeply troubled cats.

“Perhaps not what I would have expected,” Bilbo mused. “But I can see how it would fit you.” The Dwarf tangled their fingers together. “Do you still play?”

“I’ve not in years,” Thorin admitted. “I learnt as a child.” The last time he’d even held a harp was before the fire that claimed their home and his grandfather’s life.

Thorin blinked as he realised something. It didn’t hurt. Thinking about his grandfather didn’t cause his heart to feel like someone had slowly begun to squeeze it inside his chest. He still felt saddened by the loss, but not overwhelmed by it.

“You will need to practice then, before taking to the roads,” Bilbo said, breaking into his revelation, and as the meaning of the words sunk into Thorin’s head he snorted and lightly knocked his head against that of his Dwarf.

“You are still not particularly funny.”

“Give me time, give me time,” Bilbo smiled. “Now, before we get even more side-tracked, I believe there was something I wanted to tell you, my husband.”

Thorin shivered as Bilbo’s warm breath touched the shell of his ear. But he listened closely as Bilbo offered up unfamiliar syllables. When Bilbo had finished speaking Thorin tried to repeat the name, because while Bilbo would always remain Bilbo to him he was still greedy enough to be thrilled at
being given this wondrous gift. He could not have done so poorly because Bilbo’s eyes grew heavy lidded and Thorin felt a distinct twitch against his thigh.

So of course Thorin said it again.

Later, they once again dressed themselves in their clothes and armour, trying to don especially the latter as quickly and silently as possible even though the faint light from the moon and stars above them made it quite difficult.

It came as another surprise to Thorin when he realised that watching Bilbo get dressed was nearly as intriguing as watching him disrobe. Maybe it was the easy, confidant way the Dwarf tightened buckles and laces, or perhaps it was just knowing that the body the clothes now covered, that the armour now shielded, had been his to touch and caress, and it would be so again.

Hand in hand they then walked back to join the others. It was quite late but there were still several hours to go until dawn, and the only one who Thorin saw was awake was Fili, who sat watch over the rest of the Company.

He grinned at them as they came closer; a wide happy grin, but he didn’t say anything to them except to wish them a good night.

Thorin considered this quite fortunate, because he was not ready - and maybe he would never be - to discuss what had just happened between him and Bilbo. He might not be the most proper Hobbit around (or, in this company he rather was, but that was from a lack of Hobbits than anything else) but there was just some things you didn’t talk about with other people.

As such Thorin counted his blessings that Nori had not been the one on watch duty this night.

“Bilbo,” Thorin whispered when he felt sure that the he was almost asleep.

His Dwarf hummed sleepily and the hand that held Thorin’s against his chest tightened briefly before going slack again.

“I love you.”

“Hmmm, love you. Too,” Bilbo murmured, his voice almost too soft for Thorin to make out the words. Thorin hid a smile against Bilbo’s shoulder and let those words carry them both to sleep.

Mirkwood in the dim light just before dawn seemed just as ominous as it had the previous evening, if not more so. The forest no longer looked black, but that made little difference.

It looked alive, Thorin thought as he saddled his pony. And not just in the sense that trees were obviously living things. More like the forest was just one giant creature. The trees swaying in the wind was not that, it was the forest breathing. And it looked… hungry.

Suddenly furious at himself for entertaining such foolish notions Thorin turned his head away and scowled down at the cinch as he tightened it.
“May I have your attention?” Thorin turned his head towards Bilbo. The King was standing next to Balin on the other side of the camp. After breakfast the old Dwarf had asked to speak to Bilbo, and the glance Thorin had received as the request was made had made him more than a bit uneasy as he still didn’t know what Balin thought about his King getting involved with a common smith, and a Hobbit at that.

“We will soon stand before the borders of Mirkwood,” Bilbo said in a voice strong and clear. “The last true obstacle between us and Erebor; our home. It was taken from us, and now the time has come to reclaim it. This I believe with all my heart or I would not have come here.” Bilbo smiled self-deprecatingly. “My mind on the other hand warns me that this is not the time to grow careless. Master Beorn has warned us about what waits us inside the forest, and about would await us if we would not heed his words and seek another path. We are indeed close, but we are not yet at our goal. Be proud of what we have achieved so far, but beware that we have miles yet to go.”

“We will not falter now,” Kíli said, stepping forward.

“Nor will we fail,” Fíli continued, placing a hand on his brother’s shoulder and nodding. Bilbo smiled at his nephews as they bowed to him and towards the rest of the company as they followed suit and bent their heads in respect for their King and their quest.

Belatedly Thorin also inclined his head and when he next met Bilbo’s eyes they were crinkled in amusement.

“Though before we head out again there is one more thing. Thorin, would you please join me?”

A little taken aback Thorin checked that the reins to his pony really were securely fastened to the small tree they used as a hitching post. As he got closer Balin again bowed, this time to the both of them, and moved to stand just off to the side. Bilbo held out his hand for Thorin to take.

“As of last night Thorin and I are wed by Hobbit custom.” Thorin could not have turned his head towards Bilbo any faster without risking it coming loose from his neck. “And now, as the eldest amongst our company, with the exception of myself and Gandalf -” Bilbo nodded towards the Wizard who nodded back “- Balin will wed us according to Dwarven custom. Which is not all that complicated,” he added with a crooked smile and squeezed Thorin’s hand.

“I -” Thorin’s head was a mad whirl of thoughts, despite what they had talked about only hours before he had not expected this. Even so, in the end all of his thoughts came down to one thing. “Nothing would give me more pleasure, if this is what you desire as well.”

“It is,” Bilbo smiled. He turned back towards the others, suddenly looking every inch a King. “Thorin is to be considered my husband, with as much right had we married before my council and the eyes of every single Dwarf in Ered Luin. When Erebor has been reclaimed he will merely not be my consort, but a prince in his own right.”

At this Balin’s eyes widened but the stern look Bilbo gave him made the white haired Dwarf close his mouth. “In this you are all my witnesses.”

“We are going to need a really good story,” Bofur said absently and Thorin tilted his head in question. “No offence,” Bofur continued when Bilbo raised an eyebrow. “But don’t you think that the first ever Hobbit-prince might just cause a bit of a ruckus amongst the general population? And when I say ‘a bit’ I mean quite the opposite.”

“Thorin is my equal,” Bilbo said simply. “But I cannot make him king.” A short but heartfelt, thank
Eru, flew through Thorin’s mind. “But I will have him recognized as the closest thing to one.” Bilbo’s serious expression suddenly turned wicked. “That is unless I tried to have him declared Queen, but I dare say that would not meet his, or our people’s approval.” Thorin merely sighed, and Bilbo smiled at him and rubbed his thumb across Thorin’s knuckles before turning serious once more.

“Our union will not produce children, and Fíli will remain my heir. The line of Baggins is secured in him, and in Kíli, as well as in their mother. After them we also have Dáin and his son, and the sons of Fundin and Gróin.” He nodded towards a troubled-looking Balin and Dwalin, and towards Óin and Glóin who seemed equally torn between pride and disquiet. “Should anything befall me I trust that you will carry my will. I would not see Thorin’s right to remain in Erebor be questioned by anyone.”

“This isn’t a good idea,” Dwalin stated. Arms tightly wound across his chest he shook his head and sighed. “It won't matter that Thorin’s not your heir, it will just matter that he could be king. That there is a small possibility that it could happen.” Thorin frowned at the large Dwarf. Bilbo had just said that he could not make him king, what was this?

“Why would I have to be a prince to stay with you in Erebor? And what is this about me becoming king?” Thorin asked, intending the questions for Bilbo even though it was Balin who answered.

“As consort you are awarded the same manner of status as your spouse,” the white haired Dwarf explained. “In this case you’d be the King’s consort and people would treat you as they would treat Bilbo.”

Dwalin snorted and Balin glared at his brother, but it was Nori who put words to the cause of the derision.

“Unless they kill you first, for mucking up their traditionalist views on how things are supposed to be.” Nori shrugged. “Change is a dirty word to some.”

“Thank you,” Balin said coolly. “There would also be a few other exceptions between you and Bilbo. For one you would not be granted a place on the council, and you would have no power of authority regarding matters concerning law and public affairs. And if, Mahal forbid, something were to happen to Bilbo and a new king were crowned, you would no longer be the King’s consort and you’d lose your title.”

“Title?” Thorin repeated, feeling rather stupid.

“Lord Consort Thorin of Ered Luin, and Erebor once we have it back,” Kíli helpfully supplied. “Unless Uncle gets his way because then you’d be Prince Thorin, or just Your Highness. I think Da would be mighty jealous of you if you ended up with something shorter than him.” The young Dwarf grinned. “All this time, and he still has to stop himself from rolling his eyes when someone goes: ‘May I beg a moment of your time Prince Consort Víli?’”

“If Bilbo died you would technically have no claim to remain in Erebor as you are not a Dwarf,” Fíli said hesitantly. “I wouldn’t have any trouble with you staying of course,” he hastily added. “If I was King.”

“None of us would,” Dwalin told Bilbo gruffly. “Write a letter to Dáin if you are worried that he would oppose it, but making Thorin a prince is not the best option.”
Bifur muttered something Thorin couldn’t understand, so all he knew was that it did not include the words pony, sky, grass or any of the others he’d been taught the previous day. It rather sounded like he agreed with Dwalin though, and Óin was nodding.

“I know you don’t want to believe the worst of people,” Nori said looking at Bilbo. “That’s why it’s my job. Our job,” he added with an aborted glance towards Dwalin. “But listen to us. If Thorin is anything other than your consort you might very well end up getting him killed. Even more killed,” he added after a moment’s consideration.

“I still don’t understand why making me a prince,” Thorin repressed a snort at the sheer ridiculousness of that statement, “would let me stay in Erebor. Much less why people would want to kill me for it.”

“Because as a prince you inevitably hold a claim to the throne,” Gandalf stated and Balin nodded.

“Which means that no one could successfully argue that you would have no right to stay,” the Dwarf clarified. “In the event that there is no monarch, and no named heir, the throne automatically goes to one in the royal family, which you would be part of even if it’s just by marriage. Obviously the heir can be one in the royal family,” Balin nodded towards Fíli. “But it’s not necessary. There were many who wanted Bilbo to name his and our cousin Dáin as heir, and he is not a prince.”

“Your father is not part of the royal family?” Thorin asked Fíli and Kíli.

“No, he is,” Fíli said and Kíli nodded.

“Yet he is not a prince?” Thorin’s head was beginning to hurt.

“He is the father of princes though,” Kíli explained and rather needlessly gestured to himself and Fíli. “And that counts. But too his great annoyance he doesn’t get any shorter titles out of it as he is still just Prince Consort. However that’s not going to work for you unless there’s something you’ve forgotten to mention about where little Hobbits come from.”

Thorin sighed; he didn’t even have the energy to glare at the cheeky lad.

Confounded Dwarfs and their fondness for making simple things overly complicated. And this was all moot anyway. If Bilbo died there would not really be an issue regarding a Hobbit’s position in the Dwarven kingdom because quite simply Thorin could no longer imagine living in a world without him. Nonetheless he also knew it would be ill-advised to point that out. Instead he sighed and squeezed Bilbo hand to call his attention.

"I don't want to be a prince. No,” he added when Bilbo was about to protest. “Imagine what would happen if I actually, Eru forbid, ended up on anything remotely similar to a throne. I’d accidentally do something to start a war before the first week would have passed.”

"I want you recognised as -" Thorin smiled at his Dwarf, who was close to pouting. “I don’t need any titles.”

"The only opinion I care about is yours.” Bofur chimed in. “You automatically get them when you marry Bilbo. But Lord Consort Thorin does have a nice ring to it.”

"Is that really necessary?” Thorin asked. “I’m a smith, not a lord.”
“To withhold your titles would also place you in needless danger as some would doubt my regard for you.” Bilbo’s smile was wry.

“Politics,” Nori said and his upper lip curled in distaste.

“So do you agree with us?” Dwalin prompted his king, still resolutely not looking in Nori’s direction.

“We mean no slight,” Balin said before Bilbo could answer. The white haired Dwarf looked over at Thorin and smiled, and the Hobbit felt a weight fall off his chest at Balin’s obvious approval. “But as I told you not even half an hour ago, there are many who will oppose Thorin’s place by your side. Making him prince will not make their hearts fonder.” Balin turned back towards Thorin and inclined his head. “I’m sorry, lad, but there’s never been a monarch who has not been a Dwarf. And even if you are not in the immediate succession you will be close enough for that to not make a difference to most. We are a conservative people at heart.”


“You Dwarfs are fond of contracts, is there not a piece of paper I could sign that would proclaim that I’m more than happy to stay away from anything remotely resembles a throne? It couldn’t hurt.”

Bilbo snorted. “I’m afraid not. It wouldn’t be legal anyway. I think you’d make a good king,” Bilbo continued, amusement morphing into a soft smile. Thorin blinked at him.

“Am I about to marry a crazy person?”

“Quick, Balin,” Kíli joked. “Do it now before he changes his mind.”

“We might indeed want to do it now, before we lose too much time,” Balin said apologetically. “Dawn is fast approaching and you wanted to be off.”

“This is also not how I imagined this,” Bilbo murmured to Thorin. “You deserve more.”

“Sometimes we don’t get what we deserve,” Thorin said as he stroked one of Bilbo’s braids. “But I find myself thankful of that because otherwise I would likely not stand here with you.” The Hobbit’s mouth twitched. “And unlike someone I could mention, you actually did ask before having us marry. Or close enough.”

“You best start now,” Bilbo told Balin without looking away from Thorin. “Before I change my mind.”

“So I’d not get to become Lord Consort. What pity,” Thorin murmured without an ounce of real regret in his voice.

“Behave or I’ll make you a prince yet.” Bilbo shook his head. “Balin, if you’d please?”

The ceremony was admittedly not that complicated, but there was a lot more talking than in the Hobbit version of the same. Mostly in Westron, but Gandalf did politely excuse himself at one point, just before a rather lengthy section in Khuzdul. Thorin would have wanted to see the look on Dori’s face, but it was not worth looking away from Bilbo’s. He was simply radiant and more than once Thorin doubted that he really had the right to marry someone so different from himself.
But in the end, the look on Bilbo’s face made Thorin unable to do anything else. (And the look Thorin received when he gave his consent in the Dwarven tongue made the Hobbit very eager to learn more of the language.)

“Congratulations!” Glóin boomed as he slapped Thorin on the back. “I must say I did not expect this when we first came knocking on your door.”

“Neither did I, Master Glóin,” Thorin said wryly. “Neither did I.”

“Unless you want me to call you Lord Consort Thorin you better lay of the titles, my lad. We’re family now after all.” Glóin beamed at him and patted his shoulder.

Óin chuckled at the expression on Thorin’s face. “You’ve just realised what you’ve gotten yourself into, eh, lad?”

Thorin looked towards where Bofur, Bombur and Bifur was crowding around Bilbo, not caring one whit about propriety as they slapped their king’s back and ruffled his hair.

“I have an idea,” Thorin replied.

“You really don’t,” Nori drawled as he appeared at Thorin’s right side. “But that’s why we are here, to keep an eye on you and Bilbo both. Is that not right, Guard Captain?” he added and looked to Dwalin who stood just a short distance away.

“Aye,” Dwalin said. His expression indicated that he had just eaten a handful of rowanberries, but Thorin knew better than to take it personally. Only someone who was wilfully blind would miss how Nori’s cheeky smile didn’t manage to reach his eyes, and how Dwalin’s hands clenched every time he accidentally looked in Nori’s general direction. It was possible that he just wanted to throttle the thief, but Thorin rather thought it was something else.

“Uncle!” Kíli exclaimed joyously as he pretty much tackled Thorin from behind. Thorin oomphed and would have fallen if not Dwalin had been quick to reach out a steadying hand.

“Our congratulations,” Fíli said in a much more sedated manner, his brother still clinging to Thorin’s neck like an oversized burr. It would have been very dignified, if not for the way Fíli’s grin threatened to split his face in two.

Accepting his fate Thorin stretched out his arm and snagged Fíli by his collar. He was just going to give the lad a hug, and maybe try and transfer Kíli too him in the process, but as he’d taken Fíli by surprise the young Dwarf lost his balance and the three of them ended up in a pile on the ground as Dwalin wasn’t quick enough to stop it this time.

“Um, congratulations?” Ori hesitantly offered from somewhere above them, and with all the dignity that could be found in a newly titled Lord Consort of Ered Luin and Soon Also Erebor, Who Had a Lock of The Heir to the Throne’s Hair in His mouth, Thorin thanked him. He was a bit surprised when Dori also offered his good wishes, but thanked him all the same.

After everyone had sorted themselves out and enough hugs had been given and heads knocked together, everyone rushed to get ready for departure. The sun had just begun to rise when they finally
were able to start their approach to Mirkwood and despite the deep contentment he felt Thorin still couldn’t help but feel wary as the forest again filled up the horizon before them.

Like the other night no birds were to be seen or heard, and no other creatures either. Had it not been for the usual chatter amongst his companions and the sound of the ponies’ hooves the landscape would have been eerily quiet. It really did not bode well.

Thorin absently rubbed at his chest and smiled slightly when he imagined he could feel the chain and ring beneath his fingers. It was rather pointless to worry after all, he supposed, smile widening as he caught Bilbo’s eye and was given a particularly warm one in return. What would happen would happen and they would just have to do the best of what they had been given, be that good or bad.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you didn't, like Thorin did, get a headache from all the politics.
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's been a fair while since last update... plot bunnies happened.
This is a fairly long bit though, and I hope to have the next out faster. *blows kisses to you*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"There are no safe paths in this part of the world," Gandalf said as he leaned heavily on his staff.
"But I will wish you safe passage nonetheless."

They had reached the edge of Mirkwood, and the time had come to bid Gandalf farewell. No one was particularly happy about this, not even Thorin.

"Thank you for coming this far with us," Bilbo said, and inclined his head. "I wish for safe passage for you as well, my friend. May the stone lay still and smooth beneath your feet until we meet again."

"I do expect to meet you again, Bilbo Baggins. And I shall be very cross with you if that is not the case," Gandalf warned. "Heed Beorn's words, and remember to take care of each other." As he said the last sentence, he looked directly at Thorin, who glowered back. He cared not for the insinuation that he needed to be told to look out for Bilbo and the rest of the Dwarfs; the alternative, that Thorin was the one needed to be taken care of, was no better.

"And now," Gandalf said with a sigh. "I will leave to do something that should have been done many years ago. Hopefully we will all be better for it."

They all watched as Gandalf sat back up on his horse and rode off. Their own mounts had already been sent back to Beorn as soon as they reached the edge of the forest, and now the company was alone.

"Welcome to Mirkwood," Thorin heard Nori mutter as they began to walk towards the forest gate.

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According to Beorn it would take them two weeks to cross Mirkwood, and unlike their journey so far they would have a hard time resupplying once they had entered the forest. Not only would they need to carry all the food they might need, they would also need to carry all the water.

The shape shifter had warned them that the only safe streams to drink from were the ones near the cave system the Elves occupied. All others should be avoided. And since they intended to avoid the Elves… well, that made for a bit of a tricky situation.

"Why is the water dangerous?" Óin asked. "Can’t we just boil it?"

"It’s not like that," Beorn had replied. "The water you find will not poison you, not to my knowledge
anyway. But being poisoned is not the worst thing that can happen to a person."

"And what does that mean?" Dwalin had demanded. "Don't dance around the subject. Speak plainly!"

"What it means, Master Dwarf, I could not tell you exactly as I've made sure not to drink even a drop of Mirkwood's water on the occasions I've had to pass through the forest.” Beorn's expression was grave. “Normally I would not recommend that you enter the forest at all, but considering that you have annoyed both the Orcs in the north and the Goblins in the south, and that you are also somewhat pressed for time, you are then left with little choice but to take your journey through Mirkwood.”

"I'm still not hearing any details," Dwalin said gruffly.

Thorin had watched the two, a bit apprehensive that Beorn might take offence at Dwalin's words; the Man had only known them for a short time so he might think Dwalin was deliberately bad-mannered instead of just worried, but the Man had just nodded solemnly.

“You are right to be concerned, Master Dwarf, and I will tell you why.” Beorn had briefly placed his hand on Dwalin's shoulder, and it had been strange indeed to see Dwalin look small with Beorn's large hand resting on him.

"One time when I was not here – I was travelling down south - one of my friends entered the forest, and did not come back out again. Several more of my friends went looking for him, and none of them made it back either. So immediately upon my return I prepared myself and left for Mirkwood.”

“Out of the five that had gone inside I was able to find two, we still do not know what happened to the other three. And those I found…” Beorn sighed. “I know not all animals are like my friends here. And I'm not sure what makes them special. But something happened in that forest to take it away from those who had entered. I found them by the river that is about half-way into the forest, asleep. I carried them out, and when they woke their minds were as dark and murky as the water in that same river upon which banks I had found them. They did not know who they were themselves, much less who I was, and they had forgotten how to speak anything else but their own tongue. And while I do not favour the expression ‘mindless beasts’, that is how any other person would have described them, because even when their own kin tried to communicate with them they would only get the most basic of answers back.”

“What happened to them?” It had been Ori who asked. “Did they get better?”

“They did not, Master Dwarf, they did not.” Beorn shook his head. “And while I can’t say for sure that it was the river which cursed them, that is what I believe. Similar tales have been told to me by others, but this is the only one I have had any part in myself. Still, for your own safety, I would ask that you do not drink of Mirkwood’s water. When you come to the river you will need to cross it. There is a boat by the path, I have placed it there myself, and I suggest that you use it.”

“I am sorry to hear about your friends,” Bilbo said. “We all are. And we will heed your warning. I expect that we shall be able to carry all the water we need with us. When necessary we Dwarfs can go days without water without any adverse effects.”

“Hardy like the stone you came from,” Beorn said approvingly, and most of the Dwarfs nodded and looked fairly smug. Thorin scowled when he realised that he would once again be the weak link of the Company. Astute as ever, Bilbo seemed to be able to sense his thoughts, and the Dwarf had
smiled warmly at him before turning back to Beorn.

“There should be little trouble to carry what everyone will need.”

It didn’t really make Thorin feel like less of a burden, but it helped a little to know that he would be a welcome one. Learning how to use a sword was one thing, but he could no more turn himself into a Dwarf than he could turn himself into a bird and fly safely over Mirkwood.

“The Eagles,” Thorin said and blinked in startled realisation.

“Yes?” Gandalf inquired.

“Why could they not have taken us all the way to Erebor? Can you call them back?”

The rest of the company also looked surprised, as if this thought had not previously occurred to them either. Perhaps it was not that strange; the appearance and disappearance of the Eagles had been rather tangled up with other events that called everyone’s attention, still, it struck Thorin as slightly odd that not even someone like Nori had seen the opportunity presented to them.

“They took us as far as they could,” Gandalf said. “As things currently stand they cannot go near Mirkwood, but I am hoping that will change should I succeed with my mission. And no,” Gandalf added, looking at Nori who had been on the verge of asking a question. “I can’t ask them to fly around the forest.”

“Why not?” the thief asked, looking a bit sullen.

“Because that would put them unduly at risk for something that is not their business,” Gandalf said sternly. “Reclaiming Erebor is your quest, not theirs. They helped us before as a favour to me, but asking them to carry you around would make them vulnerable to attacks from Orcs, Goblins, and Men alike. The first two will shoot to kill just for the sake of killing, and the Men tend to think dark thoughts about what could happen to their livestock when they see giant eagles approaching. Especially when those Men have a bad history of large flying beasts showing up to wreak doom. Smaug might not have been seen for 60 years, but he has not been forgotten.”

“As I said I will tell you everything I know about Mirkwood,” Beorn had said, getting them back on topic once again. “And I will send as much supplies as you can carry, and that should do you if water won’t be as big of an issue as I first thought. But above everything else there is one thing that you should remember.” The shape shifter paused and let his gaze sweep over the Company. “Be careful.”

As the first days in Mirkwood passed, Beorn’s warning seemed rather redundant. Because how could they be anything other than careful when the very trees around them seemed to harbour them ill will?

Twisted branches stretched out towards them in the ever-present gloom of Mirkwood as if frozen in the act of wanting to catch them. And already on their first night inside the forest those on watch reported seeing shadows move behind the trees, as well as the gleam of eyes; both of these occurrences only increasing in frequency with every night that passed.
For all of this, Beorn’s warning also seemed a bit unnecessary, because nothing ever attacked them, or even approached them, unless you wanted to count the enormous pale moths that showed up every time someone lit a fire.

“I don’t see why they just don’t fly away from this damned forest,” Kíli muttered after the umpteenth time he’d had to brush a moth away from his head. “If it’s light they want, there is plenty to be had if they just flap their little wings and get out of this place.”

“Maybe they don’t know that,” Ori said with a sad expression as another moth flew too close to the fire and was swallowed by the flames. “Maybe this is all they know.”

It was a grim notion, Thorin thought. To yearn so for something you wouldn’t even have known existed until you saw it for the first time, and then risk everything for it, only to ultimately perish if you got too close.

“Well, I’m telling them now,” Kíli said turning his face upwards. “There is something called a sun, and you’d do well to go and have a look at it. Or the moon for that matter. Just get yourself up and out of here.”

Thorin slept poorly that night, as he had done for all nights inside of Mirkwood when he’d slept at all. There were thankfully no nightmares like the one he had suffered on the way to the forest, but his sleep was not undisturbed.

More than once he’d woken up before what counted as dawn inside the forest (the lack of a visible sunrise and sunset kept them all guessing at what time of day it really was), certain that he’d heard someone call for him. A couple of times he could even have sworn it had sounded like Bilbo, though Bilbo was always to be found lying right next to him. There was also a feeling of missing something, not in the sense of having forgotten it, but rather that there was something that he needed to do. No one else mentioned similar experiences so Thorin said nothing as he didn’t want to alarm them with was sure to be his own imagination playing tricks.

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On their sixth night in the forest Thorin really didn’t feel much like sleeping at all, so when the Company settled down for the night he asked Bilbo if he would talk with him, distract him. He would have offered to take first watch as had become his custom, but Dwalin had beaten him to it for once.

Thorin hadn’t outright asked Bilbo for a distraction, but he could see from King’s glance at their surroundings that he thought it was indeed a distraction, only one from their circumstances, and Thorin let him keep that belief, not wanting to admit that it was from his own mind that he needed a respite.

“Your Khuzdul is coming along very nicely,” Bilbo said quietly as to not disturb any of those trying to sleep, and the Dwarf smiled when Thorin began to protest. “No, truly. Just like swordplay you’ve picked up the basics impressively quick. Or perhaps Bifur and Dori are just excellent teachers?”

Bifur and Dori spent about as much time on teasing (Bifur) and being in a snit (Dori) as they did on actually teaching him anything, so that was unlikely to be it. Khuzdul was a strange language, but the more he learnt of it the more it seemed to make sense. And there had so far been little else to do in Mirkwood than to let Bifur and Dori have a go at teaching him, which likely was the reason behind
his progress.

“Perhaps it is not a hard language to learn?” Thorin suggested, and Bilbo snorted.

“Nice try, I do know that that’s not the case. Khuzdul is not the language we are taught growing up, we only begin our studies after we have first mastered another language.”

“That seems… strange,” Thorin frowned. “Did you not say that it was sacred to you? Why keep it from the children?”

“It is because it is sacred that we do so. As I’m sure you know, children have a tendency to… distort a language. Since Khuzdul was given to us by our creator, it should not be changed in any way. Westron may change with the Ages, sometimes new words are added, and some disappear, meanings get altered and spellings change, but Khuzdul remains to this day in the exact same way as when we first received it.”

To Thorin that seemed a bit impractical, but he could see it was important to Bilbo, so he merely nodded.

“I see,” he said, feeling that something needed to be said. Bilbo chuckled and nudged his shoulder against Thorin’s, shaking his head in mock-exasperation.

“It is like I could read your thoughts, and a lot of them were not complimentary. Do Hobbits have a language you call your own?”

“No,” Thorin shook his head. “Well, maybe. It would depend on what you call a language.”

“Could you explain?”

“It is not a separate language from Westron, I guess you would rather call it a dialect,” Thorin said wryly. “It is something you learn when too many people live too close together, and they all have too many opinions which are not polite to share.” Thorin let out an annoyed sigh. “Instead of saying the things you mean, you say something else, and everyone still knows what you were trying to say in the first place, only they pretend not to. It’s driven me mad from the very moment I realised it was happening. In a way this was what I liked most about your Company. Even though it was not that nice to hear that they thought Hobbits knew nothing about armour and war, it was indeed what they thought. A Hobbit in the same position would have been more inclined to nod politely and then would merely have left me behind, having already written me off.”

“I think by now you have convinced everyone that you know armour, because yours have served you as well as the armour we wear have served us. But,” Bilbo paused for a moment. “I was not actually aware that Hobbits had a history of war?”

“We are a peace loving people, and we have never in our history declared war amongst ourselves or against others, but I would still say that Hobbits are no strangers to battle and armed conflict, and what else is a war?”

“I will admit to not knowing any of this,” Bilbo said and shook his head. “Will you tell me about it?”

“The last time we took up arms was…” Thorin counted back. “About 25 years ago. We call it the Fell Winter. Many of the crops had failed that year, and the winter was the coldest in recent memory. As if the threat of starvation was not enough, the rivers froze, and equally hungry and desperate
wolves and Goblins were able to cross the Brandywine when it too finally was laid with ice.” Thorin looked away, fixed his eyes on the vague outlines of the trees that surrounded them. “It was never that bad in Michel Delving; the place where I lived with my family. But we heard what happened in Hobbiton and in many other parts of the Shire. And while the Rangers eventually showed up to help, that was not the first or last time a Hobbit has been forced to take up arms. To say that Hobbits have never known battle is to forget those who died protecting their families.”

“I understand,” Bilbo said and took Thorin’s hand. “I’m sorry to bring up such a painful subject.”

Thorin shrugged, giving Bilbo a half-smile. “As I said, my family was never part of it.”

Though the stories he heard… It was quite possible that these stories where at least part of the reason why Thorin the smith had never been satisfied by only making only the everyday objects asked for by his neighbours.

If those who had fought with the Wolves and Goblins had been properly outfitted and armed; with swords instead of knives and pans and spades, then perhaps…

But there was little use thinking such things.

Wanting to leave the subject Thorin saw his chance to move on to something that had been on his mind every now and again for the last few days, it was only that he’d never remembered to ask when he’d been alone with Bilbo.

“If I may ask… Fíli’s and Kíli’s father, why did he not join the quest? At first you only talked about their mother, so I rather assumed that he had died. But I’ve come to understand that is not the case.”

Bilbo looked surprised. “Indeed he does live. Have I done such a poor job of talking about Víli that you thought he was dead?” The Dwarf shook his head. “Don’t ever let my sister know of this, she is very protective and she might literally have my beard for it.”

“But?” Thorin asked, because he could hear one approaching.

“Víli,” Bilbo hesitated. “Víli is a good father and a good husband, and he is a talented miner - both brave and resourceful. When there was a plot against his life, and mine, he agreed to pose as bait. As a result of that he was stabbed in the shoulder, and he suffered through the pain to play unconscious, as to not draw attention from our plan.”

“But?” Thorin asked, because he could hear one approaching.

“But… he is not a warrior,” Bilbo stated simply. “He is from a family of miners and when he was young he was never really given the chance to take part of weapons’ practice. Nor did he have much aptitude for it when Dwalin and I tried to teach him. I think you surpassed what we spent months drilling into his head by your second week of training.” Bilbo chuckled. “Give him a pickaxe and ask that he find a seam of gold and he’ll do it. Ask him to bash said pickaxe into someone’s head and you’ll get a much poorer result - unless the person is willing to stand completely still and pretend to be a troublesome boulder.”

“I’m sure your sister was glad to have him stay then,” Thorin said diplomatically. He was surprised when Bilbo laughed again.
“Oh, I think she would have preferred it if she or Víli had been around to keep an eye on Fíli and Kíli. But he couldn’t come, and she couldn’t leave. You got a short lesson on Dwarven politics before,” Bilbo smiled. “Since Víli is only Prince Consort, Dís opted to remain lest the council get any, and I quote, ‘idiotic ideas’.”

“The more I hear about Dwarven politics, the more I wonder what I’ve gotten involved with,” Thorin muttered.

“I hope you think that there are some brighter spots as well,” Bilbo said and squeezed Thorin’s hand. “Regarding this thing you’ve gotten involved with.”

“A few,” Thorin admitted, leaning over for a brief kiss. “The not being crowned a prince is so far my favourite.”

Bilbo pouted, just the slightest bit, and Thorin had to kiss him again.

“Killed by faint praise,” the Dwarf complained when they parted. “I see I need to try harder.”

“Anything harder might need to be saved until such a time when we are alone,” Thorin murmured softly into Bilbo’s ear, and when Bilbo groaned in protest the Hobbit merely smiled into the side of his face.

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That night Thorin’s sleep was untroubled.

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The next day they got to the river Beorn had warned them about, and they discovered the boat. Only, the boat was currently on the wrong side of the river. And unfortunately that would merely be the beginning of their problems.

They managed to get the boat to their side of the river, and everything seemed to be going fine until it was Bombur’s turn to cross. The boat was not particularly big, and to avoid any accidents the large Dwarf had offered to be the last one to cross. Still, it was a sturdily built boat and no one had really expected any difficulties, so no one had thought to redistribute the supplies Bombur carried (which were a quite considerable part of them, seeing as he was usually the one preparing their meals anyway). More than one of the Company would later lament this, if only to themselves, when somehow the boat ended up dumping Bombur, pack and all, into the river.

While Bombur was quickly dragged back up again, the pack was lost having been washed downstream, but that seemed at the time a small matter compared to the fact that the unconscious Bombur could not be roused.

For three days they had to carry him along at a much slower pace than they had previously kept. On the fourth he woke, and it became clear that he’d forgotten everything that had happened since leaving they had left the Shire. Still, compared to Beorn’s story it was decided that it could have been much worse. Even the loss of the pack could be ignored in view of that they would only have a few more days left inside of Mirkwood.

Then came the spiders.
Thorin cursed beneath his breath as he hurriedly crept after one of the spiders carrying a Dwarf shaped cocoon. The giant creatures had come out of nowhere, and it was sheer luck that he’d remembered his ring when he did, because their swords had done little to ward against them, and Kíli only had so many arrows. Still, it hadn’t been easy to watch them take his friends away, and since he couldn’t be everywhere at once that was what he had been forced to do. The spiders had worked in pairs of two or three where one had been the distraction while the other snuck up behind the Dwarf to bind him with sticky strands of web.

Fortunately that seemed to be the extent of the spiders’ intelligence, because they had not noticed how several of their number had gone missing along with the burdens they had carried. So far he’d freed Fíli, Bifur, and Bofur; none of whom had seemed much worse for wear, so only ten more to go.

Thorin tried to ignore the little voice asking him what he’d do if he couldn’t find the others, or how he was going to find the three that he’d freed seeing as they couldn’t very well stick close to him without being caught once again by the spiders.

Luckily the spiders all seemed to be going in the same direction, so it was easy enough to follow them, and he’d pointed this out to Fíli, so he could only hope that they were doing the same.

The spider he was now drawing closer to seemed to have some issue with the Dwarf it was carrying. Thorin could see the cocoon bulging as whoever it was inside made attempts to free himself. Then he watched with horror how the spider stopped and readied itself to bite the closest part of the cocoon.

“Stop!” Thorin commanded before he could think better of it, and to his surprise the spider did halt, either out of shock that someone would try such a thing, or perhaps just from the distraction of new prey. Whatever it was Thorin made sure to take advantage, and the spider was soon dealt with.

“I need to use my sword, so you need to hold still,” Thorin warned as he was about to cut open the cocoon. “I should have thought to ask Fíli for a knife, because none of the other two actually had one on them.”

“Oh, you can get a knife from me,” Nori wheezed when Thorin managed to get him loose. The Dwarf blinked when his eyes were uncovered but there still was no Hobbit in sight.

“My ring,” Thorin explained curtly. He didn’t like the way Nori seemed to be short of breath. The Hobbit hadn’t considered that the webs might also restrict air, and upon the realisation he grew even more impatient to find the ones still missing. It didn’t come as a particularly large surprise when Nori demanded to come with him.

“I can keep myself hidden,” he said, eyes flicking around since he didn’t know where to look for Thorin. “That is unless I’m already surrounded by the creatures, because even I have a hard time disappearing completely when someone is watching. For that I think it requires a bit of help.”

“Fine,” Thorin said, not wanting to spend time arguing. “Go ahead of me, it’s not like you’ll see me anyway, and this way I’ll see if a spider takes you again. But stop if I tell you.”

“Yes m’Lord,” Nori drawled. “And may I say you’re taking quite well to being married to a King.”

Together with Nori, Thorin followed the spiders back to their lair, freeing four of the others on the
way, and it was with great relief how he discovered that all of the remaining Dwarfs were to be found at their destination. Soon enough all spiders were dead as the creatures were too dumb to run away when an invisible Hobbit again and again stabbed them with his sword, and once free all 13 Dwarfs made sure to properly thank Thorin for managing to burgle them from the spiders in such an excellent fashion.

“Again you save us,” Bilbo murmured as he embraced him.

“I’m sure there was something about it in the contract I signed,” Thorin said, probably clutching a little too hard at Bilbo but not caring in the slightest.

“I think -” was all Bilbo had time to say before he was interrupted by the sound of a horn.

“Elves?” Glóin moaned. “What’s next, Orcs and Goblins as well?”

“You shut your trap before you jinx us,” his brother scolded, slapping Glóin across the back of his head.

Thorin’s hand went automatically to the pocket where he’d placed the ring and chain. He had not yet had time to put it back on again, and now…

“Probably for the best,” Bilbo agreed when he realised what Thorin’s intentions were. “I would hope that they would greet us civilly -”

“Aren’t you going to slap him too?” Glóin muttered surly to Óin who retorted by again smacking the back of his little brother’s head.

“- but just in case…”

Thorin nodded, and let the ring slip over his finger once more.

Bilbo’s eyes widened in surprise and his hands came out to search for Thorin.

“This is rather strange,” the Dwarf remarked, hands trailing over Thorin’s chest and shoulders and the Hobbit shuddered. Bilbo was the first to touch him while he was in the grey world of the ring, and something about it felt wrong, just as all sounds appeared to be a bit muted and all the colours were bleached to grey. But there was no time to dwell on it, and regardless, the ring again proved to be very useful when the Elves showed up and politely requested - while aiming far too many arrows at the Dwarfs - that they would accompany them.

Unseen to all, Thorin followed.

Chapter End Notes

Again, I really love Tolkien’s works, but as you can see I’ve again changed more than a few things around. Poke me if you want me to explain why, or expand on something, but I hope that it’ll be fairly obvious.
Funny how being locked up in a cell gave you plenty of time to do nothing but dwell on your own mistakes and shortcomings.

With a sigh Nori sank down to the floor and pulled his knees up against his chest. He knew that there’d been a reason why he usually avoided getting locked up - aside from Dori nagging the will to live out of him should he ever had been forced to come and bail his brother out of prison. The Dwarf sighed again. It had only been five days, and the damned Elves still showed no signs of preparing to let them go. This would be so much fun… he could hardly wait.

Of course, Nori could just unlock the door to his cell and get out of it, that wasn’t the problem.

The Elves had been fairly finicky when it’d come to parting their ‘guests’ from their weapons (though Nori still had two knives in his boots which they’d missed) but they hadn’t even thought to search for other, smaller things, and as a result of that, Nori still had all his lock picks.

The problem was that while he could walk out of his cell any time he wanted to, the same wasn’t true for the rest of the Company, except Thorin of course, who hadn’t been locked up to begin. Nori really wanted that wonderful ring… The things he could do with it... but no, he wouldn't take from a friend. Not even though it really would be useful.

The time it would take Nori to pick the lock on a dozen doors would mean that one of the guard patrols would have time to catch him at it. The cells were too far apart, and the locks were too complicated for him to have it done quickly enough. And that wasn’t the only issue. Even if they somehow got everyone out undetected, they still wouldn’t get very far, because there wasn’t really anywhere they could go that would allow them to escape from the Elves.

When they had first been brought before the Elven King, the Elf had boasted that they would not be able to escape from his ‘magical doors’. Nori had quietly snorted to himself, because really? And then again when he’d discovered that the cell doors were very much not magical. He had been less amused the first time he’d tried to leave the Elves’ caves (and what was up with Elves living in caves anyway? Sure, there were trees around as well, but still, Elves and caves?) he found himself unable to even find the damned door. He’d memorized the paths they’d been taken down as they’d been brought to the cells, he knew that there should have been a door where he only found blank wall.

When he’d complained to Thorin about how there was something very unnatural in Elves using magic on stone to trick a Dwarf, Thorin had immediately demanded to know what he’d been planning to do if he’d managed to get out of the Elven bastion.

“Go back and pretend I hadn’t, try to figure out a way to get the keys off the guards so we could all -” Nori stopped speaking and narrowed his eyes at where he thought that the Hobbit was. “You thought I would leave.”

He wouldn’t leave. He couldn’t. Not when his family was still jailed, not when Bilbo was still locked up, not when Dwalin…

“I’m not going to leave the rest of the Company any more than you are,” Nori told Thorin. “If I’d
been so inclined I wouldn’t have locked myself back up in the damned cell, would I?”

Thorin grunted something and then announced that he’d be back later, and not being able to see the person you were talking to was really annoying as you for obvious reasons could read neither facial expression nor body language.

There was something about their burglar that just sounded a little off. It could just be their situation, or the one they’d just left with the spiders, or a combination of the two, or any other dozen reasons why Thorin might sound unusually irritable and be as prickly as a whole box of needles. But Nori was going to keep an eye on him all the same - or an ear, as it were. Thorin might end up doing something stupid, and if he did, Nori was going to be there to help him get out of it. He had plenty experience with that sort of thing.

The very first thing Nori had done upon leaving his cell was to go against the natural instincts of anyone who had just released themselves from prison; he’d headed towards the guards. What he’d needed was a copy of their patrol routes and schedule. Otherwise he’d lose too much time trying to establish just when it was safe for him to leave the cell, and where it was safe to go. If anyone noticed that he was missing or found him wandering the hallways… well, then he’d have the choice of staying hidden (which wasn’t that much fun when you didn’t have a ring that made you invisible) or allow himself to get thrown him back in the cell; probably after they did a better job at checking if he actually had anything on his person that would allow him to get out again. Not very good options.

It had been easier than he thought to get unnoticed into the guard barracks (which helpfully enough had been placed just next to the prison area) but annoyingly, all papers he’d seen lying around were not written in Westron. There was one he found with a map of the caves and different coloured pathways, but that was pretty damn useless unless he also knew ‘when’ the guards were going to be there or not.

Swearing loud enough inside his own head that he almost feared someone would hear him, Nori had made his way back towards the prison, hoping that the time he’d been away hadn’t given someone cause to miss him. He’d been one corridor away from the one with ‘his’ cell when someone had grabbed his shoulder. A moment later found him with one of his remaining knives in hand, holding it to the throat of… air.

“Let me go,” Thorin had growled quietly, and Nori did.

“Do not sneak up on me,” the Thief had growled back as he let the knife slide back into its hidden sheath inside his boot. “I could just as easily have slit your throat.”

“Yes, I’ll call your name next time,” Thorin had said drily. “The guards probably won’t find that interesting at all. Why are you wandering about anyway? You are going to get the others in trouble if the Elves notice that you are missing.”

“I was trying to do something about that,” Nori hissed. “Trying to find the guard schedules and something about the paths they walked, there’s always someone who keeps those things around, either for having bad memory or from being a pedantic bastard who always has to have everything written down, preferably in triplicate.” The Dwarf shrugged one shoulder. “But it’s all damned well written down in their own language isn’t it. Bloody useless.”

Thorin was quiet for a few moments, and Nori had just begun to wonder if the Hobbit had already left when:
“Bilbo can read the Elves’ language.”

To say that Nori was shocked would not have been an exaggeration.

“He can read their weird little squiggles?”

“Didn’t I just say that?” Thorin asked, sounding annoyed.

“Well, great,” Nori threw his arms out. “Then you can take the papers in the guard barracks to him. Not everything at once, mind you, or they’ll definitely notice that something strange is going on. Try the ones over at the weapon’s chest first. Now excuse me, I’m going to lock myself up again, before someone notices I’m missing.”

Nori would dearly have loved to question Bilbo how it was that he knew the Elven language, but even once he’d gotten an overview of the guards’ movements, his King was simply too far away for him to take the time for a chat, and Thorin wasn’t talking. But he did get back to Nori with a translated schedule.

Bilbo, Fíli, and Kíli were not kept in the prison like the rest of the company. According to Thorin they’d all been given private rooms closer to the Elven king. Nori did not like this, not one bit. And judging by Thorin’s strained tone of voice when telling him about it, the Hobbit rather agreed.

“The Elf wants something from Bilbo,” Thorin had muttered darkly. “He’s playing games. Asking why we are here in Mirkwood. As if he can’t figure it out.”

The rest of the company was close enough for Nori to stop by on, not at in one go of course, but the prison wasn’t large enough for someone to be so far apart from him that he couldn’t make it there and back again in time to lock himself back up into his own cell. It’d been a stone off his chest to be able to check on Dori and Ori, and Dwalin… What a mess that had turned out to be.

When he’d followed Dwalin that night before they arrived to Mirkwood he had been expecting… well, not what had happened anyway. Then he would just have damned well remained on his arse and been all the better for it.

“Go back to the camp,” Dwalin rumbled when Nori deliberately stepped on a branch to announce his presence. The other Dwarf hadn’t looked back, so either he figured that only Nori would be foolish enough to follow someone who radiated ‘leave me alone’, or he was just being a rude bastard to the poor soul that could have been someone else than Nori.

“I know I usually follow your orders, no wait, I don’t actually do that,” Nori replied, walking up to Dwalin and not stopping until he was close enough to count the individual hairs in his beard. “I want to talk to you.”

“I have nothing to say.” Dwalin kept his eyes firmly on the pony he was brushing.

“Great, then I’ll just talk to you. But don’t worry, it’s a short one.” Nori rose up on his toes and placed his hand on Dwalin’s jaw to make him meet his eyes, his other he used to stop Dwalin brushing the poor pony’s coat straight off.

“I’m not sure if I love you, but I like to find out.” Not waiting for a reply, Nori then pressed their lips together. He hadn’t really planned on taking it further than that, but the light brush of lips on lips
was like putting fire to kindle. Dwalin kissed like he was drowning and Nori the air, and after a while Nori certainly felt like he himself was drowning. But it sure was a good way to go. When they had to break for air Nori found himself well and truly wrapped in Dwalin’s arms, his own hands nested in Dwain’s beard. They were both breathing heavily and Nori thought it fitting that they were basically gasping for air, just as they would if there had been any actual drowning involved.

“We can’t do this,” Dwalin said even as his big hand gently stroked one of Nori’s braids. “I can’t do this. What do you think will happen once we have Erebor back?”

“A lot of boring speeches once Dáin and the rest of the Lords show up? And a lot of cleaning, because I will wager my share of the treasure that Dragons care little for such things.”

Dwalin didn’t even acknowledge the joke, he just shook his head and refused to meet Nori’s eyes.

“I mean, with us.”

“So there is an us?” Nori asked, pressing his body closer to Dwalin’s. He hadn’t realised before, just how much he wanted it.

“Stop that,” Dwalin growled, putting some distance between their hips but not before Nori had felt something that most definitely wasn’t Dwalin’s axe. But as soon as it arrived the aggravation was gone from the large Dwarf’s eyes. “Would you - will it be like before?” he asked. “No one to know that we no longer hate each other? Though it’s been quite some time since I truly felt anything like hate for you. If ever. I just -” Dwalin sighed and shook his head and fell silent.

“You don’t want that?” Nori asked carefully hands gently combing through Dwalin’s beard, thinking about night spent listening to fellow shadow-dwellers curse about the guards and their captain, agreeing with them, and how sometimes that meant that he could warn said captain about not so nice surprises coming his way.

“No, it’s not what I want. But I can’t have what I want.”

“Unless you actually tell me what you want -”

“I want to have the option to claim you as my own,” Dwalin burst out. “I want to court you, properly. But that’s not going to happen, is it? And not just because we’re out in the middle of nowhere.” Dwalin’s hand tightened slightly on Nori’s waist. “Nori the Thief can’t be with Dwalin the Guard. Which means that Nori the Spy can’t be with me either.”

“You can’t ask me to choose between you, and Bilbo’s life. And the lives of his family.” Nori said, placing his hand on Dwalin’s chest. Your life, he added silently. “If certain people knew that we were even on speaking terms, then they wouldn’t as much as tell me what weather we’re having.”

“No, I can’t ask you to choose,” Dwalin said slowly. ”And I’m not going to. But I couldn't love you and let the world think I hate you. I couldn’t lie with you during the night and then pretend to want to lock you in a dungeon during the day. I’m not that kind of Dwarf.”

“So this is it then?” Nori asked, feeling like something in his chest had just expanded, leaving little room for air in his lungs and causing a dull, encompassing ache. “Over before it’s even begun?”

Dwalin’s hand clenched in the fabric of Nori’s coat, before letting go completely. The Dwarf took a step back and Nori was forced to quickly release his grip on Dwalin’s beard or risk pulling it out.
"I guess it is," was all Dwalin had said before slowly walking back to the rest of the company.

But if his tongue had been of few words, his eyes had not. And it was the pain in them as much as the ache in his own chest that caused Nori to curl up around his little brother after making his way back to the camp. After a while Dori shuffled over to in turn curl up behind Nori, just like they’d slept when they were all much younger.

Ori had been a tiny thing, so small and pink, and Nori had always been a little afraid that he would accidentally crush him. Ori was still rather small, and he’d yet to grow into much bulk, but there was a wiry strength to him that allowed Nori to cling to him without being afraid to cause hurt. And behind them both was as always the solid presence of Dori. Doing his best to protect them, but against the ache in Nori’s chest he could only do so much.

The next morning Nori overheard a conversation between Dwalin and Balin.

He truly hadn’t meant to. It had been very early, and he’d just woken up and gone to relieve himself, and a lifetime of not wanting to be noticed has apparently kicked in, because Dwalin and Balin had not spotted him as they came to stow their bedrolls away on their ponies.

“I know he’s a thief, brother,” Balin had murmured and Nori had frozen where he’d been standing behind a bush. “But I hardly think that’s a reason to simply ignore this thing that has begun to grow between the two of you. It’s making you miserable, I can tell. Or has he done something...?”

“He has not, and no, that is not my reason,” Dwalin had sighed. “Not that he’s anything like an ordinary thief.” Nori winced, he’d rather not have Dwalin tell anyone that he was the Shadow, but he’d revealed himself knowing that Dwalin probably would share the information. He’d just wanted Dwalin to know, had needed him to know. In hindsight, it had been like bragging. Look, look what I can do. Look what I’ve done. Showing off for someone he wanted to impress. How stupid, showing a guard that he could steal better than anyone else and get away with it...

When Dwalin suddenly chuckled with wry amusement, it took Nori by surprise.

“But never mind that,” the warrior said, shaking his head. “What is important is that Nori is Bilbo’s spymaster, he needs be able to lead a life where he’s welcome in the darkness outside the law. He can’t be married to a guard. Especially not to a guard captain.”

“Married?” Balin had sounded shocked. “That is how it is? You wish to marry him?”

“It does not matter.” And that had been the end of that conversation.

Nori had always wanted tattoos, but he’d already at an early age realised how stupid it would be to mark himself with something permanent that could always be used to identify him and that would set him apart from all other Dwarfs.

Dwalin’s tattoos had always been fascinating to him, long before the idea to trace them with his tongue would enter his mind. And now he couldn’t have Dwalin for the same reasons as he could not get tattoos. Another thing he couldn’t allow himself as it was too revealing, too easy to use against him.

Marriage. How could Dwalin speak of such things? Did really want that? Did he even know himself? If Nori had asked the other Dwarf a month ago if he’d considered marrying him he likely would have been on the receiving end of a truly fearsome scowl, at the very least. Even if it now was
just the *possibility* of marriage… Though, did it even matter…

What Nori really wanted to know was if Dwalin did also carry something inside himself that already from the start had said, notice that Dwarf. Yes *him*. You *need* to know that one.

Nori had at the time thought that it was simply caution guiding him. But then it had grown, little by little, and even thought Dwalin had shown few signs of thinking him a friend, Nori had started to consider Dwalin one. And -

…was there no longer any use in thinking about if he’d want more that?

Nori laughed mirthlessly where he sat in his cell when he realised that he didn’t even have to think about it. He *wanted*. He wanted everything of Dwalin that he could get. And he was greedy enough, and selfish enough to even be content, if not satisfied, with stolen nights and moments while the rest of the world still thought that they were enemies. But Dwalin was not, and so, that was that.

Because Nori was *not* selfish enough to pressure him into something he did not want.

He’d only been to visit Dwalin once in these five days they’d spent as prisoners to the Elves.

“Finally found a prison not even you can escape from, eh?”

Dwalin had to *hate* being locked up, Nori had thought when he’d seen the other Dwarf behind the iron bars that made up the cell door. A bit surprisingly, the other’s Dwarf’s tone had been fairly light hearted, but Nori could hear the tension behind it and he didn’t think it all had to do with his presence.

“I’d hate to take pointers from Elves, but -”

“Perhaps I don’t want to escape,” Nori has said haughtily, curling his hand around one of the bars just to avoid fidgeting. Or reaching out. Or- “I could be enjoying some time to sleep without constantly having to fear for my life.”

For a while they had bantered about whether Elves or Spiders were worse, which pretty soon turned into a ‘the many ways Elves are bastards’ free-for-all, and all too soon the time came for Nori to take himself back to his own cell.

“You need to be careful,” Dwalin had said, reaching out a hand and lightly resting his fingers against Nori’s where they were curled around an iron bar.

Nori had nodded, feeling the light touch as a brand into his very core. That had been the closest they’d ever gotten to talking about something of weight. And it’d made the ache in Nori’s chest come back in full force and he’d not yet been back to see Dwalin.

He *wanted*, but he couldn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Just what you wanted to read on a Saturday eh? People being sad... :'(
Previously in this story we've briefly touched on young Bilbo's interest in the Elves, but learning their language was something even his grandfather and father thought was a good idea. At least a fairly good idea. Because knowing the language of someone you didn't trust could help you learning their secrets. As long as you didn't let anyone know you could do it. And quite honestly, Bilbo knew it wouldn't really impress any Dwarfs, so he never much talked about it.
Yes it's been too long! I've missed this story. I've had way too little computer time lately, and also I blame hamsters.
If you follow my stories you might see hamsters later this weekend, that's all I'm saying...

NOW, let's go back to Thorin in Mirkwood.

As the forest was clearly cursed, was it really any wonder that the Elves' dwelling place was as well?

According to the tales, Elves never truly died, but perhaps it was that they didn’t exactly go on living either. At least that was what Thorin had started to accept as the truth.

It had started with the echo of a whisper. Perhaps it’d been there already in the forest, but Thorin wasn’t sure. He’d only noticed it once everything had gotten quiet and he was walking down empty hallways alone, once he was actively listening for any sounds that might mean that someone was coming.

The first time he’d been so sure that someone had said something that he’d pressed against the wall, not even daring to breathe in case that would give himself away. He hadn’t heard what had been said, it had been too soft for him to make out the words, or even what the voice sounded like.

All that had been left was the knowledge that someone had said something. But no Elf had come walking down the halls, and eventually Thorin had been forced to admit to himself that he must have been mistaken. His ears had played a trick on him.

He told himself that the second time he heard it as well.

It was not normal for a Hobbit to sneak around unseen in an Elven bastion, in the search of missing Dwarfs no less, so his mind must be playing tricks on him. But then he heard it again, and again, and it kept getting louder. He still couldn’t make out what was said, but he no longer doubted that he heard a whisper.

He probably should have told Bilbo about it then. But… Thorin couldn’t stomach the thought of telling his lover, his husband, that he was hearing whispers that no one else seemed to hear; because one time it happened as he was talking to Dwalin, but when Thorin asked if the Dwarf had heard something, he just shook his head and warned Thorin to keep his eyes and ears peeled for Elves.

If he was going insane like his - if he was losing his mind, he was still sane enough to know it. Sane enough to know that he couldn’t bear seeing the look of pity on Bilbo’s face. Cowardly it might be, but Thorin put off telling Bilbo the truth.

Then, on the third day they spent as prisoners to the Elves (because even though Thorin was not locked inside a cell he did not consider himself free), Thorin realised that he never heard whispers when he wasn’t wearing the ring. He took it off only rarely, mostly because Bilbo asked it of him. It
just seemed wiser to go unseen whenever he could, minimizing the risk of being caught. After the first day he’d even grown used to the grey, colourless world that the ring opened up.

Nonetheless, that world seemed a lot less comfortable once the idea had awakened in his mind that the grey world could possibly be a world where the living were not the only ones to dwell. The whispers had started to come less often, but when they came they were clearer. He did not understand the language, so perhaps it was the Elven tongue, or an ancient version of it, because it didn’t quite sound like the language he’d heard the guards use.

He became more convinced that this was the truth after he’d noticed one of the Elves looking his way the moment after one of the whispers had come. He - or she, Thorin couldn’t tell - had then shaken their head as if wanting to rid themselves of a bad memory. So, that Elf sensed something which Dwalin had not, the whispers had only started inside the Elven bastion, or earliest in Mirkwood, and they were not in a language Thorin could understand.

He did not exactly appreciate the idea that wearing his ring would place part of him in the realm of the dead, but he had little choice except to keep wearing it, especially if Thorin wanted to find a way for all of them to get out. He couldn’t move in the shadows like Nori, but with the ring he could go places where the Dwarf could not. He would find a way to get them all to safety.

He did not tell Bilbo about his newfound knowledge of his ring, and that was for two reasons, only one of which he admitted to himself. When Thorin thought about telling his husband he brushed it away with the reasoning that he didn’t want to worry him. The whispers were harmless enough, and now that he knew what they were it was easy for him to ignore them. Why trouble Bilbo with something so inconsequential when he had much more pressing thoughts that required his attention?

Beneath that rationale, in a place if his mind that held neither thought nor reason, Thorin was afraid. He didn’t want to tell Bilbo, or anyone, in case it turned out that it was just all in his own head. Only now, he’d convinced himself that it wasn’t. So if that was not the truth…

That night, which he curled up in a corner just outside Bilbo’s cell – not that Bilbo knew, because if he did he would have told him to go somewhere more comfortable – Thorin heard the whispers even in his dreams. But come the morning they had melted away like dreams were wont to do and he’d forgotten everything except the feeling of someone nearby, watching over him. And he just attributed that to Bilbo’s presence and then forgot all about it.

“...I would look upon you, dear heart,” Bilbo murmured after Thorin had softly spoken a greeting to announce his presence.

Thorin hesitated for a second, though he was not sure why he did so. Then he pulled the ring from his finger.

Bilbo shook his head and reached out through the bars to cup Thorin’s smooth cheek.

“You look exhausted, when did you last sleep?” Bilbo’s thumb tenderly brushed the skin beneath Thorin’s eye. “If you ask Nori he would open one of our cells for you so you could sleep without worry for someone to stumble upon you. Best it be his so you could leave when you wished.”

*Best it be yours*, Thorin thought. *Then I wouldn’t want to leave.*

But that wouldn't do, he needed to find a way out.
It had now been seven days, and apart from guards coming to feed their prisoners at regular intervals, never speaking to them or responding when spoken to, they had been left completely alone.

That didn’t sound so bad at first, not when you considered the alternatives, but as the days of solitude started adding up Thorin begun to realise that what the Elves were doing was possibly just as cruel as what the Goblins had intended.

Except for Thorin, whose presence none of the Elves even knew about, and Nori, who kept unlocking the door to his cell regardless of how many times Thorin informed him that sooner or later someone would notice that he was missing and get the rest of the company in trouble, all the Dwarfs were locked up in different parts of the dungeons, too far away from each other to even be heard through shouts.

Saying that this was something that was not appreciated would be like saying that Hobbits occasionally enjoyed eating.

Fíli and Kíli looked more and more like wilted flowers every time Thorin stopped by their respective cells; never having been apart longer than hours before in their entire lives, and the other Dwarfs were clearly unhappy as well. Even Bilbo had begun to get a strained look about him, and he thanked Thorin profusely every time he brought word from one of the others, which is why Thorin had taken to spending more time than what was probably reasonable running with messages between the Dwarfs instead of finding a way out.

Thorin hated the Elves for doing this. What would have happened if he and Nori had not been able to move freely, or close to, inside the dungeons? They had all been brought there together, but after that they would have been unable to know what had become of the others. Of their friends, their family. They would have known nothing but their own helplessness. Now they were ‘only’ left wondering what the Elves were planning.

"I'm fine," Thorin said as he turned his face into Bilbo’s hand. "Do not worry."

"Ah, you would rob me of one of the only ways I have to make the time pass?" Bilbo teased. "How cruel of you, Master Hobbit."

“I would have thought you would have ample time practicing your jests,” Thorin said drily, even as the corner of his mouth wanted to turn upwards out of the relief that Bilbo still wanted to make jokes. “But I see there has been little improvement.”

“For that insult I think I am owed a kiss,” Bilbo said haughtily, and Thorin happily agreed, leaning in further and pressing himself against the bars to get as close as possible.

Bilbo’s breath was hot on Thorin’s face and it made Thorin realise how cold he’d been just a moment ago. But no longer, not when soft lips claimed his and rough beard scratched against his skin. Not when Bilbo’s hand stroked through his curls and cupped the back of his head to hold him firmly in place, as if there was even a chance of Thorin leaving. Or… as if he could be taken away.

Neither of those things would ever happen, as long as he still drew breath, on that Thorin swore even as he allowed Bilbo to steal the breath from his lungs with a kiss that left the Hobbit’s head reeling.

Having this glimpse of happiness during such dark conditions made Thorin wish fiercely and selfishly that they could have met in another way, under circumstances that would not have led them to this cursed place.
Bilbo would not be king, and Thorin would not have needed to run from his past, and out of those two things he counted the first as the really selfish part.

They would have met then one day, either because Bilbo had travelled outside the Blue Mountains and somehow ended up in the Shire, or because Thorin had gone to one of the cities of Men at the foot of the mountains to sell his wares.

They could have met like that. And if they had, Thorin was convinced that he would not have let Bilbo go without having them both realise what they could mean to each other. Something had made him follow Bilbo after only knowing him for a few brief hours, and it had not been a mere flight of fancy.

He could no longer fathom that he had lived such a long time without knowing that such a person like Bilbo even existed, and the idea that Thorin could once again be forced to live without him was impossible and made Thorin's heart ache inside his chest. He would sooner kill every Elf inside this stone prison than let them -

That’s when he heard the noise signalling that the guards were nearby and he quickly tore his mouth away from Bilbo’s.

Bilbo heard them too because he gently pushed at Thorin’s chest and nodded down to the ring Thorin still clutched in his left hand. Since he was wearing it more often than not, and as such didn’t need to worry about losing it, he’d removed it from the chain - Bilbo’s chain - around his neck.

But Thorin didn’t want to disappear and leave Bilbo essentially alone with the guards.

Why would they be coming now, it was not yet time for the evening meal, and it sounded like much too many Elves for it to simply be one of the patrols that occasionally marched through the dungeons. Nori would probably disagree with the use of the word ‘occasionally’ but Thorin had little interest in learning exactly when and where all the Elven guards would be. They all made noise when they walked anyway, not because they walked heavily, but the silver armour they wore tinkled softly and melodiously with every step they took, like wind chimes.

Part of Thorin, the smith part, prayed that it was just ceremonial armour of some sort, because if that was the Elven version of battle armour it was just as well that they had not tried to face a Dragon.

Part of him took pleasure in seeing all the weak spots and places where the armour would hinder rather than protect, even though he accepted that they could not hope to fight their way out of the dungeons. As Nori had discovered, all the doors leading out were enchanted, and 14 against countless Elves were poor odds indeed.

Thorin had spent hours observing how the Elves walked up to a blank section of wall and how they made a door appear just by placing their hand on the stone. It looked to be so simple, but it refused to work when he tried it. And Nori hadn’t fared any better. They could possibly capture one of the Elves and force them to open the door, but Bilbo had not liked that alternative when Thorin had put it forward. He still believed that there would be a peaceful way out.

Quickly catching Bilbo’s hand to press a kiss against the palm Thorin then let his ring slip onto his finger once more. The grey almost felt familiar by now. There wasn’t much colour in the dungeons to start with. But he didn’t like the way it made Bilbo’s eyes look. When the colour disappeared they looked much too flat, while at the same time appearing almost transparent.
Thorin softly moved away to stand in a corner the opposite way from where the guards appeared to be coming. He’d never truly understood before how much the lack of shoes or boots could benefit someone who tried to move soundless. He wondered, not for the first time, if his ring also did something to help hide him; how much of him was moved into the other world when he put it on? After the Eagles had come, Dwalin had said that he had been able to see Thorin’s shadow, but either the torches lightening the Elves’ halls were not bright enough, or something had happened, because Thorin had looked for his shadow without being able to see it.

Ten Elven guards, all dressed in the same ridiculous silver armour, stopped outside Bilbo’s cell.

“Dwarf,” one of them said. “Our King would have a word with you.”

“Oh, I’m willing to have more than a word with him,” Bilbo said with a small, cold smile. “But if I can only have one I better chose carefully then.”

The Elves did not reply. One of them unlocked the cell and as Bilbo stepped out they surrounded him like a living fence. There was no way for Thorin to let him know that he would not be alone, but he hoped that Bilbo by now knew that Thorin would never abandon him.

As they walked through seemingly endless corridors Thorin did his best to try and memorize the way. Not because he was afraid not being able to find his way back, but he had the feeling that knowing where the Elven king held court could prove itself useful.

So far Thorin hadn’t really explored all that much of the Elves domain, it took much more time than he had originally expected because every hallway looked much the same and he didn’t have Nori’s skill to mentally make a map out of where he’d been and where he hadn’t. Simply put, Thorin was afraid of getting lost if he rushed too far ahead.

Such a great champion he made, unsettled by whispers and only a few turns from never being able to find his way back to his imprisoned friends. But he was the only one they had, so he would have to do his best.

At least he’d been smart enough to hide his sword and armour behind a dusty shelf that he’d stumbled on during his first exploration, however much it pained him to do so. The knife Nori had given him while they were tearing through the spiders’ webs would have to do because while his armour, unlike certain other armour he could mention, didn’t bloody chime and tinkle, the overlapping pieces of steel could occasionally make noise, as could his sword as the scabbard bounced against his hip and thigh.

It was strange how being without armour suddenly had the power to make him feel naked, even though he had spent all his life without it up until these last few months. The only good to come out of this was that it once and for all proved to Thorin that he longer belonged in the Shire with its soft green hills and people who would stare at him in shock should he go outside while dressed in his armour.

But for all of that, he would rather be there than amongst the Elves.

The Elves’ home was a queer place. Rock and roots mixed together to form rooms and halls, and even without any sun there was plenty of plants that seemed to thrive and spread their leaves over walls and roofs. Perhaps the Elves used magic to keep them alive; otherwise Thorin did not understand how they could make something prosper in the middle of such gloom. And it seemed like a great folly to allow burning torches so close to leaves and wood, though perhaps only slightly more hazardous than Rivendell and the high walkways without railings.
Though Thorin did not really long for the Shire he still longed for the sun like a plant left too long inside a darkened room. It was fitting that the Elves were pale and gangly, because that was exactly the state you’d find such a plant you’d left in the dark once you’d remembered its existence.

Gangly was perhaps an unfair word, because even Thorin could see the grace with which they moved, but to him they were still odd-looking and much too thin and tall. Especially next to Bilbo, who even in the grey world of the ring looked so alive and vivid that the Elves looked like the last pale flickerings of a candle before it went out.

Shortly after Thorin had been forced to admit that he’d lost track of where they’d been going a good few minutes back, they stopped outside a large wooden gate. The two Elves standing outside it both nodded to the guard who seemed to be in charge and moved to open the heavy doors. Before they could close again with him on the wrong side Thorin slipped in after the last of the guards.

_Sunlight._ That was Thorin’s first thought upon entering what had to be the Elven King’s throne room. There was sunlight streaming down from gaps in the ceiling; pale and washed-out due to the ring’s magic, but unmistakably sunlight. It seemed as if they entered Mirkwood sometime in the beginning of the last Age, but Thorin hadn’t forgotten the sight of sunlight.

So caught up was Thorin in making sure he didn’t accidentally walk into anyone, while at the same time watching the sunlight and watching Bilbo in the sunlight, that he didn’t even notice the Elven King until he spoke.

“Bilbo Baggins,” the Elf said in a surprisingly deep voice. “I wish I could say that this meeting comes as a surprise.”

“Considering that we’ve been locked in your dungeons for the past week, I would question your choice of guards if my presence comes as a surprise for you.”

Thorin hid a grin before he remembered that no one could see him. Was it possible to fall more in love with someone when you were already prepared to give your life for them without a second’s regret? If so, that was what he had just done.

“Your grandfather would not thank me for letting you get killed by a Dragon,” the Elf said, and just like that Thorin’s grin melted away like snow in the middle of summer. The bloody _nerve_. If he’d said those words to Thorin, the Hobbit would have been hard-pressed not to spit in that self-righteous face. How dared he talk about the Dragon when he’d refused to aid his allies in their time of need when that same Dragon had been the cause of it.

The only way Bilbo showed that the words had displeased him was with a slight frown.

“Come now,” the Elf said when Bilbo would not answer. “It was not that hard of a riddle to solve. But I wonder what exactly it is that you are looking for. That which would bestow upon you the right to rule? The treasure? Or is it revenge?”

“I seek the home that was lost to us,” Bilbo said with quiet dignity. “No more, no less.”

“Ah,” the Elf breathed. “A quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a Dragon. Or do you think the Dragon to be dead? Dragons do not die so easily. Do you think your dozen Dwarfs can do what an army could not?”
Thorin’s hands clenched into fists, but Bilbo refused to be affected.

“I think that nothing will change unless effort is made to change it. Why would you keep us here?” he asked. “No matter what you think of it, Thranduil, our business is still our own. What right do you have to keep us as your prisoners?”

“You are my guests,” the Elf said.

“Guests that are kept behind iron bars? Do not take me for a fool.”

“I’d say that is yet to be revealed,” the Elf said with his gaze lost in the distance. Turning his attention back to Bilbo he raised a pale eyebrow. “I hope you are comfortable enough, Prince Bilbo. Or is it King now?”

“The years have changed you, Elven King,” Bilbo said quietly. “Even with how we parted I would not have believed this of you.”

The Elf raised a slim hand. “Take him back,” he commanded the guards who again surrounded Bilbo. Having little other choice Thorin followed as they marched for the exit, but he glanced behind just before the doors closed.

On his throne of wood and marble, the Elven King now looked to be made of stone himself. He sat pale and unmoving as the doors finally slipped closed the Hobbit lost sight of him.

Thorin realised that he’d been holding on to Nori’s knife almost the entire time - was still holding it - only when his hand started to cramp.
Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Notes

3055

Near Light

If anyone is interested in the soundtrack my mind is putting together for this story, the two links above will take you to two songs that belong to Thorin and Bilbo. To me those are about being lonely and then finding a connection. It’s more overwhelming for Thorin, and more bittersweet for Bilbo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I think I can convince him to let us go.”

Thorin stared at Bilbo in disbelief. “Are we speaking of the same Elf?”

The guards had brought Bilbo back to his room as requested, not answering any of the polite small talk that Bilbo kept up during the walk (why he bothered Thorin couldn’t fathom), and the Hobbit had waited until all the Elves had left again before removing his ring.

“In a sense, perhaps we are not,” Bilbo said thoughtfully, and Thorin scowled because he was not in the mood for word games. “Dwarfs are often described as unmoving and unchangeable as the stone that we come from. But it is not that hard to take a stone and shape it into whatever you want it to be. Erebor is the truth of this; we’ve shaped statues and halls and made a place for ourselves.”

“What does this have to do with the Elven king?” Thorin asked impatiently. “That he would speak as he did to you -” Thorin shook his head. “It was all I could to do stay my tongue.” And my hand, he added silently. How haughty would the Elf have looked if an invisible hand had suddenly slapped him? Now that was a pleasing thought.

“His words cannot hurt me,” Bilbo shrugged. “But despite that, they are not to be discarded. If Dwarfs are considered like stone, then Elves are like the oceans or the leaves on a tree. Eternal and absolute, they may come and go like the tide or fall in the autumn like leaves, but they will not really change, or die. It is not in their nature.” Bilbo smiled wryly. “I even believed that myself once, but Thranduil has changed from when we last met. And I believe that he knows it’s not for the better. So perhaps I might change him still.”

“Do you plan on letting that take as many years as it’s been since you last saw him?” Thorin questioned a bit sourly. He didn’t like the way Bilbo had said the Elf’s name; like they knew each other. And the Elf had used Bilbo’s name as well, despite clearly not having the right to do such a thing.
Bilbo had once wanted to run away and live with the Elves, and now that thought sat badly with Thorin.

“No,” Bilbo answered distractedly. “That’d take far too long. But it should not need to come to that. However I’ll need to think on the best course of action. Will you stay and eat with me?” Bilbo asked. “I was going to offer before, I had hoped you’d stop by so I had not yet broken my fast, but we were rudely interrupted before I could mention it.”

When Thorin hesitated Bilbo frowned. “I am not offering out of politeness, or merely because I wish to have your company. You need to eat, and I have plenty. They are not mistreating us. If they knew that they had an invisible Hobbit running around their halls, I’m sure they would leave a plate out for you.”

“You’ve really not improved your repertoire of jests,” Thorin scowled, but it lessened when Bilbo smiled at him.

“How fortunate I am that you would allow me to practice then. Please stay.”

Grudgingly, Thorin agreed, but only because it was Bilbo who was asking. He was not really hungry and the Elven food tasted bland and almost spoiled to him.

Perhaps that could only be expected considering the cursed nature of this place. But he’d not heard any of the others complain, so neither would he when they were gracious enough to share with him.

They ate in silence, Bilbo reaching out through the iron bars to press pieces of bread and dried meat into the Hobbit’s hands, and just as Thorin was swallowing the last mouthful Bilbo spoke again.

“Would you go to Glóin for me?” he asked. “His mother was something of an expert on Elves and there are things, information, I would like to know if she passed on to him.”

“What things?”

“Three things,” Bilbo said as he passed the water skin to Thorin so he could drink. “The name of Thranduil’s wife and her fate. What he might know about their son; Legolas I think his name is. And if he remembers if his mother ever told him how many Elves live in Mirkwood.”

Thorin did not understand what use knowing these things would be, not even the last one as the number of Elves had to be far too many for them to fight regardless, but he nodded and promised to ask.

“If Glóin does not know please take my questions to Óin, but I fear we shall have even worse luck with him.” When Thorin handed the water skin back Bilbo caught his hand and entwined their fingers. “Balin might also know, so I’d ask you to check with him regardless of Glóin’s, and Óin’s answers. But now,” Bilbo added with a smile. “I would ask for another kiss from my husband, and this time I hope that we won’t be interrupted right away.”

“Just a kiss I hope,” Thorin said, an answering smile pulling on his lips. “Else if the guards do return and I put on my ring, they will wonder just what Dwarfs get up to when they are left alone.”

“Imagine if you stayed and touched me while wearing the ring,” Bilbo said and pulled on Thorin’s hand to bring him closer. “Oh it’s not a good idea, not at all and for a multitude of reasons, but it is an intriguing one.”
Even knowing what he did about the ring, and knowing that Bilbo’s touch felt just the slightest bit… wrong when he was wearing it, Thorin couldn’t help but agree and he shuddered slightly as Bilbo pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist. But at the same time…

“I don’t want to share you,” Thorin murmured, tightening his fingers slightly around Bilbo’s. “Especially not with those who is not even deserving of breathing the same air as you.”

Bilbo quirked an eyebrow. “I fear we have been such a bad influence on you regarding Elves. I’d ask that you stayed away from Dwalin and Glóin in particular, but that would be both cruel and impractical considering our circumstances, and what I’ve just asked you to do.”

“If you are going to keep talking, it’s going to be difficult to kiss you,” Thorin argued, and Bilbo smiled and pressed their lips together, foreheads resting against the bars.

- Glóin sat on the stone floor of his cell, gazing down at something he held in one big hand. His other hand was resting against the stone in the same way one might rest a hand against a lovers’ side or a friends shoulder; both drawing and giving comfort.

He didn’t seem startled when Thorin suddenly appeared outside his cell, instead he only raised his head and nodded up at the Hobbit.

“And the rest of our numbers faring well?” he asked, and Thorin nodded.

“As far as I know. I’ve only seen Bilbo today, but I’ll be stopping by your brother and Balin later, probably others as well if you’d like me to pass along a message.”

“Nay, that’s not necessary, lad. But thank you for asking. I just hope that we’ll soon be out of this cursed place.” He opened his hand and Thorin saw that the item he held was the locket normally found around his neck. “If my Gimala was here-“

Thorin must have let his trepidation show because Glóin scowled up at him. “Wipe that look off your face, lad. I’ll not bore you.” The redheaded Dwarf looked away and his fist tightened around locket before he raised his hands to let it slip over his head. “It’s just difficult to be gone so long from those you love.”

Immediately Thorin felt shamed. It was difficult enough to be away from Bilbo when it was just iron bars that separated them. To have half a world between them, that was a truly terrible thought.

"My apologies,” he said a bit stiffly. “I did not mean -"

But Glóin waved him off. “Eh, I know you didn't lad. And I know I might talk a bit too much about my wife, and my son. I guess they fill so much of my thoughts that often it overflows into my words. I even dream about them.” The Dwarf was quiet for a few moments. “Good dreams mostly, where we are all together in Erebor and my lovely Gi is looking impossibly lovelier dressed in silks and gold and gems. And that’s how I know it to be a dream, because the day I talk her into wearing silks—Ah, and now I’ve done what I’d said I wouldn’t and bored you anyway,” Glóin said with a wry smile.
“No,” Thorin said slowly. “Thank you for sharing with me.”

Glóin did not look convinced, but let the matter drop. “Regardless, I doubt you came to listen to this old Dwarf moan about his wife and child. Is there something I may do for you, cousin?”

Thorin gave him a startled look and Glóin grinned and rose to his feet. “You are married to Bilbo are you not? That makes us family. I heard the boys calling you uncle before so no need to look shocked. Not that you weren’t family already, but marriage tend to make things nice and official.”

The Dwarf suddenly burst out laughing, and Thorin’s hand curled a little tighter around the ring he held as he hoped that there were not any guards nearby.

“Speaking about official matters,” Glóin snorted. “Have I wished you the best of luck when it comes to dealing with the council’s view on your marriage? Bloody politics. I’m happy beyond words that Bilbo’s side of the family got that particular responsibility. The few times I’ve had to get involved… let’s just say that it’s mighty lucky that I had to leave my axe at the door.”

“You are not on the council?” Thorin asked. “But you are a noble.”

“It’s not as clear-cut as all that, lad,” Glóin said. “Heh,” he chuckled. “Perhaps I should stop calling the husband to my King, ‘lad’. Cousin or not.”

Thorin shrugged. “Dwalin has kept it up for so long now that I hardly think he’s going to stop. I’m beyond minding. Just don’t call me by any titles.”

“Fair enough,” Glóin nodded. “Back to the matter of the council. It’s true that all council members are nobles, but not all nobles are on the council. Then to make it even more of a mess; all nobles are lords or ladies, but not all lords and ladies are nobles.”

Thorin grimaced and Glóin laughed again and slapped at his own thigh. “Exactly my thought,” he agreed. “I do not have to be on the council because my family has ceded our vote to Bilbo, his seam of the family ore being the royal one and all. The sons of Fundin have done the same. But our cousin Dáin has not because his family are the rulers of the Iron Hills so he is more invested in having a say. Even if he usually only sends ravens. Can’t exactly blame him considering how our own journey is progressing.”

“But the Iron Hills are not Erebor, or Ered Luin.”

“Ah, well spotted!” Glóin teased. “The Iron Hills are sworn to Erebor and its King, and they have been ever since the former was founded. Ask Balin if you wish to know the entire story, he tells it much better than I ever could. But to put it simply would be saying that Dáin is not a king, but Bilbo still can’t command Dáin to do anything, only make requests that have great chance of being obeyed.”

“That does not sound simple to me,” Thorin said and Glóin chuckled.

“That’s politics for you. Now, I fear the topic has quite gotten away from me. Did you want something?”

When Thorin had finished relaying Bilbo’s request for information Glóin’s brown furrowed in thought.

“Like I told you, lad, I’m glad that it’s Bilbo who is in charge, I do not need to know what he is
planning. Not yet at least.” He thoughtfully pulled on his thick beard. “Give me an hour or so, I need to sort out what I know from what I only think I remember. But the wife’s name’s Meriliel, and the son’s Legolas, as Bilbo say.”

“I will go to your brother and Balin then,” Thorin said.

“Yes, you do that,” Glóin said. “Ach, my dear old mum would be appalled that I’d forgotten so much, and my da’ would be dismayed that I remembered anything.” At Thorin’s raised eyebrow Glóin only shook his head. “If you’d met them you would understand.”

-Óin remembered very little of what his mother might once have told him, but while Balin remembered almost nothing about Thranduil’s family he didn’t even hesitate before rattling off how many Elves there had lived in Mirkwood before Smaug’s arrival to Erebor, and how many of those had been warriors, farmers, traders or a number of other professions.

“When Smaug attacked us I was being trained to be a steward,” the white-haired Dwarf explained. “It was important for me to know not only everything about Erebor, but also as much as possible about our allies. How else would you be able to calculate how many and what resources would be needed in time of war?”

Balin shook his head and sighed deeply. “Of course, it turned out to be all for naught as it wasn’t war that found us.”

“But how can you remember?” Thorin asked plainly. “It’s been so long. Are you sure you are not mistaken?”

Balin shot him a reproachful glare, but Thorin was glad to note that the slow sorrow that had begun to cloud the Dwarf’s eyes had retreated. “I’d not forget something like this. And neither would you if you had to spend countless afternoons in a stuffy room with your nose shoved into dusty ledgers. Wake me in the middle of the night and I could recite those pages up and down and backwards. I cursed the day I had learnt to read so many times. But if my knowledge can be of use now, at least some good would have come out of it.”

“Do you know what Bilbo is planning?”

“Do you?” Balin asked and Thorin scowled at him.

“Would I ask if I did?”

“I’d think that you’d ask him, but apparently not.”

“He - I didn’t want to disturb him,” Thorin said, looking away. While they had eaten Bilbo’s gaze at been fixed on something far off in the distance, an impressive feat considering that they were surrounded by stone walls.

“Thorin, you can’t think like that,” Balin scolded gently. “You are Bilbo’s husband. You might not be destined to rule by his side, but you will support him nonetheless. This means that you shouldn’t question him in public, but when it’s just the two of you, your duty is to help him make the best decisions that he can make.”
Thorin snorted. “I hardly think he needs *my* help in that area.”

“He’s not perfect,” Balin said with a kind smile. “That we love him won’t make him so. All of us are fallible.”

“Is that a comment on your memory per chance?” Thorin replied. He knew that Bilbo was not perfect, but he also knew that thus far, his husband had proved himself to be as close to the ideal as feasibly possible. And Thorin had not. Even Azog... anyone could have done the same with his ring.

He stayed and spoke to Balin for some time longer and got messages to pass along to Dwalin and Bilbo, and also to Bifur which was a little more surprising.

“And I hope you are still practicing Khuzdul,” Balin said as Thorin was about to leave. “Perhaps you will stop by Dori after you’ve seen Bifur.”

The Dwarf was planning something, but Thorin could not figure out what, so he merely shrugged noncommittally and let the ring slip onto his finger.

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The next day Thorin again opted out on exploring, instead choosing to remain with Bilbo. He still hadn’t asked his husband what he was planning, but Bilbo seemed a lot more cheerful this morning than he had the previous. Whatever he had made from the replies Thorin had brought him seemed to have suited him.

It was fortunate that Thorin had chosen to stay, because instead of two guards showing up with the Dwarf’s breakfast, ten showed up to once more escort him to the Elven King.

This time Bilbo seemed utterly serene about the ‘request’ for him to follow the guards, and Thorin took perverse pleasure in how this seemed to unnerv the guards.

Thorin had hoped that the Elven King would have been a little caught off guard as well, but the expression on his face was as bland as it had been the day before as he invited Bilbo to join him for the morning meal.

Bilbo had not been escorted to the throne room this time, but instead to a large dining room. The table was large enough to easily hold fifty people, and the room was lined around the edges with stone pillars that stretched towards a ceiling high enough that Thorin almost felt dizzy looking up. No sun shone down in this room, but many lanterns flickered merrily.

“I can’t help but wonder -” Bilbo said as he sat down at the table on a chair that had obligingly been raised to allow him to sit almost of height with the Elven King. “Why the sudden interest in my company? We have been your prisoners for over a week now.”

Something flashed in the Elf’s eye as Bilbo said the word prisoner, but it was gone so quickly that it almost seemed a flicker of light.

“I’m sure you understand that as king there are many things to call my attention,” the Elf said and Thorin glowered. A whispering voice hissed in the Hobbit’s ear, and he couldn’t help but agree with the sentiment. If he had been a ghost, he expected that he would have long gotten tired of the Elven King as well.
“Ah, of course,” Bilbo said amiably as he spread a thick layer of butter on a piece of bread. “May I then ask when you will let us go? Hosting guests who are not free to leave is not particularly good manners you know.”

“It is when they do not know their own best interests,” the Elf replied and Thorin unconsciously clenched his fists. Later he would be surprised to find the crescent marks of his own nails in the palms of his hands.

“And you do?” Bilbo asked mildly. “Tell me then, how is the rest of my company faring? Have you isolated them as you have done with me? Are you inviting them for tea when you are not busy hosting me? I could see Balin enjoying that, but if you try the same with this brother I’m afraid it will be hard on your china. Thranduil,” Bilbo added. “I will see them, all of them. It’s not even a request. It’s a demand.”

“And you think yourself to be in a position to make demands?” Thranduil leaned back in his chair. “Perhaps I should do the same. Let’s say I will let you leave -”

“Ah, progress,” Bilbo murmured as he took a neat bite of his food. “You admit that we are not free to do so now then? And here I was wondering if the iron bars could perhaps just be considered fashionable by Elves after all.”

“If I would demand half of the treasure in Erebor, in return for aiding you, what would your answer be then?”

Thorin was glad no one was able to see him, because the sheer ridiculousness of that statement caused his mouth to fall open is if he was a simpleton. Bilbo also seemed surprised, and even some of the guards standing at the back of the room moved slightly as if they were reeds stirred by a gust of wind.

“Erebor’s treasure is vast,” Bilbo said deliberately. “And I am sure that your aid could indeed be helpful, but I do not think merely letting us leave would merit you to have a claim on a single copper piece.”

“Then you are choosing to stay then,” the Elf said coolly, and before Thorin knew what he was doing he had taken a step closer to the table. That infuriating bastard of an Elf.

“No, we are not,” Bilbo said firmly. “Perhaps next time, if I may be so bold, we can speak plainly with each other, Thranduil. Because right now it seems to me that we cannot.”

“You believe we are not speaking plainly enough?” the Elven King asked, and for the first time Thorin could recognize emotion on the Elf’s face, frustration to be precise. “I cannot let you march towards your deaths, possibly that of others, and that is what will await if you continue towards your mountain. There -” he flicked out a hand. “I cannot speak more plainly than that.”

Bilbo did not reply and the Elven King’s brows furrowed. “You say you wish to speak and then you have nothing to say?”

“I have things to say, but I doubt you will listen. Apparently you have already made up your mind.” Bilbo popped the rest of his bread into his mouth and chewed it contemplatively. “But know this, Thranduil,” he said after swallowing. “We will not abandon our quest, so if you wish to keep us here you might as well kill us.” Bilbo rose to his feet. “Thank you for breakfast, I believe we are done.”
“I really don’t understand what you are doing,” Thorin told Bilbo in a hushed voice when they were alone again. The guards had just barely had enough time to get out of earshot, but the Hobbit could keep quiet no longer. “He is either deranged or simply cruel, and taunting him will not help with either of those things. He will not let you go. We need to make a plan to escape.”

“What I am doing is gambling,” Bilbo said and smiled in a frankly galling manner. “I do not believe that Thranduil really is, as you say, deranged or a cruel. No matter how his current actions may seem. He - could you please remove your ring? It is very disconcerting to talk to thin air.”

“I’m not staying,” Thorin said darkly and folded his arms over his chest. “Gamble as you please, but I will go and search for a way out of these caves. All doors cannot be -”

“Quiet,” Bilbo said softly, raising a palm, and for a moment Thorin was outraged that his husband would not even listen to him, then he too heard the chiming of approaching guards and he shut his mouth with an audible click.

The guards, only three this time, looked a little apprehensive as they stopped outside Bilbo’s cell, but if they had heard voices they didn’t mention it. Instead they unlocked the door.

“King Thranduil would see you again,” one of them said. Thorin was fairly convinced that the Elf was female, even if it was very hard to tell the difference for sure. Unlike the two others she had red hair instead of blond, and her leather armour seemed a fair bit more functional - and quieter, than the silver monstrosities her two companions wore. If there were more like her roaming the halls Thorin would have to be more careful not to be discovered. He needed to tell Nori as well.

“So soon?” Bilbo asked, choosing to lean against the iron bars instead of approaching the doorway. “Tell me… Captain,” he said after letting his gaze sweep over the armour, apparently recognizing something that Thorin didn’t. “Should I be honoured that you are the one collecting me, or alarmed considering what I last spoke to your king about?”

“If you are insinuating that King Thranduil would have me kill you, I will not stand for it,” the Elf said coldly. Thorin blinked in surprise, because he had not seen this Elf inside the Elven King’s chambers, but she must have been present if she understood the reference Bilbo had just made. They would really have to keep their eyes open.

Then the Hobbit’s mouth fell open for the second time that day when Bilbo said something in the Elven tongue to the guard. It only helped a little to see the three Elves react in much the same way, be that from the shoke of a Dwarf knowing their language or from the words themselves. As Thorin couldn’t understand them he was not able to judge.

Whatever plan Bilbo had, Thorin really hoped that he knew what he was doing, because now that the Elves knew that he understood their tongue, they had lost all chance of gaining an advantage from it.

Whatever the Elf said in stiff reply made Bilbo smile up at her; something that caused the frown on her face to deepen.

“Shall we then?” Thorin’s husband said as pleasantly as if he was about to go on a stroll through a sunlit garden.
This time they, or rather Bilbo; as the guards hopefully had no idea that Thorin followed them, were not taken to the throne room, or even to the dining room they had just left.

Thorin wasn’t sure, but it seemed to him as if these new rooms could very well be the Elven King’s private chambers. They were richly decorated, and despite the many bookcases the single writing desk gave the impression of this belonging only to one person.

“I take it that we’re not done after all,” Bilbo said as he caught sight of the Elven King standing with his arms crossed in the middle of the room.

“Leave us,” the Elf ordered the guards, and the redheaded guard looked like she was about to object before thinking better of it.

“Yes, my King,” she nodded and the three guards left.

How Bilbo could manage to look amused when faced with a glowering Elven King, Thorin would never understand.

“If I wasn’t already married, this would be such a stain on my reputation,” the Dwarf said almost playfully to the Elven King. “Being alone with you in your private chambers.”

“Married?” Thranduil raised a dark eyebrow and Bilbo grinned up at him. Normally Thorin would have taken pride in this, but as things were he was too wary about what the Elf might be planning, even if Bilbo was not.

“Is that what you wanted to talk about?”

“No, but my congratulations even so.”

Thorin resisted the urge to slap a palm over his face. If this was politics then he would have to make Óin declare that Hobbits had a painful aversion to them. He could not take much more of this polite dancing around subjects, but he also couldn’t leave Bilbo alone.

The Hobbit half expected Bilbo to thank the Elven King politely and express his regrets that he had not been able to invite him to the wedding ceremony, but instead Bilbo did what he did best and surprised him. Without waiting for Thranduil to explain why he had been summoned he let the smile fall off his face.

“After Erebor is reclaimed I would want for our realms to ally again.”

Thranduil tilted his head. “That would not be a popular decision. But perhaps you are lying?”

Thorin’s wish to be rid of polite nonsense seemed to have been granted quicker than he would have believed.

“No. I save my lying for graver matters than this.” Bilbo took a step closer to the Elven King, uncaring that this made their difference in height all that much more apparent. “I don’t know why you summoned me again, but let me be frank. I have every intention of being a better ally to you then my grandfather was.”
It was official, Thorin would never understand politics. And he really didn’t like to share the same emotions as the Elf; the Elven king looked as taken aback as Thorin felt.

“He should have offered you help when you asked,” Bilbo continued.

The Elf’s face again looked as if carved out of marble, completely expressionless, but Bilbo was not deterred and took another step closer.

“I have now seen with my own eyes that whatever dwells in this forest is not natural. My grandfather should have listened to you, or at least done what I now have and used his eyes to see a truth instead of letting prejudice keep him blind. How many of your people have you already lost to the evil inside the forest? To the spiders and the other dark things? Does your son still remain here, or have you been forced to send him away for his own protection?”

The Elven King did not answer, but Bilbo again did not let that stop him. “Leaving you to face an enemy alone was not the way to treat an ally, much less a friend.”

“We were never friends,” Thranduil said bitterly.

“No, but I would have us be.” Bilbo placed his hand on the robes covering Thranduil’s arm and unseen Thorin glowered.

“I am not my grandfather. For long that has been one of my deepest regrets, but I have come to learn that there are also advantages. Two wrongs does not make a right, but mistakes can be the root of much wisdom.”

“That really would not be a popular decision,” the Elf said, looking down at Bilbo’s hand on his arm. “Being friends with an Elf.”

“And being friends with a Dwarf, would that be better?”

The Elven King inclined his head. “Fair enough.”

Bilbo also nodded before taking a step back again, much to Thorin’s approval. “With or without your help we will continue to Erebor. I trust that you do not doubt the stubbornness of Dwarfs?” he added when it seemed the Elf would protest. “By helping us now you will be a better ally to us than you were during my grandfather’s reign, and, in return, we will be a better ally to you than we were under the same. I’ll start by sharing the news that even as we speak Mithrandir is on his way to make battle against the darkness in the south. When we parted he rode towards Dol Goldur, and I do not think he is alone.”

This meant very little to Thorin, but the Elven King’s eyes widened, and something that could have been hoped shone briefly before he again composed himself.

“And I can only assume that getting rid of the Dragon Smaug will also help restore the Greenwood to what it once was.” Bilbo smiled sadly. “I would like to know it not as Mirkwood.”

“Thirteen Dwarfs cannot hope kill a Dragon,” Thranduil said slowly.

“And Elves can’t hope to slay a Balrog, but your wife nonetheless fought at Glorifindel’s side at the battle of Fornost, did she not?”
“You will not speak of her,” Thranduil warned and Bilbo inclined his head even as Thorin’s hands again made fists. The Elf had no right.

“Let me just say one thing more. If you continue to keep us prisoner, I will retract my offer of an alliance. And that is understandably also the case if you decide to kill us rather than letting us go.”

Thorin really wished that Bilbo would stop saying that, and seeing that wish reflected on the Elf’s face only helped a little. Perhaps this was one thing they could agree on.

“I do not see how you would offer to ally your people with mine if you believe me capable of such a thing,” the Elf said stiffly.

“Perhaps I’m just hoping that you’ll prove me wrong,” Bilbo suggested. “But it would be a convenient way to deal with us.”

Beyond caring, Thorin stalked up to Bilbo’s side and pinched the fleshy part of his husband’s left hand. Bilbo didn’t as much as flinch, but Thorin hoped that his opinion of trying to talk the Elf into killing them had been made apparent.

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Not trusting himself near Bilbo without yelling at him loud enough to alert the entire forest to his presence, and opinion, Thorin slipped away as Bilbo was escorted back to his cell, and used the rest of the day to explore parts of the caves which he had not yet visited.

Thorin could now understand what Bilbo was trying to do, or so he thought. Talking about Thranduil’s family and Bilbo’s grandfather and loss and all the ways that the wrong decisions made in the past; Bilbo must be hoping to show Thranduil that the only way to create a brighter future was to not do the same thing all over again.

Balin had believed that over 30 000 Elves had lived in Mirkwood. Judging by what he had observed during his time in the Elven realm Thorin thought that no longer to be close to the current number. The difference; be that from death or other causes, must weigh heavily on the Elven King’s mind.

But why couldn’t Bilbo just speak of these things openly then? He said that he was frank, and perhaps in terms of politics that was the truth. But preferably he would speak completely without the constant mentions of the Elven King killing him and the Company… This must be what Balin had meant about Thorin needing to point out to Bilbo when he was being an idiot… even if the Dwarf hadn’t phrased it exactly like that.

Now evening again Thorin made his way back to the dungeons, trying to keep his temper in check. He would not yell at his husband. He would not. Perhaps if he started by telling him of what he had discovered things would go better.

During his exploration Thorin had stumbled over a room in the lowest levels of the cave system. It had been completely unremarkable except for the great portcullis that had almost entirely taken up one of the four walls, and for the fact that Thorin had been able to hear the thundering rush of the river on the other side of it.

This could very well be a way out for them. He wasn’t sure where the river would take them, but if they found a way to keep float, and a way to first get back their weapons, and somehow could manage to all get down there at once… it could be a way out.
On top of all those obstacles Thorin felt a bit wary of the water after what had happened to Bombur. Despite what Beorn had told them, what if this river also turned out to be cursed? The water the Elves gave them seemed fine to drink, but who was to say it came from this same river?

Still, it was worth keeping in mind, and he would share his discovery with Bilbo. And then try not to shout at him.

When Thorin rounded the corner to the hallway in which Bilbo’s cell was located he was met by the sight of an empty cell.

Was the Elven King so lacking for company that he would send for Bilbo for a third time during the same day? Frowning Thorin continued towards the nearest occupied cell. He would tell Bofur of his discoveries and then go and see if he could find Bilbo.

Bofur’s cell was also empty.

And when Thorin ran to Nori’s and then Dwalin’s, Balin’s, Fíli’s… they too were unoccupied. And so were the next three he investigated.

Bilbo wouldn’t leave without him. He wouldn’t. So did that mean that Thranduil did not intend to let them leave after all, and instead -?

Thorin ran towards the next cell. He was still a few turns away when he heard the unmistakable tinkling sound of armour. Slowing down, the Hobbit tried to calm his breathing as to not give himself away.

If the guards were here now then it couldn’t have been too long since they began… whatever it was that they were doing. It wouldn’t be too late.

As he rounded the final corner he could see three guards stop in front of the door to Glóin’s cell. Soundlessly, Thorin crept closer.

“You are being given new accommodations,” one of the Elves told the unimpressed Dwarf

“Find more miserable dungeons have you?” Glóin asked without bothering to get up from his cot. “I don’t know, I’m beginning to like this one.”

_He could kill them._

The thought came unbidden and startled Thorin in its intensity. He could see it, how he would sneak up behind the Elf standing furthest to the left and sink his dagger straight into the Elf’s unprotected neck. It would be so easy. And so quick. The other two wouldn’t even know what had happened. And then he could do the same for the second, but the third he would need to question...

If they had harmed Bilbo in any way…

“You will be given rooms in the royal wing,” the Elf said reservedly. “King Thranduil has come to an accord with your King.”

Glóin looked sceptical, and Thorin realised that his hand had already found the grip of his dagger. Of course they would _lie_, if they had been sent to kill the Company. They would want them caught off
guard to make for easier prey.

With the look of not liking what he was about to do even the slightest, one of the two other Elves looked around and sighed. Thorin’s hand tensed on the dagger and he took a step closer.

“And if the Hobbit Thorin is here-” the Elf said in a loud voice. “- then he is also invited to join us.”

The Elf did not look particularly surprised when no answer came.

Thorin stopped, and relaxed his grip on the dagger slightly. Just as Bilbo wouldn’t leave without him he couldn’t think that his husband would reveal his presence without being sure that it was safe to do so. But… he also knew that Bilbo wanted to believe the best of people.

“How do you know about Thorin?” Glóin asked, then he shook his head. “Never mind, lads, I guess Bilbo must have told you. All right, lead the way.”

One of the Elf frowned at being called a lad, be that out of an objection based on age or sex, Thorin didn’t particularly care. As they guided Glóin out of the dungeons; the Dwarf protesting that they damned well didn’t have to walk to close, Thorin followed and he did not let go of his dagger.

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“If he is not with the next one who arrives I need to go look for him,” Thorin heard Bilbo say as two guards opened the doors to the throne room.

“Bilbo-” Balin began.

“No, I left Thorin once. I will not do so again. Not even in this way.”

Seeing Bilbo alive and well made muscles Thorin hadn’t even realised were tense suddenly relax all at once, and it was all he could do to keep his knees steady beneath him.

Most of the Company was already gathered in the throne room, Fíli and Kíli standing on each side of Bilbo like clingy bookends, and the others clustered around the three. Only Bombur and Dori were still missing.

It could still be a trick.

Thorin frowned. What purpose would that serve? If the aim was to kill them, they wouldn’t have brought everyone together. Bilbo even had his sword strapped to his back, and Thorin could see one side of Kíli’s bow sticking up behind the young Dwarf.

“I’ll walk up and down the halls and shout if that’s what it’ll take. I shouldn't have gone without knowing if he could follow.”

“We’ll help you, Uncle,” Fíli said softly.

“There’s no need. I am here,” Thorin said, letting his ring slip into a pocket.

Just as the day before when he had been in the throne room, the sun shone down. But even though he was no longer wearing his ring the sunshine paled when compared to the brilliant smile Bilbo gave him.
“I’d tell you to stop that, but it’s far better than the alternative of you not showing up at all,” Bilbo murmured as he came forward to embrace him.

Thorin wrapped his arms tightly around his husband and tried to push away all the dark thoughts that had crowded in ever since he had discovered the empty cell. Everything was fine, or it would soon be.

It was easier to believe the longer he held Bilbo in his arms, and easier still when Fíli and Kíli bounded up to them like excited puppies wanting for attention.

“King Thranduil,” Bilbo said turning around after Thorin had forced his arms to drop. “Let me introduce my husband, Thorin Oakenshield.”

The Elven King looked down at them from his throne. “How very interesting.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope no one will shout at me, but in my mind the Iron Hills and the Grey Mountains are not placed where they are according to Tolkien. Why? Because it makes no bloody sense for Dáin and the King of the Grey Mountains to join a meeting in Ered Luin, or anywhere on the western side of M-E, and then go skipping back across map; totally ignoring that Bilbo is going the exact same way after a brief pit stop to recruit a burglar.

The meeting, I think, was something PJ put in the film that wasn’t at all in the book. And I totally dig the idea about a meeting because otherwise we’re left totally in the dark about why none of the other Dwarfs are willing to help, but yeah, sense it does not make *unless* we shift things around on the map or put the meeting a lot earlier; which I didn’t and I don’t want to change it.

So… since I’m already mixing book and film canon, we’re going to go with the Grey Mountains being far enough to the south that someone going to Erebor and someone going there would not have chosen the same paths at all. I’m sure this makes things horribly wrong in other aspects, but to that I say lalalalala. We’ll deal with things as they pop-up. (read: I’ll continue to make shit up)

*looks innocent*
Interlude Ten - Glóin

Chapter Notes

Thanks as always to diemarysues, because without her, you would be reading something that makes a lot less sense. (Just look at the other fics I'm writing if you want proof)

Being guests to the Mirkwood Elves only suited Glóin slightly better than being their prisoner had.

This was not entirely unexpected as their brief stay in Rivendell had quite literally left a bad taste in his mouth. Though not so here; the food they were served was not so different from what they would have made themselves, but the sooner they could leave the happier it would make him. Decent food or not, his skin was crawling from constantly being around all these Elves with their constipated expressions and frilly clothing. While the guards had reminded him more of fancy silver baubles than someone you’d want beside you in a fight, at least they’d not walked around constantly dressed in nightshirts.

Unfortunately it seemed as if they would remain for at least another few days. Bilbo and the Elven King (the latter in a nightdress with a fancy collar) had spent most of the last two days in conference, more often than not joined by Balin, Dwalin, and Bilbo’s nephews - and of course, Thorin, who seemed unable to tear himself from Bilbo’s side.

Newlyweds. Except… Glóin sighed. It wasn’t the happy look of someone just wedded to the love of his life the Dwarf saw when he looked at Thorin. Oh, he did not doubt that his cousin was loved, but the look on the Hobbit’s face on the occasions when he was forced to leave Bilbo reminded Glóin more of someone clinging to a rope above a chasm.

Perhaps part of it could be that Thorin was still wary that the Elves would try something. Glóin did not blame him.

In a way being their guests put them in a much more insecure position as there were certain things you were expected to anticipate from your jailors, but it was very rude to expect the same from your hosts.

Not that politeness was really something Glóin was concerned about. Bilbo had made a show of not going armed to the meetings with the Elven King; Glóin preferred to have his axe at hand. Balin, Fíli and Kíli had followed their King’s lead, while Dwalin and Thorin had adopted twin expressions of mulishness and walked into the meetings in full armour, blade and axes at their side.

If any of it mattered to the Elves… that was not for Glóin to say. No, let Bilbo, Dáin, and Balin have their fun in the intricate dance of madness that was politics. Glóin was happier… well he was happier doing almost anything other than being involved in those tedious mind games.

In a world without Dragons he would probably have had a quiet life, being so far from the right of succession that he would never have been involved in anything more arduous than the occasional official dinner with Bilbo and the rest of the royal family, and then just normal life beside that.
But in that life he probably would not have met his wife, so he would pay his dues.

Life was very much like a ledger - you had to make the accounts balance, otherwise you’d know something was wrong and needed a closer look. Sometimes it was just a mistake, and sometimes someone was deliberately messing with the balance. But it could almost always be corrected.

His Gi had told him more than once that life was not that simple, but Glóin did not see why it would have to be more complicated.

Gimala and Gimli, how he missed them. But while that was a constant emptiness within him, he was at the same time also thankful that they weren’t with him. Balance.

And still on that subject, Glóin’s thoughts again returned to Bilbo and Thorin.

They would also never have met if it had not been for Smaug, and for everything that happened after. Wonder if they thought it worth it? Regardless, they had to be made of stronger stuff than he was because the mere thought of having his Gimala here with him caused the blood in his veins to freeze.

He knew Bilbo had considered asking her to join them, and he knew that she would have impressed all of the current members of the company with her skill and her courage, but when Bilbo had reconsidered due to Gimli being too young to join them, and young enough (or just too much Glóin’s son) to go sneaking after them if both his parents went… Glóin had never been more relieved. He needed to go, to support his family, but…

He couldn’t… if she was… no. It likely made him selfish, because he was on that same quest that he wouldn’t have her on, was he not? But he could live with that selfishness. Gimala had always been stronger than he was. If something happened to him, she would not let herself crumble because of it. She would take care of their son, she would -

“Glóin,” Nori murmured, startling the older Dwarf as he had not even seen the thief enter the room. “I need your help.”

“Ach, don’t sneak up on me,” Glóin said, pressing his hand flat against his chest. “One day I’ll have my axe in hand and then you’ll have your head in yours and won’t that be a right mess?”

Nori smiled slightly. “Only recently I told our burglar something similar. But I shall take your words as a compliment as I’m not wearing a magical ring. I promise to duck?”

“Don’t come complaining to me then after my axe leads your hair to looking more like Dwali-” Something flashed in Nori’s eyes and Glóin stopped speaking and instead patted the empty space on the bench he sat on.

“Sit down, lad.”

Nori didn’t, instead crossing his arms and shaking his head. “No, no. That’s not something we’re going to talk about. I need you to -”

“Tell you and my cousin to stop being thick-headed sheep?” Glóin suggested. “Lad, we’ve all got eyes and ears around here. I wouldn’t even be surprised if the damned Elves had cottoned on.”

“But do any of you have anything else in your heads except tongues that speak of things you know nothing about?” Nori asked, hands tightening where they held his upper arms until the knuckles
“Doubtful.”

“If you lo -”

“If not. Speaking. About this,” Nori bit off. “I need you to help me. We – I need to go back to the river. And in case Bilbo proves hard to convince, it’ll help my case if you and Bifur have already agreed to join me.”

“The river? The one Bombur fell into?” Glóin stared disbelievingly up at Nori. “The one we’d have to walk past those damned spiders to get to? Why in the ever blazing depths of Mount Doom do you want to go back there?”

“Because I think that’s the way to defeat Smaug.”

The very first time Glóin laid eyes on Gimala he knew that she was the only one for him. It was not that she was beautiful, though she most certainly was; it went far beyond that.

When Glóin looked at her, he just knew that he loved her, that he always would love her. It was not a complicated feeling, but a simple one. Almost plain in the truth of it.

Óin had called it a childish infatuation and teased him mercilessly. Their parents, who did not know who this person was – only that someone had caught their youngest son’s eye – wavered between thinking him too young and wanting to know if they should prepare themselves to make a marriage offer.

Considering that Gimli had doubted that Gimala even knew of his existence, he thanked his parents but told them that it was much too early to speak of betrothals. This had calmed them, somewhat.

To love someone as much as he did his Gi… at the time, this had upset him just as much as it filled his heart with joy, because he hadn’t really thought that he would have much success to gain the love of someone like her. Noble born he might be, in line for the throne even if it was fairly distant, but what did it matter when even the King spent hours and hours each day on manual labour?

Glóin was good with his axe, but not impressively so. He would not be the warrior his cousin Dwalin was growing up to be. Nor did he have the want or the energy to train as much as Bilbo did.

His true talents lay more in the direction of managing ledgers and balancing accounts, which was decidedly not impressive. And he had decades still until anyone would consider him an adult. His beard hadn’t even been more than the fluff you could find on a peach. No, not at all impressive.

Gimala hadn’t been much older, but she had already been accepted into the Smith’s Guild, so great was her talent. And she was as striking as a diamond set in mithril and just as strong. Keen as the edge of a knife and as generous as the stone itself. The more he heard of her, the more certain Glóin’s heart had become – as had his resolve to try and win her heart, because he could perhaps learn to live without her, but he could not do so knowing that he had been too much of a coward to even try and earn her favour.

To his surprise he had not immediately been rebuffed. And when he asked to court her, Gimala had agreed. But then, then the battle at Azanulbizar happened. Such a tawdry way to describe it. Rain happened. A battle the size of the one fought at the gates of ancient Khazad-dûm, that did not merely happen.
Glóin had been too young to fight, having not even seen twenty-five years, though that didn’t stop him from following the warriors as they left the Blue Mountains. And part of him, the selfish part, did not go because of a noble calling, but went because Gimala had already left to help make armour and weapons.

Bilbo had been livid when he’d seen his youngest cousin in the camp, and if not for his cousin’s ability to control his temper, Glóin would probably have been dragged across the camp by his hair. As it was, Bilbo politely, albeit between clenched teeth, requested to speak with him. Then he dragged Glóin across the camp with a firm grip on his arm.

“I know my duty,” Glóin had protested. “This is -”

“Duty?” Bilbo had poked a finger at Glóins bare chin. “This tells me that your only duty is towards your parents. That they should not wake one morning and have one son less than they did a day before. It’s enough that your brother is here, but at least I trust him when he tells me he will only stay by the healing tents.”

“So you don’t trust me,” Glóin had said once they’d entered the prince’s tent. He’d tried to keep the hurt out of his voice, but it still wobbled embarrassingly at the last word. Bilbo, normally so kind and fair, was completely unmoved.

“As someone who has just come here without permission, because I know Gróin and Olara did not grant you this, do you really think that you have the right to ask me that?”

“I left a note, for my parents I mean.”

“A note!?” Bilbo had thrown his hands up. “Well, that makes it all better then. A note. Of course. Let’s go tell the King that, shall we? I’m sure he’ll be pleased.” Then his cousin had deflated, anger gone as suddenly as it had appeared.

“Glóin, tomorrow I will fight. And so will my grandfather, my brother, Dwalin, Balin, and Dáin and his father. Out of all of us, only Grandfather and Náin are actually old enough to be here. And don’t tell him I said so, but Grandfather is almost too old. Cousin,” Bilbo had placed his hands on Glóin’s shoulders. “I need you to be safe. I need someone to be safe. Or I will go out there tomorrow and -” Bilbo’s voice had broken.

“Dís will be safe,” Glóin said, unthinkingly. Then he flushed, because he realised what it sounded like. “I don’t mean - Bilbo, my place is here. With you. With all of you. I’m young, but I’m not a child. You can’t give me a doll and tell me that things will be all right.”

“Actually, I think Grandfather had to more or less lock my sister up to keep her from sneaking into his luggage,” Bilbo said wryly. “I’m not sure if a doll was involved. Perhaps I should have known that we would need to do the same for you. Funny, I thought that a decade between you would count for something, but apparently not in terms of maturity.”

“You are not that much older,” Glóin had complained, ignoring the slight. “Any of you.” He had expected Bilbo to get angry again, instead, his cousin had sighed and pulled him in for a hug.

“I know,” Bilbo had murmured. “Of course I know, cousin. Did I not just tell you so? But that does not make things better. Quite the opposite. Promise me that you will not enter the battlefield tomorrow.” Bilbo had pulled back and shook Glóin’s shoulders a little for emphasis. “You will swear this.”
“Then let me help in some other way,” Glóin had said. “Then I’ll swear. But don’t send me back to the Blue Mountains.”

“Cousin, I’d not send you back there alone,” Bilbo had said tiredly. “And we can’t afford to send warriors with you. But I’ll send a raven to your parents. And then you’ll be my raven for the rest of the day and until the battle. I need someone to take messages. Someone I can trust.”

“I will do this,” Glóin had vowed.

“And you will not try to join the battle?”

This had been harder to promise, but Glóin had done so.

“Great, now if I could only make Frerin, Dáin, Dwálin, and Balín promise the same thing,” Bilbo said as he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “Then I could perhaps get some sleep tonight.”

“I heard the Elves talking; a drop of water from that river will help someone get to sleep for the night. No memory loss. Just a drop,” Nori explained while walking back and forth in the rooms that had been given to Bilbo.

Bilbo and Thorin were seated on Bilbo’s bed, which likely also was Thorin’s bed (Glóin had no illusions that Thorin happily went to his own chamber each night), and Dwálin and Balín were seated as Glóin himself was at a small table they had moved in from another room.

“But we don’t know if it’ll work on a Dragon,” Bilbo argued.

“There is no reason why it should not work,” Nori said. “Dragons are flesh and blood.”

“Will the amount of water able to be carried by Thorin, or anyone of us, be enough for a Dragon then?” Balín asked. “Even if a drop is enough for an Elf, Smaug is many, many times the size of one.”

“We would only need him to sleep for a fairly short time anyway,” Nori said. “If Thorin can just get him to fall asleep, then we can give the Dragon more water, keep him that way.”

“Kill him,” Dwálin rumbled, and Glóin did not miss how his cousin’s eyes tracked Nori as if he was about to disappear at any moment.

“Yes, that’s rather the point isn’t it?” Nori snarked, not looking at Dwálin. “We can bring water by the keg, as long as we can carry it between us. Pour it into his jaws.”

“And if it does not work?” Balín asked.

“Then we’ve not lost anything.” Nori leaned against a bedpost. “I’m not suggesting that we have Thorin, or anyone else, go charging into the mountain and lob a bottle at Smaug’s head just to see what’ll happen. But if an opportunity presents itself… then we should be prepared. Perhaps we could make a sheep or something drink it and then give the animal to the Dragon.”

Balin shook his head. “No, the Dragon would eat it whole, and if the water is in the sheep’s stomach then it would take too long.”
“Too long? Are we in a particular hurry?” Nori said with a wry smile.

“We don’t know how long it’ll put the fire-drake to sleep,” the white-haired Dwarf clarified. “If Thorin, or someone else -”

“I’m well aware that I will be going into the mountain,” Thorin said drily. “You do not have to pretend to entertain other ideas. I signed the contract, I have my ring, it is the best option.”

“Very well,” Balin nodded. “If Thorin has to wait inside the treasure chamber; I’m not expecting the Dragon to be anywhere else, for the hours that it would take the beast to digest a sheep, the risk of being discovered would be too great. It’d be just as perilous as Nori’s suggestion of lobbing a bottle -”

“It was not a suggestion, rather what I said we should not do.”

“As we have moved on to discussing how to get the Dragon to ingest the water, can I take it as confirmation that you approve of Nori’s idea?” Bilbo asked.

“I’ve heard worse,” Glóin said with a shrug.

Dwalin and Balin exchanged a look, then Balin nodded. “It does seem to have merit.”

“Then we’ll go to the river,” Bilbo decided, looking over at Nori when the auburn haired Dwarf shook his head.

“It’s enough- it’s safer, if not all of us go. I was thinking having Glóin and Bifur join me. I’ve already spoken to Bifur about it.”

“So sure that you would manage to convince me?”

“Sure in the knowledge that my king is wise,” Nori teased, and Glóin suppressed a snort, remembering how Nori had not at all been certain his plan would meet approval. What Nori said next made everyone but Bilbo look as if they’d bitten into a lemon.

“I was also thinking that it would be good to have an Elf or two join us.”

“They do know the area,” Bilbo nodded slowly, ignoring the frowns that had appeared on his companion’s brows. “Very well. Leave tomorrow, there’s not enough light left today to travel. Especially not in this forest.”

“I’ll look after him, cousin,” Glóin said to Dwalin after they had left Bilbo’s rooms. “You look after Bilbo for us. Can’t trust these Elves.”

Nori had stayed to discuss something else, and Balin had excused himself to do… probably something concerning politics that Glóin would rather be left out of. “But let me tell you what I told him, you are both too stubborn for your own good. Just admit what you feel for the lad and -”

“Not everything is as easy as that, Glóin,” Dwalin said darkly. “But I thank you for your advice, and
your assurance.”

“When there is a Dragon at our journey’s end, some things should be that simple,” Glóin said before slapping Dwalin’s back and heading back to his own rooms.

Part of Glóin had been thankful to Bilbo, for forbidding him to join the battle. But only a very small and young part. The rest of him watched with sloping shoulders how the countless warriors marched away, wishing that he too could be one of them.

Shivering in the cold breeze Glóin went to seek Gimala. Óin would be busy with the rest of the healers trying to prepare as much as they could for the wounded that were sure to come. But with Bilbo now gone Glóin had little purpose, and with all the warriors gone, neither would Gimala.

He found her sharpening the blade of a large axe, staring blindly out on the now empty camp. Even with her cheeks and hair darkened with soot, she was still the loveliest sight Glóin had ever laid eyes on.

“May I join you?”

Gimala had looked up at him, blank look replaced by a small smile. “You may.”

Afterwards, it was the moments like that which kept Glóin going when he learned of Frerin’s and Bungo’s deaths, of the deaths of thousands and thousands of good Dwarfs.

He married Gimala on the very same day that he came of age. Terrible things could happen at any given moment, so to keep the balance even, everyone had to make sure that the good things also could.

For all they had expected their little expedition to be perilous and filled of spiders, it turned out to be quite unremarkable. The time required to reach the river shrunk quite dramatically when they were not forced to carry Bombur along, and not only that, the Elves finally proved themselves useful by having horses surefooted enough to be able to traverse the forest paths.

Not having to spend days inside the forest as he had first assumed almost made up for the indignity of having to cling to an Elf or else risk falling off the horse.

“Stop complaining,” Nori said while they were filling the kegs at the river. “Imagine having to walk through this place carrying a few of these and be grateful that you won’t have to.”

Glóin stopped complaining, at least out loud.

“Maybe Thorin will rest easier now that we have a plan and the means for it,” Nori said slowly as they carefully lowered another keg into the river, Bifur standing guard beside them and the Elves hopefully doing the same wherever they disappeared to. “But I’m not going to put my coin on it.”

Glóin frowned, seeing Bifur do the same. “He has trouble sleeping?”
“He has nightmares,” Nori said. “While we were in the dungeons he mostly slept outside Bilbo’s cell, but he spent two nights in mine after Bilbo and I convinced him that he needed sleep that could not be interrupted by someone stumbling over him. He had bad dreams during both of those nights, though he seemed to forget about them after waking up.”

“He’s going to have to face a Dragon.” Glóin shook his head. “Plan or not, it’s hard to sleep peacefully knowing that.”

“Probably,” Nori admitted. “Our burglar is not one to talk in his sleep, so I’m not sure what troubles his dreams. I’d ask Bilbo if he’s noticed anything, but even for me it’s rather hard finding one without the other these days.”

“Why not ask Thorin directly?”

“Didn’t I say? He forgets that he has them.” Nori frowned. “No matter, dreams are just dreams.”

“He’s been looking a little less pale ever since our accommodations were improved upon,” Glóin said. “Perhaps it’s already sorted itself out. If not you can try and put a drop of this in his goblet.”

Nori shivered. “No thank you. Don’t you feel it? I don’t understand how the Elves can use it like that.”

Bifur agreed, and knowing that he would not be understood by anyone other than the two Dwarfs, he said a few choice words about his opinion of Elven medicine.

“You’ve been spending too much time with my brother,” Glóin muttered.

“Funny,” Nori said wryly. “I would say that he’s been spending an awful lot of time with mine.”

To Glóin’s surprise, Bifur blushed at this.

“I hold thy brother in only the highest regards,” Bifur murmured.

“We are talking about Dori here?” Glóin questioned and Nori rolled his eyes.

“Have you seen Bifur making cow-eyes at Ori? I certainly hope you haven’t.”

Bifur sniffed.

“Well,” Glóin said. “I can’t fault your taste, nor your bravery. No offence, lad,” he added to Nori who just shook his head.

“None taken. Dori is very capable of fending for himself.”

Glóin huffed in amusement when Bifur got a distinctively dreamy look to his eyes.

“Good luck,” he offered. “I have a feeling that you might need it.”


They got the three filled kegs back from the river without accident, found the missing Elves, and returned to the Elven stronghold without any issue worse than Glóin’s irritation over again being
forced to hold on to the reedy waist of one of the Elves. Frankly, it felt like he could accidentally snap them in half. What use was good food if they still didn’t eat it?

Having heard the Elves’ horns (another thing much more irritating up close), Bilbo met them as they arrived, Thorin by his side.

“Any trouble? That was faster than I expected.”

“None,” Glóin grunted to his cousin as he jumped down from the horse. “I guess we really did get most of the Spiders before.”

One of the Elves murmured something, and Bilbo looked towards… him? Glóin wasn’t entirely sure.

“You don’t fight alone now,” he said, and the Elf inclined his head slightly before he departed with his two comrades.

“What did the Elf say?” Nori asked, looking suspiciously after him.

“He said that they always come back.” Bilbo frowned. “The Spiders.”

“Then you just have to kill them again,” Glóin rumbled. “Sooner or later they’ll get the message.” He heaved one of the kegs up on his shoulder. “Come now, let’s get these inside before I perish from hunger. It has got to be dinner time.”

“Only salad,” his cousin replied innocently, and Glóin would have thrown the keg at Bilbo’s head if not for the laugh the King let out.

It was good to hear that laugh again. Would that he would hear it more often, even in light of the challenges still ahead.
I'm alive!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Would you sing to me?”

Thorin raised himself up on one elbow, the movement jostling the golden ring he wore around his neck on Bilbo’s chain, and the Hobbit briefly pressed his palm over his ring to still it.

“Sing to you?” he asked, looking down at his husband. They were both in bed together, more specifically in the frankly huge bed that dominated the bedroom Bilbo had been given by the Elven King once the Company had been let out of the prison.

Thorin cared little for the intricate details carved into the wood frame, or how many geese must have been plucked to fill the pillows and comforters, not even for the elaborate metal chandelier hanging down from the ceiling in the middle of the room even though it was clearly a masterful piece of work.

All he cared for was the fair-haired Dwarf lying by his side beneath soft sheets. Bilbo’s hair had been released from its braids, but the resulting mess was more caused by Thorin’s fingers than the lack of clasps and beads. Even now his digits itched to sink into that soft roughness and -

“Yes, I do believe I just asked you to,” Bilbo teased. “So… will you sing to me?”

“What makes you think that I can sing?” Thorin asked, turning his face into Bilbo’s hand when it came to cup his jaw and cheek.

“Everyone can sing,” Bilbo said determinedly.

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Then what makes you think that you want to hear it?”

“Because it’s something that I don’t yet know about you,” Bilbo said softly, brushing his thumb over Thorin’s upper lip. “And I want to know everything about you.”

Thorin only realised that he was frowning when Bilbo’s thumb and hand moved upward to smooth out the creases that had appeared in his forehead.

“What if -” Thorin began hesitantly. “Everything is not going to be pleasant.”

_Stupid_. The Hobbit’s gaze dropped to the moss green bedding. Of course Bilbo knew that already, he already knew so much more than Thorin had ever told anyone before. But Bilbo still didn’t know all of it.

“Is that a comment on your singing?”
When Thorin didn’t return his smile Bilbo sighed softly and tangled a hand in the Hobbit’s dark hair, tugging lightly until Thorin bent his head far enough for Bilbo to reach up kiss him.

“You are under no obligation to tell me,” Bilbo said softly. “Or sing to me. But if you think that there is anything you can share that will change how I feel for you -” The Dwarf frowned. “But no, that’s wrong isn’t it.” And Thorin’s heart skipped a beat, as he almost-hysterically tried to remember what he’d done to lessen Bilbo’s regard of him – but then: “You’ve already said and done things that have made me love you even more than should be possible.”

Fumbling for something to say Thorin cursed his inability to ever find the right words. Any words. He wanted something that would manage to give voice to what he felt inside his chest. But nothing suitable would come.

“What do you wish for me to sing?” he asked instead, hoping that the smile that touched the corners of Bilbo’s mouth and made them turn upwards was a sign that he had still been understood. He would give a song to Bilbo, just as he would anything else that was in his power to give. He would give everything.

“Whatever that comes to mind.”

That wasn’t particularly helpful, but as Thorin’s mind blanked again, the edge of a memory appeared.

Home is behind, the world ahead,
And there are many paths to tread
Through shadows to the edge of night,
Until the stars are all alight.
Then world behind and home ahead,
We’ll wander back to home and bed.

“That song, it almost sounds familiar,” Bilbo said slowly, getting his elbows beneath him and moving into a sitting position. “What is it called?”

“I don’t know,” Thorin replied. “I guess my mother must have sung it to me. I believe it’s supposed to be longer, but I do not remember the rest of the words.”

“It’s not a Dwarven song,” Bilbo said distractedly. “I wonder why it feels as though… as though I should know it. But never mind that,” he added, smiling at Thorin. “You have a lovely singing voice. As I suspected.”

Thorin snorted ungracefully and also moved to sit cross-legged on the bed, sheets pooling in his lap.

“I have listened to you talk, husband of mine,” Bilbo teased. “And if I could make everyone on my council sound like you I wouldn’t mind the meetings half as much. That your voice is also apt at singing seemed only natural.”

Thorin shook his head. “I do not think it works like that.”

“Then I am fortunate indeed.” Bilbo smiled. “Because your singing truly is lovely.”

“As is yours.”

Now it was Bilbo’s turn to look sceptical. “When did you hear me sing? Whenever the others start a
song I’m busy laughing at the faces you make at the lyrics.”

“That night in my smial,” Thorin explained. “You all sang about your lost home. And after the fire had burned down to embers and everyone had gone to bed, the memory of that song would not leave me be.” That song, but also the look in Bilbo’s eyes as he had turned his gaze eastwards while they both had been seated outside on the bench.

At the time Thorin had not yet made up his mind to join the quest, but in hindsight, the song had probably helped to make the decision for him. He hummed what he remembered of beginning of the melody and Bilbo looked at him in surprise.

“All these months and you still remember it?”

“Not the text,” Thorin said apologetically. “But the melody stayed with me. I don’t suppose I should be singing it anyway. It’s clearly a private song.”

He couldn’t remember the exact words, but it had been about the loss of Erebor, and as such, not something he should dabble with. But it had been beautiful, even in its sadness.

“Songs are meant to be shared,” Bilbo shrugged. “They’re meant to be sung and enjoyed. And when the ones who wrote the song are long gone, and the ones the song is about have passed countless years ago, the song can still live on. And so can their memory.”

“Then will you teach this song to me?” Thorin asked hopefully.

“Of course,” Bilbo murmured, twining their fingers together. “And then you will sing it to me.”

“If you wish,” Thorin agreed.

“I do.”

“Then I will.” Thorin pressed a kiss to the bumps of Bilbo’s knuckles. “There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you. You need only ask.”

“There is a promise I would like to have from you,” Bilbo said, his face now serious. “But it might be difficult to keep.”

“Name it then,” Thorin prompted. “And I shall do my best.”

“I’m not sure you will,” Bilbo said with a sad smile. Thorin frowned at his husband and he would have pulled his hand back if Bilbo hadn’t tightened his grip.

“Do you suddenly doubt my word?”

“Oh, not at all,” Bilbo said. “But what I would have you promise me is that you will live. That when this quest is finished, regardless of its outcome, you will still be alive.” When Thorin didn’t answer, Bilbo sighed. “I told you that it would be difficult to keep. But this is my wish.”

“Can you promise me the same?” Thorin asked stormily, and Bilbo shook his head. “Then how can you expect me to -”

“Because so far you’ve surprised me at every turn,” Bilbo said softly and the upset drained from
Thorin.

“You say that as if I’ve been more than just fortunate,” Thorin murmured, free hand coming up to touch his golden ring. “I’ve done nothing that others could not have.”

When Bilbo’s hand covered his, Thorin’s grip on his ring tightened reflexively before he relaxed it again.

“The same can be said about any of us, but we are all here, and none can say that we would still be here if we had not been who we are now.” Bilbo squeezed his hands around both of Thorin’s before letting go. Instead he cupped Thorin’s face and pressed their foreheads together.

For a few moments they just sat there, breathing each other’s air.

“I don’t want to make you a promise that I’m not sure I can keep,” Thorin said quietly. “It would be dishonest.”

“Then promise me that you will try. And that you will try your best,” Bilbo urged. He pulled back but did not remove his hands from Thorin’s jaw, and his thumbs brushed along Thorin’s smooth cheeks. “I can’t bear the thought of you getting hurt, or worse, because of me. Not you. Not… not again.”

The look in Bilbo’s eyes was distant and lost.

“Did you love him?” Thorin asked quietly. He could guess what memory had prompted that expression. “The boy who died - the guard?”

“No,” Bilbo said just as quietly. “No, I did not. And for so long I thought that made it worse. That he died because he loved me, and I did not even return those feelings. But to lose you… that would be worse beyond compare.” Bilbo sighed. “Which makes me feel sorry for poor Havin all over again.”

“If he loved you, and died to save you, he would not be sorry,” Thorin said solemnly and Bilbo turned his face away, golden blond hair tumbling forward to shield part of his face until Thorin carefully tucked it away behind a rounded ear.

“Thorin I can’t – I - to have you as my husband has been the treasure I never thought I would have. And I’m greedy. I do not want to lose you. I can’t.” At the end of this, Bilbo was looking pleadingly at him, but Thorin thought that Bilbo could lose him. Could survive it. He was a king, and an uncle, a brother. He was a leader and a friend. He had so much to live for. And he was strong, so incredibly strong. Thorin was not.

“You must promise me,” Bilbo prompted. “At least that you will try.”

“I promise I will try,” Thorin repeated. And he would, because he was greedy too.

He wanted to live however many years he had left with Bilbo. He wanted to become even older than the old Took and get the chance to grow old together with his husband. He wanted… he wanted it all.

But he could not, would not, let Bilbo die if there was something to be done about it. He would do anything to keep that from happening. Give anything, even if it was his own life. Living without
Bilbo would not be living. Not anymore.

“Thank you,” was all Bilbo said before leaning forward to claim Thorin’s lips in a bruising kiss. Strong hands tangled themselves in his curls and Thorin went willingly when Bilbo pushed him backwards into the bed, the Dwarf moving to straddle his waist. Thorin’s hands came to rest against Bilbo’s hips, thumbs mapping the solid bones they found there.

“I will not lose you,” Bilbo murmured between kisses. “I will not. I cannot.”

Thorin wanted so badly to tell Bilbo that he’d never lose him. But, it was something he could not promise. “I love you,” he said instead. And he said it over and over until all the air in his lungs was needed for gasps and moans and what little was left kept being stolen by Bilbo’s kisses. But even then he kept thinking it, trying to show it with every touch, every kiss, every look.

“I love you too, my husband,” Bilbo whispered some time later, just as the first fingers of slumber were tugging at the edge of Thorin’s mind.

Those words then followed him, drops of liquid gold against a black backdrop, as he slid into sleep.

- 

You have the power to do anything you want. You can make all your wants and desires come true. All you need to do… is to use me.

Despite the heat coming from the fireplace and from the two entwined bodies, the ring that had slipped to hang down against Thorin’s back stayed cool to the touch. The Hobbit shivered slightly and buried his face against Bilbo’s neck.

Anything you want.

- 

A few nights later Thorin tossed and turned in his sleep, hands and arms seeking a warm, compact Dwarven body which now was not to be found, leaving the sleeping Hobbit restless and discontented.

He was alone in the bed because Bilbo had not yet returned from a meeting requested by Dwalin and Balin. Normally Thorin would have joined them, but even though the hour was not that late, his eyes had kept falling shut as he and Bilbo had shared a quiet supper. Bilbo had taken one look at him and then ordered him to bed, ignoring all protests.

And normally… normally Thorin would just have ignored that in turn. However, he really did feel tired. He couldn’t understand why, because ever since the Dwarfs had been let out of the dungeons he’d spent close to every night in a comfortable bed with his arms wrapped around his husband. But despite that, he felt more tired than when he’d been sleeping on a cold stone floor, only being able to curl his fingers around Bilbo’s and nothing more.

So in the end he’d let Bilbo go alone, trusting that Dwalin would keep him safe, and then Thorin had gone to bed, barely summoning the energy to undress before sinking between soft sheets, almost instantly falling asleep.

Thorin’s eyes flickered beneath closed eyelids.
"Your heart's desire. Your biggest wish. Everything and anything you want is just waiting for you to claim it."

The room was almost completely dark. No fire burned on the hearth, and only a single candle remained lit over by the doorway leading to the connecting room.

In the faint light Thorin’s skin looked almost as white as the sheets which he rested on, and his curly hair was as black as the darkness filling the room.

Then, from the Hobbit’s bare chest there came a glint of gold. And then another.

The ring resting over Thorin’s heart almost seemed to pulse, and while it could just have been a trick of the light; the candle’s flame being reflected, it was not. At least, not that kind of trick.

_All you need to do… is to use me._

- "We’ll leave tomorrow morning,” Bilbo said as they were all eating breakfast together. Everyone in the company was gathered around a wooden table even larger than the one that Beorn had in his home. Unlike that table, this was perfectly smooth, or… it had at least started out that way.

(If Thorin was petty enough to deliberately set his goblet down a little too hard each time he placed back on the table… it was not necessary to tell anyone about it.)

“Finally!” Glóin exclaimed, and Thorin hid a smile when the Dwarf thumped his fork against the table for emphasis. “Even in this place I can feel that autumn is beginning to prepare for its departure. We must get to Erebor before Baggins’ Day is upon us.”

Thorin looked in surprise to Glóin. “Autumn? But summer has hardly passed?”

“Lad, I’m sure my cousin gives you good reason to remain in bed -” As one Fíli and Kíli winced. “But I didn’t think you’d spent the last weeks sleeping.” Glóin took a deep breath. “Feel that. It’s autumn, sure enough.” The red-headed Dwarf made a face. “And Elf. Bah.”

When Thorin then looked towards Balin the white-haired Dwarf shrugged. “There’s still weeks to go, but yes, we are now closer to winter than we are to summer. We’ve spent much more time in this forest than we ever planned on, and there is still a ways to go before we have arrived at our destination.”

“And that is Balin’s diplomatic way of saying that we should have left quite some time ago,” Bilbo said with a smile.

“Why would we?” Nori muttered darkly. “We’re having so much fun here.”

“I had not realised so much time had passed,” Thorin murmured. The days were too much the same, and too lacking in sunlight, they must have begun to blur together for him.

“If you count the time we spent locked up, it’s been…” Kíli frowned. “How long has it been, Fíli?”

“Ori?” Fíli asked, and the young Dwarf sighed.
“A little over a month.”

There were groans from around the table, as if hearing it made it that much worse.

Thorin shook his head. A month? How could it be? But if Balin and Ori said so then it must be true. When he thought back, there had been quite a large number of breakfasts that they had been served at this table. And then there had been the time in Mirkwood before the Spiders had found them, as well as the days that they’d needed to get from the shape shifter and into the forest. So perhaps it was not that strange that autumn had come upon them.

Still, Thorin was not used to feeling this disorientated. But things would be better when there was again a clear difference between night and day that did not come from how many torches were lit.

“I’m as eager as any of you to get to Erebor,” Bilbo said firmly. “But this has not been time wasted. Not only have we now a plan to defeat the Dragon Smaug. -” At this Bilbo nodded proudly at Nori who smiled back. “We have regained old allies. The Elven King has promised us supplies for our continued journey, and once we have reclaimed our home, they will also make sure that we will not spend the winter starving.” Bilbo shook his head when murmurs rose. “Before the Dragon came we had Dale, but Dale is no more. And we won’t find enough supplies inside Erebor that have lasted long enough to last us through the winter.”

“I thought that the Men resettled,” Bofur said. “Didn’t you tell me that they rebuilt somewhere nearby?”

“They did indeed,” Bilbo nodded. “By the Long Lake there’s now the settlement they have named Lake-town.”

Glóin and Bifur both snorted.

“Yes, it is not the most fanciful of names,” Bilbo said with a small smile. “But as Erebor is also called the Lonely Mountain because it is a single, solitary mountain, I will not judge.”

“So we could perhaps do without the Elves?” Óin demanded. “If we should rekindle old alliances, why not with the Men?”

“We will in time,” Bilbo said. “But not now. I had hoped that it would not be necessary to seek the Men out during this quest, and now we will not have to.”

“Do you think they’ll blame us for the desolation wrought by the Dragon?” Ori asked softly.

“Perhaps. But it’s got more to do with what Dáin has told me. Considering the Iron Mountains location he has had some business together with those who in turn have done business with Lake-town. And from what he tells me the Man in charge of the town is a greedy opportunist.” Bilbo shook his head. “I’d rather we’d not put ourselves in his debt.”

“But you’d put us in the Elves’ debt?” Glóin rumbled, clearly displeased.

“They still owe us for the help that did not come,” Dwalin growled, crossing his arms. “This only helps to make up for that, it helps clear theirs and does not put us in debt...”

“If the Men want gold, why not just give it to them?” Kíli asked, and more than one of the Company turned to look at him with horror in their eyes. “What?” the young Dwarf asked. “If the treasure in
Erebor is even an eighth as big as the treasure from the stories I’ve been told, those Men could be made rich and we’d be no worse off for it.”

“I do not want allies that can be bought with gold,” Bilbo said to his nephew shortly, but not unkindly. “Alliances bought with gold makes for very frail bonds. Better the ally who will help us even as they scowl down at us, than the ones who will smile and laugh whenever we are looking and then turn covetous eyes toward what is ours when we are not.”

“Hard to disagree with that,” Bofur said amiably. “But it’d be nice to get a break from the scowling nonetheless.”

Bifur nodded and said something that Thorin understood to be rather rude, but that understanding came as much from Dori’s glare and Ori’s faint blush as it did from his knowledge of the Dwarven language. Something about the Elves’ fondness for trees, and from there Thorin could guess at the rest.

“We will have an escort until we have left the forest,” Bilbo said mildly, obviously struggling not to smile when his words were met with moans and groans. “We have also been offered horses, which would make the journey shorter, but each of us will have to ride with an Elf.”

“Surely not me,” Bombur said hopefully and patted his stomach. “I will need my own horse.”

Dwalin snorted. “They all look like a strong wind will blow them away, they hardly-”

“Why do we need an escort?” Kíli asked, snickering when Dwalin glared at him.

“The horses?” Thorin questioned. “Do they not trust us to leave? That’s a strange turn if that’s so.”

“There’s darkness in this forest, lad,” Balin said sombrely. “We’ve only seen part of it. While I don’t like this any more than you do, there is strength in numbers.”

“And on that subject, one of the reasons we’ve stayed here this long is that I hoped Gandalf would join us after he completed his task,” Bilbo said sombrely. “I hope that the only reason he has not is because he found more urgent business elsewhere.”

“Or he is not yet finished,” Fíli murmured, absentmindedly twisting one of his moustache braids. “Or perhaps he headed straight for Erebor, not knowing he would find us here.”

“Perhaps,” Bilbo agreed with a calm smile, even though he had previously told Thorin that the Elven King had stationed messengers along the paths Gandalf would have to travel. That Gandalf had not yet joined them meant that he had not yet left the southern parts of the forest, at least not to go north. “Or he might be on his way now, and so shall we be in the morning.”

“Are we really going to ride with Elves?” Glóin complained.

“You’ve done so once already, and survived.” Bilbo smiled at his cousin’s disgruntled expression. “Nori, Bifur; so have you. Tell us how you possibly managed such a thing and calm everyone’s worries.”

Nori just snorted and shook his head, but Bifur grinned and opened his mouth. However, before he could speak Dori promptly covered his mouth with a broad palm.
“Thank you, we do not need to hear what is sure to be a rude story,” he said firmly, ignoring the besotted look Bifur gave him.

Lessons with those two had been… interesting as of late. Sometimes they did not even notice when he left, being too caught up in arguments and what Thorin could only name as flirtation. At least from Bifur’s side. Dori was a little harder to read. But from what Thorin had learned about Dori’s character the fact that he allowed Bifur to keep flirting was telling enough. As was the fact that it wasn’t actually Bifur who had sat next to Dori at breakfast, but the other way around.

They would be an odd couple, but if Thorin was honest, not more so than the pair he and Bilbo made. The golden Dwarven King and the peculiar Hobbit smith. Indeed.

Nor would they be stranger than Dwalin and Nori. Those two were most assuredly not sitting together, instead choosing to keep as much of the table as possible between them. But the way they were not looking at each other was as significant as the way Bifur grinned at Dori and the way Dori kept sneaking glances beneath his eyelashes.

Another thing worthy of notice was the speculative glint in Fíli’s and Kíli’s eyes when they looked at Dwalin and Nori. If Thorin was not mistaken those two were planning something, and he wished Dwalin and Nori all the luck with whatever it was. He also wished that he would be left entirely out of it.

“I’m riding with you,” Thorin murmured to Bilbo.

“Are you now?” Bilbo raised an eyebrow. “Have you mistaken me for an Elf?”

“There is little chance of that,” Thorin said wryly. “But I would think that if a horse can carry Bombur and another rider, another horse can carry the both of us as well as a third rider.”

“Perhaps,” Bilbo murmured. “So will you be the one to hold on to said third as we ride, or will you hold on to me as I’ll be the one to hold on in turn?”

Thorin opened his mouth, closed it again, and scowled.

The idea of Bilbo wrapping his arms around another’s waist, around an Elf, was not pleasing. Not in the slightest. But neither was the thought of himself holding on to one of the Elves. His first impressions of Elves, formed already in Rivendell, had not grown fonder with their time spent in Mirkwood.

To Thorin the Elves all seemed stiff and inflexible. They rarely wore expressions of joy or even excitement, and they all walked as if they had a pole stuck up their backsides, still managing to do so gracefully somehow. They were condescending and false, as their attempt to imprison the Company clearly showed.

“We will figure something out,” Bilbo said and patted Thorin’s hand. “I wouldn’t want you to do something you’re uncomfortable with.” Even as his voice claimed that, his teasing smile and laughing eyes told another story, and Thorin just sighed, knowing that he was being silly but unable to help it. He didn’t trust the Elves, especially not with Bilbo’s wellbeing.
There was no banquet that night to celebrate or honor their approaching departure, which was just as well. The company ate together, and then, seeing Bilbo caught up in something Fili was telling him, the Hobbit caught Nori’s eye, slipped his ring over his finger and disappeared.

If the others noticed that he was gone, Nori would tell them not to worry. He had something he wanted to do before they left.

Thorin had not enjoyed the stay in Mirkwood, even if it had improved some after the Elven King had stopped acting like a righteous piece of a pony’s backside, but there was one place within the Elven bastion which had caught his interest, even his favor.

Not far from where the royal quarters were located, he had found a small open area; a garden of sorts. Thorin had only been passing by, on his way to find Bilbo (he was loathe to leave his husband alone with the Elven King, but sometimes the Elf managed to snatch him when Thorin was previously occupied) when to his surprise he’d seen a glint of sunlight.

What he’d found behind tall hedges had been a well-tended rose garden. Through a skylight, golden sunshine found its way down between heavy branches above, and if you looked closely you could even see slivers of blue sky peeking through the foliage. Not wanting to stay long Thorin quickly continued towards where he would find his husband, but to his surprise, his mind kept returning to the rosebushes that he’d found there.

Anyone with the family name of Gamgee would have claimed that it was only the nature of a Hobbit to enjoy a well-tended garden, but that had never held any previous attraction for Thorin. Still, there was something that kept calling him back. There was a sense of peace there. Even though the garden’s presence to the royal quarters meant that Thorin always wore his ring, not even the shadowy world’s whispers could quite erase the sheer loveliness of the garden.

The roses had been in full bloom during his first visit, their scent heady and full, and now, weeks afterwards it seemed that they too were preparing for the winter, petals as much on the ground as still on the bushes. It had been some time since his last visit, and this development was not something Thorin had counted on.

He had thought about bringing one of the flowers to Bilbo, as a gift, but now it was too late.

The Hobbit pinched a few petals between his fingers and they fell easily from the rest of the flower at his slight tug, pooling in the palm of his hand. Like most of the roses, they were a dark, deep red, more like blood than any flower he had ever seen before. But despite that they were not sinister. They embodied passion and adoration, not-

“Show yourself,” a voice suddenly demanded and Thorin automatically crouched down, hand on sword.

“Who is there?” he asked.

“I could ask the same,” the voice said. “But I think I already know.” From the shadows at the far end of the garden, the pale figure of the Elven King stepped out and unseen Thorin scowled and got back up again. The Elf was dressed simply in a grey tunic and dark trousers, crown for once nowhere in sight and his pale hair unbound.

When Thorin let the ring slip off his finger, into his pocket unseen, a pale eyebrow rose slightly.
“That is an interesting talent, Master Hobbit,” he said. “To think you spent days wandering my halls without anyone noticing.”

“Indeed,” Thorin said noncommittally, wondering how rude it would be just to excuse himself and leave right away. All that kept him was the chance that the Elven King would make a fuss about someone being in what clearly was a private garden.

“How fortunate that there were not more rosebushes for you to fondle,” Thranduil added archly, “or you would perhaps have been discovered sooner. I was watching the flowers when the petals suddenly disappeared. How does it work? Can your touch make anything invisible?”

This Thorin didn’t actually know. When he donned the ring his sword became invisible, as did his clothes and armour (which certainly was fortunate as the alternative was rather impractical). But if he touched another person they did not. Or else the Elven king would have become suspicious as Bilbo would have kept flickering in and out of sight during their first meetings. Perhaps if he carried another person…

Thorin realised with much disgruntlement that if it had been Nori who had found the ring, the Thief would probably have learnt all of its secrets by now. For some reason this did not sit well with him. Probably because he kept waiting for Nori to try and take it from him.

“I don’t see how that is any of your business,” Thorin answered shortly. “Unless you seek to know so you will be able to catch me the next time you jail my companions?”

It was the first time he’d been alone anywhere with the Elven King, and while he realised that it was not exactly wise to quarrel with him, Thorin was still displeased about how the Dwarfs had been treated.

The Elven King simply ignored the question, and the thinly veiled insult.

“I hadn’t known that Hobbits could use magic, but I also have never known Hobbits to travel the world with in the company of Dwarfs. However,” the Elf looked haughtily down at Thorin, “I would advise you to not place too much trust in magic. Trust should be placed in yourself and others, not in spells. They break far more easily.”

“Are you really going to lecture me about trust?” Thorin asked before he could stop himself.

“Your husband trusts me,” the Elf said mildly, reaching out to cup a rose in his hand; touch light enough that not a single petal fell. “Do you not trust his judgement?”

Thorin bit his tongue. He would not disgrace Bilbo. He would not tell this Elf that his husband trusted far too easily even if it was the truth.

“So tell me, where does your journey end?” the Elven King asked when Thorin didn’t answer. “With your husband’s home reclaimed?”

“Yes,” Thorin said simply, a little surprised at the question. What other answer could possibly be expected?

Thranduil nodded, and seemingly pleased with the answer he did not speak again, not even when Thorin left, putting on his ring as soon as he was a few turns away from the gardens.

The Hobbit had gotten halfway back to Bilbo’s rooms before he realised he still had three blood red petals cradled in his hand.
It felt wrong to simply throw them away, leave them on the floor for others to tread on, so instead he tucked them into his pocket.

The next morning he let them flutter from his hand as they rode over a bridge crossing a large river, only a short distance away from the Elven caves.

Unbeknownst to Thorin the petals did not fall into the roaring water below instead taking flight and soaring up and away until they came to rest in the Elven King’s outstretched palm.

“There is darkness in him, Meriliel,” Thranduil said softly, looking down on the red petals. “I can feel it. But then, there is darkness in us all.” The Elf sighed. “And such is the nature of evil, in time all foul things come forth. I hope…” He trailed off and raised his head to watch the horses and their riders disappear into the forest. “I hope.”

Chapter End Notes

Song of course belongs to Tolkien. If Richard Armitage would sing that... *shudders happily*

Why do I want to send all incarnations of Thorin to a therapist? Except maybe the cats. This is very weird.

On a more serious note, I've obviously been changing things again. And I'd love to know what you think about it.
On the morning of the third day, they came upon the ruins that had once been the city of Dale. Considering the time that had passed, Dale should have been covered with weeds and full of animals that had made their homes in what had once been a prosperous home to thousands of Men.

Instead, the city was close to barren, desolated by the lingering traces of what the Dragon had wrought all those years ago. And it was not just the city. For the past day and a half the landscape had been blackened and bleak. Only the occasional tuft of heather and moss seemed to have the will to survive in the shadow of the mountain. There were no trees, no grass, and the only animals they’d seen so far were birds.

Thorin only hoped that these things would be put right after the Dragon was no more; that with the beast’s death the malicious influence he still had on the land would be broken.

Erebor had been an overwhelming presence from the very moment they left Mirkwood behind them, but compared with the low-lying skeletons of stables and houses the mountain now seemed impossibly larger still.

The Hobbit looked out over destroyed towers and the empty streets and alleys lined by further destruction, and sighed. The path the Elves had chosen had led them to a hill overlooking the city, and Bilbo had requested that they stay for a moment, to show respect for the lives lost; Mannish and Dwarfish both.

As they stood upon the hill in a silence that even the Elves’ horses respected, Thorin reached out and took Bilbo’s hand in his own. He squeezed it lightly, just to show that he was there, that he understood.

Over one and a half centuries had passed, but that didn’t diminish the loss. You just grew used to carrying it with you.

- 

Not very long after getting back up on the horses, they dismounted again, Thorin reflexively reaching out to help Bilbo jump down. His husband allowed it with a distracted amusement.

The horses were not able to carry them the entire way to Erebor’s gates due to the loose rocks and gravel that littered the ground at the foot of the mountain, but the Company was now only a few dozen metres away, and each and every one of the Dwarfs seemed to buzz with what seemed to Thorin like barely restrained… not excitement exactly, it was much too reserved. Anticipation perhaps, or… hope.

The Lonely Mountain was very much like Thorin had imagined it; the only real difference was that no one had told him of the great waterfall that burst forth from the side of the mountain, crashing down to the ground and then beginning to snake its way through the landscape, past Dale, and beyond, in a fast moving river.

The roar from the waterfall was not loud enough to be deafening, but neither could it be called quiet.
Fíli and Kíli looked with wide eyes at the two colossal statues flanking the gates, and at the gates themselves of course because their size were no less impressive. They two young Dwarfs were not alone in their gawking; everyone seemed as deeply enthralled, and Thorin was no exception.

For a single moment the Hobbit questioned what the point had been in making the gates so large; they were much too big to be remotely practical after all, but just to look at them was an answer in and of itself. Never before had he seen such skill when it came to working stone, and with such talent and ability it would be hard to stop building and bettering until you’d exceeded even your own expectations of what could be accomplished.

Where Dale had been in ruins, there were few outward signs that not everything was as it should inside the mountain. There was the rubble that had halted their arrival on horseback of course, and the quiet anguish of the landscape. But the most obvious sign was the large ragged opening in the gates; splintered and burned black around the edges. It almost looked obscene when compared to the artistry that had gone into the rest of the structure.

“I thought that the gates were sealed,” Thorin murmured to Bilbo. “That great breach seems the opposite of sealed to me.”

“These gates only lead to a second set of doors,” Bilbo explained, staring at the opening with a slightly unfocused expression on his face. “There is little sense in meeting a foe head on when you can force him to fight on your terms. In times of war, our response would be to first barricade ourselves -“ he gestured up at the front gate, “- letting the enemy wait and delve deeply into their supplies.” A smile touch Bilbo’s lips, but it left just as quickly. “Someone who is bored and sick of the same provisions day after day will make more mistakes than someone who is alert and primed for battle.”

“Not only that,” said Balin, coming up to stand beside them. “If it was judged that the enemy had a chance of breaking through - or if they were foolish enough to try and climb the battlements where our warriors would be waiting - our troops would gather outside the second set of doors, still protected as no enemy would come from behind or above, but capable to fight against any approaching attackers.” The white-haired Dwarf looked away. “Or so we believed.”

“Smaug attacked quickly.” Bilbo’s hands were clenched at his sides. “Much too quickly. The warriors - led by my Grandfather - were still coming out from the inner doors when the Dragon broke down the front gates. There was no time to close the second set, and he could walk right in - ending lives beneath his scaled feet as he went.”

“The second set of doors is not made of stone,” Balin described, gaze lost in a time long ago. “For most part they were made out of steel inlaid with mithril, over a core of wood that had been made resistant to fire. Close to impossible to break through.”

“Our people fled from the mountain,” Bilbo continued. “Only able to get away because the Dragon was not interested in further wanton death. He had now only one thing on his mind and that was the treasure chambers. When we dared go back, the second set of doors had been sealed from the inside. No doubt partially melted by the Dragon’s breath, because they were still scorching to the touch.”

“What of the other entrances?” one of the Elves asked, drawing the Company’s attention to him as they had forgotten that they were not alone.

“Sealed as well,” Balin said reluctantly, though there was little to lose by confirming to the Elves what they surely had already seen for themselves. “And they were made to be impossible to open.
from the outside. Though some were merely destroyed, buried beneath countless layers of rock and debris.”

“But you have found a way in?” the Elf continued. “No, no need for you to answer that,” he added when stormy looks found their way onto more than one face. “You would hardly be here if that was not the case, but you are under no obligation to share this information with us.”

“Damned right,” Dwalin muttered.

“Thank you, for your discretion, Prince Legolas,” Bilbo said with a small nod.

The Elf looked at Bilbo in surprise, as did Thorin. As did everyone else for that matter, at least those who were not busy looking at the Elf.

“My discretion seems to be less than I would have thought it to be,” the Elven prince said drily.

One of the other Elves, the redheaded Captain that Thorin remembered from the dungeons, murmured something and Bilbo smiled even as the Elven prince scowled.

“I'll take that as a compliment, Captain,” Bilbo said lightly.

“My apologies,” the Elf said stiffly, only now remembering that the Dwarven king spoke their language, but Bilbo merely waved her off.

“I thank you for your aid, please bear my gratitude to your king,” he said instead, the dismissal as clear as if he’d asked them outright to leave. It made Thorin hide a smile.

The redhead bowed. “We will come again in a week’s time with fresh supplies.”

“And we will thank you for them,” Bilbo said pleasantly.

The Elven Prince said something in their strange language, and then he and the rest mounted their horses.

“Until next we meet, our thoughts are with you, King under the mountain,” the Prince said, inclining his head to Bilbo.

Thorin’s husband smiled and said something in the Elven tongue, bowing his head as well.

And with that, the Elves departed.

“What did you tell them?” Nori asked after they’d ridden out of earshot.

“We part now not as friends, but perhaps we will come to meet as such.”

Dwalin snorted and scratched at his beard. “Well, if you say so.” When Bilbo sighed exasperatedly the big Dwarf only rolled his eyes. “The day I call an Elf for a friend is the day -” Dwalin cut himself off and his face clouded. “-the day I catch the Shadow,” he finished in a strained voice.

“Don’t be so glum,” Kili said. “I know you always say that like it’s never going to happen, but you’ll do it one day or another.” Then he frowned. “Though perhaps the Shadow will stay in Ered Luin. Plenty of things left to steal there, especially now that you’re gone.”

“Right,” Dwalin said brusquely. “Enough of this. Daylight’s fading, we best move.”
It was a thin excuse at it was not yet mid-day, but Thorin was still amongst those who nodded in agreement. Whoever this Shadow was - apart from a thief because that much was clear - it seemed that Dwalin did not like him or her much. And this was not the time to drag up dark thoughts that would otherwise have slumbered on undisturbed.

While they still needed to find a way in, they had indeed finally arrived at their journey's end.

They were here. They were home.

- 

For two days nothing in particular happened. The Company explored the halls just inside the front gates, finding nothing except dust and soot. What had been left had either been removed back when the people of Erebor had abandoned their home, or it had since then picked cleaned by the scavengers and scroungers brave enough to risk facing the wrath of a Dragon.

It was formally agreed that entry to Erebor would not be gained through the heavy metal doors leading into the mountain. From the outside they seemed as smooth as the blade of a sword, impossible to force open, and as such the exploration continued outside the gates, up the sides of the mountain slopes in search of the secret door that Bilbo’s map told of.

Years back Balin and Dwalin had been part of an expedition to Erebor, but as they had known nothing about the secret door back then, they had merely gone to investigate the gates they knew of, and finding them blocked, had returned to Ered Luin.

Now though, the entire mountain was to be searched.

Their camp, however, remained just inside the broken front gates, because while the area wore deep scars dealt by Smaug, it was both safer and warmer than to make camp on the mountain slopes where wind and foes could come from any direction.

As proven on the third day when they were joined by uninvited visitors...

- 

“There’s probably plenty of cram inside the mountain,” Dwalin grunted as he hoisted himself up on another ledge. “We won’t need the Elves if we can just find the damned door.”

“Cram?” Thorin asked, following behind.

“It’s like the bread the elves gave us.” This was said with a sour expression, as if comparing anything to something Elven was painful.

“Only it doesn’t taste quite as nice,” Kili pointed out, grinning down at Dwalin’s frown.

Thorin made a face as well. He did not consider the Elven wafers to taste particularly good to start with. Not only did they smell funny; almost like they were on the verge of becoming spoiled, every single bite he took grew in his mouth until swallowing became a chore. Whatever this cram was, it could hardly be worse. Or so the Hobbit hoped. Still.

“If it’s been there all this time, I don’t see how you can think it will be edible.”
“Cram never goes bad,” Dwalin explained, looking down over his shoulder at Thorin. “Ever.”

“But you can argue if it’s edible to begin with,” Kíli chirped. “It’s just not very good,” he added when Dwalin shook his head in exasperation. “I wish we had some of Beorn’s honey cakes. The wafers the Elves gave us -” the young Dwarf wrinkled his nose. “While they’re better than cram, they’re not something I would eat for the pleasure of eating.”

Thorin smiled slightly. “I can’t say that I disagree.”

Kíli return the smile and reached down to give Thorin a helping hand. It was not really needed, but he appreciated it none the less. The two Dwarfs were both taller than him, and as such, they had an easier time finding handholds that Thorin couldn’t quite reach, making his progress up the mountain slower.

“Excellent! Then you will convince Uncle that we should send a message to Master Beorn for the immediately delivery of eight dozen honey cakes.”

“And how do you propose to -”


At first Thorin didn’t see where Dwalin was pointing, then movement down in the landscape below caught his eye. They were too far away to make out any details, but it did indeed look like riders, perhaps a dozen of them, coming from the east.

“Are the Elves back already?” Kíli asked, quickly refastening the silver clasp that held his hair back as it had begun to slip.

“Wrong side of the river,” Dwalin replied, shaking his head. “Unless they had business even further to the East and are now making their way back, but I can’t think what that could be. Best tell Bilbo.”

Thorin nodded, squinting to try and make out just who the riders could be. They were riding on horses, so probably not Orcs as Orcs preferred to eat and not ride any horses they stumbled over. Other than that though, it was impossible to tell.

- The riders turned out to be Men from Lake-town; the Mannish settlement that Bilbo had told them about before their departure from Mirkwood, and their leader quickly proved that Bilbo had indeed been correct in his decision not to seek them out.

“You have no right to try and enter the mountain,” the Man said in lieu of greeting and introduction, jumping down from his horse before the beast had come to a full halt.

“We have the only right,” Bilbo said quietly. He gestured to the rest of the Company standing behind and around him, and then at the mountain who stretched up into the sky behind them. “This is our home. Who are you to tell us differently?”

“I am Bard. Heir to Girion, lord of Dale. Lost as the Dragon destroyed his town.”

“Lured here by Dwarven gold,” one of the other Men muttered darkly.

“Unlike most everyone here I remember that day very well,” Bilbo said with quiet sorrow. “My
mother and father both lost their lives in Dale. Much the same as any of your people.”

“But it was your fault that the dragon came,” accused the same man who had muttered before. “You and your treasure.”

“ Treasure that you of course want no part of,” Nori said scornfully. “That you keep mentioning it, that’s just coincidence.” After a look from Bilbo, Nori quieted, but the glare Thorin saw in his eyes spoke volumes.

“Without Erebor there would have been no Dale,” Bilbo said. “Your forefathers only settled here because trade with mine was made possible, and we both benefitted from it. I’m not saying it makes what happened right,” Bilbo added when the Men’s faces darkened. “I’m saying that we all lost something that day. Your people have made new lives for themselves. So have we. But we still harbour longing for our true home. If the same can be said for you this will also be your chance to reclaim it.”

“The dragon,” Bard said, folding his arms over his chest. “Do you think it to be dead?”

“No. But we would have it end up that way.”

Laughter rose from the Men. “What do you think you can do?” one of them asked. “A dozen Dwarfs against a Dragon.”

“We think we can kill it.” Bilbo’s soft reassurance made the laughter cut off as if someone had taken a blade to it.

“If you awaken that beast, you'll destroy us all,” Bard said hoarsely. “You are mad if you think differently.”

“Then why waste your time arguing with me?”

“Why indeed?” one of the other Men asked, putting his hand on the pommel of his sword.

“Glir, no,” Bard said sharply.

“Kili, no,” Bilbo said at the same time and Thorin turned to see the young dwarf with an arrow already notched and aimed at the Man called Glir. The Hobbit hadn’t even heard him take his bow out.

“The only one we mean harm to is the Dragon,” Bilbo said firmly.

“Then do not wake him,” Bard demanded. “Do not enter the mountain. You will bring doom upon us all if you do.”

“He could have destroyed your town at any given moment since you resettled!” Thorin exclaimed, unable to hold his silence any longer. “Why do you think he will choose to do so if we disturb him? We are not Men. You have not disturbed him during all these years. Why would he think us to be from your town and seek revenge?”

Bard blinked down at Thorin as if seeing him for the first time, then he turned accusing eyes at Bilbo.

“Are you bringing your children on this fool’s errand? He does not even have a beard.”

“I am not a Dwarf,” Thorin growled and took a step forwards. “But you are clearly blind, or just incapable of -”
A hand on his wrist halted his words, and Thorin let out a breath but allowed Bilbo to pull him back. He was not yet done though. The Hobbit glared darkly at the one called Bard.

“The Dragon has not been seen in your lifetime. And perhaps it was never going to be seen in it, but Dragons are not made of stone. Like anything living they require sustenance. Sooner or later it would have ventured outside the mountain again. And then the beast would have stumbled upon you.”

An uneasy mutter spread amongst the Men.

“I can understand why you chose to settle where you have,” Bilbo said gently. “But neither of us will have our true homes back as long as the Dragon still lives. Nor will we have true peace. I don’t ask for your help, only that you will not hinder.”

With that, Bilbo turned his back to the Men and started walking back towards the front gates.

Thorin hesitated, not wanting to leave himself open for attack - leave Bilbo open for attack - but he also didn’t want to let Bilbo walk away on his own. Not to mention that his husband still had one hand clamped around Thorin’s wrist, so in the end there was only one choice and Thorin followed. As did the others.

The Men did not. And when Thorin looked back, they were gone.

- 

That same night Thorin woke up from an already forgotten dream and realised that instead of lying curled around his husband, he was standing few hundred metres outside the broken gates of Erebor.

The waning moon did not provide much light, but enough so that Thorin could orient himself and know that he was facing south and west, which would have allowed him to see Mirkwood had not the dark of night shrouded his vision.

Only when he reached up to rub a hand over his face did the Hobbit notice that he was wearing his ring. Thorin frowned down at it. At least that explained how he could leave the camp in his sleep with no one stopping him, but he best get back before he was missed.

Yet, Thorin took a moment more to linger.

Was it the magic of his ring that was calling him back to the shadows and whispers of the forest? He had heard no more whispers since leaving the forest, not even as they'd halted at the ruins of Dale or upon arrival at Erebor. Perhaps it was only Elven spirits that lingered…

Shivering, Thorin turned and made the short journey back to the front gates. When Bifur didn’t acknowledge him with even a glance the Hobbit realised that he was wearing his ring, the waterfall masking the sound of his footsteps on the lose rocks. With a shrug Thorin decided to continue to go unseen; there was little sense in alarming Bifur by suddenly appearing out of thin air.

There was small wonder that he had not yet been missed because Bifur’s gaze was split between warily keeping an eye on the destroyed gates and the outside… and between observing the sleeping Dori with a much less stern look. As Dori and his brothers had bedded down in another part of the hall than he and Bilbo had, Bifur would not have noticed Thorin’s sudden disappearance.

Bilbo was stirring as Thorin padded closer, and the Hobbit let the ring slip back into his pocket;
reminding himself to return it to the chain in the morning.

“Thorin?” Bilbo murmured sleepily.

“Shhh…” Thorin knelt down and stroked a hand over Bilbo’s forehead, trailing down over his cheek. “Sleep.” He didn’t want to disturb his husband with this. Maybe it wasn’t even the ring’s doing, it was likely just nerves. Each day took them closer to Baggins’ day, the day when the secret door could be opened. And when that happened, Thorin would seek out the Dragon and they would all know if Nori’s plan would work or not.

“Thorin,” Bilbo murmured again, softer now.

“Sleep, my love,” Thorin said softly, because if anyone needed it, it was his husband. Bilbo needed a clear mind and steady hand, and Thorin would hardly help him with that if he kept him up at night like a child afraid of the dark. They could talk in the morning.

With a soft sigh Bilbo relaxed into their bedrolls once more, and Thorin bent to press a kiss to a bearded cheek before joining him.

- 

“When I woke during the night, you were not by my side,” Bilbo said to Thorin while they were eating breakfast.

The rest of the Company was already scurrying up and down the mountain - Thorin winced when he saw Dori more or less throw Bofur up to the next ledge, which was impressively far from the one they’d been standing on - none of them having deigned to wake Thorin or Bilbo, claiming that they both had needed the sleep.

Which was perhaps true, because it was not like Bilbo to sleep that long; Thorin had actually woken before his husband - though it could just be that Bilbo been awake longer than Thorin had assumed during the night.

“I was just about to get up and look for you when you returned. And then I fell asleep again.”

“I just needed to pass water,” the lie came easily and Thorin was appalled by himself when he realised what he’d said. Why-

“Bilbo, I -”

“We’ve found it!” Fíli called, scrambling down the side of the mountain, his brother at his heels.

“The door, we’ve found it!”

Chapter End Notes

Come to hear me babble at myself again? Good.

I'm really curious how Peter Jackson will be handling the gates of Erebor. Obviously the
company can't enter the normal way or there'd be no point of the back-door and the key and all that, but at the end of the Hobbit you could see the big hole in the gates, and on the film poster there's like light coming from said hole. Plus, in the film when Smaug attacks, we have Thorin and Balin on like the battlements and I assume those are the ones above the front gates, and when Thorin turns he's basically looking into the mountain, but it's mostly pillars and stuff, so a kind of front hall makes a world of sense to me.

For me, thinking of both film and book canon, this was the best solution to how Smaug got in, but why no one else can. Plus, Dwarfs strike me as the type to have safe-guards. And this would have worked well against smaller enemies.
Chapter Notes

As always, diemarysues keeps you from clutching at your heads and wondering what I am trying to say. She's awesome like that.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In a way he’d been waiting his whole life for it. So perhaps it was little wonder that he wasn’t even surprised when he heard the shouting that morning.

“There’s smoke coming from the mountain!”

Bard put his axe down against the chopping block and wiped the sweat from his forehead. From beyond the other side of the short wooden fence that surrounded his house he could hear the worried murmurs of his neighbours. It took on much the same quality as the sound of the water below them all, indistinct and almost soothing.

“Smoke! From the mountain!”

Out of the corner of his eye Bard saw movement and he turned to see his wife Eleena step out onto the porch carrying Lily, Bain following a step behind the two.

“Is the Dragon back?” Bain asked, ducking beneath his mother’s arms and racing out to stand beside Bard, gazing towards the Lonely Mountain with an expression that was part fear and part… anticipation.

Not yet 11 summers, and born to parents who had never seen as much as a Dragon scale - something which could also be said for their parents in turn -, Bain viewed Dragons much as creatures from a fairy tale. If they turned out to truly exist after all, their sheer reality would be the cause of as much wonder as terror, at least to start with.

“No,” Bard said slowly. “I don’t think that is the case.”

“Truly?” Eleena asked, coming to rest her head against Bard’s shoulder as she gently rocked their sleeping baby girl in her arms.

Bard nodded. He could not explain why, but he was convinced that the smoke was not the Dragon. That wasn’t to say that he thought the smoke harmless, because if it was not the Dragon, it could still be the cooking fire from someone who would try and disturb it.

“We will go and investigate,” Bard said, not taking his eyes off the mountain. Truth be told, they were too far away to see any smoke, and perhaps it would turn out to be just a trick of the eye for whoever it was who had first seen it - but perhaps it would not.

Part of him knew it would not.
Some of the men who had offered to come with him rode fearing the worst. They may not have said as much, but it was evident in their stiff postures and the way they flinched when the smallest of sparrows flew 'cross the sky.

The Dragon had not been seen for generations, but it had not been forgotten by Bard’s. He’d not seen the beast with his own two eyes, no. But he remembered the tales told to him by his grandfather. He remembered the calm voice with which they had been told, so at odds with the shaking of hands and the look of fear in cloudy grey eyes, a look that his grandfather had not been able to hide.

“Listen closely, my boy,” the white-haired old Man had said. “So that you will not repeat the mistakes of those before us.”

After the destruction of Dale its people had tried to rebuild. What else had there been to do? Dale had been their home. But the reconstruction had barely begun before the Dragon came once more.

At this time the Dwarfs had all left, and it had been the people of Dale who had stood alone against the beast when it would crawl out of the mountain at night to sate its terrible appetite. It seemed that the Drake was no longer interested in destruction, but it wreaked no less havoc.

It was not possible to live like that, so Dale was abandoned, and when the Dragon realised its wrath was again terrible and what little had been rebuilt was quickly torn asunder as it searched the town for anyone foolish enough to still dwell there.

Perhaps it also had been foolish to settle again so close to their old home. The two days it took to ride between the newly named Lake-town and Dale (and the former kingdom of Erebor) could be made much faster by one who owned wings; likewise it could be said to be absurd to build a new home out of wood when your enemy was a fire-drake, but both those things had their explanations.

Where Lake-town now stood there had once been the city of Esgaroth. Over the years after the Dwarfs’ arrival to the Lonely Mountain Esgaroth’s population had lessened and then dwindled into nothing as the Men moved to the city of Dale which prospered from the trade with the Dwarves of Erebor and Elves of Mirkwood both, as well as the Dwarves of the Iron Mountains and other surrounding Mannish settlements.

At the time of the Desolation, Esgaroth had been an almost forgotten memory, but not completely.

The work to cut down trees and make new foundations and build new houses went a lot quicker than it would have gone if bricks and stone had instead been picked, and soon enough a born-again town spread out over the surface of the Long Lake.

Smaug did of course discover this, but the fire-drake seemed wary of the great body of water surrounding the town, and on those occasions that he dared to fly by and spew fire, those fires were easily put out with pumps and buckets.

For all that, the people of Lake-town soon learned the value in having herds of livestock between themselves and the mountain. If the Dragon was allowed to gorge itself on sheep, then it strayed no further and let them be.

A balance was found, and children were born, who had children of their own and then grandchildren who in turn had grandchildren. Then a decade went by without any appearance of the Dragon. Then
another decade, and another, until the day came that Bard’s grandfather told his grandson about the

time he had seen the beast with his own two eyes. The last time anyone had ever seen it, more than

thirty years ago.

Or, at least hat had been the last time anyone had seen it and lived to tell the tale.

As Bard tried to fall asleep that first night away from Lake-town, on the way towards the sighted

smoke, he thought again of the stories that his grandfather had told him, the stories that Eleena would

not have him tell their children for fear of frightening them half to death.

The inner gates to the mountain were always closed, unless the Dragon had left its lair to feed and

spread fear. There were those who had gone to the mountain, into the mountain, to lie in wait and try

and kill the beast as it came back sated and full to fall into a deep slumber.

However… none that had tried had ever returned.

Because none had returned, it was impossible to know what had really taken place, but as a young

boy, and ever later as a grown man, Bard had never had any trouble picturing what could have

happened. What must have happened.

He imagined going through the gates, so tall and heavy - large enough for a Dragon even though its

makers were so small -, and the moment were he’d turn his head back to take one last look at the sun

before continuing into the darkened halls of what had once been a prosperous Dwarven kingdom.

He imagined the echo from his footsteps and each breath made would seem as loud as a shout in the

silence of the abandoned halls. He imagined the courage it would take to continue walking knowing

that while no Dragon dwelled within the mountain at that moment, it would undoubtedly be back.

Upon returning, the beast would likely know that interlopers had entered his lair, because it was said

that a Dragon’s sense of smell was strong enough to sniff the gold out of the rock a thousand feet

below ground. Even so, there would be little need to rush to discover those who had come.

No, the Dragon would return to his nest and wait. They would all find their way there eventually;

after all, they could hardly expect to kill him if they could not find him. And while he was waiting,

the Dragon would smile.

Bard shivered.

The Dragon could not be killed. That was why the old Master had forbidden anyone from

approaching the mountain gates. He’d wanted no more meaningless death and loss and his will had

been carried out by all Masters following after him.

The only thing you could try and do was to live with the Dragon. Live with it and remember those

who no longer did. And it was with that thought in his head that Bard finally fell asleep.

- 

Before dawn they were again back on their horses, and that afternoon they reached the slopes of the

mountain. By then they had seen the movements from tiny figures up on the mountainside, and they

knew that they had been seen in turn.

The creators of the smoke turned out to be Dwarfs, which came as no surprise. Who else would be

foolish enough to disturb the Dragon if not the people who had brought it upon them all in the first
Their talk of homes was pretty enough - but what good was a home if you were dead?

The destruction the beast had wreaked on Dale, the lives it had ended since then… For a moment, when Glir went for his sword, Bard was tempted not to stop him. The Dwarfs were clearly not in their right minds. Still, there had to be a way in which blood would not need to be spilled, so when the Dwarfs’ leader talked, Bard let him, and when he turned to leave, Bard let him go.

“We could take them,” Glir muttered, and while the Dwarfs might only have seen malice in his eyes; had they turned to look, Bard saw the fear that lived there as well.

He shook his head and mounted his horse again. “We will find another way, one without blood.”

“If they wake the Dragon,” Hans said quietly, “then that way will be no more.”

“This is not the place to discuss this,” Bard said and pulled softly on the reins to get his horse to turn. “Come.”

They rode swiftly back down from where they’d come, but instead of taking the route towards Lake-town, Bard turned them around the curve of the mountain, out of sight from the gates.

“Listen now,” Bard said as the others all gathered around him. “We will make camp tonight, let them forget us. Then tomorrow as before dusk begins to fall we will go back on foot, sneak up on them, and take one or more of their number. But I want no bloodshed, and we will bring our captive back to Lake-town. They -”

“So you think they’ll care?” Milas asked. “They’ll not just continue on their merry way?”

“If they do, then we will try something else,” Bard said. “But I do not think they’ll so easily throw away one of their own.” Not in the same careless manner they would throw away an entire town, he added silently, keeping the thought to himself as it would do nothing but stir up bad blood.

The Dwarfs he had met had all been from the Iron Hills, and might not be cut from the same cloth as these, but there was no reason to think that they would value kith and kin any less for that. If one of their went missing they would stop their quest and seek him out. There would be chance to reason with them.

“Who will ride back and inform the Master?” Bard then asked, because it needed to be done or they were likely to have visitors of their own before the plan could be put into motion. Unsurprisingly, there were no sudden flood of volunteers, but then Milas shrugged.

“I’ll do it, but he won’t be happy.”

“What else is new,” Eidrer murmured.

“And I’m blaming you,” Milas added, looking at Bard who smiled wryly.

“That is as it should be then. I will see you in three days’ time. Please bring my love for my family.”

“I shall bring it to the Master as well, it might help,” Milas quipped as he gathered his reins up and put his heels to the horse’s sides. “Three days, my friend. Or I will come and see what became of you.”
“Three days,” Bard nodded, and they all watched as Milas rode away.

“Let’s continue a little further away,” Bard suggested. “We will not wish to be found before the time is right.”

“That would be convenient, wouldn’t it,” Hans said with a snort. “To have one of them just wandering into our camp. We could nab ‘im before he’d even known what’d happened.”

“Or if we get their leader,” Allan suggested. “Then they would definitely need to follow us.”

“It’ll be as it’ll be,” Bard said and looked up at the mountain. “It always is.”

Chapter End Notes

So, Bilbo was not correct that it had been 160 years since anyone had walked in the halls of Erebor...

Logic reasons that if Smaug can get out (since he had been seen after the sacking of Erebor), people can also get in.

But the Men doesn't really talk to anyone about this. It's painful because no one really goes to the mountain thinking that they'll make it, not really. I think it might have been a punishment for a while, instead of the death penalty you could pick 'get locked up until that day arrives when you can try and sneak into the mountain and kill the Dragon'. Also, they don't talk about it as they don't want to deal with the drama of telling a Dwarf they'd been trying to get into his/her mountain.

But they tried, because there is always hope. Even now, I think part of Bard still hopes.
Chapter Twenty-five

Of course finding the door did not mean that they could just march right in. For one it wasn’t so much the door the boys had found, as the place where the door was likely to be.

Kíli had stumbled, quite literally, over a staircase. Almost invisible unless you knew it was there… or just if you were too busy looking everywhere else except where you were actually going and ended up falling flat on your face.

As Kíli had gotten back up, he’d noticed that what had tripped him was a slab of stone, sticking up just slightly from the rest of the mountain. And then Fíli had noticed how it connected to another slab of stone, also raised a little higher than the rest.

They were easy enough to miss as there wasn’t exactly a lack of stone on the mountainside, but once you saw the pattern it was clear enough. To the Dwarfs anyway.

Thorin was less sure, but as Fíli and Kíli led them all along the ‘path’, chirping enthusiastically all the while, he was willing to take their word for it.

Up and up they went, the steps leading them to a narrower path of lighter coloured stone set into the mountain. To Thorin it just looked like a variation in the rock, but he did not doubt Bofur when the Dwarf, almost giddy in his excitement, said that it definitely wasn’t natural.

That path then led to an even narrower ledge. And then, after a fairly uncomfortable shuffle along said ledge which was barely wide enough to allow one person to walk it, the path widened again and turned into a small steep-walled hollow in the mountain side.

Later they would gaze up at it from the ground, finding nothing more than a shadowed crack in the mountain, almost invisible unless you knew to look for it.

It was facing west, so as it was early morning still the hollow was fairly dark; the sun standing too low to shine down from above, and in the wrong position to find a path via the same route the Company had found.

However, it was not dark enough that the flat wall rising up at the end of the hollow could be left unquestioned. The boys pulled their unresisting uncle to it, pressing Bilbo’s hands against it and practically bouncing in their eagerness.

“This has to be it,” Bofur said after joining them. The miner slowly stroked his hand up and down the smooth stone. “No chance this just happened to be here.”

“Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Baggins’ Day will shine upon the key-hole,” Bilbo murmured, palm still pressed against the stone. “And we do have the key.”

“And four days to go still, before Baggins’ Day,” Dwalin said, Balin nodding thoughtfully in agreement.

“I would think that there is another part to the magic,” he said. “Something that would allow us to open it before or after Baggins’ Day, as the other alternative would be terribly inconvenient. But what that could be is one in a million possibilities. I would think that the King wrote as he did on the
map to avoid any random passers-by gaining entry.”

“Random passers-by?” Nori asked with a raised eyebrow. “It would be fairly tricky to randomly pass by this place. Dragon infested mountains aren’t the place you pick for an evening stroll to begin with, and this place isn’t visible from the ground or we would have seen it by now, and the wall wouldn’t be visible if you came in from above up. You’d almost have to fall down here to notice it.”

“I don’t understand the part with the thrush.” Kili said, eyebrows knitted together in a frown. “They’re just birds, what do they have to do with anything?”

“If only we knew,” Bilbo smiled. “But thrushes used to live on the mountain side before Grandfather’s rule. They were tame to the hand, long-lived, and some say even magical. They didn’t speak our language, nor did we speak theirs, not like the ravens’ - but there were those amongst the Men who could.”

“How can birds be magical?” Thorin asked. “They’re only birds.” Even Ravens were not magical, and they could speak.

“And this is only stone,” Bilbo replied, brushing his fingers against the smooth wall. “But no matter how much we would try to force entry, it would not break. Not if there’s magic cast upon it.”

Thorin scowled as he was reminded of the magical doors in Mirkwood that had refused to open or even exist unless there was an Elf around. Magic. It was hard to say what irked him more, that or politics.

“That’s not a reason not to try and break it down,” Dwalin grunted, eyeing the wall speculatively, and Thorin shot him an approving look.

Bilbo chuckled. “Be my guest. As you say, there’s four days -”

“Is that really wise?” Dori interrupted. “To go banging on the mountain. What if the noise is enough to wake the Dragon?”

Silence spread, as no one had thought about that.

“Perhaps it would be foolish to take that risk,” Balin finally said, and Bilbo sighed.

“Yes, I should have considered that.”

“We’re just to wait then?” Dwalin said with distaste. “Sit around for half-a-week and do nothing?”

“The Elves should be back the day after tomorrow,” Bilbo pointed out with a small smile. “I’m sure they can keep you company, if you ask them nicely.”

“They said that they’d be back in a week’s time,” Fili pointed out. “A week will not have passed by the day after tomorrow.”

“The journey from Mirkwood took us three days,” Bilbo explained. “But that was without pressing the horses, and while they were carrying two or more riders. The Elven party could probably make it back to Mirkwood and here again by this very evening if they wanted to. And I would not be surprised if they do wish to. But to show up so much earlier than promised would not be courteous. A day earlier however, that’s hardly something we can complain about seeing as they will arrive
with our provisions. Then we would be discourteous.”

“Bloody politics,” Dwalin muttered, his words echoed by Nori. An awkward silence fell as the two looked at anything other than each other. Bilbo and Balin exchanged a look that spoke volumes; Thorin just wasn’t sure exactly what about.

“But, we’re allies?” Kíli said hesitantly, breaking the silence. He sounded as if he knew that what he said should matter, but that it still didn’t. “Shouldn’t we trust each other?”

“Alliances sadly do not mean that you trust each other explicitly, or even at all. They could just be because you share a goal, or mistrust someone else more than you do each other,” Bilbo said with a wry smile. “And for us it would be a case of the former. In a way we’re like an investment. Thranduil has more to gain by us succeeding than he has by our failure, enough that what he could lose by our failure is also worth it. Otherwise I would not have been able to convince him to release us.”

“Please remain King for a good while yet, uncle” Fíli muttered, and his disgruntled expression brought a smile to more than one face.

“Ah,” Bilbo hummed. “Perhaps that is what I shall threaten the two of you with from now on. Behave, or I’ll step down and leave you two to deal with the resulting mess while I move to the Shire with my husband.”


“I am but a simple Hobbit,” Thorin said blankly. “Who am I to command a King?”

Thorin realised of course that Bilbo was joking, but the thought of returning to the Shire was unsettling. He wasn’t entirely opposed it, to his own surprise. As long as he had Bilbo he would even agree to live with the damned Elves. And compared to Elves a few gossiping Hobbits were a far bit easier to deal with. But he still didn’t really like the idea. He wanted both Bilbo and a life that would mean something, even if that had to include politics and magic. And Elves.

“You’re his husband,” Kíli whined, eyes growing wide and vulnerable, but Thorin knew better than to fall for that.

“The easy solution for this is the two of you to simply behave,” Bilbo said mildly.

Thorin’s lips twitched at the twin look of disbelief that earned his husband.

“We will need ambassadors to the Elves,” Balin mused and Kíli gasped.

“You’ve never struck me as cruel, Balin,” he said, his expression quickly turning back into a sorrowful mask.

“But if you returned to the Elves you could -” Fíli began, not getting further due to Kíli clamping a hand over his mouth.

“I think we should talk about more interesting things. Maybe we can go back to the birds?”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed. What in the world? There was actually a blush on Kíli’s cheeks. And it appeared Bilbo had noticed it too.
“Is this something I’d want to abdicate over?” he asked warily.

“I’ll tell you later,” Nori murmured from his spot next to Dori and Ori.

“Nori!” Kili protested.

“Information is my line of business, prince,” Nori said unapologetically. “But you are free to tell your uncle on your own if you want. But as it could come to concern him he needs to know. If your brother hadn’t mentioned it now, I would have anyway.”

There was a small pause, and then:

“I’ll tell you later,” Kili muttered, shoulders slumping with defeat, and Fili winced at the dark glare his brother threw him.

“Great,” Bilbo said after giving both of his nephews a searching look. “Glad we got that settled, whatever that was. Shall we continue with the matter of the secret doorway then?”

As they did not want the Elves to find it upon their return, and especially not the Men if they would decide to come back for another ‘discussion’, it was decided that instead of moving the camp there as their first instinct had been, only a few of them would make camp up amongst the cliffs. They would only move the barest minimum of supplies, apart from the barrels of water from the black river, and everything else would remain by the front gates, giving the appearance that it was the only camp site.

Bifur and Bofur offered to spend the first night up by the door, both being more than a fair bit enamoured with the stone and the magic wrought on it.

Thorin pressed his palms flat against the stone, and felt nothing but stone. Bofur had described it as a slight tickling sensation, saying that while he couldn’t feel the space behind it as he should, there was not the solid sensation of the mountain either.

The Company called this ‘stone sense’, and Thorin supposed it wasn’t the first time they’d spoken about it. Already back in Rivendell Glóin had boasted that he would never fall down from the narrow, railing-less death-traps that the Elves had called bridges, as they were made out of stone, but they hadn’t been this open about what that really meant. Perhaps because they hadn’t yet trusted him.

Or perhaps it was just that he hadn’t asked.

In Rivendell his thoughts had more or less all been about Bilbo and the possibility to be allowed to stay for a while after Erebor had been reclaimed. And of the kisses he’d seen Bilbo and Bofur share.

And when he’d tried to think of other things Fili and Kili had always been at hand to help him practice his swordplay, making sure to work him hard enough that most thoughts simply gave up and filtered out of his head.

Now though, he had both the questions and there were answers to receive, so Thorin spent most of the day with Bofur and Bifur, practicing both his Khuzdul and learning more of the Dwarven ability to know stone with a single touch. The three of them weren’t the only ones who lingered by the secret door, Dwalin and Balin did the same, along with Glóin. And Bilbo had stayed as well until Kili had come to steal him away to talk about whatever it was that had made the boy blush before.

Thorin wasn’t sure what the rest of the Company were up to, but he trusted that they could handle
“It’s not something everyone can do,” Bofur said matter-of-factly. “Like singing isn’t something everyone can do either, but some are born with it and some get better with practice.”

“And there are those who will forever fail their attempts,” Bifur nodded.

“It’s right handy as a miner,” Bofur said with a grin that managed to be proud and modest all at once. “It’s not fail proof of course, but more than once I’ve sensed a fault in the stone that likely would have sent the roof crashing down on our heads should we have disturbed it.”

“And you felt that the stones leading up here had been placed there by someone?” Thorin questioned.

Bofur nodded. “Don’t know if I can describe it though. It’s like… a resonance? Like you could say everything has a sound, but you sort of feel it instead of hearing it? And when something suddenly isn’t sounding the same as the rest, that means something has been done to it.”

“But you couldn’t tell that the Goblins’ caves were below us before we fell?” Thorin asked, frowning as the memory of tumbling down the shaft resurfaced.

“I - might not have been actively looking for anything,” Bofur explained, a bit embarrassed. “It’s not like a sound in the sense that you just have to be around to hear it.” He reached out and touched the wall with his hand. “I can do this and not feel a thing out of the ordinary, but if I look for it…” He closed his eyes, and after only a few moments a warm smile spread across his face. “Then it’s there.”

“It is worth mentioning that all do not feel it the same as my cousin,” Bifur said. “For me, it is neither a sound, nor a sensation as he would describe it. And it is much fainter.” Bifur sent Bofur a proud smile and the younger ducked his head. “Bofur is very much talented.”

“How is it -”

“In our tongue, please,” Bifur requested, and Thorin hid a sigh as he scrambled to find the right words.

“What does the rock-sense resemble to you?”

“Stone sense,” Bifur corrected. “And I do not think I can put words to it. Can colour be described to one who has been blind all his life?”

“And you?” Thorin asked Balin, Dwalin, and Glóin. “Can you describe it?”

“It’s not a gift that has ever been very strong in the line of Baggins,” Balin said apologetically. “Nor have the lads inherited their father’s ability -”

“The prince consort is something of a legend,” Bofur explained with an admiring grin. “He’d have been able to warn us about the Goblins for sure.”

“Nori has a fairly strong touch of it,” Balin continued. “So you might want to ask him, if you want to know.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said slowly, trying to understand everything he’d just been told. It rather
reminded him of the Gamgees’ unerring ability to know just where a plant should be put and how it should be handled for it to grow and prosper. He truly did hope that they would be the ones to move into his home once everyone had agreed that he would not be coming back, what he had built deserved people who would appreciate it.

“Thorin?” Bilbo walked into the hollow. “Could I please borrow you?”

“Of course,” Thorin replied, getting to his feet and nodding at the other Dwarfs. “Thank you again.”

“You know where to find us,” Bofur said with a grin and a nod. “We didn’t even get to the interesting things like the ones who can find gold, or the fella’ I knew who had a rather inappropriate reaction each time he went near marble.”

Thorin snorted. “Another time then.”

“Sorry to interrupt you,” Bilbo said as Thorin walked over. “But as you’re part of our family now, I rather think you should join my little discussion with Kíli and Fíli. And not only because I feel I need the moral support.” Bilbo took Thorin’s hand and gave it a light squeeze. “I’m sorry for not asking you straight away.”

“I’m honoured you would think of it at all,” Thorin said, lifting Bilbo’s hand to press a kiss to it. “But tell me, honestly, is it really bad enough that you need my support?”

Bilbo snorted. “Perhaps, perhaps not, but I’ll let you be the judge of that.”

- 

“So,” Bilbo prompted his youngest nephew as he and Thorin joined them further down on the mountain. “Where were we?”

“I hardly think you’ve forgotten,” Kíli muttered.

“No, but Thorin has not been privy to the conversation, has he now?” Bilbo asked, but at the unhappy glance Kíli sent his brother the king’s face softened.

“Kíli, please repeat what you just told me. I didn’t react too badly, did I?”

“No, but - Fíli?” Kíli said pleadingly, nudging his brother.

“You won’t like it,” Fíli told Thorin who frowned.

“Then I will like it less the longer I stand here wondering what I’m going to hear.” In a way he was amazed that his opinion would mean so much to Kíli, amazed and grateful, and doubly so that Bilbo would also consider him to have the right to be a part of this. On the other hand, he was now beginning to get worried about what Kíli was about to share. It couldn’t be too bad, or Bilbo would have

“I’m, oh by Mahal,” Kíli muttered. “I think this might actually be worse than when Da’ and Mum had the talk with us.”

“Do you want me to -?” Fíli began but Kíli shook his head.
“No.” He took a deep breath. “I’m in love with an Elf,” he blurted.

“You what?!” Thorin demanded. “After what they did to your people, after they threw you in prison?”

“I told you you wouldn’t like it,” Fíli murmured.

“Bilbo, tell him he’s being a fool,” Thorin demanded, and Bilbo sighed.

“Dear heart, you’re being a little unfair, but,” he added, looking back towards Kíli. “I also don’t see how you could consider yourself in love after having only exchanged a handful of words with the object of your affection.”

“We’ve had many conversations,” Kíli said, injured but then his face took on a certain dreamy quality.

“She stopped to speak with me twice in Mirkwood. And also on the journey from Mirkwood. And -” he added, pointing at Thorin. “Don’t tell me that you didn’t love uncle right away.”

“I realised that I loved your uncle around the time the Trolls captured us,” Thorin said. “And that was hardly at the start of our journey, and definitely after many conversations.” A lot more than a handful, at any count.

“But you loved him before then,” Kíli protested. “I know you did. Straight away the two of you were looking at each other like you’d gone and found something that’d been misplaced.”

“Kíli,” Bilbo said gently. “This isn’t about us now, is it? We just don’t want you to get hurt. It’s quite possible to think that you love someone, only to later realise it was just infatuation. And even if you do love someone, it’s not certain that your feelings are returned.”

“Who is this Elf?” Thorin demanded. “And why didn’t you tell us before now that you’d spoken to her while still in Mirkwood? While still in your cell? She might have just been trying to get information from you about the quest.”

“We didn’t talk about anything to do with the quest,” Kíli objected. “She’s not like that.”

“You never said who she is,” Bilbo prompted. “And I’ve not really seen you spend a lot of time with anyone -”

“I didn’t want you to know,” Kíli muttered and Bilbo sighed.

“If she was one of the Elves accompanying us here there are not many to choose from, but please, tell us her name.”

“Tauriel,” Kíli said defiantly, crossing his arms - and Bilbo sighed while Thorin just drew a blank. The only Elves he knew by name were the Elven King and his son, neither one of them female or called Tauriel.

“You knew?” Bilbo asked his older nephew and Fíli hesitated before nodding.

“It was not my place to tell you,” Fíli said. “And apparently Nori felt the same.”

“Until today when you both decided to blab,” Kíli said darkly.
“I think I shall have words with my Spymaster later,” Bilbo murmured, and Kíli scowled harder.

“Who is this Tauriel?” Thorin demanded.

“She’s the guard captain that escorted us here,” Bilbo explained. “And you must have seen her in Mirkwood as well. She often came to bring me before Thranduil.”

“The Captain of the Elven King’s guards?” Thorin growled. “Kíli, what are you thinking?”

Kíli raised his chin and squared his shoulders. “I love her.”

“You don’t know her,” Bilbo said tiredly. “But peace,” he added when Kíli was about to protest again, and Thorin shut his mouth as well.

“Let’s not argue about this. It’s neither the time, nor the place. But I would ask one thing of you, and that is to not do anything rash. If you love her as you say, and if your feelings are returned -” For the first time during their conversation Kíli looked a little uncertain and Thorin’s shoulders relaxed the smallest bit. He would not wish unrequited love on the young Dwarf, but surely he should understand that dallying with an Elf would only lead to heartbreak on his side? They were immortal after all. Even a Dwarf’s lifetime was just a brief spark compared to that.

“- then those feelings will survive a period of inaction.” Bilbo’s mouth twitched the smallest bit. “And if you would hold me and Thorin as an example then you will wait at least another month before you even begin courting”

Thorin touched the chain around his neck and carefully didn’t point out how they had only been courting for a very small amount of time before being wed, and how Bilbo had spent a fairly good portion of that time complaining that they were moving too fast to follow proper protocol. He also did not mention that none of them knew what a month’s time would bring them.

“If you cannot promise me this, you will simply remain here as the Elves arrive with supplies,” Bilbo said firmly.

“Is that an order from my uncle, or my King?” Kíli asked dourly. “And I’m not sure she’s coming anyway. It’s just a supply run after all,” he added with a morose sigh.

“Both,” Bilbo said. “I do not know her, so I can’t trust that she will not hurt you, and I can’t trust that she will not use you to learn details of our quest.”

“She’s really not like that, uncle,” Kíli said pleadingly. “She’s funny, and quite sweet. Kind too.”

Thorin snorted, as the Elf he had seen had only been strict and cold, but he held his tongue.

“Then she would understand why anything, even a deepening friendship, would have to wait,” Bilbo said, clasping Kíli’s shoulder. “Kíli, will you do as I ask?”

“Yes,” Kíli murmured softly, hanging his head, and Thorin was struck by how young the Dwarf truly was, despite that he was decades ahead of him in age.

Bilbo cupped Kíli’s face and gently touched their foreheads together. He had to rise up on his toes to do this, and the image they made something ache inside Thorin’s chest. Perhaps it was just the clear affection they had for each other, despite the argument, or perhaps it was that he was allowed to
witness it.

“You will help him make the right choices?” Thorin murmured to Fíli as Bilbo whispered something to his youngest nephew.

“I will try,” Fíli sighed softly and stepped closer to the Hobbit. “I do think he really loves her. He’s never acted like this before. And he’s right, is he not? You and uncle were like two pieces slotting together, almost right from the start. I don’t think any of us were surprised when he gave you his chain and you accepted. So it can clearly happen like that.”

Thorin shook his head. “I certainly was surprised that he gave it to me.”

“Thorin,” Fíli said quietly as Bilbo and Kíli separated. “There is something I would speak to you both about as well. But I’d rather not Kíli hear.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for an Elf as well?” Thorin pleading expression was only half-joking.

“No,” Fíli snorted. “No, I promise.”


The young Dwarf looked up. “Yes, Uncle Thorin?”

Again the ache came inside Thorin, the gratefulness that the boy would still address him so even after they had quarreled. “Could you please join the others for a little while, we would like to speak to Fíli alone for a moment.” And expression of ‘we would?’ flitted across Bilbo’s face for a moment before it was gone again.

“You can’t yell at him,” Kíli said immediately, loyal even if he was still not pleased about his brother's ‘blabbing’. “I asked him not to say anything, he -”

“We’re not going to yell at anyone,” Bilbo promised, giving Thorin a questioning look that Thorin could only return with a small shrug. “I promise you.”

“It’s alright, brother,” Fíli said with a warm smile. “I’ll join you shortly.”

Kíli gave them all a hesitant glance, but then he did turn and began walking back up the path once more.

“What’s this then?” Bilbo asked and Thorin shrugged again.

“I’ve been planning to speak to you about this for quite some time, but,” Fíli sighed. “No time like the present? Especially since it might make you look more fondly on Kíli’s choice.”

“You don’t think it’s merely an infatuation then?” Bilbo asked.

“For him it’s serious enough,” Fíli replied. “I would not speak for the Elf though, but she did look at him, from time to time, while we travelled here. But if that truly means that his love is returned…”

“Nothing can ever quite go to plan, can it?” Bilbo sighed. “But enough about that, what did you want to speak to us about?”

“Marriage, actually.”
Thorin just barely resisted the urge to groan. But Fíli had said that there were no Elves involved....

“Marriage?” Bilbo asked, surprised. “To whom?”

“That’s the part I wanted to talk to you about.” Fíli hesitated. “If Kíli is serious about this, and his feelings are returned, it’s very unlikely that such a union would have any children. Men and Elves, yes. But Dwarfs and Elves? I have never heard of such a thing. And even more unlikely is it that you, dear uncles, will have any.” Fíli smiled. “Which leaves me. I have no lover, but in the future I would not oppose an arranged marriage, should you find a suitable wife for me among the nobility.”

Thorin blinked. Whatever he had been expecting, this had not been it. Arranged marriages? That sounded much too archaic to what was left of his Hobbit sensibilities.

“Fíli,” Bilbo said gently. “Whatever happens between Kíli and the Captain does not really change anything. To be completely honest I was hoping that one of you would fall for Ori and that it would be requited. And for all of their strengths, their house is not noble, and such a union would not beget our line with children.”

Bilbo turned to smile at Thorin who returned it without thinking. “I could hardly marry the one I love and then ask you to do anything else.”

“But you’re not asking, I’m offering,” Fíli insisted. “I’ve - I’ve never been in love. And - I’ve never lain with anyone. Kíli teases me that I’m waiting for someone as perfect as myself, but -” the young Dwarf shook his head, making his braids fly. “If the other person is agreeable that ours would begin and perhaps stay a marriage of convenience, then I would be happy with that.” The smile that touched Fíli’s lips was more than a little wistful. “I’ve always wanted children, and I do not think I will take a wife if it’s left entirely up to me.”

“What if you marry and then meet the one for you?” Thorin asked slowly, as his mind tried to come to terms with what he was hearing.

“What if I marry someone I love and then realise I love someone else more?” Fíli countered. “There’s never a guarantee in matters of the heart. I just - I don’t want Kíli to think I would do this as a sacrifice for him, and he might think that, if he knew. And in a way it’s true as I would not have spoken about it now if he had not fallen for the lady Tauriel. But I truly don’t mind the idea as long as I get some say in who I’ll marry.”

“I would never ask you to marry someone against your will,” Bilbo promise. “Fíli, you’ve thought about what you’re offering?”

“I have,” Fíli nodded. “Truly. Depending on who is picked it would also be of great political benefit.”

“Very well then,” Bilbo said, reaching out to pull his older nephew into an embrace. “I will keep it in mind. But please remember that you can change your mind at any time.”

“I didn’t expect you to bring out a bride from the nearest bush,” Fíli smiled. “If there were still bushes around that was.”

“Smart mouth,” Bilbo said fondly. “Now go join your brother before he begins to think that we’re planning to send both of you back to your mother.”
They watched Fíli saunter up the stone path. “I do wish that my sister was here,” Bilbo sighed. “I feel like I’ve been set down on a boat in the middle of the ocean, and instead of oars someone has provided me with two smoked herrings.” He chuckled and turned to press a kiss to Thorin’s cheek. “But thank you, for helping me with them.”

“The herrings or your nephews?” Thorin asked and raised an eyebrow.

“The Herrings or your nephews?” Thorin asked and raised an eyebrow.

“Thorin, I know that *you* know what a metaphor is.”

“As I said earlier, I’m just a simple Hobbit,” Thorin replied, straight-faced, and Bilbo laughed and pressed more kisses on his cheek and jaw. Pretending to be shocked at this, Thorin continue to protest how he was just a humble smith, not worthy of the attention from such a handsome and brilliant king.

“Then if I’m such a wonderful person -” Bilbo murmured. “- don’t you think you should bow to my better judgement?”

“You have a point,” Thorin admitted after pretending to mull the question over. “But there is also the small detail of how I’m married. And I’m very much in love with my husband, and very fond of his troublesome nephews.”

“That your husband is very lucky,” Bilbo said, brushing Thorin’s curls away from his forehead.

“Not as lucky as I am,” Thorin said as he leaned in for a small, chaste kiss.

-“My heart’s desire,” Thorin murmured as his eyes flickered behind closed lids. “All I need -”

“Thorin?” came Bilbo’s sleepy voice and the Hobbit jostled awake, half-sitting up before realising where he was and who he was with. With a sigh Thorin allowed Bilbo to pull him back on the bedroll and into his arms.

“You were - talking in your sleep,” Bilbo whispered, a small yawn breaking up the sentence.

“I was?” Thorin blinked and tried to recall what he had been dreaming about. “What did I say?”

“Something about your ‘heart’s desire’,“ Bilbo said with a small smile, and Thorin nudged his nose against the side of Bilbo’s face, pressing a kiss to a rounded ear.

“About you then,” he whispered.

“Sap,” Bilbo said fondly, carding his fingers through dark curls.

“Is to be found in trees,” Thorin told Bilbo’s jaw, smirking softly when Bilbo groaned.

“Sleep now,” Bilbo commanded.

“Anything my husband wishes,” Thorin mumbled, sighing contently Bilbo arranged them in their usual sleeping positions all the while muttering quietly about certain people being too adorable for their own good, and limpets besides.
The next morning there was no need to search for the door, and also no reason to think the keyhole would suddenly appear, so Thorin agreed to spar with Dwalin.

What he hadn’t counted on was that Balin would take the opportunity to give a lecture on Dragons, which Dwalin approved of since it meant that Thorin would have to concentrate on two things at once.

“In battle you’re not going to have a line of opponents politely waiting for you,” Dwalin told him when he protested. “You need to learn how to do many things at once.”

“Wouldn’t this be a better lesson then if someone else came and sparred with us?” Thorin asked. “I hardly think someone will stop in the middle of a fight to quiz me on Dragons.”

“Lad, I’ve been fighting since before your parents were born, do as I say.”

“It’s happened to you then?” Thorin asked with mock-surprise. “Was it a written test, or did you have to present a report? I would have thought Orcs were not the studious type.”

“You’re going to get it now,” Bombur murmured.

“Nice knowing you,” Bofur agreed.

“We’ll see,” Thorin said with a small smile as he got up from the ground and stretched.

“I get your ring, right?” Nori asked innocently.

“No,” Thorin growled, good mood replaced with irritation that Nori couldn’t just leave well enough alone. It had stopped being funny a long time ago, and for a moment Nori looked surprised before he schooled his face into exaggerated grief.

“Then I’m cheering for you after all,” he told Thorin solemnly.

He didn’t though. And Thorin lost. Quite badly. Not that these two things were related, but still. As he lay panting on the sun warmed rock, Thorin realised that he barely remembered half of what Balin had been going on about, so he’d probably have to listen to it all over again.

All in all, not the best of mornings.

At least Bilbo hadn’t been around to see him fall to the ground again and again. His husband had called for Nori shortly after Dwalin had begun to demonstrate why Thorin’s natural gift with a sword did not mean that a month’s time of hardly touching it was a good idea, and the two of them and Óin had been busy talking ever since.

It would either be about the Dragon or about the revelations both boys had given them, but probably the former as Thorin couldn’t really figure out what Nori, or at least Óin, had to do with the latter. While he didn’t understand Kíli’s choice, the lad was hardly sick.
“You did well,” Dwalin said as Thorin finally managed to scrape enough breath together to get back up on his feet again.

“No need to coddle me,” Thorin snorted. “I was on the ground almost as much as I was not.” At least he’d not fallen and hit his head; that would just have been a brilliant finish. But constantly tripping over the uneven ground and his own feet, that was bad enough. It was almost like when Fíli had first started teaching him, if not worse.

“You’ve not sparred properly since before Mirkwood,” Dwalin said with a shrug. “And you’d hardly touched a blade only a few months before that. Don’t be too rough on yourself.” The large Dwarf grinned. “Not when I can be that for you. You’ll be feeling this tomorrow, mark my words.”

“Thank you,” Thorin said drily.

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Not wanting to disturb Bilbo’s discussion Thorin went to wash himself off by the river close to the waterfall. The water was icy cold, which was why Thorin wasn’t too happy when Kíli startled him bad enough to almost fall in.

“Sorry, sorry,” Kíli half-shouted as he helped Thorin regain his balance, the two of them almost falling in but managing to right themselves before actually doing so. “I didn’t realise that you wouldn’t hear me coming.”

“How did you possible not realise that?” Thorin growled, gesturing up at the roaring waterfall.

Kíli awkwardly scratched the back of his neck and glanced away. “I’m sorry, uncle Thorin.”

*The Valar have mercy,* Thorin thought as most of his annoyance was instantly washed away by those words. If the boys ever realised how much of a pushover he was when they called him uncle…

“I just - I hope - you’re not too disappointed with me?”

“For failing to understand that a waterfall makes noise?” Thorin frowned. “I’ll live.”

“No.” Kíli shook his head. “About what I told you and Uncle last night.”

Oh. *Ohhh.*

“Kíli,” Thorin began, but he didn’t get much further before the young Dwarf’s face fell.

“You are,” he said wretchedly, turning his face away to say something else that Thorin couldn’t hear due to the roaring water. For the love of… Thorin grabbed Kíli’s shoulder and made him turn back around again

“If we were to have this conversation, we would have it in a place where we can actually hear what we are saying to each other, and when I’m not half-dressed and wet!” Thorin said firmly, giving Kíli a small shake. “But there’s no need for this conversation, because your uncle and I are not disappointed with you.”

When Kíli threw his arms around Thorin, uncaring about his state of undress, they almost fell into the river once again. At least it would have been for a more worthy cause this time.
“Truly?” Kíli asked as he pulled back. “And you’re not upset with Fíli either? He wouldn’t tell me what you talked about.”

“Truly,” Thorin promised. “Just, listen to your uncle, and don’t do anything rash.”

Some of Kíli’s normal humour came back into his eyes and he poked at Thorin’s chest. “Says the one who came back wearing my uncle’s chain after exactly no courting or even declarations thereof.”

“Well,” Thorin slapped Kíli’s fingers away. “We’re hardly the best of role models then are we.”

Kíli snickered a bit before leaning down to lightly knock their heads together. “Thank you,” he said softly. “I know you don’t really approve, but thank you.”

Thorin had no idea what to say to that, because he truly did not really approve, but it seemed harsh to admit it. With a sigh Thorin reached up to pat a stubbly cheek.

“Remember; give your uncle too much of a hard time, and we’ll end up moving to the Shire.”

“Fíli is heir,” Kíli pointed out. “I’ve realised that it’s mostly his problem.”

“Such loyalty,” Thorin said wryly.

“Says the one who’s moving to the Shire,” Kíli scoffed, and Thorin smiled.

“Fair point. Now, let me finish here. I’ll join you when I’m done.”

“Sure you won’t get lost?” Kíli teased. “I can wait and guide you.”

“Go,” Thorin commanded, pointing up towards Erebor’s front gates. He smiled to himself as Kíli strolled away; spring back in his steps again, and then he resumed his ablutions, twitching as he splashed more cold water on himself. It was lucky that the sun was shining; hopefully it would continue to do so during the afternoon and allow him to dry quickly. Spying on a Dragon would be even more complicated if he had to do it while sneezing and sniffing. Unless his ring would help with that?

Thorin stroked a finger along the outside of it. No one had heard him in the Elven halls after all. And Elves were supposed to have excellent hearing.

It was possible that there was even more to it than he’d first assumed. Humming thoughtfully Thorin stroked his ring again. And... perhaps he’d even been wrong in his assumptions about the whispers he’d heard while wearing it. Even the wind blowing through leaves sounded like whispers sometimes. Perhaps it was just how magic felt to him, instead of the tickling sensation that Bofur felt.

It was just as well that he’d never told Bilbo about it, Thorin thought, forgetting about the other things he’d not told Bilbo about.

Like waking up in the middle of the night with the golden band around his finger, and then lying to his husband about it when asked.

It would have been a shame to worry him for nothing.
Chapter Twenty-six

Chapter Notes

The chapter I felt I would never get to, because all the characters kept doing everything except advancing the plot in the right direction. Seriously, parts of this was written months and months ago, so I'm glad to finally post it :) 

Chapter is close to 9k ... so warning to anyone who only has a five minute reading break, you'll want to read fast. 

Also: diemarysues is awesome, here endeth the public service announcement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite their talk, Kíli kept sneaking glances in Thorin’s and Bilbo’s direction. Thorin decided to ignore it for the time being; it was probably Bilbo’s opinion the boy was worried about anyway, and it’d be sorted out as soon as he did broach the subject with his uncle once again.

Fíli on the other hand was the very picture of serenity where he was sitting together with Ori, scribbling and talking about nothing in particular.

“They would have made a beautiful couple,” Bilbo murmured into Thorin’s ear, and the Hobbit snorted. It would seem that his husband’s matchmaking tendencies had not quite yet given up hope.

“And their children would have been lovely too,” Thorin agreed with a nod, lips quirking when Bilbo elbowed him lightly.

“They picked a fine time to choose their own paths in life,” Bilbo sighed. “One of them head over heels for an Elf, and one thinking that he’ll never fall in love. If they’re both right or if they’re both wrong, I’ll guess we’ll learn with time, Mahal willing.”

Thorin hummed in agreement, leaning against Bilbo’s side and turning his face up into the sun.

Despite that Baggins’ day was so close, and with it the onset of winter, it did not show in the weather that day. The sky was a clear, crystal blue, and the sun warmed rock spreading a sense of lethargy amongst the Company, Hobbit and Dwarf alike, heightened by the very fact that there was very little to do but wait.

Dwalin and Balin along with Glóin and Bombur had disappeared up to the hidden door, Balin muttering something about trying to get the magic to reveal the lock before the foretold time, and the rest of their group had more or less collapsed on the rocky slopes at the foot of the mountain.

Their stay with the Elves had perhaps not been very straining on their bodies, but they had still not been able to relax. Not that they allowed themselves to truly do so now, but there was still a difference in being together out beneath the open sky, on solid rock, and being inside the gloom of the Elves’ forest.

Nori and Dori were talking quietly in the way that meant they were quite possibly arguing but not
willing to admit it as Ori was around to hear it if they began shouting; however they were the only ones who seemed to have the energy for such things. Even Kíli stopped his furtive glancing after a while, relaxing into the rock with a contended smile and dropping off to sleep, one hand resting on the hilt of his blade.

Bilbo laughed quietly. “Please, dear heart, talk to me lest we fall asleep as well. Imagine if the Dragon picked this moment to exit the mountain again, only to stumble over us napping in the sun. Oh, and are you hungry?”

“You go from speaking about the Dragon finding us laid out as a spread breakfast to asking me if I’m hungry?” Thorin shook his head. “Bilbo, sometimes I wonder what exactly goes on in your mind. And thank you, but I’m not hungry.”

The Elven bread had just kept getting harder and harder to stomach, and even the dried meat seemed unappetizing. Perhaps the Elves might bring something else if they arrived the next day, to break the repetitiveness. They could hunt, but that would mean leaving the mountain or asking Kíli to shoot the few birds that occasionally beat their wings across the sky, and it seemed a shame to kill the only beings that had proved themselves resistant to the Dragon’s desolation.

“Did someone mention food?” Bofur asked, raising his head from where it’d been pillowed on his arms.

“If you’re going, bring me some,” Bilbo requested sweetly.

“So it was but a plot,” Thorin murmured. “But if you wanted me to bring you something to eat, you need only ask. As I said last night, anything you wish.”

“So you do remember that,” Bilbo smiled. “You looked to be more than half asleep still; your eyes wouldn’t quite focus. I rather expected you’d forget me as you did that dream of yours.”

“Never,” Thorin promised, leaning in to kiss Bilbo’s cheek. However when Bilbo sneakily turned his head it turned into to something rather more involved than that, and Thorin only remember that they were not alone when Bofur snorted and got to his feet.

“I can see that my company won’t be missed, so I will indeed get something to eat I think. And something for my King of course,” he added with a small bow. The miner then patted at his pockets. “You’ve got a water skin?”

“Afraid not,” Bilbo said and Thorin shook his head.

“Will be getting mine as well then,” Bofur mused, groaning as he stretched his arms above his head. “I think I’m only now starting to feel those days of being back on a horse again. Came creeping up on me it did. Unless…” He winked at Thorin. “It might just be sympathy pain for the bruises Dwalin gave you today. But fear not,” he added, looking to Bilbo. “Your husband fought valiantly even if he ended up flat on his arse more than once.”

“Thank you kindly for the retelling, Bofur,” Thorin said drily, sighing at the bright grin he got in return.

“Off with you then,” Bilbo laughed. “Before I give into temptation and ask just exactly what happened.”
“He already revealed the truth of it,” Thorin said with a sigh as Bofur trotted off after bowing gallantly to them both, tipping his hat with a flourish. “The ground and I got a little too acquainted, and a little too often.”

“We’ve never sparred together,” Bilbo said thoughtfully, and Thorin snorted.

“Nor will be do so today if you wish me to walk tomorrow.”

“I can think of better ways to render unable to walk,” Bilbo said, voice dropping to a low murmur and Thorin’s ears flushed.

“May I remind you that we’re in public,” Thorin muttered.

“I’m not doing anything,” Bilbo said innocently, immediately making a liar of himself by shuffling closer still, pressing their bodies firmly together from knee to shoulder.

“Bilbo.” Thorin raised an eyebrow.

“Thorin,” Bilbo replied brightly, laughing at the disgruntled expression on the Hobbit’s face. “I’m sorry, dear heart, but we are married and still fully clothed, so if I want to sit by your side I hope everyone will live through the shock of it all.”

“And your talk about making me unable to walk?” Thorin asked.

“Like this,” Bilbo said, nestling his arm around Thorin’s waist. “What did you think I meant?”

The look Thorin shot his husband was very much unimpressed, but he could not hold on to it for long when faced with bright hazel eyes and a teasing grin. With a sigh Thorin tipped his head onto Bilbo’s shoulder, fitting his arm around Bilbo’s waist in turn.

“Did you know that your eyes are as blue as the sky,” Bilbo murmured and Thorin tilted his head to look at him.

“And you shine as the sun,” Thorin said in the Dwarven tongue, delighting in how the hazel of Bilbo’s eyes darkened to a mossy green. Learning a second language definitely had some advantages that he never would have expected.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” Bilbo smiled, leaning in for a kiss, and Thorin glanced over towards the others, none of whom were even looking at them, before meeting Bilbo’s lips.

“You’re usually not so concerned with the others,” Bilbo remarked. “It’s nothing they’ve not seen before -”

“Unfortunately,” Kíli murmured, without opening his eyes.

“You’re supposed to be asleep,” Bilbo scolded his nephew.

“Someone talked about food,” Kíli complained. “My stomach woke me. And then my ears started burning most -”

His complaints were interrupted by Glóin storming down the mountainside, complaining beneath his breath about cousins’ who had too much hair in their ears to listen to sound advice. With a sigh Óin excused himself from the conversation he’d been having with Bifur and moved to follow his brother.
“It would seem that Balin’s attempts are so far unsuccessful,” Bilbo said with a small chuckle. “I would not be surprised if it turns out to be impossible to open the door before the time is right. It could be meant primarily as a way out, and if that’s the case then the magic will not let itself be rushed.”

“I mean no offence,” Thorin told his husband. “But this seems to be a rather inconvenient type of doorway. Though…” he paused. “I guess no one thought that the mountain could be taken, and the normal ways in lost.”

“Indeed not,” Bilbo sighed, stroking his hand over Thorin’s side. “My guess would be that this door was perhaps a test of sorts? Because as you say, what would be the use of having a door that only works properly once a year? A scholar’s experiment, or a student’s. Perhaps not someone’s test of Mastery though, because to wait a year to find out if you had passed or not seems very inconvenient.”

“Or they could just do the spell just before Baggins’ day,” Kíli said even as Thorin was nodding in agreement. “If it opens on that day but not before or after, they’d succeeded. What?” the young Dwarf asked in the ensuing silence. “Didn’t think of that?”

“Indeed not,” Bilbo said again, smiling at his nephew, and Kíli looked smug.

“It’s not just mum’s stunning good looks that I inherited, and on that note, I think I’ll go and find something to eat.”

“How is that even relevant?” Thorin asked, amused. Kíli gracefully got to his feet, shooting a grin down at them.

“Because, dear uncles, I’m hungry. Therefore it’s wise of me to go and get something to -”

“BILBO!”

Everyone on the mountainside turned in the direction of the shout. It was Glóin, and the auburn-haired Dwarf was running up the mountain, holding in his hand what looked to be a piece of cloth, Óin following at his heels.

“Bilbo! They’ve taken Bofur!”

“What?!” Kíli asked, eyes widening in shock.

“Taken?” Thorin murmured, getting to his feet as Bilbo also stood. “Who?” Was it the Elves? But to what purpose?

Panting Glóin skidded to a halt in front of the three of them. The rest of the company, excepting those up by the hidden door; and of course Bofur, quickly gathered around.

“A note,” Glóin huffed and waved the cloth. “From that Bard fellow. Telling us all to come to Lake-town. And Bofur, missing. Horses, we heard horses.”

Face grim Bilbo took the cloth and unfolded it to read the smudged writing. Thorin peered over his shoulder.
It had been written using charcoal, and more than a few of the letters were too smudged to read, but the main message was clear enough. If they wanted to see their friend again, the rest of the Company would present themselves in Lake-town within four days’ time.

“We’ll need to split up,” Nori said, breaking the heavy silence that had formed. “There’s not enough time for us to go to Lake-town and get back here before Baggins’ day. Not unless we learnt to fly.”

“Three days left,” Fíli murmured. “But the Elves are likely to arrive tomorrow.”

“If they come,” Glóin said, jaw clenched tight. “But still, I doubt it will be as simple as showing up and asking the Men to release our companion. And even if, that would still be cutting it close.”

“Are we sure that they will… do something to him, if we won’t show-up?” Dori asked hesitantly.

“We cannot leave him,” Bifur protested, looking aghast at Dori who grimaced apologetically, reaching out a hand towards Bifur, and they both looked equally upset when the warrior pulled away.

“Bifur, of course not,” Dori said. “But -”

“I’ll stay alone,” Thorin offered. “The rest of you can go.”

“No,” Bilbo shook his head. “But before this discussion moves further, we should get the others to join us.”

“Is that safe?” Kíli asked, looking around. “What if we’re being watched?”

“They’ll still not know why the others were up at the hollow,” Bilbo replied. “And if they’re watching now, they’ve been watching for quite some time before now as well.” The King looked towards Fíli. “Will you get them?”

Fíli nodded and started jogging up the mountain. Thorin watched him go with a frown on his face. This was a complication they had not needed.

“This is a fine mess,” Bilbo sighed once they were all gathered together - all except for Bofur - and explanations had been made. The King looked towards Balin. “My friend, I’ve always trusted your judgement, what do you say?”

“If you do not go to Lake-town, you will surely be missed,” Balin sighed. “Me? I did not speak up while the Men were here. It’s possible that they won’t notice that I’m missing. Or any of the others who also did not speak. And even if they do, what can they say? So we could split up. My guess is that they wish to speak to you, to try and convince you not to enter the mountain. You are the only one who truly needs to go.”

“They’ll definitely notice if Thorin is missing,” Fíli pointed out, and Thorin shot the Dwarf an annoyed look, but he was annoyed at himself as well, since if he hadn’t spoken so harshly to Bard before, he would also have been unlikely to be remembered.

“I should stay,” Thorin argued. “Even if they would notice that I’m missing and ride back to search for me, they won’t find me if I use my ring. What happens if Balin, or anyone else, stays only to be set-upon by the ones that were here before? If they’ve taken Bofur, they might take any of us, they
just need to wait for us to fall asleep.”

“There are only two of us who has ever set foot inside Erebor before, either Balin or myself should stay,” Bilbo said tiredly. “Not that I think the mountain should be explored, if we’re not all here, but just in case. However -” he added when Thorin was about to protest. “You make a valid point.”

“Balin knows the most about magic,” Ori piped in. “I mean, if something goes wrong with the door.”

“Thank you, lad,” Balin said with a wry smile. “I’m afraid it’s all theoretical though.”

“They would not be able to take me,” Dwalin growled. “And I could go without sleep for longer than a couple of days if I had to.”

“Aye,” Glóin agreed, coming to stand beside his cousin.

“We could st -” Fíli began, after exchanging a look with Kíli.

“No,” Bilbo, Dwalin, and Thorin chorused, and the boys deflated.

“I would be the best at hiding,” Nori reasoned. “If the Men come back. Because we don’t want them to find the door either.”

Unseen to Nori, but not to Thorin, both Dwalin’s and Dori’s knuckles turned white as they clenched their fists.

“But they’re sure to have noticed you when they were here before,” Bilbo tugged at a braid in frustration. “No, Balin and Thorin stay. The rest of us will head out, and if the Elves shows up tomorrow -” he looked to Thorin and Balin, “-you’ll send them after us. Hopefully they will hold some sway with the Men, and even if not, they will get us there faster.”

Reaching into his shirt Bilbo fished up the key that hung around his neck on its iron chain. Slowly he pulled it over his head, handing it to Balin who took it with reverence.

“My father used to say that as long as there’s life, there’s hope,” Bilbo said solemnly as Balin let the chain settle around his own neck. “We will not let this stop us.”

“Indeed not,” Balin replied, clasping his hand to Bilbo’s shoulder, and his words were echoes by the others. Thorin remained silent, his heart aching at the thought of being separated from Bilbo. That Bilbo needed to go, and that he should stay, it made sense, but it still made him feel deeply unsettled.

“I can’t say that my heart rejoices at the thought of being parted from you,” Bilbo murmured to Thorin as the others were preparing to leave. They were all gathered inside the broken front gates, the others packing up their bedrolls and most of the leftover food. “It seems to have happened much too often on this journey. And this time it would seem to be for the longest time yet.”

“But we will always find each other,” Thorin whispered, pressing their foreheads together. “You will come for me or I will come for you. No matter what happens.”

“Yes.” Bilbo closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“We’ll get the door open for you,” Thorin promised.
“I know you will,” Bilbo smiled. “But above that, be safe. And don’t upset the Elves too much when they arrive.”

Thorin pulled back to give his husband an unamused look. He had been planning on wearing his ring anyway, but still.

“I’m just saying that perhaps Balin should do the talking,” Bilbo said, cupping Thorin’s cheek to pull him in for a kiss. “I dare say he is slightly more diplomatic.”

“Slightly?” Thorin asked wryly.

“Slightly,” Bilbo nodded. “I love you.”

“Love you.” Thorin wrapped his arms around his husband. “And I think it’s you who should take extra care to safe. And make sure that the boys, or any of the others, do not do anything rash.” It was not Thorin who was about to head for a town of Men who might harbour nothing but ill will.

The Hobbit’s arms tightened around his husband as he, for the thousandth time since it was decided, questioned the wisdom of this decision.

“If they wanted to hurt us, they could just have attacked us. I believe Balin is right; they just want to stop us from entering the mountain. But I convinced the Elven King, this should be comparatively simple,” Bilbo’s arms tightened around Thorin in turn though. “So I say again, be careful.”

“I will put on my ring as you leave,” Thorin promised. “They won’t find me. I won’t fail you.”

“You never could,” Bilbo promised, stealing another small kiss before pulling back. Turning his head he called over to the others: “Ready?”

There were a chorus of agreements, coming much too quickly for them not to have been ready already, and Thorin frowned slightly. He didn’t much like that they had probably been watching them. What he and Bilbo had, it was private. It was theirs, and theirs alone. But this was hardly the time to dwell on such things.

Thorin and Balin stayed inside the gates as the others marched off, Thorin’s fist clenched tightly around his ring. He hated that Bilbo would go. It was almost a physical pain, and almost bad enough for him to call out, tell them that he’d changed his mind. He couldn’t though. He needed to stay.

“Don’t worry, lad,” Balin said quietly, patting Thorin’s shoulder. “Things will work out.”

“Forgive me,” Thorin said darkly. “But if it was as simple as just saying that, then there would be little wrong with the world. I’m putting my ring on now,” he added when it seemed Balin would argue. “I’m not sure if you will hear me after that.” He couldn’t actually remember if he had ever tried to speak to someone while cloaked by the ring’s magic, and the Elves had not heard him walking... But he assumed he would now find out if it worked.

“Well, I certainly can’t see you,” Balin murmured as Thorin vanished. “Say something then.”

“Oh, something,” Thorin said sardonically.

“Come again?” Balin asked, cupping his hand behind his ear. “I’m afraid the derision drowned out the actual word.”
“Funny,” Thorin said wryly. He wasn’t sure if this was good news or not. It would have been hard to communicate with Balin if the Dwarf had been unable to hear him, but this also meant that he would have to take extra care to be quiet as he ventured into the mountain, if the ring wouldn’t aid him. It also called into question the capability of the Elven guards, but then again, Thorin’s opinion of them hadn’t been that high to begin with.

“Ah, so you do recognize that word,” Balin mused. “Cheer up now, lad. We’ll be with them again before we know it. Of that I’m sure.”

“I hope you are right, Balin,” Thorin murmured. “I really do.”

The Elves arrived at noon the next day, Thorin, still wearing his ring kept some distance to them, not sure if the horses would be spooked by the smell of someone they couldn’t see.

The guard captain was with them, which was curious as this was intended to be nothing more than a supply run, but if that meant that Kíli was right, or simply that the Elven King wanted someone he trusted to keep an eye on them… that would have to wait for another time.

“Greetings,” Balin said as he walked up to the Elves as they dismounted. “I have a favour to ask of you, on behalf of my king.”

“And where is he?” the captain, Tauriel, asked as she gathered her horse’s reins in one hand.

“He and the others are headed towards the town on the long lake,” Balin explained. “One of our number was taken by the Men; the rest followed to demand his release.”

“Why would the Men of Lake-town take one of you?” one of the other Elves asked, and Thorin took advantage of being unseen to roll his eyes.

“They seem to think that our attempts to gain back our home should be hindered,” Balin said, with an admirable lack of accusation in his voice.

“What favour do you ask then?” Tauriel demanded, brows furrowed in something that could be concern, or simple annoyance.

“The Men asked that we present ourselves within a time limit,” Balin explained. “My King asked that I request that you ride after them, and help them arrive in Lake-town well within the time given.”

“Are you not coming then?” Tauriel asked, and Balin shook his head.

He and Thorin had discussed what they should reply to this, because it was fairly given that the Elves would wonder why someone would remain even after passing on the request for aid. In the end they had agreed on something that was both true, and which would be hard to argue with.

“My King asked that I would stay. So if you would leave some provisions, I would be much obliged.”

“A moment,” Tauriel said, before turning to her companions, saying something in the Elven tongue.
After a short, but fairly spirited discussion, two of the Elves began unpacking the supplies their horses had carried. The captain and a dark-haired Elf had been the two most vocal debaters, seemingly having the most opposing opinions, but Thorin was not sure which of the two had won as both now affected a blank expression.

“Four of us will ride towards Lake-town,” Tauriel explained. “Two will return to tell King Thranduil of what has happened. I’m would not be surprised if he sent out additional guards, in honour of our alliance, so if you change your mind, make sure to remain in this area when they ride by.”

“I thank you, Captain,” Balin said with a short bow, and Thorin had to admit that Bilbo might have a point regarding certain diplomatic skills, or lack thereof. He could admit that if he had been the one to speak there would probably have been a little more yelling happening.

The Elves then mounted their horses again, two riding back west, and the other four riding towards the Mannish settlement. Thorin and Balin looked after them until they had disappeared from view, and as they did so, Balin sighed.

“Come on then, my unseen friend; let’s see what they left for us. If we’re unlucky we’ll be here for a while.”

“If it’s just more of their bread I might do something rash when the other Elves ride by,” Thorin muttered, following Balin as he went to collect the packs.

The next two days passed in somewhat of a blur. They saw neither hide nor hair of any others, except for when a dozen Elves galloped by. Undoubtedly these were the ones the captain had said would come, because they slowed just as they were passing the mountain; when Balin didn’t show, they turned their horses south and east.

Thorin still wore his ring, even though Balin often protested how it was mighty disturbing not to know for sure if he was talking to Thorin or just to himself.

If they were being watched, it was better that the Men - or Elves, because Thorin still didn’t quite trust them - thought that Balin was slightly addled than knowing that he was not alone.

Nothing would stop Thorin from opening the door; he would not let Bilbo down.

Balin tried to make the time pass by speaking more about the Dragon, and Dragons in general. But despite knowing that it was important Thorin had trouble focusing. This was the longest time he and Bilbo had been separated since their departure from the Shire, and it didn’t sit well with the Hobbit.

He slept badly, had even less appetite than he’d had the last few days; only the fresh fruit and vegetables the Elves had brought seemed palatable, and gradually his replies to Balin’s questions became more and more monosyllabic. He could see that this worried the Dwarf, but there was little he could do about it. There was nothing wrong with him after all. Quite honestly he knew that he was being silly, pining like a tween, but it seemed that nothing would shake the gloom that had settled over him. Not to mention that there was a real worry in not knowing how the Bilbo and the others were being treated. At least the Elves would probably be good for that much, but at the same time it was worrying that none of them had been sent back by Bilbo to report.

When the sunset on Baggins’ day finally came, they still hadn’t gotten any news from the others, and Thorin’s mood had not improved. As Glóin had said, it was unlikely that it would be as simple as
just showing up and collecting Bofur, but the complete lack of news worried the Hobbit. He hoped that the Elves had just refused to be treated like pigeons; it seemed like something they would do.

“Thorin?” Balin asked and the Hobbit sighed.

“Still here.” Where else would he be.

“You might take the ring off now, lad. I hardly think anyone is going to see you up here, and should someone come we’ll hear them.”

They both stood in front of the smooth stone that would hopefully soon reveal itself as the door into the mountain, so Balin’s words were true enough. Still, Thorin found himself rather reluctant to do so. What if someone did come? He couldn’t fail Bilbo.

However, he knew Balin had a point, and nothing they’d seen in the last few days seemed to indicate that any of the Men - or Elves - was still sneaking around the mountain. And he could always just don the ring again.

Balin tutted as Thorin let the ring slip from his finger. “You look dreadful. Haven’t you’ve been sleeping at all?”

“I’ve slept,” Thorin replied, not bothering to give a more detailed explanation.

“I’m sure,” Balin said, sounding unconvinced.

“The key?” Thorin prompted and Balin pulled the chain over his head.

“‘The setting sun with the last light of Baggins’ Day will shine upon the key-hole’,” Balin quoted as he ran his fingers over the length of the key. “It won’t be long now.”

Thorin looked back, towards the horizon and the setting sun and nodded in agreement.

When it did happen, it was remarkably undramatic.

The sky was red and gold, the sun a shining disc disappearing beneath the horizon even as the slim, barely there, crescent of autumn’s last moon rose to proclaiming the Dwarven new year, and Baggins’ Day.

Balin and Thorin both started as a bird flew in from above, carrying in its beak a snail. The bird paid little attention to the two of them, instead hopping up towards the wall, striking the snail against it with the intention to crack the shell.

At the third strike, the sun sunk far enough that its rays reached the stone wall, and there was a sharp crack, and then suddenly there was a keyhole, looking as if it’d been there all along.

With hands that trembled slightly Balin hastened to press the key inside, making the bird squawk with outrage at being disturbed, and as the Dwarf turned the key there was another crack, and a small clicking sound, and the outlines of a doorway became visible. Ignored, the bird took the snail in its beak once more and flew off to seek a more peaceful spot.

“Help me open it,” Balin said, his voice carrying the same tremor as his hands.
Together the Hobbit and Dwarf pushed at the stone until it gave way and opened fully to reveal the way into the mountain, into Erebor. The shadows were dark, but to Thorin they almost seemed… inviting.

“Wait,” Balin said as Thorin moved to enter. “We should wait until the others are back.”

“I just want to have a look,” Thorin argued. “If the Dragon is dead -”

“Then it will be just as dead in a week’s time, should it come to that,” Balin said firmly.

Thorin looked towards the dark gateway. He wanted to go inside. He wanted to see the place which would become his home. He wanted to see where Bilbo had been born and where he’d grown up. He didn’t want to wait for however long it would take for them to convince the people of Lake-town that they were being quite ridiculous. If the Dragon was dead he wanted to be able to bring the news to the others, make them see at once how stupid the Men were, how stupid the Elves had been.

“Balin,” Thorin said, putting his hand on the Dwarf’s arm. “You can’t tell me that you truly wish to wait. If I find myself with an urge to see the halls of Erebor, touch the stone walls and walk upon the smooth floors, then I would assume that your urge is certainly no less great. We can’t leave for Lake-town, if we leave the door like this anyone could come, and if we close it, we might not be able to open it. Are you telling me that we should just remain here? Doing nothing?”

“I -” Balin hesitated. “We shouldn’t.”

“What harm can it do?” Thorin asked. “At most I will take a peek into the treasure chambers, just to see if the Dragon is there, if it still lives. No more. Bilbo wanted you to stay, the only one apart from himself who has walked the halls of Erebor. We won’t explore, that can wait, but we have to look. And you can show me the way.”

“All right,” the old Dwarf sighed. “But remove your armour first, and I will remove mine. There’s bound to be damage caused by the Dragon, and if we would happen to take a tumble it would definitely make enough noise to wake a Dragon even from the deepest of sleep, and…” he hesitated.

“Yes?” Thorin prompted.

“Armour won’t do much good against a Dragon anyway,” Balin finished reluctantly. “Thorin, lad, I think we should perhaps wait after all.”

“Even if the others were here, all of you wouldn’t be able to help me anyway, should it come to that,” Thorin said calmly. “It is my task to go and see if there Dragon is here, and if it is still alive. But I will remove my armour, and take some of the water as well, just in case.” His sword he would take with him though, also just in case.

“Just in case,” Balin echoed, but he did not protest further, and in his eyes, Thorin saw the same kind of longing that he was sure to find mirrored in his own; greater even, because this had been Balin’s home once, just at it had been Bilbo’s, and now it would be again, Thorin would make sure of that. He would earn his own right to stay.

The passage down into the mountain was dark, but the floor was smooth and the path straight. Thorin and Balin each pressed a palm to the wall, Thorin picking the left one and Balin the right, and slowly they made their way down. After a while Thorin put on his ring again, and the world grew the slightest bit brighter, allowing him to see the path before them. As such he almost didn’t notice
when a slight glow from further down the tunnel became visible, thinking it only to be the ring’s magic.

“Thorin, stop,” Balin whispered, and Thorin turned his head to see the Dwarf peering further down the tunnel with narrowed eyes. “There’s light ahead.”

“Stay here,” Thorin replied quietly. “Go further back up, even; I’ll investigate and return to you. If you don’t hear me coming, be sure not to yell.”

“Careful,” Balin whispered, reaching out a hand to search for Thorin’s shoulder, but knowing how touch felt while wearing his ring Thorin moved away and pretended not to see it.

As noiselessly as possible, Thorin crept further down the tunnel. Now he could also clearly see that the dark had grown lighter again, and it also felt warmer. There was also a low thrum of noise, a mix between thunder and the steady gurgling of a great pot of boiling soup. Not long after noticing the sound, Thorin saw the end of the tunnel; an opening much the same shape and size as the one Balin and he had entered.

A hand on one of the bottles tied to his belt, the other on the hilt of his sword, Thorin slowly peeked through the doorway.

At first the Hobbit could almost not understand what he was seeing. But a second look did indeed confirm what Thorin had seen. The pathway had led him straight into the treasure chambers. There would be no need for Balin to guide him there after all.

Everywhere he looked piles and piles of gems and gold gleamed and sparkled, only with the silver-grey shine that everything was given by the ring. There were literal mountains of precious things, and the room stretched away further than even Thorin could see. Something he couldn’t see though, was the Dragon. At least not at first…

His first clue was that that both the light and the noise seemed to come from a particular point in the vast chamber, and as Thorin narrowed his eyes; peering into the grey and silver darkness, he could see the faint gleam of scales beneath the brighter shine from the gold. The beast had buried itself beneath its stolen treasure, but now that Thorin knew where to look he could see it quite clearly.

It was curled around one of the stone pillars holding up the roof, and of such a massive size that Thorin again almost couldn’t believe what he was seeing. But no, there was the point of the tail, and the line of its back. And over there, the massive bulk of its body only barely covered by the gold, leading to the smaller – though still giant – bulge that was sure to be the beast’s head.

Yes, Thorin could now see two nostrils peaking up from the piles of treasure. It seemed even Dragons could not breathe gold. Perhaps… perhaps he could manage to throw the water into one of the nostrils. And that should work just as well as swallowing; trying to learn how to swim had certainly told him that it was possible to swallow using his nose. He would need to get a lot closer though.

Too focused on remaining quiet as he tiptoed back up into the tunnel, Thorin missed the faint, melodic noise of gold coins tumbling over each other as a giant golden eye blinked open.

“...The Dragon is asleep,” Thorin hissed to Balin once he’d walked far enough back up the tunnel to
find the Dwarf again. “And this could be the best opportunity we have to -”

“Thorin, Bilbo didn’t want -”

“He would change his mind had he seen what I’ve seen,” Thorin argued. “The beast is asleep, curled around a pillar, if I climb the pillar I should be able to throw the water down onto its muzzle, and while it likely won’t go into its mouth, it should work just as well to aim for its nose.”

“And then what?” Balin whispered, eyes blinking rapidly in effort to win over the darkness in the tunnel. Not that it mattered as Thorin was still wearing his ring. “What if it does not work?”

“Then it won’t find me,” Thorin said, trying to appear confident. “It won’t know that I’m on the pillar, and I can wait until -”

“It might smell you,” Balin hissed. “And what then.”

“We won’t find a perfect plan,” Thorin said quietly. “No matter how long we wait the beast is unlikely to position itself with open jaws and swallow politely as we dump a barrel of the river water in its maws.”

“Thorin, if something happens to you, Bilbo will never forgive me,” Balin said while looking as old as Thorin had ever seen him. “And neither will I forgive myself.”

Unseen in the darkness, Thorin smiled, it was a faint smile, and a sad one, and had Balin been able to see it, what happened next might have turned out different. “He will. And so will you.” With that Thorin stretched out the finger he had wetted in one of the bottles he carried, placing it on Balin’s mouth, wincing slightly at the touch of skin on skin. It felt like ants crawling over him.

“What-?” the Dwarf asked, reflexively licking his lips, and that was all he had time to say before slumping over, Thorin catching him with a low grunt as the weight was heavier then he’d estimated, even without the armour, and then he winced again because just as before, touching another while wearing his ring carried with it a sense of wrongness even through clothes. But he gritted his teeth, and by pressing Balin up against the wall Thorin then managed to ease him down on the tunnel floor in a fairly dignified manner.

“You had no choice,” Thorin murmured as he sat crouched next to his sleeping friend. “And Bilbo won’t blame you for my actions. And hopefully, not himself either, should this not go as planned.”

With that, Thorin straightened back up again, and after checking that he’d securely sealed the bottle again, he once more headed down towards the treasure chamber.

If a drop was enough to put Balin to sleep, then two bottles would be enough to put the Dragon to sleep for long enough for Thorin to make the trek outside again for more of the water. And then, he could kill it. Smaug was one of the last Dragons in existence; the rest had all been slain, so it had to be possible to kill this one as well. It was just a matter of finding the right way of going about it, and that was what Thorin was about to do. For his husband.

It would always have come down to this anyway. As he’d told Balin it was not like the Dragon would have volunteered to get itself killed. And now, at least Thorin knew that Bilbo was well away from the mountain, should anything go wrong. By now they were sure to have arrived in Lake-town. And Balin was far enough up the tunnel that Smaug would not be able to reach him, and as he was sleeping he would not be able to do something foolish.
No, Thorin thought as he once again saw the end of the tunnel. This was the best of the possible solutions. He was always destined to have to do this alone, and were something to go wrong now, he alone would bear the cost of it.

So intent was Thorin on remaining quiet that it wasn’t until he began making his way towards the pillar that he realised that something was amiss. At first he thought that he’d headed towards the wrong pillar - after all, there were plenty of the thick, massive columns reaching up towards the ceiling - but that was not it. The piles of gold did not look different because Thorin was heading in the wrong direction; they looked different because something had disturbed them.

As soon as he’d come to that realisation Thorin also noticed that the thundering noise from before was now missing. The Dragon had moved. It had woken up.

The thought made the Hobbit stop cold. He was standing in the middle of a sea of golden coins, and it now seemed to him that each breath he took caused the gold beneath his feet to shift and make noise. To a sleeping Dragon this would hardly have been noticeable as it had been the cause of plenty of noise itself, but now…

And where had the beast gone?

Slowly Thorin turned around and began making his way back to the tunnel, taking care to step as lightly as possible. He had only a short distance left to go when the air was filled with a rolling, booming voice.

“Who dares come into my home? Who dares!?”

Thorin just barely managed to scramble backwards in time to avoid the sweep of the Dragon’s tail.

“I can smell you,” the Dragon hissed, as Thorin tumbled to the ground, thankfully unseen as his landing was impossible to separate from the flow of coins that the Dragon had been the cause of. “I feel your air, thief.”

“It is you who is the thief,” Thorin called, biting his tongue as soon as he’d spoken the last word. Stupid. Quickly he bent down to grab a handful of coins, throwing them in one direction while he ran in the other. Unfortunately he could not head towards the tunnel as the beast’s tail blocked that path. Instead Thorin headed towards the nearest pillar, figuring that his best bet was to get himself away from the treasure that would continue to give away his position.

“I can smell you,” the Dragon hissed. “I felt a draft before; tell me who you are. Who it is that I am about to devour.”

Jaws clenched tight, Thorin reached down to push at a large silver shield, making it slide down into a pile of goblets with a large clang, and they in turn continued to bump into other objects. He didn’t dare to turn around; he only hoped that it was enough of a distraction to keep the focus away from himself. The pillar was only a short distance away now, and after a few more seconds Thorin had reached it and began climbing up its side, quietly thanking the ones who had carved it for bothering to make all sorts of decoration that now provided ample foot and handholds.

“I don’t know your scent,” the Dragon muttered darkly, and now half-way up the pillar Thorin finally dared to look at the beast once again. The huge golden eyes scanned the room, but it didn’t
seem to be looking at the pillar Thorin clung to, not more than it looked at anything else. “But you also smell of Dwarfs, the greedy little pests.”

Biting his tongue Thorin managed to pull himself up to a slight ledge on the pillar, only as wide as the length of his feet. It too was littered with golden coins, and he winced each time he caused one of them to fall, sure that any of them would be enough for the Dragon find him.

“And -” the Dragon sniffed. “Of Elves too, how curious. But at the same time not so. Everyone wants to steal from me. Yesss, there is the smell of Men as well, as I thought. You are all in this together, aren’t you?”

The Dragon, in a motion oddly graceful for such an impossible huge creature, moved further into the treasure chambers, leaving the path to the tunnel open once more. Thorin knew better than to attempt it though. The moment he sat a foot on the ground, the Dragon would have a greatly improved chance of finding him, same if he spoke. He tried to remember everything that Balin had told him, about not giving the Dragon his name, about how they enjoyed mind games, and how they could enchant anyone if you stared into their eyes. Saying nothing and keeping hidden seemed to be a good way of avoiding all of those things.

“But the smell of Dwarf is the strongest,” the Dragon declared, voice rumbling from somewhere beyond Thorin’s sight, filled with distaste. “How much have they promised you to come here? Are they waiting outside, eager for you to bring them my gold? I’ve almost a mind to let you try. Just look at it. It’s far vaster than one pair of thieving hands can ever carry. You smell of horse as well, but you would need all the horses on Arda to carry my treasure away.”

Thorin’s hands tightened on the pillar as the Dragon’s head suddenly appeared to his right, almost at the exact height that he was standing. It was close, perhaps close enough for Thorin to attempt to throw one of the bottles at it.

“But perhaps, you have been promised something else…” the Dragon said slowly, thoughtfully. It sniffed again. “One of them is your lover. Yesss, that is what I smell.” Suddenly the Dragon’s eyes narrowed. “You might think that you’re doing this for love, but I know that it is just greed. Everyone wants to steal from me. Everyone. The Men tried and tried, and I do not think that they have stopped wanting, but perhaps they have decided to change their method. It has been quite some time since I discovered one of them in my nest. Perhaps…”

Thorin cringed as the bottle he’d just thrown smashed uselessly against the treasure below, Smaug having turned his head at the last moment. The only good to come out of it, was that he’d turned his head away from Thorin, so he couldn’t be quite sure where the bottle had been thrown from.

“Poison?” Smaug asked mildly, peering down at the water trickling down towards the floor somewhere below the layers of treasure. “And such a pitiful amount of it. I hope you have more. You might want to consider saving some for yourself.”

The Dragon suddenly smiled, and it was possibly the most horrible thing Thorin had ever seen.

“Yesss,” it repeated. “That’s what I’ll do, little thief. I will leave you here, and instead I will go outside, to find that lover of yours. It has been quite some time since I last ate, and Dwarfs never go anywhere alone, it is not in their nature. Like the pests they are they constantly move in packs and hordes. So they’ll make a fine meal. But their kind is small. And you smell of Elf and Man as well, so they will make my dessert. The Men’s cattle won’t be enough to sate me now. But don’t worry; I will save your love for last. So he and you will both know that you’ve failed.”
“No,” Thorin whispered, because even if Smaug would find no one outside the mountain, that would only mean that sooner or later he would turn his attention towards the Mannish town, and there he would find Bilbo. Even if he went to the Elves first that would mean nothing; Bilbo would not do what they had done all those years ago. To honour their alliance he would try his outmost to help them, even if it meant his own death.

“Oh, yesss,” Smaug hissed, turning his head towards Thorin, his eyes still searched, moving to and fro’ and it was clear that he was still not certain where exactly the intruder was, but it mattered little. He had him right where he wanted.

Once again the Dragon inhaled deeply. “I smell your fear, and it’s sweet. Will your lover be as delicious, little thief? I think so. And there is nothing you can do to stop me!”

- everything and anything… use me.

As Smaug turned to leave, he began to laugh and the sound finally broke Thorin out of his frozen state. He had to do something. Anything. Unthinkingly he untied the other bottle from his side, and threw it after the beast. This time he didn’t miss, but the bottle only struck the side of the Dragon’s jaw, none of the water entering its mouth.

“You will need to think of something else,” Smaug mocked as he leisurely turned his head to face Thorin once more. “Perhaps by the time I get back you will have thought of something. A blade perhaps? You can help me clean between my teeth. Does your love wear armour? That has the tendency to -”

Something in Thorin abruptly snapped.

“You will not touch him!” he growled, and the Dragon paused briefly.

“It speaks!” it exclaimed with feigned surprise. “Tell me, little thief, any last words then, for your lover’s ears?” It didn’t bother waiting for a reply, instead continuing on towards the far end of the chamber.

…use me…

“Stop!” Thorin roared, and the Dragon did stop. At first Thorin thought that the beast only did it to make more taunts, or perhaps to change its mind and turn back to kill him first, but then Smaug growled, and it was a sound filled with rage.

"What have you done to me?"

…use… me…

Thorin stared in shock at the Dragon as it seemed unable to move even a single claw forward. The beast’s great muscles tensed, twitched and strained, it was clear that it tried to move, nevertheless, it remained where it was. Eyes widening, the Hobbit stared down at his hand, at the ring that sat so innocently on his finger.

He thought back to the spider in Mirkwood, how he had told it to stop, and how it had done so. He had thought it had only stopped out of surprise, but…

And the Elves! They had not heard him, or seen him, walking through their hallways even though Balin had no issue hearing him speaking, and even though Dwalin had seen his shadow while they
had battled Azog.

The only real difference was that when in Mirkwood, as the guards had been close, Thorin had been thinking - as loudly as he could - that he wasn’t there. That there was no one for them to find, to hear, to see. He had been -

“You will pay for this!” the Dragon shrieked, and if it would have been able to move its head, that would have been the end of Thorin, because from its mouth a huge burst of flames spilled, hot enough for Thorin to feel the heat of it, even from where he stood well behind the Dragon’s middle.

“Stop,” he commanded, not even raising his voice this time, but the flames died down, leaving in their wake molten bubbling gold that slowly spread over the floor.

“Do you think you can use magic against one such as me,” the Dragon spat. “Me! I will unravel your pathetic spells, and then I will tear the flesh from your bones and crush them. You will be but a pile of smoking ash when I am done with you. And then I will feast on your loved ones.”

“You will do no such thing,” Thorin told him, rubbing his thumb against the side of his ring, and unseen to all, especially to himself, his eyes glimmered gold for the briefest of moments.

Chapter End Notes

YES CLIFFHANGER! I AM EVIL! *runs off cackling*

*slinks back* If I might take a moment to be more mature, thank you for reading. I've seen that the number of subscribers on this thing keeps increasing which is amazing, as does kudos and bookmarks. So, thank you peeps :) Hope you liked this chapter as much as I did.
Peeps! I'd like to share with you that I am doing the Hobbit Big Bang And you should too!

At least he could say that he’d had worse days. Though perhaps that was bad in and of itself; that the worst thing to happen to him had been worse than being kidnapped by a group of Men who seemed to think Dwarfs should be trussed up like rabbits and carried off on horses. At least they’d not gone for the even more undignified bag approach. (Yes, almost being eaten by Trolls, that had been worse.)

It was bloody well fortunate for the Men that they’d not picked someone like Dwalin or Bifur, or one of the lads even. Any one of them never would have accepted being slung over a horse like a bag of potatoes, and probably would have ended up taking a tumble off said horse while trying to do something about it. And while that would have been unfortunate enough for the Dwarf in question considering the risk of getting trampled to death by one of the other horses, the Men would not have appreciated what would happen when Bilbo eventually found out what had happened. Or when Nori found out. Because while Bilbo might hesitate to ask Nori to kill for him, Bofur didn’t think that Bilbo would really need to ask. Nori would kill for Dwalin; that Bofur didn’t doubt. And it seemed like Bifur and Dori were growing ever closer, so he probably would have considered that to merit revenge as well. And everyone loved the lads; there was no getting around that. So all in all, it was quite fortunate that someone as sensible as he had been taken, Bofur concluded. No need to start a war.

On that note, it was also quite fortunate that these Men didn’t really seem to host any real ill will towards him, or the others. If they had been thus inclined then surely he would have suffered worse than being jostled around on the horse. Especially since his stupid mouth wouldn’t stop pointing out how ridiculous this plan of theirs was. Really, he’d tried to shut up, but his thoughts, naturally enough, kept returning to his predicament. And it really was a bloody stupid plan.

It was so incredibly ill-advised, and he hadn’t really been able to stop himself from pointing it out until his throat started to ache from the long periods of trying to speak loud enough to drown out the
sound of horses running.

No, the Men seemed more… nervous, or even scared, than anything else. (Though right after he’d stopped shouting at them they had seemed relieved enough.)

The haunted look in their eyes was perhaps the main reason Bofur hadn’t continued to struggle once he realised that they’d tied him up well enough that getting out of the ropes would require a small miracle. While he was just as stubborn as the rest of the Company, he admittedly didn’t fancy trying to make his way back to the others by squirming. And beyond that, fear had a funny way of making people make all sorts of bad decisions. Falling off the horse really didn’t sound like a good idea, and if he tried to sneak (squirm) his way in the night… they seemed jumpy enough to not make that a good idea either. He knew from personal experience that once it got dark, a great deal of things seemed a lot more threatening than during the day. And that bow Bard carried seemed awfully capable of making unfortunate holes in people.

At least his show of cooperation seemed to work slightly in his favour. As the Men prepared to break camp after a night that Bofur had actually been able to sleep through - there was there was obviously some advantage to not having to listen to Bombur and Glóin snoring - their leader, the one called Bard, crouched next to where Bofur was sitting. Or sitting might be giving what he was doing too much credit. He was basically propped up by a bunch of packs and saddle bags as the way he was bound didn’t really work in the favour of sitting without the aid of a backrest.

“Thank you,” the Man murmured. “For not making this worse than it has to be.”

“Well, I can’t say that I see why it has to at all be this way,” Bofur pointed out. “I’m not sure what you hope to accomplish with this.”

They didn’t know about the fairly narrow time frame the Company operated in. If they thought that they could keep them from entering the mountain for all the coming time, then Bofur would have to assume that they were all a fair bit bonkers.

“I wish to discuss matters with your King,” Bard said, his face blank. And Bofur took a moment to thank Mahal that they’d the Men had not been foolish - or from their perspective lucky - enough to have taken Bilbo.

While Bilbo was able to talk most people into doing what he wanted (all those mothballs on the council must make for good practice) and as such would probably be doing a better job than he was of convincing Bard that he was being an idiot, there was still the small matter of what Thorin, Dwalin, Glóin, Fíli, Kíli, Dori, and so on would have thought was a fitting response to the kidnapping. Not the best of thinkers those, not when it came to the people they loved. It probably would have been up to him, Balin, and Nori to try and stop them from doing something rash.

“If you wanted a chat with Bilbo, I think there’re easier ways of going about that.” Bofur shrugged, feeling the rope chafe slightly against his wrists. “Could have brought a bit of tea and biscuits, invited us for a picnic.”

“At the foot of the mountain where all our doom sleeps?” Bard shook his head. “No I could not. You do not understand what you are doing, tempting fate like you are.”

“That puts us on equal footing then,” Bofur said drily, before he could think better of it. “Really, what do you think Bilbo will say? Compliment you on your Dwarf-napping skills and then promise never to try and take Erebor back, ever again?”
Considering that Bilbo wasn’t likely to show up until after they’d gotten the door open that would be a moot promise anyway. He’d be likely to send Balin, maybe Dwalin as well to be properly threatening, and with them the promise to show up himself. In a couple of days or so. Or maybe they could try sending the Elves? Men liked Elves, didn’t they?

“We lost Dale, just as you lost your home; we manage to live without it, so can you.”

Not wanting to get into the whole explanation of how he wasn’t really one of Erebor’s people and had always been able to do just fine without it (but how that wasn’t really the point), Bofur just shook his head. “So if you could get Dale back, you’d not take that chance?”

“Not as long as the Dragon lives,” Bard said shortly. “What use is a home, if there is no one left alive to live in it?”

“Dragons are flesh and blood, like anything else,” Bofur argued. “They can be killed. Everything that bleeds can be killed.”

“However, some things are far better at killing.” With that, Bard rose to his feet again and moved to saddle his horse.

Bofur sighed and followed the Man with his gaze as he went. Yeah, this would be so much fun. Or not.

The Dwarf swore softly when he could feel himself beginning to lilt sidewise, one of the packs supporting him having slipped. And he also needed to pass water. Brilliant. Well, perhaps that would at least give him another angle on explaining to Bard why this plan was so ridiculous.

They arrived in Lake-town late that same day, though perhaps late enough that it was technically not the same day. Riding in the dark, especially whilst lying on a horse, was not enjoyable; despite the fact of the Men and their horses seeming sure of the best paths to take, it only took one rabbit hole to send you flying. Still, in spite of everything else, Bofur was happy to have arrived at their destination. Even if it smelled like fish.

“See you in the morning,” Bard said, and Bofur had a moment to wonder if he was included or if it was just the other Men, but then Bard stopped right in front of the horse that he was lying on.

“If you untie my legs, I can walk,” Bofur pointed out as Bard hoisted him over his shoulders. “You’ve all got much longer legs than me. You’d catch me if I tried to run.”

“Does that mean that you’d not try and run, or that you just believe that you would be caught?”

“Lovely weather we’re having,” Bofur grinned, and Bard sighed.

“I’m not sure if you’re being honest with me, or just pretending to be honest about telling me that you’d run away so I would trust you not to, thereby giving you the opportunity to actually do so.”

“That sounds very complicated,” Bofur pointed out. “And if I tell you that I’d run away, to get you to trust me so I’d be able to run away, wouldn’t that basically be the same thing as being honest?”
“Sometimes lies can be frighteningly honest,” Bard muttered.

“And sometimes truths can fool you,” Bofur agreed, shifting slightly to try and make himself more comfortable over Bard’s shoulder. “Are we headed somewhere far away?”

“No.”

Well, that was certainly not the most information-filled answer ever, and Bofur sighed. He was really quite sick of getting captured. Trolls, Goblins, Elves, and perhaps even Orcs depending on how you counted that ‘being stuck in a tree’ bit. And now Men. That was definitely most of the sentient races on Arda. Sadly it wouldn’t give him a lot of bragging rights.

They, or rather Bard, had walked for just a few minutes when a rat-like man appeared from the shadows. He didn’t look trustworthy at all, but at least he didn’t look to be carrying a weapon. And he was a bit too finely dressed for an assassin anyway. Wouldn’t be practical trying to get blood out of that wool coat.

“Bard,” this Man said with an impressive amount of disdain loaded into that one syllable. “The Master wants to see you.”

“I would have thought that he was sleeping this time of night,” Bard replied, without bothering to stop. “I hear a full stomach needs plenty of time to settle down to prepare itself for breakfast.”

“He sent me to collect you,” the smaller Man persisted.

“I assume he did so many hours ago. I hope it’s not been too uncomfortable for you. At least it’s not raining.”

“Speaking about uncomfortable,” Bofur said, tired of being ignored. “Hello, I’m Bofur. And uncomfortable.”

None of the Men paid any attention to him, and Bofur considered kicking Bard. Sure, he wasn’t Bilbo or Dwalin and Balin all of whom people automatically paid attention to, but it would be nice if they would at least pretend to be aware of his existence.

“I’ll go to the Master first thing in the morning, Alfrid,” Bard stated, nodding at the other Man. “Good night.”

“At dawn!” Alfrid exclaims.

“I wish you the best of luck if you wake him that early,” Bard said over his shoulder, the one Bofur was not currently occupying, as they turned around a corner and left the little rat-like Man behind.

“The Master, eh?” Bofur asked, remembering what Bilbo had said in Mirkwood about the Man in charge of Lake-town being greedy and unreliable. So far nothing had been said to disprove that information.

“Not a subject up for discussion,” Bard said shortly.

“Just going to say that he seems like a lovely fellow. Has to be to be able to stand being around that one, Alfrid did you say? I’ve seen slugs with more of a spine.”

Bofur grinned at the slight snort that Bard hadn’t been able to repress, but wisely chose not to
comment on it.

A short time after that, Bard stopped outside a low wooden fence.

“I hope I can trust you enough to be quiet,” the man said as he unlatched the gate.

“Um, sure?” Bofur tilted his head in an attempt to get a look at the Man’s face. “’s not like screaming is going to help I guess. But why?”

“Considering the hour, the children are likely asleep.

The shock from that statement stilled Bofur’s tongue until they were actually inside the small house, and Bard had lifted him into a worn armchair.

“You are joking?” Bofur hissed, eyes opened wide in astonishment. “You’ve got little ones?”

“What’s so -”

“You don’t bring people you’ve kidnapped back home to your family.”

To Bofur’s surprise, the Man actually smiled slightly. It was the first time he’d seen him looking anything but stern, and to Bofur’s surprise he realised that Bard was likely a great deal younger than he’d first assumed.

“Got much experience with that then?” Bard asked. “The business of kidnapping I mean.”

“If you think I do, then you definitely should not have brought me here.” Bofur’s arms strained against the rope as he tried to wave them around. This definitely merited some angry arm waving, and it was certainly no laughing matter. “The others, who were with you, don’t anyone one of them have a place with a conveniently located roof?”

“You’re my responsibility,” Bard said, shrugging one shoulder.

“Your responsibility should be your family,” Bofur pointed out. By Mahal’s pickaxe, if he’d had his hands free he would have been tearing at his hair. It was official. This was the worst plan to be had by anyone, ever. And to think that he’d been a bit sceptical about the whole reclaim Erebor plan when Bilbo had first brought it up. Hah!

“You don’t know anything about me aside from the fact that I’m a Dwarf. I’m clearly not -”

“If you get loose during the night, will you murder us all in our sleep?”

“No, but -”

“Then I see no problem with my decision. Especially since you’re not about to get loose.”

Bofur’s jaw worked as he tried to think of something to say to that. Meanwhile, Bard went to put away his coat and lit a candle, then moved to check on the fire burning in the small stove.

“Are you comfortable enough?”

“I’m beginning to think that my captor is insane, but beyond that, I’m just fine,” Bofur said from between clenched teeth. When Bard brought out another coil of rope the Dwarf nodded approvingly.
“That’s at least sensible of you,” he pointed out as the Man began tying him to the chair.

“Glad to have your approval.”

“Bard?” came a voice and Bofur and Bard both turned their heads as a slim, dark-haired woman stepped out from another room, dressed only in a white shift that reached mid-thigh. Bofur politely averted his eyes. “What’s going on?”

“We have a guest,” Bard said calmly, even as he tied Bofur’s legs to the chair.

“He’s kidnapped me,” Bofur drawled. “Hence the ropes and all. Does he do this often? He seems to have a lot of ropes lying about.”

“Bard?”

“Everything is alright, Eleena.”

The woman, Eleena, crossed her arms, not that Bofur was looking. “Usually when things are alright, we do not have a bound Dwarf in our home.”

“I do believe I told you so,” Bofur said to Bard.

Bard didn’t bring him to the meeting with the Master of Lake-town, which meant that Bofur had the honour of having breakfast with his family.

Really, the Man was an idiot. Sure, none of the others would harm any little ones either, or the wife, but there were plenty of people out in the world that would if given half the chance.

At least Bard’s wife seemed to have a bit more sense in her head, because regardless of what Bard had told her after they’d gone off to talk privately the night before, she looked at Bofur with a wary expression, and she kept a heavy cooking pan at hand. As she should.

That being said, Bofur couldn’t exactly claim that he enjoyed being looked at in a manner that indicated that he might at any minute turn into an Orc, but you couldn’t have it all. At least she’d been kind enough to feed him some porridge, since he hardly could feed himself.

Her sensible manner didn’t last though, because after the first hour when Bofur hadn’t done anything worse than smile at the children she’d relented somewhat. Much too trusting these Men. And lucky that Bard hadn’t carried anyone unreliable home with him. It was almost enough that Bofur wanted to act mean, just to remind her that there were lots of that sort in the world as well. But that probably would have earned him a smack over the head with the pan, so he planned on skipping that act for now.

The little ones were a delight though. Their mother, wisely, had told them not to go too close, but that didn’t stop them. They must have taken after their da’.

“Mister Dwarf,” the boy, Bain, asked as he casually edged his way towards him. “May I ask you another question?”
“Sure, lad,” Bofur smiled, glancing over at the boy’s mother. “If you’ve still got any left.” Three,

“Bain, go and sit at the table again,” Eleena ordered, without looking up from her sewing.

“It’s unfair that he doesn’t have to sit at the table,” Bain muttered as he slunk back. “Not even for
breakfast.” He turned and looked very earnestly at Bofur. “We always have to sit at the table when
eating.”

“Because you’re not raised in a barn,” Eleena said firmly. “Lily, come here.”

Lily, who couldn’t be more than a few years, and pretty as a moonstone, pulled on his trousers.
“Up?”

“I can’t pick you up, darlin’,” Bofur explained apologetically. “Your da’ and I are playing a game,
and that’s not part of the rules. Go back to your mama.”

“Bain, get your sister.”

“First I’m supposed to sit at the table, then I’m not supposed to,” Bain muttered as he got up, and
Bofur hid a smile. The boy looked to be just on the cusp of that age when you weren’t really a child
but you were still far away from being considered a grown-up. It was clear that it didn’t suit him.
“Lily, come here.”

“No,” the girl said, still pawing at Bofur’s trousers and looking at him with huge green eyes. “Up?”

“Sweetheart, you are going to be such a heartbreaker,” Bofur told her solemnly.

“Noooo,” Lily wailed as Bain caught her around the waist and hauled her up into his arms.

“Oh, yes,” Bofur nodded.

Fortunately the front door opened at that moment, distracting them all before that wail could turn into
something eardrum splitting. From the look on Bard’s face, the meeting with the Master of Lake-
town could have gone better.

“Are my sleeping quarters for the night going to be…” Bofur looked for the right word as he didn’t
want to say ‘jail’, ‘prison’, ‘dungeons’ (or whatever the equivalent of dungeons was when you lived
on a lake) in front of the children. “- less… homey?”

“No,” Bard said shortly. “You’re staying here.”

Well, that was encouraging; unfortunately Eleena didn’t seem to share Bofur’s opinion, nor her
husband’s.

“Bard, he can’t stay.”

Lily’s bottom lip started to wobble and she squirmed in Bain’s arms.

“He needs to,” Bard said firmly. “Until the rest of his people arrive.”

“Why can’t he stay with the Master?”
“Because I just spent hours talking him out of it.”

Eleena glanced towards her children and noticing that their attention was split between Bard and Bofur she nodded meaningfully down at the table, where the empty bowls from their breakfast still stood.

“Bard,” Eleena said empathically. “He can’t stay.”

Bofur’s eyes grew wide as he clued in to what she was saying. Empty bowls. These people didn’t have enough food to go around to feed an extra mouth.

He had wondered why Bard had been forced to share his rations with him as they were heading towards Lake-town, but written it off as the Men simply hadn’t thought they’d end up with an extra stomach to sate during their little trip. That or they’d stayed longer than intended. But even if he’d known that those slim rations were all there were, he wouldn’t have believed that they literally were all that there were.

With newly opened eyes he looked at the little family, noticing how both Bard’ and Eleena’s clothes hung a little too loosely on their frames, and that Bain showed signs of what could either be - as Bofur had assumed – a recent growth spurt, or some missed meals. Not enough that the boy was starving, no, but he could definitely use more meat on his bones. And while Lily’s cheeks were chubby enough, the rest of her could probably do with a bit more padding.

And they’d shared their food with him? Insane, the lot of them. Then Eleena glanced his way and dear Mahal, no, no.

“Pardon me,” Bofur said carefully. “But might I tell you a little something about myself? Or about Dwarfs rather.”

Bain’s eyes lit up, but his parents didn’t seem quite as excited.

“This isn’t the time ..-

“To be fair, your son was about to ask me something before you came, and I’m guessing that it would have been related to yours truly, isn’t that right, Bain?”

“Bain, have you been bothering our guest?” Bard asked sternly, and Bofur just barely stopped himself from heaving a sigh. It was fine for Bard to tie him up, but Mahal forbid he was bothered by darling children, now wearing similar hangdog expressions on their little faces.

“It’s quite alright,” Bofur promised, trying not to let his frustration show. “Now, an interesting thing about us Dwarfs is that we don’t need to sleep for several nights. Not unless we want to. And when it comes to food we can go even longer without it. We were created to last.”

“That’s grand, Mister Dwarf,” Bain breathed, and Lily, even though Bofur doubted that she’d really understood everything he’d said, nodded solemnly.

“I see,” Bard said after a moment’s silence, and Bofur caught his eyes and nodded. Eleena still looked embarrassed, but at least she’d stopped looking guilty. Guilty, for not being able to feed someone her husband had taken hostage. By Mahal’s beard…

“I’m sure you do,” Bofur said and nodded again.
“Mum, can he please stay?” Bain asked, eyes not quite as wide and green as his sister’s, but just as pleading. “I’ve got lots more questions.”

“May he please stay,” Eleena murmured, and when she turned to look at him Bofur tried to look hopeful, but not too hopeful. He had not doubt that staying with these four was better than staying with that Master of theirs. Regardless of if he actually had food or not. Or perhaps regardless of if he was willing to share it or not, what had Bard said about a full stomach…

Bofur wondered how bad it was for the rest of the town if Bard, the heir to a former Lord, had to live on the edge of starvation. How could the Master of this place let something like that happen?

Especially if he traded with the Dwarfs from the Iron Hill. Bofur couldn’t really think of much that they would trade for except for food. Perhaps wool and skins… but he doubted it.

Whatever information Bilbo had gotten from Dáin regarding the Man seemed to not be bad enough.

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“You’re truly alright going without food?” Bard asked quietly as he was carrying Bofur back from the latrine. Bofur felt a bit awkward about it sure, but he felt more awkward for the fishes living in the lake. Doing your business straight into the water surely couldn’t be healthy in the long run.

“Yeah,” Bofur said. “I’ll be fine until the others come to collect me.” Hopefully it wouldn’t be too long.

“They should arrive the day after tomorrow,” Bard said casually as you may please, and Bofur blinked.

“And how would you know that?”

“Because that’s roughly how long it takes to walk between the mountain and Lake-town if they would have started shortly after we left.”

“You really think they’ll miss me that much,” Bofur joked, as he knew that there was still a door to be opened.

“In the note we left it said that they all should come within four days’ time.”

Bofur’s eyebrows climbed up into his hat. Four days? And all of them? “Or what?”

“It doesn’t matter; I don’t think there is any chance of that happening.”

Well, that certainly wasn’t comforting.

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The rest of the day was oddly domestic. Bofur told stories to the children, small commonly known things about Dwarfs in general as well as fairy tales and stories that his mother had told to him and Bombur when they’d been children themselves, and they seemed to like it.

Lily was still a bit cross since she still wasn’t allowed to sit on his knee, but not cross enough that wailing seemed more important than story time. Finding things to talk about that were interesting to both her and Bain both was a bit tricky, but judging by the attention they paid him he’d done well
“I thought that you traded with the Dwarfs from the Iron Hills?” Bofur asked Bard during another trip to the latrine. “But the boy seems to have never met a Dwarf, maybe not even seen one.”

“The Master and his… associates handle the trade,” Bard said, brow heavily furrowed in what looked like anger, and Bofur tallied up another point for his conclusion that food that could ill afforded to be, was indeed traded away. That was not the face of someone who was upset about wool.

This news was not only bad for the Men, but it would also make the Dwarfs of Erebor completely reliant on the Elves once they’d reclaimed the mountain. Bilbo had told him about how Dale had been the source of much of Erebor’s food back in the day, both having a great many farms and also bringing merchants from far and wide to their markets. That didn’t look like much of an option anymore, and Bofur could only assume that Lord Dáin wasn’t aware of what his trade was doing to the common people. He’d seemed like a reasonable enough fellow on the few times their paths had crossed. And he had to be aware that Bilbo would never stand for something like that.

That evening Bofur had just fallen asleep when he was shaken back awake again.

“Your people have arrived,” Bard said, but he didn’t sound too happy about that, which he should be because if they were hear already then they must have been eager to do as he’d bid them. Then Bofur noticed the two guards at the door. Well, that would explain it.

Nothing that he’d heard Bard or Eleena say about the guards seemed to point to them being the kind of people you’d want to have carrying weapons around. And if he’d been able to get that opinion just from the discrete murmurs from two people; who by no account seemed to have troubles with the law – all kidnapped Dwarfs aside – then the reality had to be even worse.

Bofur thought about pretending to need to use the loo just to get a chance to speak privately to Bard, but he wasn’t sure what he hoped to accomplish by that. If the guards were here to take him to Balin and Dwalin or whoever Bilbo would have sent with them to carry his deepest regrets that he’d need another day or two or three before arriving, then that was how things were, and things could definitely be worse. And he could say nothing about the guards, considering that this was the first he saw of them, and even if he could bring some insights, it likely wouldn’t have been something Bard didn’t already know.

So Bofur just nodded and sat all quiet and nice as Bard untied him from the armchair.

Being carried around by Bard started to be awfully familiar, Bofur realised as they were moving towards the part of the town that he assumed the Master’s residence was located in. Lake-town still smelled like fish, but beyond that there wasn’t really much Bofur could offer his opinion on considering how damned dark it was. He just saw the outlines of houses and windows, and not really more than that. While he appreciated their caution when it came to combining an abundance of torches with the seemingly very flammable wooden platforms and houses that the town seemed to consist of, at least some light wouldn’t have been amiss. He didn’t know how the Men didn’t constantly fall into the lake.

Perhaps the darkness had something to do with their fear of the Dragon, because Bofur could imagine that anyone flying by in the sky above would have issues even knowing that there was a
town below them.

No sooner had they stepped through the gates of what better be the Master’s house, the first house with a torch outside it, than Bofur could hear a familiar voice.

“- where our companion is?”

Bilbo. Bofur couldn’t have stopped the grin even if he’d tried. However it quickly turned into a frown.

Bilbo wasn’t supposed to be here. He and the key were supposed to be in Erebor. Baggins’ day was tomorrow for crying out loud. There was no way -

“He’s being brought here now,” a smarmy voiced promised. “As I already told you.”

Bofur blinked to try and make his eyes used to the much brighter insides of the house. It looked to be a world away from Bard’ and Eleena’s humble home. Lush tapestries hung on the walls, and a great many lit candles were placed at almost all available surfaces, even when that put them a little too close to the previously mentioned tapestries. Where there weren’t candles there were all sorts of trinkets and small treasures. There were finely made glasses placed in a bookshelf, and what looked to be a golden chamber pot balanced on top of it.

Instead of being insane, perhaps Bard was the very model of what counted as sane for these people.

A golden chamber pot? Really? And why on Arda would anyone put it on top of a bookshelf?

Not to mention that almost everything was covered in a thick layer of dust. That something hadn’t yet caught on fire seemed a small miracle.

“Perhaps I could walk now?” Bofur said quietly before Bard had the chance to carry him any further. “It would make for a better impression if I weren’t trussed up when I saw the rest of them.”

Bard looked surprised, as if he hadn’t thought about how the rest of the Dwarfs might take offence at seeing one of their numbers bound. He was likely the worst kidnapper ever, which in a way made him a rather good one to be kidnapped by, except for the frustration.

“Of course,” Bard murmured, carefully putting him back on the ground. “A moment.”

“You can’t carry weapons in here!” one of the guards objected as Bard pulled out a knife.

“It seems that I can,” Bard said shortly as he cut away the ropes. Rubbing his wrists Bofur nodded his thanks and awkwardly got back up on his feet. He had excellent timing, before no sooner had he done so before Bilbo came storming in from the other room.

“Bofur?”

“Who else.” Bofur’s smile turned a little less brilliant as he saw what seemed to be the rest of the company filtering into the hall behind Bilbo, followed by a group of Elves. Had the entire world gone insane without giving him prior notice? What about the blasted door?

“You’re all right?” Bilbo asked, subtly making the signs for truth? as he spoke.
“I’m just fine,” Bofur promised, signing back an affirmative, which caused Bilbo’s shoulders to relax the fraction of an inch. But only a fraction.

The reason for Bilbo’s tense state became fairly obvious when Bofur finally did a proper headcount on the rest of the Company. Balin and Thorin were both missing.

Crap.

- 

“I’m not sure when everyone started making bad choices,” Bofur muttered darkly even as he stepped into Bilbo’s embrace. “But I wasn’t notified about it.”

“If you’re suggesting that we might have left you -”

“They were hardly going to hurt me.”

“That was not for us to know,” Bifur said gravely from where he stood to the side of them, and Bilbo gave him a last squeeze before releasing him.

“You’re really okay?” Bombur asked nervously, and Bofur nodded and clasped his brother’s shoulder before pressing their foreheads together. The bulk of his brother pressed against him was a comforting feeling, he hadn’t realised how alone he’d felt in the last couple of days until he suddenly wasn’t.

When Bifur literally squeezed the breath out of him Bofur only smiled.

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It seemed to be a very long night.

Bilbo, Dwalin, and Nori had gone off to speak with Bard and the Master, who hadn’t seemed very keen on Dwalin’s inclusion in the negotiations, but Bilbo had talked him into allowing it. The Master was a very large Man, easily several heads taller than Dwalin and almost as wide as Bombur, so normally it would have been rather amusing that he seemed so nervous around the bald Dwarf, but… Bofur wasn’t really in the mood to be amused.

“Did you truly leave Thorin and Balin without help?” he hissed to Bifur, speaking in Khuzdul as to not be understood by the Men and Elves. He spoke very quietly though, as to not be easily overheard, not wanting to misuse their maker’s language any more than he had to. “And there was none amongst you who thought that this was a terrible, horrible, disastrous idea?”

“We had little choice,” Bifur protested. “We could not leave you. And we could not risk missing the opportunity to open the gate.”

“You could have left me for a few days,” Bofur protested. “It’s highly unlikely that they’d start sending you pieces of me to prove that they were being sincere. By Mahal’s beard, Bard even let me play with his little ones.”

“Lad, do shut up,” Glóin said wearily. “It’s been a long few days. With Elves, no less! And this is neither the time nor the place for an argument.”

Bofur huffed and crossed his arms over his chest (and what a relief to be able to do that again).
“All I’m saying is that I’m the last sane person left on the whole of Arda.”

“I think you’re being unfair,” Kíli protested from across the room, and Bofur sighed. Then Fíli snorted, nodded in the Elves’ direction, winked, and Bofur watched as Kíli turned as red as a ripe tomato.

“Shut up,” he hissed at his brother who merely started snickering and slung his arm over the now sulking Kíli’s shoulders.

“I only tease because I love you, brother mine,” Fíli said, still snickering.

Bofur pulled his hat down to cover his eyes. Yup. Last sane person. Duly noted.

-  

He was half-asleep again, sitting slumped against the wall and with the comfortable presences of Bifur and Bombur on each side of him when a door creaked open and Bilbo, Dwalin, and Nori walked out.

“Discussions will continue in the morning,” the Master declared. “Feel free to spend the night in this house.” Then the Man was quick enough to shut the door again, just to open it once again to let Bard and that little rat-faced Man out. Then it closed with a slam.

“Does he mean we should sleep in the hallway?” Ori asked, looking around and Bard sighed.

“There are more rooms upstairs. The door next to the writing desk.”

“You dare -” the rat-Man begun, puffing himself up.

“It was not I who said that they could spend the night, Alfrid,” Bard said. “Take it up with he who did.” The Man nodded at Bofur, who nodded back while feeling guilty about what he was about to do. Bard then walked to the front door and left, not bothering to acknowledge any of the others. The Elves had already left, flouncing off to places unknown, but the redheaded one had said that they’d be back in the morning.

“Well then,” Dori said with forced cheer as he helped Ori up from the floor. “Shall we?”

“Bilbo, a word,” Bofur signed as his the blond Dwarf walked by him.

Bilbo nodded and together they walked up the stairs to the first floor. There were three rooms that were suitable bedrooms, and Bofur apologetically shrugged at a scowling Dwalin and dragged Bilbo into the middle room (very low chance of any of the Men eavesdropping). It was clear that the warrior didn’t appreciate letting Bilbo out of his sight, but Bofur didn’t want anyone but Bilbo to hear what he had to say. Not yet, and then it would be up to Bilbo to share the information, if he so chose to.

“We won’t be long.”

Dwalin snorted. “It’s lucky I know you well enough to know that you’re not going into that room for a tumble. Even a quick one. Or I would have to do something about it.”
That particular thought hadn’t even crossed Bofur’s mind, and he chuckled, waggling his eyebrows up and down as he closed the door.

“You always look a bit demented when you do that,” Bilbo murmured and Bofur huffed.

“I’ll have you know that I’m the last sane person in this very town, perhaps on this very world.”

“You can Gandalf can have a discussion about what that feels when next we cross paths with him,” Bilbo teased. “But I’m guessing that that isn’t what you wanted to talk to me about.”

“No,” Bofur said, serious once more. “No, indeed not. So your talks. My guess would be that the Master hinted that he would require payment before letting us leave, and that Bard is more interested in what we will do after we’ve returned to Erebor.”

“You would be correct,” Bilbo admitted. “But as I said to the others before we left, if I could convince the Elven king -”

“You don’t need to convince either of them, you can buy them,” Bofur said quietly and Bilbo arched an eyebrow.

“Bard seems to have little interest in the barrels of gold that the Master keeps hinting about, with less and less grace I might add.”

“Not gold.” Bofur shook his head. “Food, for his people. They’re starving, Bilbo.”

“They’re starving? But they’re trading with Dáin, and the Master had plenty of food in -” Bilbo’s face turned blank. “He’s starving his people for his own benefit?”

“Seems that way,” Bofur said slowly. “Of course I’ve got little proof, just what I’ve seen so far. But a quick look around tomorrow once its daylight should be more than proof enough. Also, if you think back on the Men that rode to Erebor, and their horses, don’t they strike you as a tad too slim and pale? Well, maybe the horses weren’t pale, but you know what I mean.”

“I’ll tell Nori,” Bilbo murmured. “He can easily have a look around, even tonight. But how can we offer food? Gold would be easier.”

“But useless unless there is someone to buy food from. So either way it would come down to the Elves.” Bofur shrugged. “Seems that way to me at least. I’m not sure why they’re not trading with them already, but surely that would be an option? Especially if you talked the Elves into it, if the problem is on their side. Though gold might be enough to lure some merchants here from further south.”

“Considering that Bard thinks we’re all about to be eaten by a Dragon, I’m not sure that he trusts me to keep my promises,” Bilbo said drily.

“Then keep yourself out of it,” Bofur suggested. “If they make a deal with the Elves that completely leaves us out of it, then it won’t matter what happens to us. Or if you give him gold, at least if you can keep that Master from claiming it.”

“I’m still not convinced that Bard would agree to this,” Bilbo said, walking over to sit on the bed with a weary sigh. “He thinks we’ll kill them all by going to Erebor.”
“But how long are they going to last without food? And what would happen if they revolted against their Master? Seems to me that those guards of his are being fed well enough. They’d not be in a hurry to change things around.”

Perhaps when faced with a certain slow death, the chance of a quicker one would not seem as dire.

“I will find a way to get you on my council,” Bilbo murmured and Bofur snorted.

“No thank you.”

“If I make you the head of the Miner’s guild…”

“Bilbo,” Bofur protested, eyes wide in mute plea. “You can’t do that to me. That’s horrible. There’s paperwork involved with that.” He narrowed his eyes. “Was that the reason why you taught me to read? Preparing me for future torture?”

“Now you’re being quite silly.”

“That’s not a no.”

Whatever Bilbo did end up promising to convince Bard, and the Master, seemed to do the trick. Even before noon they were riding away from the Mannish town, having turned down the boat the Master offered as riding with the Elves would be a great deal faster. That Bilbo was motivated to get them back to Erebor as quickly as possible was not doubted by anyone.

Bofur hadn’t had the chance to say good-bye to Bard, or Eleena and the little ones, and that was likely for the best. But he’d had a talk with Nori during the night, before the thief had gone on his little information-gathering expedition (Nori’s words, not Bofur’s), and Nori had agreed to smuggle some food out with him when he left. So hopefully they’d take that as the thanks he intended it to be. And hopefully they’d be better off, if he met them again.

As Bofur had lain awake, pondering what exactly it was that made people turn against their own kind – and of course this wasn’t just something exclusive to Men, of course not, but in a way this slow torture that the Master was responsible for was almost worse than the assassination attempts on Víli, or Bilbo, or even the lads.

The Dwarfs that had been responsible for those, and the ones that skulked around in the shadows spouting lies, they did it because they hated, and ‘cause they feared, doing both with a passion. They just wanted things to be the way they were comfortable with, even if they picked appalling ways of going about it, and they probably believed that they were doing the right thing for everyone.

But it seemed that the Master did what he did almost absently. Of course Bofur could be wrong about that, he’d not exactly spent a lot of time with the Man, but it seemed fairly clear that greed was his primary motivation. And everything else came second to that, even the lives of his people, the people who had put their trust in him. That seemed the marks of a very poor ruler.

Bofur had never, not even for a second, entertained actual thoughts about marrying Bilbo, but it wasn’t because he didn’t love him, because he did. And it wasn’t because he couldn’t see them spending their lives together, because Bofur was fairly sure that their friendship was strong enough to manage that. And their tumbles had been very enjoyable, no reason to deny that either. However he
truly had no ill-feelings towards Thorin.

Bofur could never have married Bilbo because he never wanted to have power over other people’s lives. And Bilbo could never have married Bofur because that would then have meant stepping down from the throne. Perhaps, if Thorin had never entered the picture, they would eventually have married; years and years down the line when Fíli was old enough to be crowned King, but Bofur very much doubted it.

He loved Bilbo just enough not to want to change anything about him, but not enough to change the parts of himself that would needed to be changed to be able to marry a King, even a former one. And Bilbo loved him plenty; he’d never doubted that, enough not to ask him to change, but apparently not enough to not threaten him with a position on the council. Head of the Miner’s Guild. Completely ridiculous.

- 

The Elven horses sure were a lot faster than the Men’s, but even they couldn’t make it back to Erebor in half a day, so as night fell they made camp. When the last light of Baggins’ day came and went, there was not one of the Dwarfs who didn’t turn his gaze towards the shadowy form of Erebor in the distance, but it quickly grew too dark to see anything.

Camping with a group of Elves was thankfully something they’d gotten used to on their way from Mirkwood to Erebor, but it was still not without issues, and when Dwalin pointedly started to sharpening his axes, Glóin following suit, Bofur gracefully excused himself for the night. They didn’t have enough bedrolls for everyone, but after sleeping in a chair that didn’t seem like much of an issue.

- 

It was still before dawn when the ground trembled.

“Was that an earthquake?” Dori asked, sitting up on the bedroll he shared with Ori, rubbing at his eyes. “There’re never earthquakes here. Never were at least.”

Bofur worried his bottom lip. That hadn’t really felt like a proper earth quake to him. There was something… wrong about it.

Then came the roar.

“Dragon,” Dwalin growled, and Bofur’s eyes flew to where Bilbo was sitting, his friend looking pale as wax even in the warm glow from the campfire.


“If they’ve woken the Dragon -” the redheaded Elf, Tauriel, breathed, already on her feet with her hand on her blade. (What good she thought that would do Bofur didn’t know.)

Another roar sundered the silence that had fallen over them all, but then it was abruptly cut off, and Bofur dearly hoped that it wasn’t because the Dragon’s mouth was busy doing other things.

“We can’t ride out yet,” one of the Elves said. “It’s too dark, and the ground is too uneven. The horses can’t -”
“If the Dragon is truly awake,” Tauriel breathed. “Then I fear it will be he who comes for us. We should put out the fire.”

One of her companions quickly headed her words, and the camp was plunged into darkness. Bofur sat quietly as he waited for his eyes to grow accustomed to the lack of light. It was darker than this in the mines, and even if the horses wouldn’t be able to see where they put their feet, the same was not true for any Dwarf worth his ore. His sight had just begun to return enough for him to see the outlines of the others when:

“Bilbo, no,” Dwalin said sharply, putting both arms around their King’s waist as he started to head for the horses. “It’s too dark, they’re right in that much. If the horses misstep, they’ll break their legs, as easy as that. And perhaps your neck while they’re at it.”

“Bilbo, I can’t just remain here -” Bilbo pleaded, straining against Dwalin’s hold, and Bofur had never heard him sound so helpless before. “Not while -”

“There’s nothing you can do right now. We have to wait.”

“But -”

“My brother is there as well,” Dwalin said tightly. “Don’t you think I’ve forgotten that. But we’re not going to do anyone any good if we end up in a ditch half-way there.”

Dwalin followed Bilbo down on the ground when it seemed that the latter’s knees decided that enough was enough, and Bofur got up from the ground to join them, hearing more than seeing the others do the same.

“They’ll hide,” Fíli murmured. “They’ll be fine. Thorin has the ring, and Balin knows so much about Dragons.”

“Yeah,” Kíli agreed, but his voice was just the slightest bit unsteady, and he kept looking up at the sky in Erebor’s direction.

No Dragon came, but neither did sleep for any of them.

As the red and golden light of dawn crept over the horizon, the sun still hiding below it, the horses were already saddled and everyone was ready to depart. The ride reminded Bofur of when the Eagles had carried them away from the Orcs. The unease of knowing nothing about Thorin’ and Balin’s fate much the same as seeing Bilbo’s seemingly lifeless body being carried away in the claws of an Eagle.

It was obvious that Bilbo was distraught, because he directed the Elves to ride as close to the path leading up to the door as possible, not even stopping to thank them before he was off the horse and running up the mountainside; Dwalin and Nori followed close behind, and they in turn were followed by Fíli and Kíli. Not that the rest of them were particularly tardy, but Bofur took a moment to thank the redheaded Elf for their assistance. And also suggest that they perhaps shouldn’t follow them.

Bofur rather felt that someone had to be sensible, and secret doors were meant to stay secret. That
being said, he didn’t bother waiting for a reply before he too sprinting up the mountain.

“No!” Dwalin roared as they came upon the slumped form of Balin in the passage; a passage leading them Mahal only knew where into the mountain, (though Bofur could feel that it was indeed deep underground) but wherever it was, it seemed that their two companions had gone there before them. They’d gotten the door open, and then they’d apparently gone about proving Bofur right. He really was the only sensible, sane, person around. They weren’t supposed to go into the mountain when it was just the two of them.

Nori had given them small torches that he’d carried somewhere on his person, striking light to them with a piece of flint, and guided by their light the Company had made their way further and further down, only stopping when the light suddenly reflected off a head of white hair and a white beard.

Dwalin fell to his knees and gathered Balin up in his arms, clutching him to his chest.

“Let me,” Nori murmured, crouching beside them, and Dwalin didn’t reply, but neither did he protest when Nori pressed careful fingers to Balin’s neck, and then touched his mouth and nose.

“He’s not dead. I think… I think he’s just sleeping,” Nori declared, relief heavy in his voice. Then his eyes widened. “Sleeping. The water?”

“But - why?” Dori asked, wringing his hands. “That makes no sense.”

“I don’t see how else he could sleep through Dwalin shouting like that,” Óin said. “Even I heard that just fine. And I can only imagine that the Dragon did too.”

“Cousin, shut up,” Dwalin growled, still clinging to his brother. “Or wait until Glóin is the one -”

“No need for that,” Óin said stiffly.

“Where’s Bilbo?” Bombur asked, and Bofur pulled on his braids in frustration.

“Wasn’t anyone watching him?”

“He’s our King, not a toddler,” Glóin pointed out, but he was already moving further down the dark passage. With a sigh Bofur followed him. He might not love Bilbo enough to marry him, but he would not let him face a Dragon alone.

At the end of the tunnel Bofur again had cause to wonder if he truly was the only sane person in the world. Who made a secret passage that led directly to the treasure chambers? Fine, the door seemed to only be possible to open once a year, but that was not an excuse. Secret passages should lead to the dungeons or some other unpleasant place, discouraging uninvited guests and not the other way around. True, the Dragon had to be pretty damned discouraging, but that had hardly been a planned inclusion.

The treasure chamber was huge, and very poorly lit, but that didn’t matter to Bofur. The walls told him enough when he put his hands on them. Bilbo was standing just a short distance away from the tunnel, blankly staring out at the gold, and Bofur’s eyes flitted between him and how Dwalin
carefully put Balin down on a spot of ground that wasn’t covered in gold and gems, gently stroking his brother’s beard into something that resembled order.

Regardless of what had happened that caused Balin to fall asleep, this was probably not the homecoming he and Bilbo had imagined.

“Where now?” Glóin asked as he walked up to stand by Bilbo, clasping his shoulder and giving his cousin a small shake.

“I don’t know,” Bilbo said helplessly. “There are several ways out of these vaults. Some leading deeper into the mountain and some leading towards -”

Everyone froze as they heard the sound of falling coins, and even though it was much too small a sound to have been caused by a Dragon, that was still the direction Bofur’s thought took.

For endless moments they stood frozen, and then they heard a familiar voice cursing softly, and then… chuckling?

“Thorin!” Bilbo called, rushing in the direction of the noise, slipping and stumbling over likely priceless treasures and jewels.

“Bilbo?”

When Bofur had managed to make his own way over the piles of gold he was met to the sight of Bilbo and Thorin holding each other tight enough that they seemed to be giving the concept of melting into one being a go.

“You’re back,” Thorin breathed, a small smile playing on his lips. In fact, the Hobbit seemed almost giddy, for him at least.

“’We’re back?’” Bilbo echoed, pulling back enough to look into the Hobbit’s eyes. “Thorin, what’s happened? Why is Balin asleep? What -”

“What made the ground shake?” Nori asked, and the thief was still scanning the treasure chambers with a wary look on his face, and very often glancing back in Dwalin’s direction as the warrior hadn’t joined them as they’d gone off after Bilbo, instead staying with Balin.

But Thorin didn’t really answer to any of those questions. Instead he took Bilbo’s hands into his own and smiled, wider and brighter than Bofur had ever seen him smile. And Bofur’s eyes grew wide as he finally noticed the dark, dark red, almost black, stains of dried blood on Thorin’s sleeves and hands.

“The Dragon is dead.”

Chapter End Notes

I've gotten so many new subscribers for this story since last time... I'm not sure if dwalinroxxx's awesome art is making the rounds again, but regardless, whenever you new peeps catch up to here, hiya! Glad to have you, and thanks for reading.
Chapter Twenty-seven

Chapter Summary

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Thorin climbed down from the pillar he wondered if there were any limitations on what he could make the Dragon do. Could he simply order it to die? If he could that would certainly be a quick way to -

Thorin stopped half-way down to the treasure-covered ground as a thought occurred to him.

If Smaug had sealed the gates leading into the mountain, having the Dragon die before it could unseal them again would cause a fairly huge problem. Bilbo and the others didn’t think that they would be able to open the gates by themselves. Or at least not very easily or they never would have put so much effort into getting to Erebor before Baggins’ day and finding the hidden doorway. What had Bilbo said…? The gates were made of steel and wood and mithril. Impossible to break.

But perhaps there was a way for him to open them from the inside? They were meant to be opened from the inside after all. And since Smaug had actually left the mountain on several occasions the Dragon had to be able to open them. It was possible it required a Dragon’s strength, unless…

Unless…

Thorin finished his climb down and his eyes found a golden goblet laying a stone’s throw away on the floor.

“Come,” he told it, feeling quite ridiculous as he did so, and even more so when nothing happened.

Thorin looked towards the Dragon, which had not uttered a word after he told it to be silent. The great beast had not appreciated the ring’s magic stopping him from moving, and as Thorin had begun climbing down from the pillar Smaug had roared loud enough to make his ears ring, and the Hobbit had almost fallen in his distraction.

But he hadn’t. He’d managed to cling to the pillar, and when he’d told the Dragon to be quiet, it had fallen silent.

If he could force a Dragon to bend to his will, a being that was centuries old and that clearly had a will of its own, then surely he should be able to call a goblet to him? Perhaps even force open the gates if he needed to.

Thorin locked his eyes on the goblet again. “Come here,” he said more determinedly, reaching out as if to grab it. And this time the goblet twitched. It did not proceed fly through the air to land in his outstretched hand, but it had moved.
“Come here,” Thorin repeated, and the goblet started to slide towards him over the piles of gold. Not with great speed or grace, but it was clearly moving.

It struck Thorin as strange that one word was enough to stop a Dragon, but this little goblet did not seem to want to do what he was telling it.

Possibly the problem was that it had never been designed to move on its own. A Dragon could be quiet and motionless of its own free will, but a goblet was never meant to move on its own.

Regardless, after a few more moments the goblet came to a stop at his feet and when Thorin nudged it with one of his toes it obligingly rolled to the side, no longer interested in moving towards him. It might not have wanted to move, but it had done as he told it. Just like the-

A low rumble of gold sliding against gold made Thorin snap his head in the Dragon’s direction once more.

The beast had begun to turn, and as Thorin watched, its head twisted around to face him.

The sheer malice in those golden eyes had the Hobbit reflexively taking a step back.

He was still wearing his ring, so the Dragon couldn’t see him, but as he moved backwards, enough gold moved to give away his position and a terrible smile came to the Dragon’s face. Seeing those sword-like teeth brought Thorin out of his stupor, just in time too, because he’d seen how the underside of the Dragon’s belly and throat had begun to glow. It had looked much the same before, when it had had spewed flames.

“Stay right where you are,” Thorin commanded it. “And keep your mouth shut.”

There was a flash of triumph in the Dragon’s eyes and the next moment flames shot out through the beast’s nostrils.

The distance separating him and the Dragon gave Thorin just enough time to dive behind the pillar. He pressed himself to the cool stone as the flames licked at the air on either side of him.

“Stop!” he shouted and even though the Dragon should not have been able to hear him over the rush of fire; Thorin could barely hear himself, the flames died out.

The goblet had no ears at all, so perhaps it was possible that his words would truly have reached Smaug, nevertheless Thorin was still wary of stepping out from behind the pillar. It could be a trick. Balin had warned him that if given the smallest chance, a Dragon would try and trick you.

“Do not breathe fire!” the Hobbit called, the words striking him as rather ridiculous, but what else could he say? He needed to be certain that it would not roast him, but he wasn’t sure if he could be. He wouldn’t know if it had worked until he stepped out from behind the pillar. Lest he made the Dragon think that he had…

A large, red gem lay just at his feet and after a moment’s consideration Thorin picked it up and hurled it to the left of the pillar.

It caused a small cascade of gold where it landed, but no fire came. Did that mean that the Dragon had noticed that it had been a gem that caused the gold to move, or was it really not able to attack him?
Cautiously Thorin stuck his head out from behind the pillar, trying not to disturb the gold beneath his feet.

The Dragon did not seem pleased, which was good as Thorin suspected that a pleased Dragon could only mean ill news for himself.

Smoke was slowly spiralling out of its nostrils and its belly still glowed a dark golden red, but it wasn’t moving, and certainly not breathing fire. But... wasn’t it a little closer than it had been before he’d sought cover behind the pillar?

Most of its body was still turned away from Thorin; it had been in the middle of leaving the treasure chambers when he’d first stopped it after all, but it definitely looked like it had moved more than its head in his direction.

With a frown Thorin glanced down at the golden ring on around his finger. Did the ring’s magic really only work for a short period of time? Would he need to repeat himself over and over again to be sure that the Dragon wouldn’t be able to kill him? Or had it completely stopped working and the Dragon was only waiting for him to give himself away? But if so, why hadn't it come closer still...

“Turn your head, then press it against the ground.”

The Dragon didn’t move. “DO IT!” Thorin ordered, and slowly; clearly fighting all the while, the Dragon’s neck and head turned, golden coins moving beneath it like streams of water as it pressed itself into the treasure.

“Kill you,” it hissed darkly.

“Be silent, unless I ask you to speak.” Thorin licked his very dry lips and brushed his curls out of his eyes. Right. The magic still worked, and he was safe for now, but how long?

One option was to wait until Bilbo came back or Balin woke up. They would be able to advise him on what to do.

...anything...

But then again, Thorin knew what he should do. The Dragon needed to die, and the front gates should be opened. He only needed to figure out the best way to accomplish those two things. And before the Dragon figured out some way to use its own magic against the magic of his ring and permanently disrupt it.

Thorin did not know the way to the front gates, and he didn’t dare let the Dragon out of his sight, so ordering the Dragon to show him the way seemed reasonable. And if the gates were sealed and only the Dragon could open them then he could just command it to open them. And then... then... he’d just figure out what he should do after that.

“You will show me the way to the front gates of Erebor,” Thorin said with as much conviction he could muster. “Lead the way, slowly, and I shall follow. And choose the shortest path that we both can walk.”

There, that ought to have eliminated most of the traps his own words could set. If he’d simply told it to take him to the gates that might just have allowed it to eat him and carry him in its stomach.
“I refuse!” the Dragon hissed, even as it started creeping over the piles of gold, its head still pressed against the floor and ploughing a large trench in the gold. “I will crack your bones and burn you to ash, you insignificant little thing!”

Thorin did not like that the Dragon was now speaking again. He’d told it to be silent, and it had, but no longer. And before he’d told it not to move, but it still had. It was clear that for whatever reason the magic did not last very long.

Or was there simply a limit to the number of things he could make it do at once?

It had begun to move again when he’d tried to make the goblet move, so perhaps his ring would only allow him to do so much at the same time. Thorin sighed and stroked his thumb over the golden band.

It did not really matter, he would just need to follow the beast at quite some distance just in case it turned on him again, but still be close enough just in case he’d needed to repeat his commands. Thorin bit his bottom lip. He really could have used some advice on what to do. But he didn’t dare to wait either.

It wasn’t just his own life at stake, but also the lives of of the Company and all the Men living in Lake-town, because if the Dragon found a way to break the magic it would undoubtedly do as it had said and go to the Mannish town to wreak death and destruction.

Swallowing another sigh, Thorin hurried after the Dragon, making sure to keep out of range from the beast’s long tail.

At least the ring’s power of invisibility would help him during the trek to the gates. Once they left the treasure chambers and the tell-tale clink of the golden coins beneath his feet disappeared, it should be easy for him to pass unseen, and he would be safer if the Dragon had no idea of where he was. If the enchantment broke the Dragon would not immediately know where he was and he would just have to make sure it didn’t get a chance to escape.

Thorin shook his head. Unlike Bilbo and his people; who had for over one and a half centuries wanted the Dragon gone from Erebor, his biggest concern now was that the Dragon must not leave the mountain. Not really what he had expected, to say the least.

Thorin had just laid eyes on a large, dark opening in the wall (it was clearly not a doorway put there by Dwarven builders as it was much too uneven and ragged) when he realised that not once after creeping down into the treasure chambers had he wanted to take some of the treasure for himself. He’d not cared at all about the gold, not beyond being impressed with how much of it there was, but surely anyone would be impressed with that. But he didn’t at all mind leaving it behind.

A slow, guarded smile spread over Thorin’s face. Did he dare think it? That maybe the sickness that had conquered the minds of his grandfather and father would have no hold of him?

He glanced towards the Dragon again just to be sure that it was still moving forward, then turned his attention back to the piles of treasure that he had literally been wading in for however long it’d been since he first left the tunnel.

Thorin bent and plucked a coin from the ground; felt the weight of it in his hand. Solid gold.
His grandfather had run into a burning house for the sake of his coin, and here was enough gold to have buried their house in. And he didn’t want it. And he hadn’t wanted the goblet, or the jewel he’d thrown to create a distraction, or the coin in his hand. Thorin let it fall to join the rest of the treasure once more. He didn’t want any of it.

The smile on the Hobbit’s face grew wider, and wider still as he realised how absurd everything was. The Dragon could not leave the mountain, and he alone was about to follow it into the halls of Erebor, and at the end of whatever was about to happen he would need to kill it. If there really was such a thing as Destiny, it played by a wondrous set of rules to be able to lead him here, to these circumstances. But all in all, Thorin was incredibly grateful for it. It had given him Bilbo, and a purpose. And his ring.

Smile still firmly in place Thorin followed the Dragon. Erebor and destiny awaited.

- It was with wonder that Thorin beheld what would, with the Valar’s grace, become his new home.

Erebor was magnificent. Truly. It was nothing like the Goblin caves or the Elven dungeons, not any more than a muddy puddle could be called an ocean.

He didn’t know how deep beneath the mountain they were, but judging by the time it had taken to walk down the passage to the treasure chamber he’d say that they were indeed quite a long way down. It would have been logical if that made him feel trapped and uneasy, but the way the halls had been built gave him the sense of air and space. Of grace even. And beauty.

The halls they were walking through had clearly felt Smaug’s presence before over the years. The floors and walls had scars from claws and scales, so this must have been a path the beast had walked often. There probably were not many halls that the Dragon was able to fit in, and even a Dragon could not force its way through solid rock.

Once statues had probably lined both sides of the hall they now passed, but now most of them were broken and tumbled to the ground. Most of the pillars still stood - which was fortunate as Thorin supposed they had not been placed there merely as decoration - but the occasional one that had been in the Dragon’s path had been destroyed, and only the bases of them still stood. The bulk of the pillars themselves had been brushed aside to lie against the walls and as Thorin passed one he touched his hand to it in something like apology.

Even with the mindless destruction the halls were still beautiful, and Thorin’s heart filled with equal parts joy, sadness, and anger. The joy was for the pride and love he could see in the detailed carvings and mosaics that decorated even the most humble hallways. The skill he had first noticed in the grand statues outside Erebor and in the outer gates was just as evident inside the mountain.

The sadness and the anger were for the damage wrought to such a proud city.

How dare Smaug? How dare he?

Thorin’s smial in Hobbiton had taken a long time to build, and he had only been forced to contend with dirt and roots. How long could it have taken Bilbo’s people to build this inside a mountain?

He couldn’t remember if Bilbo had ever mentioned how long the Lonely Mountain had been home to his kin, but it had to have been for countless generations. And the Dragon dared to not only taking
their lives, but by destroying what they had to leave behind it also stole their memories, their legacy.

The Dragon was muttering something beneath its breath, and Thorin glared at the back of its head as he lightly stroked his hand along a smooth marble wall.

“- carry something, something gold -” the Dragon mumbled, the sound still loud enough to echo down the hall, and Thorin’s glare intensified.

Every now and again he had noticed gold or jewels lying on the ground, or he’d heard the sound of something falling on the stone in front of him, and after a while Thorin realised that the treasures must be falling from the Dragon’s scales. The huge lizard had spent so much time bedding down on its ill-gotten treasure that it must have begun to cleave to it like a set of armour. But that armour would not help it in the end.

It was nothing more than a murderer and a thief, and soon enough it would be dead. Thorin would make sure of that.

He would not fail Bilbo. He would have revenge for his husband’s parents, for his home, his kin, his -

A sudden flash of movement caught Thorin’s eye and his gaze snapped back to the Dragon just in time to see it make a grand sweep with its tail, smashing it into the wall opposite of where he was standing. Had the Dragon chosen to move its tail in the other direction then he would now be dead, because it had left a large indent in the stone, and it had destroyed a row of statues that had been untouched only moments before.

All at once Thorin was angrier than he’d ever been in his life, and when Smaug’s tail began to move once more, perhaps intent on repeating the destruction on the wall Thorin still had his hand pressed to, he cried out for it to halt.

“All you are is dust and shadows, little thief,” the Dragon hissed, its eyes flicking back and forth as it tried to make sense of where he was. “Dust and shadows, little thief.” The tip of its tail twitched.

“Still,” Thorin barked. “Or I won’t even allow you to breathe.”

“Silence.” Thorin watched with satisfaction how the huge jaws of the Dragon clamped shut. “I am not afraid of you; I refuse to be afraid of you. You thought I would die like this? At the hands of an overgrown garden slug with wings?”

Thorin pressed his index finger of his right hand to his ring and stroked it, and the motion calmed him.

“You don’t even know what I am,” he informed the seething Dragon. “You have been made unsighted, and unmoving. Unspeaking. Unable to defend yourself. I can make you do anything.”
As Thorin said the last word his eyes flashed golden, and then just as quickly they were pale blue once more.

“I will kill you,” Thorin said softly, not caring if the Dragon heard him or not. This was a promise to himself, and to Bilbo and the others, not to anyone else. “But not yet. I will punish you first. Not just for trying to kill me, but for all the things you have done.”

Thorin looked thoughtfully up at the Dragon. He was still keeping plenty of space between them, but he was close enough now that he could feel warmth radiating out from its body. Close enough that he truly understood just how colossal it was even hunched as it was to be able to fit in the hallway.

If he lost control of it, it could easily crush him, break him, devour him whole. But he truly refused to be afraid. He wanted the Dragon to be afraid. To be helpless and weak. To know even a fraction of what its victims must have felt.

“Take your tail in your mouth and bite down.” The words were said calmly, in a tone of voice which would not have been out of place at the dinner table, suggesting that someone help themselves to another portion of roast.

Thorin had told the Dragon to be silent, and it did not make a single sound as its teeth pierced scales and flesh.

Its blood steamed from its mouth and tail, dripping to the floor. It didn’t look to be boiling, but it definitely had to be a great deal hotter than the air and the stone below them.

“You are still useful to me, but there will come a time when you won’t be,” Thorin said coldly.

The rage in the Dragon’s eyes burnt as hot as before, but now there was pain mixed in with it. Thorin had no regrets, and definitely no remorse. This was the monster that had killed Bilbo’s parents and so many others besides. It would kill Bilbo, and him, if given the slightest chance. It deserved this.

“That’s enough,” he said after a decent amount of time had passed. He could make the Dragon bite its tail clean off, but then there would be a tail lying in the middle of the hallway, not to mention that there would be blood everywhere. Cleaning up mud from the hall of his smial in Hobbiton was bad enough, and Thorin suspected that Dragon blood in the halls of Erebor would be no better. No, for now this would do.

The long sharp teeth were smeared with dark blood as the Dragon unclenched his jaws, and a single scale tumbled to the floor.

“You will do nothing to harm me,” Thorin continued, having just realised that such a command had to be one of the safest to use. “And now you will continue towards the front gates, same pace as before.”

As Smaug began to move once more Thorin saw something very interesting. Another scale was missing, this one on the left side of the Dragon’s chest. Right over where his heart would be if Dragon’s had hearts like Hobbits did.

If he had needed to kill the Dragon with a weapon that would have been the spot to aim for, but now that he likely didn’t… well, it could perhaps still be useful.
As he followed it Thorin entertained the thought of not killing the Dragon. Would it benefit Erebor to have a Dragon on a leash for a time? Was it possible that he could control it to that affect? But he soon discarded the idea.

Smaug had to die. To drag it out would not only be risky, it would also be to dishonour those it had killed. He only wished that Bilbo could have been here to watch as he killed it for him.

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Thorin wasn’t sure how long it took for them to walk to the gates. Erebor was without a sun and moon, and though the silver-grey light of the ring’s world made it bright enough for him to see, it could not help him tell the time.

It had to be late as it had been sunset when he’d first entered the mountain, but Thorin didn’t feel the least bit tired. Nor was he hungry or thirsty. He would have thought that it had something to do with the ring, but he’d been wearing it for a long while in Mirkwood as well, and had still needed sleep and sustenance. But perhaps it was different now that he had mastered another branch of its magic? Was there more to discover still?

Those thoughts, and thoughts of Smaug, occupied Thorin’s mind as he walked through the final stretches of empty halls.

Smaug had been silent and compliant enough ever since the punishment, and every so often Thorin saw the large drops of blood that fell from its wounded tail. It would be easy to assume that the danger was all but over; that he could let his guard down, but Thorin would let himself do so.

Balin had told him how clever and scheming Dragons were, which meant that Smaug could just be waiting for the opportunity to seize control again. There could be no such opportunity.

Finally, they arrived at the main hall and the front gates, and there Thorin’s anger ignited once more.

Piled on each side of the gates were the armour and scattered bones of Dwarven warriors. Some armour had been crushed almost flat, some were blackened from fire, and some had marks from teeth and claws. All were covered in dust and dirt.

Was this the remains of the brave soldiers that had been unable to stop the Dragon’s entry into the mountain?

“Listen to me, slug,” Thorin growled. “You will do what you usually do to open these gates. But you will not leave. Once the gates are open, you will stop moving. Begin.”

When the rush of fire came Thorin thought that the Dragon had gained back control once more, and he almost shouted for it to stop. Then he realised that the flames were not aimed in his direction, but instead at the sealed gates.

The blaze lit up the entire hall, and painted everything in red and gold and shadow. It was beautiful.

When Smaug stopped the gates glowed, but the metal on it did not seem to have melted. The fire must just have been hot enough to make it more pliant, Thorin realised.

If there was mithril in the doors, then they would perhaps be too strong to break even for a Dragon.
At least too strong to break cleanly. The doors would likely just have come off from their hinges after a while, but then Smaug would have lost an easy way in an out of the mountain as it would have needed to block the gate with stone and rubble to keep its lair secure. It had done so with the other gates after all.

But as mithril could be used to create the most wonderful and intricate things – Thorin’s hand rose to the chain Bilbo had given him – it stood to reason that it would at some point be malleable enough to form. Malleable enough to seal a gate shut as it hardened once more, or malleable enough to break while it still burned hot.

True enough, when Smaug set his shoulder against the gates and shoved, and then shoved again, they opened, and for the first time in decades and decades the hint of a breeze rolled through Erebor’s main hall, tugging lightly on one of Thorin's curls. The Hobbit shivered slightly where he stood. Right then, time to slay a Dragon.

Chapter End Notes

remember the Big Bang

I will be placing our beloved characters from the Hobbit into the world from the Dragon Age games, and probably cock everything up most amazingly. (creative license will only go so far I fear, and looks like it's going to be my darkest story yet)

So if that's my plan, you totally dare to join the BB as well.

Oh, and just in random news, for me Thorin's musical theme while he is in Erebor is totally Death Is The Road To Awe from The Fountain OST.

You should check that film out just on general principle if you've not seen it. It's not got the highest ratings, but Aronofsky's films are always interesting. (And on a completely shallow note, Hugh Jackman and Rachel Weisz are in it)
Chapter Twenty-eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

How to kill a Dragon… They had never made a proper plan on how to do this. The idea to douse it with the river water and put it to sleep had been a plan to eliminate it as a threat. Nori had never specified what he thought that they should do after that beyond killing it, and no one else had either. Now it seemed as something of an oversight.

Nori’s plan hadn’t succeeded, but what Thorin had on his hands now was still a harmless (well mostly) Dragon. Even if not actually a sleeping one. And Erebor’s gates were now open, so all Thorin had to do now was kill it.

Simply telling it to die had been a rather humiliating attempt as it hadn’t worked, and to Thorin it seemed as if his attempt had been met with derision and scorn even if the Dragon was actually incapable of moving. Regardless, Thorin was not about to give up so easily.

“There is a scale missing from your chest,” Thorin said to the huge beast.

The Dragon was curled up just inside the gates; its wounded tail lay stiffly along its side, still bleeding sluggishly. Its eyes were closed and were it not for the steady rise and fall of its chest Thorin could almost imagine that it was dead already.

“I wonder,” the Hobbit continued. “Would a sword manage to pierce your heart if I aim for that chink in your armour?”

Belatedly Thorin remembered that he actually had no sword, he’d left it in the tunnel with Balin together with his armour. The Hobbit glanced towards the pile of long dead Dwarven warriors. Surely one of them would have a weapon they’d lend him with their blessings. Even if he was not one of them, not a Dwarf, he couldn’t imagine that they’d not want to aid the one about to slay the Dragon that had been their bane.

“Speak!” Thorin commanded when the Dragon would not reply on its own. He had no desire to try and get close to it, to try and thrust a sword into it if it would merely tickle it. Bilbo had said that they could not love, so perhaps it didn’t even have a heart.

“You lover will fear you,” Smaug said, and for the first time since Thorin had encountered it, it didn’t sound jubilant, or enraged, not even condescending. It sounded oddly reasonable for something making such an outrageous claim. “They will all fear you.”

“Quiet,” Thorin snarled. “I’m not going to fall for your tricks.”

Because it was a trick, even if he didn’t at all understand it. What he should have done was to tell to answer his question, instead of giving it leeway to speak its lies. It had realised that it was about to die, and since raging at him hadn’t helped before, it had obviously decided to try deceit instead. But such an odd thing to say… They would fear him? Why would anyone ever fear him? Especially Bilbo, since Thorin would rather kill himself before causing his lover harm.

“Answer my question,” Thorin said coldly.
“What question?” the Dragon asked with a note of mocking in his voice. It hadn’t moved a muscle except for those it needed to speak, but Thorin liked the idea of mind games even less than he’d liked Smaug trying to kill him outright. It didn’t need to see him to try and spin him into a web of lies, so his ring would not be able to help.

“My question on how best to kill you,” Thorin growled. “Answer me.”

“The best thing would be not to kill me.”

Thorin laughed mockingly. “Perhaps for you. Now, worm, answer me. Do you actually have a heart behind that missing scale? A heart that can be pierced by a sword?”

A giant eye cracked open slightly, just enough to reveal the hint of a shimmer. “Had you a sword the size of a horse, you could surely kill me.”

Thorin’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not interested in playing your games. A sword the size of horse would surely be able to most things, but it would hardly be necessary would it?”

“But it is not necessary to kill me,” Smaug said, sounding almost bored.

Snorting, Thorin shook his head. “I promise you, it is. Now, turn your head away from me, and then do not move. And no fire and flames. And if your tail as much as twitches you will lose the rest of it before I kill you.”

Instead of playing the lizard’s games, he might as well try and kill it. If it didn’t work, it didn’t work. But if it worked… problem solved. He needed to get a weapon first though.

Walking to where the dead Dwarfs lay brought Thorin a lot closer to the Dragon, and he regretted only making it turn its head. He should have asked it to move away entirely. But to tell it to do so now would show himself weak. It needed to die knowing that it was the weak one.

Finding a weapon took a little longer than Thorin had estimated. He didn’t want to dig through the piles of bones and armour like he was a common grave robber in search of treasure, but he wasn’t really left with much choice. Once it had been bodies that the Dragon had piled up with such careless disregard, but the years had devoured their flesh and their clothes, leaving a muddle of pale bones and dented armour. He tried to be careful, respectful, as he moved them in his search for a suitable weapon; an axe would not do (and unfortunately that seemed to have been the weapon of choice for almost all of them) but he couldn’t stop some of the bones from tumbling down from the pile and to the floor and Thorin winced in sympathy as they hit the stone.

As he collected the wayward bones and put them back with the others he silently promised them a worthy burial. Or burning. Or whatever it was that the Dwarfs did with their dead to honour them. It had not been a subject ever to come up around the camp fire; likely no one wanted to think of death as a possible outcome for the quest, so Thorin didn’t really know what their customs were. He supposed they weren’t buried like Hobbits seeing as there would likely be no soil inside the mountain for a garden of remembrance, and even if there were, what plants could grow inside a mountain? To have mushrooms would be disgusting as they were for eating.

But to burn their dead like some of the Men in the south did didn’t seem right either. At least not after Smaug’s arrival to Erebor. To burn the bones of someone who had already been burnt by Dragon fire… no.
“Perhaps you should ask me again how I should be killed,” the Dragon said, startling Thorin enough that he accidentally cut himself on the sword he had been able to work lose. The blade fell to the floor with a sharp ringing as Thorin snatched his hand back, both impressed and annoyed with the skills that would allow the edge to remain sharp over a century after it had last seen use.

“The method would depend on how much you want your companions to fear you.”

“Quiet,” Thorin commanded, realising that he’d not actually bid the Dragon to be silent after it last had spoken. He didn’t much like that it had been quiet until now, what had it been plotting? “When I kill you, they will thank me for it.”

Then Thorin did the mistake of turning to look at the Dragon. He’d expected that its head would be turned away as he had ordered, but instead he found himself looking directly into a pair of large, gleaming eyes.

If he hadn’t been wearing the ring, it was quite possible that Thorin’s story would have ended there, because as Balin had warned him, Dragons could weave a powerful magic and bind you to follow their will if they learned your true name, or if you looked deeply enough into their eyes to allow them to enchant you.

However, Thorin was indeed wearing the golden ring that he’d found in the Goblin’s caves, and it did save him, because while Thorin looked at the Dragon, the Dragon could not really look back. Even so, Thorin stared into the giant eyes, feeling as if he could sink right into them.

The Dragon wasn’t sure exactly what had just happened. It didn’t know exactly where the annoying shadow was, and it was still too tightly bound by the ring’s magic to let its flames fill the chamber and take care of the problem once and for all, and it could only move so very, very slowly. Turning its head had taken almost all its strength. However it could sense that the invisible bonds weighing it down had lessened further. Not enough to free him entirely, not enough to let him move freely, but enough to free his tongue. Perhaps that was all that would be needed.

“You’ve managed to snare the mind of a Dragon,” Smaug rumbled. “Compared to that, what is the mind of a Dwarf? If you kill me, your lover will distrust you, and fear you. You mortals often fear what you can’t understand, but you fear what you can understand even more. And you all know power, what it does to the one who has too much of it.”

Thorin blinked slowly. Inside his mind the image of Bilbo was brought into life. But it was not his lover as he was used to seeing him. Instead Bilbo was looking at him with distrust in his eyes, pulling away from him.

“If you release me from your magic, I will not return in your lifetime,” the Dragon promised. “You can tell them I left. They would believe it, because I would be gone, and the gates left open.” The Dragon sighed, and it was a wistful sound, aching, similar to a sound one would make in the morning as you left a warm bed and a sleeping lover.

The Bilbo inside Thorin’s mind smiled at him, told him that it didn’t matter where the Dragon had gone.

“Open to anyone who would come by, my treasure left inside.” The Dragon closed his eyes, overwhelmed by that very concept, and that was its mistake as it broke the spell it had been trying to weave over Thorin.
The Hobbit blinked again, and again, as the dreamlike images before his eyes vanished as wisps of smoke. What…?

“Your companions would question my disappearance at first, but they would not ask too many questions. Their kind is suspicious, it’s their nature, but if someone gives them a sack of gold, they do not ask why. *My* gold…” The Dragon sighed again. “Still, whatever you are, I know that you are mortal, and your life is short.”

Smaug’s front leg twitched and the Dragon grinned darkly. “Sometimes mortal lives are even shorter than expected, little thief. Sometimes mistakes are made.”

“You are also mortal,” Thorin hissed as he let the two handed sword he had found fly into Smaug’s side. It had picked itself up the floor with a flick of his hand, and trembled silently in the air as Thorin had tried to gain control over it. The Dragon had not seen it as it had been focused on testing the hold of the ring’s magic.

The ring’s magic helped Thorin lodge the sword far deeper than it would have penetrated had he wielded it with his own two hands, and the ground shook as Smaug thrashed, throwing himself against the stone wall; away from the blade.

A flick of Thorin’s wrist pulled the sword back out, and another let the large blade sink deeply into the Dragon’s side once more, at a slightly different angle. Smaug roared, and dust spilled down from the ceiling. Next to Thorin, the bones of the dead Dwarfs shook and some rolled away to spread out over the floor.

The Dragon’s injured tail undulated and smashed into a pillar; and actually succeeding in toppling the thing to crash down on top of it, and its roar took on a deeper note of pain.

However it did not seem to be dying.

“Do not move,” Thorin said with quiet command, and the Dragon stilled. The Hobbit took a step closer, being forced to stop and cover his ears as the Dragon roared once more, a deep bellow of rage and… fear.

A smile touched Thorin’s lips. It was possible that the Dragon had never before known the taste of a Dwarven blade, but now… now it would be the last thing that it knew.

“Silence!”

The roar cut off abruptly, and Thorin’s smile grew wider. The Dragon had thought that it could trick him. It had tried to kill him several times. But now, now that would all end. It had killed so many, but no more.

Thorin turned back to the fallen warriors and let his eyes run over bone and dented armour until—there. He glanced back at the Dragon; its chest had begun to glow a dull red, but it seemed to be trapped by the ring’s magic still as it was not moving nor making a single noise.

“Come,” Thorin commanded, and a spear he had noticed earlier shook its way up from the bone and metal and hovered uncertainly in the air in front of him. It was long, longer than Thorin, and sturdy enough that he probably could not have wielded it with the use of both arms. The head was triangular and twice as wide as Thorin’s hand, tapering off into a pointed edge. If it had been made with even half the skill of the one making the sword it would be plenty sharp for his purposes.
If the Dragon was finally afraid, then it was because it feared that Thorin could kill it, believed that he could. And although the sword had not worked yet, perhaps the spear would be able to fix that.

The sword tore itself from the Dragon’s side and clanked over the ground to rest by Thorin’s feet. Unthinkingly he bent to pick it up, but he had no sooner taken wrapped his hand around the hilt before he released it. The sword was as hot as if it had come fresh from the forge, and the blood that had stained the grip burned his hands, making him curse and attempt to wipe it off on his shirt.

“You are going to die now,” he told the Dragon. “Killed by a Dwarven weapon. And your death shall finally bring peace to those who died. And with time, you will be nothing more than a bad memory for those who still live. And you will die, at the hands of a mortal. A creature you do not even know. You die now.”

The spear wavered but did not fly towards its target, and Thorin glared at it. The sword had been no issue, why would this be any difference?

_The Dragon could be useful._

Again Thorin entertained the idea of not killing the beast, but just as before he discarded the idea. It did not deserve to live. Did not deserve even the slight redemption that a life as a slave would earn it. The best thing it could do, the only thing it could do, was to-

“Die.”

The Dragon stood entirely still as the spear disappeared into its body. The great hall was almost utterly quiet apart from Thorin’s breathing and the soft, wet noises from metal spearing into flesh.

The Dragon’s eyes were open with something that could be shock, or perhaps sheer amazement that it was indeed mortal after all, because as the spear disappeared from view the beast shuddered, its claws dug into the stone below it, and then it slumped to the ground, causing more dust to whirl down from above.

It did not stir when Thorin willed the sword to lodge itself in its tail. When he ordered it to move a twitch ran through it from nose to the tip of the tail and Thorin took a step back. Then he recognized that what he had just seen was like when he first had told the cup to move.

He raised his hand and the tip of the Dragon’s tail rose with it, swaying awkwardly in the air.

It looked ridiculous and Thorin surprised himself by chuckling. But why wouldn’t he laugh? He had killed a Dragon! He, a Hobbit of the Shire had killed a Dragon!

Letting the tail flop back down on the ground Thorin observed the Dragon. It definitely seemed to be dead; perhaps the best way to be sure was to remove his ring. Any spell holding it should break by doing that, Thorin surmised. So it would likely try and kill him again. But, he didn’t really doubt that it was dead. Its chest was no longer rising and falling, and the glow that had suffused it before had faded. Dark blood, but not the black of the Orcs, ran sluggishly down from the wound in its chest and white strands of steam rose from it and into the air.

Removing the ring felt like putting out a light and Thorin quickly let it slip back onto his finger once more. He’d not realised how dark Erebor was, but of course the lack of torches and candles would mean that it was dark. Not only was it night outside, but there were no windows. Though, was it still night outside?
The slightest of breezes was still coming from the open gates, and with a long look at the Dragon – still lying completely lifeless – Thorin walked past it and out into the front hall, and then continued down it to the outer gates. It was a risk. If the Dragon had somehow been able to fool him, this would give it a chance to… well to kill him. But there was no way that it could sneak up on him, so Thorin walked out into the darkness of the night and allowed himself to breathe deeply in the fresh air.

Judging by the absence of light at the horizon dawn was still hours away. Thorin had entertained the idea of going back to Balin by the hidden trail and the tunnel; it seemed that would save him some time. But since he doubted his ability to find the hidden trail by himself even during day time, he would not give much credit to the task of doing so at night, not even with the ring. Compared to wandering around on the mountain waiting for the sun to rise, surely it would be faster to return to the treasure chamber the same way as he’d come.

Or, would it? It had been a long walk. Thorin wasn’t entirely sure how long. But no, it had to be faster. It had been dark when they’d entered Erebor, and it was dark still. So not that many hours could have passed.

The stars were twinkling brightly in the sky when Thorin pulled the ring from his finger, and for a few long moments he stood in the dark, thinking about Bilbo would convince the Men and how he and the others would be back soon, preferably without the Elves. And how happy they would be that Smaug was dead. Even if he expected that Balin would be livid for a while, his plan had worked, had it not?

Before putting the ring back on again, Thorin hesitated.

“They will all fear you.’

What if… what if there was some truth to what the Dragon had claimed? He didn’t think that the members of the Company would fear him, or that Bilbo would, but there were others who would perhaps not understand. The Elves. The people of Lake-town. And if they did not fear him, perhaps they would try and take the ring. His ring.

He trusted his companions, of course he did. But. What if they accidentally told someone? What if Kili told that Elf that he fancied himself in love with? Or Bofur let something slip by accident seeing how his mouth was very rarely still? Right now they only knew that his ring made him invisible. He would need to tell them about the rest of course. But. Perhaps he should only tell Bilbo at first. Yes. The ring could be dangerous if someone misused it. The Men and the Elves had already proved that they were not above kidnapping and imprisonment when they thought it suited their purpose…. Yes, Thorin decided. The best thing would be to only tell Bilbo and ask for his opinion.

The others… well, he could think of something to say to them on the way back to the treasure chambers. Maybe Bilbo could help with that too.

As the ring slid back over his knuckles Thorin swayed slightly and he reached out to touch his hand to the door. Obviously it was not a particularly good idea to go so long without eating or sleeping. Thorin snorted. He hoped Balin would at least appreciate the good night’s sleep he was getting. But he knew better than to think that would work as a defence. He’d not want to risk that the Dwarf got injured, and it had worked. It’d been a good plan.

As he returned to the main hall, he noted that Smaug had not moved even a single inch. The only thing that had happened was that a puddle of blood had begun to spread beneath it, and Thorin
winced. Hopefully everyone would be so happy about the Dragon being dead that they would overlook the issue of cleaning up the resulting mess. Perhaps he should have killed it outside. But there was little to do about it now. He could try and move the Dragon, but the trails of blood that would result in would be close to impossible to explain if Bilbo wanted him to keep the magic a secret.

No, better leave it here for now. With a last look at the dead Dragon, Thorin headed for the hallway that would take him to the treasure chambers.

Of course, it wasn’t quite that easy. Finding his back to the treasure chambers proved a little more challenging than he’d first assumed. He tried to follow the traces of Smaug’s blood on the ground, but that was hard as the drops hadn’t fallen all that often. Following the traces of battered and broken pillars and walls worked a little better, but twice, Thorin picked the wrong hallway, and had to retrace his steps when he realised that this could not have been the way he’d come, the Dragon would never had been able to fit.

Instead of being annoyed at this, or at the failed attempt to get a piece of rock to show him the way (telling it to go to the treasure chamber had resulted in the rock doing a confused looking circle on the ground) it struck Thorin as quite amusing.

He had killed a Dragon, but he almost couldn’t find his way through halls that he’d passed just a few short hours before. Ori would be so disappointed when he found out about this part, the lad wanted to tell the story of a heroic group setting out to kill a Dragon, not about the Hobbit who kept mistaking one stone gate for another.

When he finally saw the ragged hole in the wall that would lead him into the treasure chamber Thorin snorted and mentally patted himself on the back. Finally. Imagine if Bilbo and the others had returned and needed to wander around Erebor shouting for him. Thorin paused. It would not be visible from the outside that the inner gates had been opened, so unless they went into the front hall, and saw the Dragon they would not even have known that it was dead. They would only have had a sleeping Balin and a missing Hobbit.

Well, that would happen now. And if they did go into the front hall for some reason, they would find the Dragon, and that ought to be reassuring? Thorin snorted again. Yes, nothing quite as reassuring as a dead Dragon. But in a way it was absolutely true. To know that the Dragon could not fly off to Lake-town and kill everyone there… it was a huge relief. It would not kill anyone ever again.

Orientating himself inside the treasure chambers also proved to be a bit tricky and it wasn’t until he removed his ring that Thorin figured out which way to head in. As he’d left he’d been so focused on the Dragon that he’d not paid much attention to the path it had chosen. The only reason that he removed his ring was because the whispers had returned. They’d been absent the whole time from their leaving of Mirkwood and up until that moment, but now they’d returned. And there were no trees here to make noises that could be mistaken for whispers, so Thorin was again forced to admit that perhaps there were still aspects of his ring that he did not understand.

He only meant to remove it for a short time, to see if that would make the whispers go away, but as he blinked in the sudden darkness, he realised that it was not the complete black that the inside of the main hall had been.

He remembered seeing light coming from the treasure chambers when he first walked down the tunnel, and at the time it had seemed to come from the Dragon, but with the Dragon gone, something was still giving off light.
Curious Thorin moved forward, letting the ring slip into his pocket.

There was a dim light coming from the ceiling and pillars, some kind of glowing rock… It wasn’t like anything he had seen before, but it was certainly practical considering the absence of burning torches.

Thorin followed the light, reasoning that if he’d seen the light from inside the tunnel, it made little sense to head out into the darker parts of the chamber. And after a while when the piles of gold deepened he could see the clear traces of a large body having moved through them.

When he saw the half-melted mounds of gold, he knew that he’d picked the right direction.

Thorin was so intent on looking where he should go, that he paradoxically didn’t pay all that much attention to where he put his feet. The result of that was a long slide on his arse down a mountain of gold, and a fairly abrupt stop as he almost tumbled head first into a pillar. Thorin cursed beneath his breath then chuckled softly. That would have been a fine end for the Dragon killer, knocking himself senseless by his own -

“Thorin!”

“Bilbo?” Thorin blinked. Could it really -

“Thorin, where are you?”

“I’m -” he didn’t have time to finish the next word before a familiar head popped up over a pile of treasure.

Thorin half-crawled, half-climbed up the treasure, getting back up on his feet in time to almost be knocked to the ground again by Bilbo as the Dwarf threw his arms around him.

“You’re back,” Thorin breathed into Bilbo’s hair. They were back and safe and the Dragon was dead and - Thorin squeezed Bilbo tighter.

“’We’re back?’” Bilbo echoed, pulling back and framing Thorin’s face with his hands. “Thorin, what’s happened? Why is Balin asleep? What -”

“What made the ground shake?” Nori asked from behind Bilbo, but Thorin didn’t pay him any mind. He covered Bilbo’s hands with his own, brought them down between them and squeezed them gently. He could feel the grin spreading over his face.

“The Dragon is dead.”

“What?” Bilbo’s voice was just a whisper.

“It’s dead.” Thorin pressed their foreheads together. “Erebor is yours again.”

He pulled back, wanting to see the look on Bilbo’s face, but as he did so, the world suddenly swirled around him. He could hear Bilbo’s voice, but it sounded like it came from somewhere far away.

“Thorin! Thorin! Nori, help me with him.”

And then the darkness that had been lurking at the edges of his vision closed in.
When he woke up, he found his head pillow in Bilbo’s lap, the Dwarf running his fingers through dark, slightly dusty curls.

“What happened?”

“Apparently you killed a Dragon?” Bilbo leaned down and kissed him. “Never scare me like that again. When did you eat last? Or even drink something?”

“I don’t know.” When Thorin tried to sit up Bilbo splayed his hand in the middle of his chest and gently nudged him back down again.

“Not so fast.”

“I’m fine,” Thorin protested, reaching up to push Bilbo’s hand away. He frowned when he noticed that his hands had been wrapped in soft cloth. “What’s this?”

“You had blisters on your palms,” Bilbo explained. “And a cut. Didn’t you notice?”

“Huh,” Thorin said. “No.” The cut would be from the sword, and the blisters weren’t terribly surprising; it could have been either the sword or the Dragon’s blood. He’d not really paid a lot of attention to his hands at the time beyond noticing that it burned.

When Bilbo leaned down to press their lips together again Thorin smiled into the kiss. Bilbo made a protesting sound. “Don’t think I’m not terribly angry with you. You weren’t supposed to go into the mountain! And did you make Balin fall asleep? He’s going to be livid when he wakes up. And what happened? Is the Dragon truly dead? Where is it? And…”

Thorin just kept smiling up at his husband, letting the words wash over him.

It was over now.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, so not really. *looks guilty*

And Thorin, what makes a good plan a good plan isn’t necessary if it works or not… Sometimes you have a stupid plan and get lucky (And I’ve still not gotten over certain plans in DoS, you need to go on a bloody workshop on how to make plans, stat)
Chapter Twenty-nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“So where is the Dragon?”

“How - no, is it truly dead?”

“How?”

Thorin glanced towards Bilbo. He would have preferred it if he’d gotten the chance to seek his husband’s advice before trying to explain how he’d killed the Dragon, but he could hardly pull him aside now. Then the others would know that there was something strange going on.

Stupidly, he’d not broached the subject while they’d been alone, or well, as alone as the others had let them be; they’d all hovered around them at a respectable distance, pretending not to look as Thorin had clung to Bilbo. But they’d been far enough away that they could have held a whispered conversation.

Thorin could not really regret that he’d taken those moments to revel in the knowledge that they both were safe and together again, but he could also see that it’d been rather foolish, and he wasn’t sure what to do now.

They were all gathered a short distance from the opening to the secret tunnel, sitting on the stone floor from which Fíli and Kíli had tried to clear away the bulkier treasure. It had been a rather slow process until Glóin had sighed and gone to help them; help in this case meaning that he’d pointed out that they could gawk however much as they wanted later, but right now everyone would prefer to be able to sit down without getting a goblet up their backside.

“It is dead,” Thorin said slowly. “Its body is in the main hall, just inside the gates, which are open again.”

A new stream of questions spilled forth from the Company and Thorin licked his lips. Bilbo saw this and mistook it for something other than hesitation.

“Here,” he said, handing Thorin his water skin. “And you lot, let him explain what happened instead of having to answer that flood of questions.”

“Maybe we should wait until Balin wakes up?” Thorin suggested, thinking that it would buy him just enough time to speak to Bilbo. “I -” His eyes sought out Dwalin. “It was only a drop, probably less, and it’s been hours - I just - I didn’t want him to get hurt. And he would have followed me. The chance would have been higher that the Dragon woke up.”

“So it was asleep when you arrived?” Bofur asked and Thorin nodded.

“The Dragon was asleep, and I wanted to try and deepen that sleep by dousing it with the water. Balin… didn’t agree with that plan.”

“I can’t say that I blame him,” Dwalin said thunderously. He had Balin’s head pillowed on his knee, holding one hand on the older Dwarf’s shoulder. “You weren’t supposed to go anywhere near the
“But it worked!” Kíli exclaimed, face falling when Thorin sighed and shook his head. “It didn’t work?”

“Not… quite.” Thorin glanced towards Bilbo, and then at Dwalin again. “I didn’t want Balin anywhere near the Dragon. My ring protected me, but the Dragon would have seen Balin without problem if it had woken up. And it did wake up.”

“So what happened exactly?” Fíli questioned. “Didn’t the water put it to sleep as we thought it would?”

“I missed,” Thorin confessed. “When I threw the bottles. First I missed entirely. And the second water only hit the side of its jaw. It didn’t put it to sleep. Not completely.”

Not at all. But it was only half of a lie. And he would tell them that later, after he’d spoken to Bilbo.

“In other words you did exactly what I said that you shouldn’t do,” Nori said, glaring at Thorin. “You ran into the mountain and decided to lob a bottle at the Dragon. Exactly what part of me saying that we shouldn’t do that was unclear?”

“But he did it, Nori,” Dori protested. “And now the Dragon is dead.”

One of Nori’s eyebrows travelled upwards. “Brother, are you the one encouraging risky behaviour and I’m the one advising caution? I almost believe that I’m dreaming.”

“What is done is done,” Bifur said, hand hovering just over Dori’s shoulder without daring to settle. “Now we can -”

A low, unhappy sound came from Balin.

“Brother?” Dwalin said hopefully.

More low mutters and very cranky sounding murmurs could be heard, and then a bleary eye opened.

“Where is Thorin?”

“I’m here, Balin,” Thorin said, getting to his feet and walking the short distance to where Dwalin and Balin were. He knelt down on the ground beside them just as Balin struggled to sit up.

“You stupid, wilful boy!” Balin glared at Thorin, then swatted at Dwalin as the bald Dwarf tried to help him straighten up.

Apparently the Elves had been right when saying that a drop of water didn’t result in any memory loss. Or it just made people wake up in a foul mood and made them want to yell at the nearest Hobbit. Thorin was however not really holding out for this second notion to be true.

“The Dragon is dead, Balin,” Thorin began. “It’s -”

“Of course it is! I hope we’d not be sitting around here if it weren’t as that would have been just as bloody idiotic as you going after it on your own! What on Arda possessed you to think this was a good idea!”
“But it worked!” Kíli said again.

“That has nothing to do with if it’s a good idea or not!” Balin’s scowl made Kíli press back against his brother’s side. “Thorin, it was a terrible idea. That it worked has nothing -”

“And it didn’t even work properly,” Nori pointed out, arms folded across his chest.

“The Dragon is dead,” Thorin said firmly. “I would think that is the important thing.”

“No!” Balin exclaimed, poking Thorin in the chest with a thick finger. “The important thing is that by some miracle you are not dead, you foolish boy!”

Thorin’s eyes widened in surprise when Balin’s arms enfolded him, but after a moment’s confusion he returned the embrace.

“You can marry my king as many times you want,” Balin murmured. “But if you ever do something that foolish again I -”

“I’m sorry about putting you to sleep,” Thorin said quietly into Balin’s beard. “I just -”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.” Balin pulled back and gave Thorin’s shoulder a shake. “What part about facing a Dragon by yourself seemed like a valid course of action?”

“The part where no one else would get hurt,” Thorin said, steadfastly meeting Balin’s eyes. “That was not something I could risk.”

“And did you think that we would not want to risk you?” Dwalin growled. “Did that thought flit through your head?”

“I was always going to be at risk,” Thorin protested. “My purpose on this trip was to go down and spy on the Dragon. This wasn’t really -”

“There’s a difference between climbing down a mountain and jumping off the first cliff you see,” Balin protested.

“Perhaps this is a conversation for another time,” Glóin interjected, holding up his hands when Balin and Dwalin both turned their glares at him. “All I’m saying that we have Erebor back. And I want to see her.”

“Yes,” Bilbo agreed. “But I will speak to Thorin about this.”

Thorin’s shoulders slumped somewhat in resignation. Bilbo had said that he was angry with him, but he had hoped it was just, well, something that wasn’t really anger.

“But we shouldn’t forget that he has also done something incredible,” Bilbo continued, smiling at Thorin who tentatively smiled back.

“If he acts like a child -” Balin grumbled, but he sighed and patted Thorin on the shoulder before pulling him into another embrace. “Thank you, lad,” he murmured. “I can’t even begin to fathom how you did it, so that will be an interesting tale to hear.”
‘They will fear you.’

Thorin bit his bottom lip. So far it seemed that the Dwarfs were quite calm about the entire thing. Of course that could abruptly change if he told them how he’d been able to control the mind of a Dragon.

As it was they probably thought that he’d gotten lucky somehow. Maybe annoyed Smaug enough that the Dragon simply expired in a fit of rage. They were hardly imagining anything close to what had actually happened or they’d not be this tranquil about it. If he would tell them…

No, he needed to speak to Bilbo first, before sharing what had really happened.

“I’m sure it’s not as interesting as you think,” Thorin said and tried to keep the smile from fading.

“Perhaps we will get to hear the story now?” Ori said, looking between Thorin and Bilbo. “Or, I guess - The Elves? They’re still outside?”

“Yes.” Bilbo chuckled slightly. “I assume so. And since they don’t know that the Dragon is dead, they are probably getting a bit… worried.”

“Likely not about us,” Glóin murmured sourly.

“Even so, we should go outside to speak with them before they decide to follow us, and then we should - you are sure that the main gates are open again?”

Thorin nodded.

“Then we should close the secret passage and finally enter our home the proper way.

“But what if the gates have been closed again somehow?” Thorin protested. “It was probably hours since I left them, and if there are Elves outside -”

“They can’t have sealed them,” Bilbo explained. “And if they are not sealed then we can still open them from the outside. There is a trick to it,” Bilbo smiled. “To lock anyone who doesn’t know it out, but allow the rest of us in.”

“Magic,” Dwalin said with a derisive scoff. “I don’t trust it, and I never will. I’ll be going the long way through Erebor. And if the gates have somehow been shut again, I will be kind enough to let you in. If you ask nicely.”

“You just don’t want to deal with the Elves,” Bofur teased.

“I’m sure some of us can bear that burden,” Fíli said, snorting when Kíli elbowed him.

“I’ll go with you,” Balin said. “It would be a fine thing if you managed to get yourself lost.”

“Well I managed,” Thorin offered. “Eventually. And I did follow the Dragon the first time around.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“I’m really looking forward to this story of yours, lad,” Balin said.
Thorin couldn’t really say the same. Of course Dwalin didn’t trust magic. So what was he supposed to tell them?

- 

He didn’t get a chance to pull Bilbo to the side on the walk back up to the surface, and after emerging from the tunnel and closing the door they had hardly taken five steps before running into the Elves.

Thorin would not say one word about his ring as long as they were around to hear it.

“The Dragon is dead,” Bilbo said as the Elven captain walked towards them her hand on her sword. “There is no need to fear.”

Thorin eyed the Elf warily. Perhaps Bilbo should consider that it wasn’t because of the Dragon that she’d been ready to do violence.

“It is dead? How?”

“We are waiting to hear all the details ourselves,” Bilbo said. “But it is thanks to my husband.”

The look Thorin got from the red-headed Elf was part disbelief, part… part something that stirred something uneasy to life in his stomach.

The emotion in her eyes wasn’t fear. But it was something that felt a lot like distrust. Did she merely think he was lying about the Dragon being dead, or…?

“Then that is a story I look forward to hearing,” Tauriel said, her face blank of emotion once again. Or almost.

Her gaze slipped away from Thorin to land on Kíli where he was standing next to Fíli, and for a moment everything about her seemed to soften.

When Thorin glanced back at Kíli he found that the young Dwarf was grinning from ear to ear, eyes sparkling. He was quite obviously in love, and regardless of his feelings were requited or not - though for Kíli’s sake Thorin hoped that the Elf wasn’t just playing with him - it seemed possible that he would not be able to keep Thorin’s secret. It was hard to hide something from the one you loved.

“Would you please return to King Thranduil with my thanks?” Bilbo requested. “And please convey my hope that he will agree to a visit once we have gotten ourselves properly settled.”

“I will, your majesty,” Tauriel said, bowing her head. “And my congratulations on reclaiming your home.”

“Thank you, captain,” Bilbo said with a small but sincere smile. “Thank you.”

- 

Once the Elves had left Nori nodded approvingly at Bilbo. “Brilliant way of telling them to bugger off while still being polite about it.”

“I didn’t tell anyone to bugger off,” Bilbo said, shaking his head. “But I would prefer not to have Thranduil here in the morning either. We will need allies, no doubt about it, but we do not need to
have those allies in every corner of Erebor. Especially not before we get ourselves in something close to order."

“"I stand by my comment,” Nori said as he slapped Bilbo on the back. “I guess that’s why you’re king and I’m as far away from diplomacy as I can get.”

“I was actually going to talk to you about something along those lines,” Bilbo murmured. “But it can wait. Though I have a favour to ask?”

“The sudden sense of foreboding running down my spine tells me that I should say no and run for the hills,” Nori said with a narrowed eye look. “Should I?”

“All I would ask is that you go up to the cliff, up there -” Bilbo pointed up the hill, and a moss-covered overhang. “That is where the ravens used to gather before, and if there are any still left I would like to send word to Dáin.” Bilbo smiled at Nori. “Might be a bit of a climb since if there’s been any damage to the staircases, and you’re the one amongst us that I’d trust not to fall. But it can wait until we’ve seen Erebor.”

“There are -” Thorin hesitated. “In the hall, there are the remains of those who did not make it.”

A sombre silence spread amongst the Dwarfs and Bilbo sighed. “Indeed, we should not forget those who were killed by the Dragon. But that should not stop us from also feeling joy at what has happened. They would not want us to let grief overtake everything else.”

“It’s thanks to them that the Dragon is dead,” Thorin said, thinking of the sword he’d borrowed, and the spear.

Bilbo gave him a curious look. “I think we should go and wait for Balin and Dwalin, and then you can tell us your story. It must be a remarkable one.”

Well, his husband wasn’t wrong… Thorin bit the inside of his cheek. By the Valar… How was he going to explain what had happened without revealing just what the ring’s magic allowed him to do?

He pondered this all the way to the gates, trying to work out where the line of what had happened and the line of what he could tell intersected each other.

Despite it now being day, it was fairly murky in the outer chamber and it was not immediately obvious that the inner gates were open. The shadows stretched thickly over that wall and where once there had been torches there was now only more shadows.

But as they walked, it became more and more obvious that the dark rectangular shape was not two closed doors, and instead two open ones. An excited murmur rose from the Dwarfs around him and Thorin smiled at Bilbo when his husband grabbed his hand and squeezed it hard. However, it was in silence that they crossed the threshold and that silence stretched and held until their eyes had grown used to the darkness inside and they saw the Dragon.

Thorin’s eyes had not yet adjusted to the dimness, and he could hardly use the ring, but the gasps and muttered curse words left little doubt of what his companions were seeing. The Dragon was as he’d left it hours before.

“I didn’t doubt you,” Bilbo said, squeezing his hand. “Of course I didn’t, but -”

“I understand,” Thorin said. “I would - until I saw it for myself, I would have doubted me too.” The
words tasted like ash in his mouth since he was in fact giving Bilbo reason to doubt him. He wasn’t telling him the entire story. That he would do so at the first opportunity wasn’t really enough to make up for how he was planning on deceiving him now. “When it died, I didn’t even believe it at first.”

Shadows moved in the dark, and he could hear footsteps moving away from him and Bilbo.

“Ori, don’t touch it,” Dori said.

“It’s still warm.”

“I said don’t touch it!”

“How on Arda are we going to get it out?” Bofur murmured.

Someone snorted, possibly Bifur.

“I would think that is a rather nice problem to have,” Nori said. “You know, compared to the alternative. Better to try and figure out how to deal with a dead Dragon than an alive one.”

“The scales alone are worth a fortune,” Glóin mused. “Dragon scale armour… that would be a sight.”

Thorin tugged lightly on Bilbo’s hand. “The fallen warriors are behind us, on each side of the gate,” he murmured. “I wondered, what will happen to them?”

“They will be entombed in the burial vaults,” Bilbo said quietly. “And remembered for their bravery.”

Burial vaults. Well, that made a certain sense Thorin supposed. It wasn’t a burial exactly, as it was sure to have no earth, but it seemed suitable for Dwarfs to go to their final rest amongst the stone that they were supposed to have been carved from. He briefly tried to imagine Bilbo being laid to rest in that way but shied away from the thought as soon as it had appeared.

“It was by one of their weapons that the Dragon died. I expect it’s still lodged in his side.”

“Is it so that my husband truly managed what an Elven army dared not try?”

Thorin could not see well enough to know the look in Bilbo’s eyes, but he hoped that it was void of fear. He needed it to be. Mindful that their companions stood only a few feet away Thorin did not dare tell Bilbo the truth. Not the whole truth.

“Well,” he said, reaching out to cup Bilbo’s face; which he managed after only one failed try. Thorin leaned in, pressing their foreheads together. “I had something they did not.”

“What?” Bilbo asked.

“Courage.”

Balin and Dwalin arrived quicker than Thorin had expected. Perhaps there were paths that Balin knew that was not the same as the one that the Dragon had picked. Perhaps that one had been picked
because it was the only one big enough to fit the giant beast.

Somewhere along the way Balin had found a torch. And as he and Dwalin came closer Thorin blinked rapidly to clear his vision as the red and golden light seemed unusually strong.

“How did you manage to see when you followed the Dragon?” Balin asked. “Before I remembered where the torches used to be kept in a room just outside the treasure chambers we were stumbling around like drunkards. Blind drunkards even.”

“The Dragon glowed.” Again, not a lie, but also definitely not the whole truth. “Especially when it was about to breathe fire.”

“And how many times was it about to do that?” Bilbo asked in a slightly strained voice.

“It did breathe fire once in the treasure chambers, and again when getting the gates open. And it tried again as it was dying.”

“By Mahal’s beard,” Dwalin muttered. “And you say that as if it was nothing.”

Thorin shrugged one shoulder. “It was terrifying at the time -” well the first time had been “- but I’m still here, there’s no need to fear something that did not happen.”

“Start from the beginning,” Balin said. “What happened after you decided to put me to sleep? Which, by the way, you are never doing again unless it includes a good book, a glass of the best ale, and at least three blankets.”

“I’m sor -”

“You’re not sorry for the right reasons,” Balin said with a sigh. “But never mind that now; please, tell us what happened after you’d thrown the second bottle of water.”

“The Dragon decided to leave the treasure chambers. I guess, since it couldn’t see me anywhere it must have thought I had tried and escape and wanted to catch me. It left in a pace slow enough that I could follow it as it moved towards the front gates. And -”

“So the water affected it even though it did not swallow much?” Fíli asked and Thorin nodded and hoped it didn’t look as reluctant as it felt.

“It was definitely affected.” By the ring’s magic.

“You said it breathed fire once inside the treasure chambers?” Bombur tilted his head in question, the flickering light from the torch turning his hair as red as the fire itself.

“It was angry,” Thorin said with a wry smile. “Imagine why.”

“If it had managed to burn you -” Kíli said in a hushed voice.

“I was behind a pillar,” Thorin promised. “And it would not have seen me had I not been. I hope it didn’t destroy anything too val -”

“Thorin, please don’t finish that sentence,” Bilbo said, hand half covering his face. “I don’t care if it would have destroyed every single coin as long as that meant that you’d not been harmed.”
“Go on with the story,” Dwalin said shortly. “What happened next?”

“I followed it to the gates, it opened them.” Thorin dug his nails into the palm of his hand. “But before it could leave it stumbled. And I saw that there was a scale missing from the side of its chest.”

The entire company turned to look at the Dragon, but the way it had fallen meant that there was no way to see the missing scale, or the spear that was sure to still be lodged in its flesh.

“Perhaps the water does not affect Dragons the same way,” Thorin said carefully. “Because after it had stumbled, it did not get back up again. But it wasn’t asleep either.”

“What did you do then?” Kíli asked, eyes huge and dark in the low light.

“I -” Thorin’s mind was racing to find a plausible explanation. “I had already seen the weapons belonging to the fallen warriors. So I took a sword, and I -”

“Oh no you didn’t,” Nori moaned, and startled Thorin whipped his head in the red-haired Dwarf’s direction. “Please, Thorin, tell me that you didn’t actually walk up to a Dragon, armed with a sword that had been left untouched for more than a century, and -”

“It was a really sharp sword.” Thorin held up his hand even though the cut could not be seen through the bindings. “The Dragon made a sound and startled me into grabbing the edge.”

Shaking his head Nori began muttering something in Khuzdul that was mostly too quick for Thorin to make out, but it seemed that he was more inclined to think Thorin an idiot and not a liar.

“Nori that’s simply not appropriate,” Dori said with a glare in his brother’s direction.

“Neither is having a royal consort with the self-preservation instincts of a legless spider,” Nori spat.

“The Dragon was going to Lake-town,” Thorin protested. “I heard it say that. It was going to kill you. All of you. Of course I had to try and kill it first, since I had a chance to do so. If I had failed, I would likely have died. I know that. But what would it have mattered since you would have died as well.”

“It would have mattered,” Bilbo said quietly and Thorin reached out to take his hand, heart filling with relief when Bilbo let him.

“I’ve not forgotten what I promised, Bilbo,” Thorin said. “I’m alive aren’t I? Because I promised you. But I cannot honestly tell you that I would have regretted it if I had died as long as the Dragon died with me.”

“We heard the Dragon roar all the way to our camp,” Ori said. “And the ground shook. I would guess that it was a closer call than you are telling us?”

“The sword didn’t kill it,” Thorin said, not letting go of Bilbo’s hand. “But the spear did.”

“And the Dragon just, let you do it?” Bofur asked.

“It didn’t move to get away,” Thorin replied truthfully, of course leaving out the part where his magic had made it unable to do so. “It smashed a pillar, but nothing more. Perhaps the water made it
confused.”

“And then it died?” Dwalin demanded.

“And then it died,” Thorin confirmed.

“Your burns,” Óin said. “And the stains on your shirt. They were from the Dragon’s blood then.”

“I didn’t notice them at the time,” Thorin said with a small shrug.

Nori’s mutterings started up again.


“Uncle Dragon-slayer,” Fíli mused, and Thorin smiled gratefully at them both before turning his attention to Bilbo. His husband looked a little stunned, but not the slightest bit scared or doubtful and Thorin’s heart fell and soared all at once.

“I can only repeat what I’ve already told you,” Bilbo said quietly as he pulled Thorin into his arms. “Whatever I did to deserve you I am so incredibly grateful I did it.”

“I love you,” Thorin whispered. “I’d kill a thousand Dragons for you.”

The sound Bilbo made was somewhere between a chuckle and a sob. “I think this one quite enough.”

“I love you,” Thorin said again.

“I love you too.”

Thorin grunted when Kíli threw his arms around them both, followed by Fíli, who though moved with a little more grace did not squeeze them with less fervour. The others followed suit, and Thorin was enveloped in a tangle of laughing and crying Dwarfs.

He’d managed to convince them.

-

Thorin dreamt, and he knew that it was a dream because Azog was dead, so the pale Orc standing in front of him couldn’t really be him. It didn’t quite look like him either; features slightly different which also followed the inherent random nature of dreams, but the malice in his eyes was exactly the same.

The Orc began to speak, and again this was proof that Thorin was dreaming, because while the words were unfamiliar he somehow understood the meaning of them.

"Master?" The Orc said, and at the same time did not say, as it was nothing like the word ‘master’.

The sound of it sent a cold shiver down Thorin’s spine, but that feeling immediately faded as he heard himself respond in the same language.
“My shade in the forest has been destroyed.” The words rolled smoothly from his tongue, like dark smoke. “The plan has changed. The north will wait. This vessel will make a suitable bearer. As soon as he is malleable enough, I will send him south. You will wait for my command, then follow.”

“Master,” the Orc said and bowed. “He killed my father.”

“Then thank him, because you now command my armies. That the Dragon died was not part of my plans, but it will serve them all the same.”

The Orc inclined his head. “And the Dwarf-scum?”

“Do you question my command?” The words were not said with anger, instead with cold indifference, and Thorin could feel his mouth form a sneer. “I have no use for a commander who does.”

Thorin raised his hand, curling his fingers slightly towards the palm, and a ball of flame formed. He looked at it curiously, but did not question it, he was dreaming after all.

“Master, your forgiveness.” The Orc bowed his head, but just as quickly looked up again. “I would ask you for permission to take the Dwarf-scum’s head. To honour my father. The line of Durin -”

An image of Bilbo lying lifeless on the ground flashed by inside Thorin’s mind. Azog walking towards him with a blade in his hand.

“No,” Thorin growled. “You’ll die before you touch him.” Suddenly he had a sword in his hand and then it was lodged in the belly of the pale Orc, just like it’d happened on the cliff. This time the white Orc didn’t look confused. It looked afraid, and it suited him.

“Master -”


As the light went out in the Orc’s eyes and he slumped to the ground a fierce pain started in Thorin’s chest. No, not in his chest. It was coming from the ring where it rested against his chest. Just to the right of his heart.

It burned, and Thorin scrambled to lift it away, but when he grabbed the chain and lifted the ring would not move. Instead it sank into his chest, scorching him, taking his breath away. He was going to die. It hurt so badly. He -

“Thorin!”

Thorin sat up and inhaled sharply. Bilbo was kneeling at his side, his face pale even in the golden sunlight. “You would not wake up. And you sounded like you were in pain.”

“What?” Thorin blinked. A memory lurked at the edge of his vision, but as he tried to grasp it, it slipped away entirely. “It must have been a dream. But I don’t remember it.”

“Some dream,” Bilbo murmured, leaning down to kiss him.
They were outside on the slopes of the mountain, much in the same place they’d been when they’d learnt that the Men from Lake-town had kidnapped Bofur, and Bilbo’s hair gleamed like the sun itself as he held himself over Thorin. Thorin raised a hand to brush through it, as he hummed happily into the kiss.

“You’ve been asleep for hours,” Bilbo said, gently brushing some of Thorin’s curls away from his forehead. “Fíli and Kíli has been keeping an eye on you, as have I. But now it’s time for you to eat something.”

“When you say eat something, please say that you’re not talking about the damned Elven bread,” Thorin groaned.

Bilbo chuckled and kissed him again.

“There is perhaps something else still left, but the bread, lembas I heard them call it, is the most abundant to be sure. But I’m sure that we can find something to keep you fed.”

There was a teasing glint in the Dwarf’s eye, and Thorin’s heart just about burst from love for his husband. He was so incredibly beautiful, and wise, and gentle and -

Thorin abruptly realised that they were alone. He could tell Bilbo about everything that had happened. About the ring -

Thorin grunted as the echo of something like pain pulsed through his chest.

“Oh, am I too heavy?” Bilbo asked. “I’m sorry, I’ll -”

“No,” Thorin protested. “I - I must have strained something before. It’s nothing. Don’t move.”

“I do have to move though,” Bilbo argued. “Or you’ll not get anything to eat.”

“I’m not hungry anyway,” Thorin said, wrapping both arms around Bilbo. “It’s true,” he promised when the Dwarf looked sceptically at him. “Don’t go.”

The teasing look returned to Bilbo’s eyes, accompanied by a sly twinkle.

“Perhaps you are just not hungry for food?” he asked as he leaned in for another kiss, one which left Thorin’s toes curling. “I could have lost you,” Bilbo whispered against his skin. “I can’t believe I didn’t.”

“Same,” Thorin managed, hands already scrambling to try and unbuckle and unbutton Bilbo’s clothes. “Yes, please -”

“Shhh,” Bilbo said, and this time the kiss was slower, but no less urgent. “I told the others that I might let you sleep for a while longer. They’re not going to come looking for us for some time. Would you want -?”

A stupid question considering the hungry sound of triumph Thorin made as he managed to get Bilbo’s belt open.

He’d tell him later. Before they went back to the rest of the Company. But not right now. Later.
As usual, thank you for reading, and if you leave a comment, that's very much appreciated.
“Nori, may I speak with you?”

Nori looked up at Bilbo and smirked. “I don’t know, you were just supposed to wake Thorin and you ended up shagging. I’m feeling a bit apprehensive here. But I guess -”

“You… saw that?” A bit of pink dusted Bilbo’s cheeks and Nori got to his feet and gave his friend a comforting pat on the back.

“No, but Bofur did, and he also blushed when he told us not to disturb the both of you. Not sure why he blushed though considering that he wasn’t the one baring his hairy arse to the skies. And he’s had a much closer look at your arse so it can’t be -”

“Thank you, Nori.”

“While we’re on the subject, since Thorin is sleeping again I think you might have gone at it a bit -”

“Thank you.” The pink had bloomed into two red spots high on Bilbo’s cheeks. “That’s quite enough. Please walk with me.”

“So what do you want? More ravens need wrangling?” Nori asked as they headed away from Erebor’s main hall and towards the western halls which probably meant the main living quarters. Nori was far from comfortable finding his way around Erebor, but the quick maps he’d asked Balin to make had been very helpful.

“No, not until Dáin replies, and since the raven was only sent this morning I think it’s a bit soon to expect one. Remember how I said that there was something I wished to speak to you about?”

“Yes, you asked me just a minute ago,” Nori said with a straight face.

Bilbo heaved a sigh. “I meant when before, when we were passing the ravens’ cliff. Diplomacy?”

Nori had of course not forgotten. But he had rather been hoping that Bilbo had.

“Doesn’t ring a bell,” Nori said. “Oh.” He snapped his fingers. “I just remembered I had to go help Dori with -”

“Nori…” Bilbo said in a longsuffering tone of voice.

“- but I’m sure he can wait,” Nori finished with a sigh.

“It’s actually good news,” Bilbo smiled. “So stop looking like you’re about to be executed.”

“The word ‘diplomacy’ has been mentioned,” Nori muttered. “Which means politics. Which means that I probably would prefer the execution if it’s all the same.”

“Sorry,” Bilbo said, not sounding sorry in the slightest. “But you’re not about to be executed.”
“Then I hope your good news is really bloody excellent,” Nori muttered, knocking his shoulder into Bilbo’s.

They lapsed into a companionable silence, and Nori studied the halls they were walking through, adding them to the mental map he was building on top of the ones he’d gotten from Balin.

It was rare to get a chance like this and be able to walk unhindered wherever he pleased throughout an entire city. Or at least, wherever he pleased that Bofur hadn’t already deemed potentially unstable due to a certain Dragon crashing its way through one time too many.

Once Erebor was inhabited once again he would have a great advantage if he’d already learnt all the paths available to take a person from point A to point B. Especially if he could also learn which of those paths allowed for someone to walk them unseen. That knowledge could be used both to hide himself in the shadows and to make sure someone else wasn’t already hiding there…

Yes, things would definitely be interesting when the mountain started to fill with people once more. Before that happened he would definitely need to have more than a just general idea of how everything was organised, especially the royal living quarters.

While most people likely would hail Bilbo as someone only slightly less than Mahal for managing to reclaim Erebor, some would not be quite as enthusiastic. Where others would see a hero, they would see an ever growing problem. A king should not be allowed to have too much power, and a king that held the love and admiration of their entire people arguably had too much power already. Bilbo was already admired by many for how he had handled himself ever since his grandfather died. He had provided a good life for those who had settled in the Blue Mountains, but that would be nothing compared to reclaiming Erebor…

Nori would need to be prepared.

- 

His assumption that they had been headed for the living quarters proved true, and it could even be near the royal ones he mused, because the decoration on the walls was certainly done skilfully enough to be the pride of any noble’s home. But unless Erebor had been planned very differently from Ered Luin this still was too close to the surface for the royal chambers, so when Bilbo stopped outside a nondescript door Nori raised a braided eyebrow and leered at him.

“None of that now,” Bilbo said and opened the door. He motioned for Nori to go inside and the thief did so, sense of foreboding growing ever stronger, and when he saw who was waiting in the room he mentally gave himself a pat on the back for continuing to have such a good sense of self-preservation.

“Yeah, so Dori probably needed help now after all. I’ll just -” Nori was half way out the room, the room with none other than Dwalin in it, when Bilbo snagged his coat and halted his… tactical retreat. Okay fine: his attempt to run away.

“I said none of that,” Bilbo huffed and pulled him back inside. “Remember, this is good news.”

“You didn’t say anything about him joining us for this conversation,” Dwalin said, arms already folded defensively over his chest.

“Wonder why,” Bilbo murmured. “Oh, I know. Because the two of you are avoiding each other and
wouldn’t have come if you’d known.”

“No one is avoiding anyone.” Nori smiled brightly. “Great. Glad to have cleared that up, and now I’ll be -”

“It distresses me to see two of my closest friends be so unhappy,” Bilbo said quietly, looking between Nori and Dwalin, and not budging an inch from where he was blocking the doorway. Damn him.

Nori determinedly didn’t look at Dwalin and instead only smiled even brighter. “How can we be unhappy when Erebor is reclaimed?”

“Because you love each other and think that you cannot be together.”

The red-head bit back a groan. Apparently Bilbo was not in a mood to mince words.

“Talking about it is not going to improve the situation, Bilbo,” Dwalin growled. “We have Erebor, you’ve Thorin, but that doesn’t mean that -”

“Please,” Bilbo said, reaching out to touch Dwalin’s arm. “And peace as well. I’d not talk to you about this to torment you. I wished to speak to you because I believe I have found a solution.”

Dwalin snorted. “Right. Well this ought to be good. We can’t be together without lying about it, or risking your life. And you know why that’s not going to happen.”

Nori looked away. Right. Dwalin had already said that he wouldn’t -

“I changed my mind you know.” Startled, Nori looked up to meet Dwalin’s eyes. “I would pretend to hate you, tell everyone that I knew you belonged in the deepest and darkest and dampest of dungeons. I’d lie while staring people straight in the eyes if that meant I could be with you, even for just a few hours out of every week. Even if it’s far from what you deserve, and even if I would eventually hate myself for it. It would be worth it to have you for however long it lasted.” Now it was Dwalin who looked away.

“But I’m not a good liar. It’s not something I’ve ever mourned before, but I do now. Someone would figure it out, and if your informants find out that you’ve been carrying on with me in secret, I can’t imagine that they’d look favourably upon that. Bilbo you know this.”

“Dwalin…” Nori didn’t know what to say.

That he’d offer to lie for him, that was… Dwalin was the most honest person Nori had ever known. Even more than Dori because Dori would happily lie to himself and others to try and make things seem better.

‘No, mother, Nori has of course not been out all night, he’d been sleeping quietly in his bed.’ ‘No, father’s cough is not getting worse.’ ‘Yes, of course the healers will be able to help…’

Dwalin didn’t say things like that. To him, things just were the way they were. Even getting him to help spread some rumours about why Nori was really coming along on the quest to Erebor had been like pulling teeth. And the time with the traitors in the guard… it was probably damned lucky they’d not had been forced to play the long game or Dwalin most likely would have imploded from rage and frustration. The four days that they’d had been forced to wait had been bad enough.
“But what if you didn’t have to lie,” Bilbo said, breaking Nori out of his gloomy thoughts. “What if you could tell everyone that you loved him?”

“Then I hope you’ll have plenty of that river water on hand,” Dwalin scoffed. “To make everyone forget it afterwards.”

Ah, yes. The river water. Nori had thought about that, more than once. If forgetting Dwalin would hurt less than loving him. It wouldn’t take much. He’d just need to forget the last few months. He’d drink, go to sleep, and wake up. And then… Dwalin would have gone back to being just the captain of the guards.

Only… that was a lie and Nori knew it. He would need to forget a lot more than the last few months if he wanted to fix the problem. What had happened on the quest had only happened because of years and years and hundreds of moments leading up to that evening just before they reached Mirkwood…

But in the end it didn’t matter.

He didn’t want to forget. He would keep the memory of the kiss he’d taken, and the feeling of being wrapped in Dwalin’s arms, and he would guard those memories jealously until the time came to go to the Halls of Waiting.

“I’m not going to do anything that could lead to you getting killed, Bilbo,” Nori said firmly, meeting the too-calm hazel eyes of his King. “I’m only useful if people can trust me because I’m untrustworthy. And -”

“Consider this,” Bilbo interrupted reaching out to touch a hand to each of their arms. “If you are a thief, someone whose only goal is to get rich, and the king wanted to be your friend, and the captain of the guards wanted to marry you, what would you do?”

“Pinch my arm and wonder if someone had slipped something into my ale,” Nori snorted.

“Would you play along?” Bilbo prompted. “Would you pretend to enjoy the king’s company and return the captain’s feelings?”

“Well, yes,” Nori admitted, hating that he so easily could put himself into the shoes of someone who was only out for himself. “Of course I would. Regardless of if my goal would be to get into the treasure chambers or just live the spoilt life of a noble, it would obviously be in my best interest to play along.” He snorted again. “Unless I wanted to move. You don’t snub a king and the captain of the guards and think that you can get away with it.”

“It will be known that you were amongst my company on this quest,” Bilbo said. “What if, instead of trying to make everyone think that this meant nothing to you and trying and go back to how things were in Ered Luin - which really won’t be possible anyway - we offer another story?"

“That you want to be my friend?” Nori said incredulous. “That Dwalin wants to marry me? Bilbo, I said I wouldn’t do anything that would get you killed. Or get the lads killed. Or Thorin. Dís. Víli. I know it’s going to be hard to get certain people to believe that I have nothing to do with you, but going in the complete opposite direction? How is that supposed to help? And who would even believe it?”

Nori licked his lips. “It’s - I don’t understand what you’re trying to achieve except getting yourself
killed the next time I don’t hear about a plot against you.”

“What I’m suggesting is that we don’t try to hide the truth with a lie. We hide a lie with the truth.” Bilbo smiled. “Because as you say, who would believe the truth anyway? We just need to offer the right kind of lie, and the right kind of truth.”

“Quit dancing around the subject,” Dwalin demanded, brows drawn in a way that made Nori want to do all sorts of indecent things to the wrinkle appearing just at the base of Dwalin’s nose. But he settled for digging his nails into his own palm, sternly telling himself to get a bloody grip. And no, that wasn’t a grip on Dwalin’s arse.

“The following could happen,” Bilbo described, waving his hands about dramatically. “A story could be spread, a story of how Nori saved my life during the quest. At the risk of his own, because he realised that there were things worth more than gold.”

Nori stared incredulously at Bilbo as the king smiled blithely at him and continued to spout pure nonsense.

“You deliberately put yourself in harm’s way, making me and Dwalin both realise that you are a loyal subject. And when you and Dwalin grew closer over the course of our journey, I looked favourably upon such a union. Encouraged it even.”

“I told you, this isn’t going to work.” Nori shook his head. “It’s -”

“I’m not done,” Bilbo said, his tone making Nori snap his mouth shut. “There would be another version of the story. In which you’d also save me, but it would have been a complete accident. Albeit an accident you’d be a fool not to take advantage of when it led to the king and the captain taking you into their confidence because of it. When it made Dwalin fall in love with you. When it led you to having the ear of the king. Perhaps you realised that warming the bed of the captain was worth the price of never having to fear being thrown into the dungeons. Dwalin would naturally defend you most ardently against any and all accusations. After all, you’ve never been found guilty of anything. And he would never fall for a criminal.”

“People would not believe that…” Nori said slowly, looking at Dwalin who seemed at loss for words.

“Why not?” Bilbo shrugged. “Isn’t it more plausible than the truth that we’ve been friends for years? And to some this lie will be infinitely more plausible than the other lie in which the thief nobly tried to sacrifice himself when he saw the error of his ways. Those who you need to get information from would much rather believe of you what they know about themselves; that everything is a clever lie. But will they look deeper than the lie beneath the lie? I think not. Tell me, what were you planning on telling them about the quest when you next needed to hear the whispers in the shadows?”

“That it meant nothing,” Nori said quietly. “Nothing except the chance to get rich, and of course to look out for my brothers. But then you tricked me and I didn’t get the pay promised even though we succeeded. I would also spread rumours that it wasn’t true, and that had lost all the coin I was given. Spent it on whoring and gambling probably. It would depend on what Erebor would eventually have to offer in the way of convenient excuses. Whoring and gambling usually follows wherever people go.”

“You would still be telling the first part of that lie,” Bilbo nodded. “Just not with words. While at the same time proclaiming to everyone that would hear that you are of course eternally devoted to me
“But -” Nori glanced to Dwalin who still hadn’t said a word since Bilbo had started his explanation. “If people believe that I’ve thrown my lot in with you for my own good, then they still wouldn’t trust me enough to tell me what I need to know. Don’t bite the hand that feeds and all that.”

“You don’t need the ear of the king and the captain of the guards both,” Bilbo said with a wry smile. “I’m sure you can make it clear that you could care less about who should sit on the throne of Erebor, as long you have all the coin you need and the captain of the guards to keep you out of harm’s way. And plots against Dwalin are rare.”

“What exactly would I need to do?” Dwalin asked, and Nori saw his large hands clench into white-knuckled fists.

“You would need to tell everyone that you love Nori. That he is loyal without a doubt. That you trust him with your life, and that you won’t stand to hear anyone telling lies about him.” Bilbo’s eyes were very kind, and he gently touched his hand to Dwalin’s left fist. “You would need to tell the truth. No more.”

“They’ll think I’m tricking him, using him. They’ll think he’s a fool,” Nori protested.

“I’d be all right with that, if I could have you,” Dwalin said quietly. “What people believe, that’s up to them, and I’ve never cared before, so I don’t see why I would start now.”

“But the other guards -”

“Will get over it.” Dwalin snorted. “They’ve never cared as much about catching you as I have anyway. Funny that. If we tell them that you’ve saved Bilbo’s life I’m sure most of them will give you the benefit of the doubt. Like they did back when you saved the lads. Those who were there that night were all smart enough, and loyal enough not to tell anyone about your involvement, but they’ve never really understood why I’ve been so harsh with you. Their words not mine,” Dwalin added with a wry smile. “And I think they’ve passed along that sentiment to some of the others.”

“Surely you’re not telling me that there have been guards going easy on me over the years?” Nori asked, horrified.

No, surely that couldn’t be, because they’d not caught the Shadow. They’d not gone easy on him. He’d not let himself go soft and unfocused. He could still do his job. He’d been doing his job all this time after all. Bilbo and the boys and everyone were still alive. No need to panic. No -

“I’ve never gone easy on you. I always tried to catch you,” Dwalin said, obviously aiming to comfort him, which admittedly worked, and Nori smiled at him before he realised what he was doing and forced a blank mask to settle over his face. But - did he still need to do that?

“Were you... agreeing? With Bilbo just now?” he asked Dwalin. “Do you think that we should do this?”

“I’ll leave you two to talk about it,” Bilbo said before Dwalin had a chance to reply. “But know that you both deserve to be happy, and I want to do whatever I can to help you get that happiness. Soon enough Fíli will be old enough to rule, and after that I think -”

“Wait, you’re really planning on step down?” Nori asked. “Why?”
“I’ve never really been the sort of ruler our people have wanted,” Bilbo said with a small smile. “I flatter myself by thinking I might have been what was needed, but wanted? No. And my marriage to Thorin -”

“That’s just going to upset the fools in the council,” Dwalin protested. “No one else will care, much less -”

“Bilbo, everyone loves you,” Nori said. “Okay, maybe not everyone, but you have the people’s favour. It’s only -”

“I don’t mean to complain,” Bilbo said with a small shrug of one shoulder. “Or sound ignorant or ungrateful. But I know that I’m not what most people had expected or wanted since I’d rather spend my days in the library instead of out on the training fields. But Fíli will be what has been wanted, and he will also be what Erebor will need. He’ll be a golden king to lead Erebor into a golden age. But this is not the time to talk of such things and I’ll leave you now. And when I see you next I hope I will be able to offer my congratulations.”

Just before he walked out the door Bilbo turned back and grinned at them both. “Oh, and there’s a bed if you go through the door just behind you.”

The door closed, leaving Nori and Dwalin standing in the soft light from the lamp Dwalin had brought. Or perhaps he had just found it and lit it? Did oil and wicks really work as they should after over one and a half centuries and why by Mahal’s stones was he even considering this question?

“I know there are things we need to discuss,” Dwalin said, breaking Nori away from his slightly panicked trail of thoughts. “But all I can think of right now is how badly I want to kiss you again. And how I’m going to pay Bilbo back for that bed comment and the smirk and this entire thing the next time I spar with him.”

Nori’s eyes widened. “You can’t say that, the kissing bit. I’m supposed to be the impulsive one here. We can’t both be.”

One corner of Dwalin’s mouth quirked. “You plan everything. You’re impulsive the way flames are wet.”

Not true. He hadn't planned any of this. When Nori took a step forward Dwalin shifted slightly but did not move away.

“Stop that.”

“You started it.”

When he was close enough that he could feel the warmth coming from Dwalin’s body, and the hot puffs of air falling from flaring nostrils, Nori did stop.

“Kiss me,” he breathed. “If you want to kiss me then kiss me. I want to know that you want me.”

“I want you badly enough that it scares me,” Dwalin murmured, reaching up to cup Nori’s face in a big, calloused hand. “Was Bilbo making sense just now or do I just want to believe it enough that I’m fooling myself?”

“He usually makes sense.”
“When he’s not suggesting that Thorin should be made a prince?”

“I said usually. Kiss me.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop,” Dwalin warned and Nori snorted.

“You liar. I see I’m already corrupting you. But I don’t care. Kiss me.”

“Love you,” Dwalin said gravely and Nori didn’t really have any time to try and digest finally hearing him say that before they were kissing and stumbling towards the bedroom that Bilbo had pointed out. Nori was really going to either thank him profusely later or curse him down to the last curly little hair because if this was the only time he would get to have this it was going to hurt worse than anything he could imagine. But he was not going to say no. Not if Dwalin wanted it.

Nori’s hands scrambled blindly over buckles and buttons as he was too busy trying to crawl inside of Dwalin by way of his mouth to see what he was doing. It’d been quite some time since he’d undressed anyone else, and it’d never meant anything like this before. He’d not tumbled that many people over the years as he’d rarely trusted any of the other thieves enough and it was a bit more awkward to try and proposition people he didn’t spend any time with. But he hopefully knew enough to please Dwalin. The way the larger Dwarf was groaning and clutching at him certainly seemed indicative of that.

“Wait,” Nori protested when Dwalin’s hands begun to sink into his hair.

Dwalin immediately froze and snatched his hands back and it made the thief’s lips twitch because he’d known that Dwalin would stop if asked. If Dwalin accused him of being impulsive the same way flames were wet, well, then Dwalin was careless the same way diamonds were soft. But Nori had not asked just to tease.

“My knives. Give me a minute.”

It was dark in the bedroom. The only light came from the doorway and the single lamp left in the other room, but Nori eyes had always been sharp even in the dark, and he had no problem seeing the bushy eyebrow being raised.

“I have three just in my hair,” Nori explained, shrugging one shoulder. “I’d like it if your fingers stayed attached to your hands.”

The larger Dwarf still looked sceptical but he did take a half-step back and crossed his arms.

“Well, get to it then.”

“Feel free to continue undressing,” Nori prompted as he quickly and efficiently sought out his hidden blades and tossed them onto the dresser. “I don’t mean to hold anything up; I just don’t intend this to end with bloodshed.”

After he kicked off his boots (no need to remove the knives when the boots would come off sooner or later anyway) he took a moment to consider his options and then he shrugged and started pulling off his clothes.

Nori knew that he was a lot smaller without the many layers of clothes and leather armour that he wore, almost scrawny for a Dwarf. He also knew that Dwalin had seen him in various states of
undress before, and apparently had no complaints, but it was still gratifying to see the heat in Dwalin’s eyes as the layers began to come off.

“You done with the knives?” Dwalin asked huskily. “Because I really want to touch you.”

“Perhaps you could lose a few more clothes yourself first,” Nori suggested, because Dwalin was still much too dressed. “Or I can help?” Nori pressed his hands to Dwalin’s chest and slid them up to toy with the collar of his undershirt. “I - mhmm -”

Dwalin was really a very good kisser, Nori mused and happily curled his fingers into soft-rough beard. He smiled into the kiss at the pleased shudder Dwalin made when the large Dwarf gently cupped the back of Nori’s head and let his fingers sink into thick auburn hair.

“You like my hair?” Nori murmured, stroking his hands over Dwalin’s broad shoulders, regrettfully still covered by the damned undershirt. “Trade you. Get rid of the rest of your clothes and I’ll undo my braids.”

“And your clothes?” Dwalin said huskily, a big hand stroking down Nori’s back to give one arse cheek a friendly squeeze.

“You’ll just need to help me with those I guess,” Nori said innocently and Dwalin chuckled and licked his lips.

“Aye, we’ve a deal then.”

Unbound Nori’s beard reached his waist, and with his hair not made up into the customary peaks it reached the small of his back and the Dwarf deftly ran his fingers through it to remove any snags. When he looked back at Dwalin he found the other Dwarf wearing an uncharacteristically slack jawed expression.

“You really like my hair then,” Nori smiled. “Ah, ah,” he added when eager hands reached for him. “You’re not fully unclothed yet.”

With an impatient huff Dwalin removed his socks and smallclothes and then spread his arms as if to say: there, happy now?

Nori was very happy indeed. There seemed to be miles and miles of skin stretching out for him to touch and stroke and dare he even think… mark? He loved Dwalin’s tattoos, the way the ink stretched and curved around muscles and bones; now he did not only have the urge to map them with his tongue, learn them as thoroughly as he would the rooms of Erebor, he also wanted to leave new marks. Bites and scratches to show to anyone who would look that Dwalin was not only taken but his.

The thief briefly pondered how Dwalin would feel about getting his name tattooed somewhere strategic. Over the heart? On the arse? ‘Cross the head was perhaps too much to ask for…

And there were not only tattoos to marvel at but also two small silver rings decorating two dusky pink nipples, glinting out at him from tufts of black-grey hair and oh, Nori had always had a weakness for shiny things, but this was taking it to a whole new level.

He tried not to look at the silver chain hanging from Dwalin’s neck. He had talked about marriage before with Balin, but Nori hadn’t been meant to hear that. And regardless of what Bilbo thought he didn’t know everything. No need to put the cart before the horse.
“You going to stare long?” Dwalin said gruffly and Nori looked up to meet his eyes, lips quirking in a small smile.

“There is a lot of you to look at, I’ve not even gotten past your chest.”

He let his eyes drop lower, following the trail of hair from Dwalin’s stomach down to the thatch between his thighs and the thick cock just beginning to perk up. Realising that it would be very easy for his attention to get caught there, Nori forced himself to continue, admiring sturdy, lightly furred thighs and the dark trails of ink and pale scars every so often intersecting the tan skin.

“You’re gorgeous,” Nori concluded, noting to his delight that Dwalin squirmed a little at the compliment. Oh, that was just delicious.

“And you’re beautiful.” Dwalin said, reaching out to trail his fingers down Nori’s beard and chest. The tough was light, almost hesitant, and Nori wanted to tell him that he wouldn’t break. “The most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Considering that he was still standing in his ragged and stained undershirt, and his underpants, Nori would doubt that if it hadn’t been for the look of amazement in Dwalin’s voice. He really believed what he was saying and Nori’s chest suddenly felt a bit tight. As did his pants. It was something of a new combination to be entirely honest.

“Are you going to help me undress?” Nori asked, pressing his hand over Dwalin’s to push it more firmly against his chest. “And then I’d like more kisses.”

Dwalin nodded but didn’t actually move except to lightly curl his fingers into Nori’s beard.

“You can change your mind,” Nori said quietly and Dwalin’s eyes widened.

“I don’t want to change my mind. I couldn’t bloody well change my mind even when I did want to.”

“We don’t need to do anything right now then.” Nori curled his fingers around Dwalin’s larger ones. “If you don’t want -”

“Oh I want…” Dwalin said huskily. “I want so much I don’t even know where to start. But what do you want? Do you really - would you really want to marry me? Do you - was Bilbo right when he said that you love me?”

Nori blinked and just barely managed to refrain from asking Dwalin if he was insane. That probably would have been taken the wrong way.

“I want whatever you would allow me to have. And if that is marriage, then I’ll gladly take it. If it’s your heart, then it’s only fair because you have mine.” Nori smiled slightly and reached up to mould his other hand over Dwalin’s, pressing their three hands against the left side of his chest. “Stole it when I wasn’t looking you did, such a disgraceful thing to do for the captain of the guards. I’m shocked and slightly impressed.”

When Dwalin pulled his hand back, Nori almost protested, but he bit his tongue instead, quietly waiting to see what the other Dwarf would do.

He’d not expected thick fingers to go to the back of a thicker neck and undo the fastening of the chain Dwalin wore.
“I want you to have this,” Dwalin said and almost brusquely thrust the chain into Nori’s hands.

“I -” Nori licked suddenly dry lips. “I can’t give you mine. I don’t have one,” he hastily added when a sad glint entered Dwalin’s eyes. “The only things I always carry are my knives. I can’t have anything to help someone identify me.”

“Does that mean - you, can’t wear it?” Dwalin’s fingers twitched as if planning to take the chain back and Nori reflexively pulled his hand away, because no one was going to take the chain from him.

It was a work of seconds for Nori’s fingers to fasten the chain around his neck.

It was not a delicate chain; the links were sturdy but fit together perfectly in an intricate pattern and Nori gently pulled his beard up and away; parted it to reveal the silver resting against his collar bones.

“I want whatever I can get of you,” Nori promised. “And -”

He did not get any further with his promise to make Dwalin a chain in return because then lips were covering his own, stealing the words he had intended to say, the promises he’d been meaning to give, and Nori happily gave them up and stole whatever he could in return.

They had to part for a moment when Dwalin pulled off Nori’s shirt, but it was worth it because when Nori next pressed himself against Dwalin everything was just so much better. He wanted to push Dwalin down on the conveniently placed bed and just rub himself over him, so he did. Or, tried to, because Dwalin was not budging.

“Get on the bed,” Nori demanded, ignoring how much like a whiny child it made him sound.

“I still need to help you with your pants.” Dwalin had the nerve to sound amused of all things, which Nori decided to overlook for the sake of what they were doing and he quickly pushed his pants down and stepped out of them.

The next thing he knew he was the one on the bed, but he didn’t feel like complaining as Dwalin quickly followed, bracketing him but not actually touching him, and that just wouldn’t do.

Curling his arms around Dwalin’s shoulders and his legs around his hips Nori pulled him down into a kiss, trying to ignore how he could now only take quick shallow breaths.

“’m crushing you,” Dwalin murmured, and Nori protested with a half-gasped moan when he pulled away. “Just - how ‘bout like this?” For a moment breathing really became an issue and then Dwalin rolled him so Nori was draped over him instead of being beneath him, legs splayed on each side of wide hips. Nori scrambled to try and get his knees down on the mattress (which was suspiciously not very dusty at all and had Bilbo actually cleaned?) and one of Dwalin’s hands came down to cup his arse and then everything was just wonderful friction and wet kisses.

However, as they were pressed together head to toe, rutting against sweat-slicked skin everything suddenly slowed down again. Deep, wet kisses turned soft and tender, and hands that had been grabbing began to leisurely caress.

Every thrust of Nori’s hips made the chain – Dwalin’s chain – around his neck move slightly and it
was an ever present reminder of what they were doing, what it meant, and Nori’s head spun with the thought of it all.

Dwalin was murmuring endearments and praises beneath his breath, most of them lost between kisses, or too soft for Nori to really hear, but the ones he did hear were enough to make his chest feel tight again and he buried his head in the crook of Dwalin’s neck and took a deep breath.

“Love you,” he whispered.

“I love you,” Dwalin replied, voice rumbling in his chest as well as in Nori’s ear. Careful hands came to gently brush through passion-tangled hair. “My beautiful Nori. I want to see, can I see?”

Nori didn’t really understand what Dwalin meant, but he still nodded, and when he realised that Dwalin definitely couldn’t see that he murmured his agreement. Trusting Dwalin he let himself be pushed back into a sitting position, even if the loss of that much skin against his felt like difficult thing to bear.

“Thank you,” Dwalin said as he wrapped his hand around Nori’s flushed, slick length. “Are you close? I want to see you come. Will you come for me?”

Nori shuddered at the image that brought to his head, of spending himself all over Dwalin’s stomach and chest, marking him, and he nodded.

“You?” was all he could manage in return, but it seemed to be enough for Dwalin because he smiled.

“If you just move a little, and - yes, brace your arms, yeah just like that.”

The auburn-haired Dwarf shuddered again as Dwalin wrapped his hand around them both. Everything felt so good, too good. His arms were trembling where they tried to hold his weight up so Dwalin could see them rub against each other and his breath came in pants, but so did Dwalin’s so it was all right.

“I’m close. I want -” Nori tried to find the words. “Can I -”

“Whatsoever you want,” Dwalin promised and Nori let out a shaky laugh.

“Dangerous to promise me that.”

“Trust you.”

Nori lowered his head and pressed his mouth to Dwalin’s shoulder. First only in a kiss, but then he lightly sank his teeth into the bulky muscle. “That? Is that okay?”

“Yes,” Dwalin replied, his eyes dark, and Nori stole a kiss before returned to the shoulder and biting and sucking at the skin until a decent sized bruise bloomed. Looking at it felt almost as good as the warmth coiling ever more tightly in his stomach.

“Marking me,” Dwalin murmured and Nori shuddered and nodded. “Making me yours?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.” Thick fingers reached up to pull at the silver chain. “All yours.”
The slight pain of the chain digging into his neck was all that was needed to push Nori over the edge and his hips jerked as he spent himself over Dwalin’s fist. He wasn’t sure how his arms managed to hold him, but somehow they did; only giving way when Dwalin pulled him down into a kiss, his own cock pulsing wetly between them.

“‘We’re doing this then? What Bilbo suggested.’

“Up to you,” Dwalin said quietly, stroking his hand down Nori’s bare back and he arched up into it much like a cat would when petted. “I’ll trust your judgement.”

“Some people won’t talk to the husband of the guard captain,” Nori said softly, raising himself up on one elbow to look Dwalin in the eyes. “But most of them would not have talked to me for going on the quest in the first place. To get their trust back I would have had to do things that I’m not comfortable with.”

“Would you have done them?”

“I would do anything to keep those I love safe.” Nori’s eyes slid away from Dwalin’s. “Lie, cheat, steal, kill. I know you wouldn’t. I - I know that doesn’t make me a good p -”

“You are a good person.” Dwalin’s big hand cupped his face and turned him to meet serious blue-grey eyes again. “I don’t agree with everything Bilbo does, definitely not with everything Balin does, and they don’t agree with everything I do. Doesn’t mean I love them any less or that I think less of them. Doesn’t mean that I don’t fight with them from time to time though, if they’re doing something incredibly stupid. Just, whatever happens, don’t lie to me unless you absolutely have to.”

A little startled Nori blinked. “You’d be okay with me lying to you if I thought I had to?”

Dwalin shrugged slightly. “We’ve already settled how I can’t really be trusted to lie. I can see how it would be best not to tell me certain things. But don’t lie because you think I wouldn’t like what you have to say, and only when you really think it’s the only way. Otherwise we’ll have a fight because that counts as incredibly stupid.”

Nori gave him a crooked smile and pretended that it wasn’t slightly wobbly at the corners. “At least our fights from now on will have a steamy aftermath, yes?”

Dwalin nodded his head in the direction of the dresser and Nori’s pile of knives. “I would think that gets in the way of some of the steam. Plenty of time to cool off while you stop yourself from turning me into a pin cushion.”

“I’ll teach you where they are,” Nori promised. "It's not that difficult to learn."

“Have you… shown anyone else?”

“Jealous?”

“Yes,” Dwalin gritted out and Nori laughed because they were both covered in each other’s seed, and he didn’t really know how they were supposed to make themselves presentable before stumbling over someone from the Company, and all in all it seemed rather pointless indeed for Dwalin to be
jealous.

“I’ve shown Bilbo most of them, because I figured he should know where to find a knife if he needed one and was around. And Fili knows, which means that Kili probably knows as well.”

“Fili?”

“Who did you think taught that boy to handle knives?”

“Not you.”

“Good, because you weren’t supposed to. We figured that you wouldn’t approve.”

Dwalin’s brow furrowed but there was a playful glint in his eyes that he couldn’t disguise. “Dís ask you to?”

“She did,” Nori admitted. “Seemed like she’d been thinking about it for quite some time.”

“But not Kili?”

“You should know better than I do that he’s not suited for it.” Nori wiggled the fingers on his free hand in front of Dwalin’s face. “Not quite nimble-fingered enough. And it helps that Fili throws just as well with his left as with his right.”

“I’m not sure what you’re insinuating I should know about the lads being nimble-fingered,” Dwalin teased and Nori snorted.

“Funny. Do you know something else that’s funny? You asked to court me while you were naked and I was still wearing my under things. What a sight we must have made.”

“No one was there to see.”

“No, but it’s the principle.”

“Principles?” Dwalin asked, tilting his head to the side. “Sounds vaguely familiar.”

“I have to say that corrupting you went much quicker than I expected,” Nori mused. “Now what am I going to do when my master plan is already completed.”

“I can think of a thing or two,” Dwalin murmured as his hand crept further down. “And for the record, I didn’t ask to court you, I asked to marry you. I’m a disgrace to courtship protocol everywhere.”

“Good.” Nori leaned up for a kiss. “Because I hope that we can get married before Dís or Dáin arrives. Dáin is not going to like this and Dís is going to want to throw a feast.”

“We can ask Bilbo, or Balin,” Dwalin promised, tucking a long strand of red hair behind Nori’s ear. “But before than I think we might want to clean up?”

“Did Bilbo actually leave something to clean up with then?” Nori asked as he allowed himself to be rolled onto his back. “Because - oh.”
Dwalin smirked up at him as he dragged his tongue again over Nori’s suddenly quivering stomach muscles. “Oh?”

“Nothing, never mind,” Nori murmured spreading his legs to make room.

Chapter End Notes

*throws confetti*

Chapters are slow coming because: Big Bang. Please bear with me, and hopefully you'll like it when its done :)


“Why did you tell me?” Bilbo’s golden eyes were filled with unshed tears and they glimmered as bright as any star Thorin had ever seen in the sky. “Why did you tell me the truth?”

“I -” Thorin reached out for his husband but snatched his hand back when Bilbo flinched.

“Don’t you think you’ve hurt me enough?” Bilbo spat and Thorin shook his head, then realised how that could be interpreted and nodded, then shook it again.

“Bilbo, please. I don’t under -”

“You should never have told me,” Bilbo said again and held up his hands. “Then this would never have happened.”

Thorin’s eyes widened. Bilbo’s hands, they - they had no fingers. Only stumps. Some were still bleeding sluggishly. The blood was a deep dark red, almost black and it trailed down Bilbo’s palms, down to his wrists.

“Who did this?” Thorin demanded, his own hands clenching into fists at his side. “Tell me who did this and they will not live to see the dawn.”

“You cannot destroy a whole city,” Bilbo said, and his head, his shoulders, his entire body slumped in defeat. “You told me about the Ring’s powers, and I shared this with Balin, who convinced me to tell my councillors. They met, and agreed that a King cannot be allowed to have absolute power. And now, now I cannot ever use the Ring.”

Again Thorin reached out for Bilbo. But when he saw his own hand he recoiled. He had no fingers either. Not even any stumps. His hands were smooth lumps of flesh and Thorin stared down at them in shock. It looked as if there had never even been any fingers. But he knew that wasn’t true. He lifted one of his deformed hands to touch the ring hanging around his neck, but instead of his ring Thorin found a still beating heart attached to the chain. Snapping his gaze back to Bilbo made Thorin’s eyes open wide in horror.

“The Ring isn’t mine,” Bilbo said and shook his head as blood started pouring from the open wound in his chest. “Nor is it yours.”

“Did you sleep well?” Bilbo asked when Thorin, yawning, joined him outside the mountain. He had
found his husband on the western slopes, within sight of Ravenhill. Unlike when they had passed it
the first time Thorin could now see black birds up on the cliff. Some flying, others just sitting; small
black spots against the grey stone.

“[I believe I did],” Thorin replied and started to reach for Bilbo, but something about that action
seemed wrong. It made him pause for half of a moment before he shook it off.

Mentally telling himself to stop being so stupid Thorin curled his fingers around Bilbo’s wrist and
tugged slightly, reeling his very unresisting Dwarf in for what by rights should have been a good
morning kiss, except for it being late afternoon…

The sun had begun its descent and long shadows was beginning to creep out over the landscape
around them.

Thorin didn’t know why he’d been so tired ever since killing Smaug, but he did not enjoy it.
Sleeping should be done with Bilbo in his arms; otherwise he saw little point in it.

“You should eat,” Bilbo murmured and Thorin thought of the Elven bread and his stomach turned.

“I’m not -”

“I’m not letting you starve to death after slaying a Dragon,” Bilbo gently scolded him. “You’d upset
Ori. He can’t write an epic tale if the hero dies in the end.”

“Hero?” Thorin echoed. “No. That’s not -”

“Slayed a Dragon,” Bilbo said again, a smile lighting up his eyes and curving his lips. “Reclaimed a
lost kingdom. I’m terribly sorry, but I do think that qualifies as heroic.”

This was a perfect opportunity to tell Bilbo what had really happened, Thorin realised.

They were alone, they were talking about Smaug. Thorin had his ring around his neck, he could put
it on and show Bilbo how he could move rocks, tell the truth about how he had been able to control
Smaug as well.

And then… then all he would be able to do was hope that it wouldn’t change things.

Thorin hesitated. Perhaps it would be better if he waited. If he told Bilbo after some time had passed,
after Bilbo had seen for himself that things were as they always had been - if everything was normal
surely Bilbo wouldn’t mind the hidden power Thorin had discovered in his ring. His husband
wouldn’t be afraid because he would know that nothing had changed. Yes. And besides, the ravens
could see them. He didn’t know if they were the kind that was able to talk, but why take the risk? It
was better to wait.

Bilbo gently stroked his thumb over the bandages covering Thorin’s palm, the one with the cut. “But
please don’t do anything of the sort ever again or my hair will be as white as Balin’s.”

“I will endeavour to stay away from Dragons,” Thorin agreed and tangled their fingers together.

“But not from food.” Bilbo tugged at Thorin’s hand. “Come on, I promise we’ll find something you
like. Since when were Hobbits picky eaters anyway?”
They started walking back towards Erebor’s entrance, the descending sun at their backs.

“I’ll have you know that we are known far and wide for our taste,” Thorin said and affected a haughty look. “And we suffer when we are forced to eat the same thing for weeks on end.”

“Poor thing,” Bilbo murmured. “We have mistreated you horribly. Do you think that you can ever forgive us?”

“I might have to take matters up with your King,” Thorin considered. “And demand proper compensation.”

He had not intended for his jest to bring a serious look to Bilbo’s face. All he had wanted was to steal a few more kisses.

“I mean to talk to you about this.”

“Compensation?” Thorin asked. “Bilbo, I was just jesting.” Thorin didn’t even want the part of the treasure that he’d been promised when first signing the contract. Not because he was afraid of the gold, no, that fear had left him after the time he’d spent in the treasure chambers. But it did not sit right with him, to take gold, coin, or gems for something he had done for Bilbo’s sake.

“No.” Bilbo snorted. “No, that’s not what I meant. But on the subject of kings… I want you to know that when things have settled down I’m planning to hand over the throne to Fíli. He will be the King Erebor deserves. The one to bring them into a new era.”

“Would you have done this even if you had not wedded me?” Thorin asked cautiously. “I do not want you to do something you would later regret. And I’ve understood that our union might not be looked upon favourably.”

“I can’t say that I wasn’t meant to be king.” Bilbo sighed. “Both Father and Grandfather certainly meant for me to become one. And perhaps things would have been different if I’d had their guidance when I first donned the crown. But I would prefer to help Fíli become a better King than I’ve ever been, and let him grow into the role slowly instead of having it be thrust upon him.”

“That is not an answer to my question.”

“No,” Bilbo said finally. “I would not have been so quick to abdicate if I had not married you.”

“I see.” Thorin said and slackened his grip on Bilbo’s hand. But his husband did not allow him to pull away, instead holding fast and halting, making Thorin stop as well.

“I don’t think you do.” Bilbo’s eyes were smiling. “Thorin, the only reason I plan on stepping down as soon as I judge it’s fair to Fíli is because I now have someone to share my life with. As King, my life is not my own. But as your husband, all I want is to be able to share it with you. Only you.”

Overwhelmed, Thorin’s mind fastened to the most absurd part of that statement. “Only me? But your nephews, your sister, and -”

“Dwarfs are greedy.” Bilbo’s smile widened to encompass also his lips. “I would have you all in my life. But if you realised that Erebor was not what you had expected, asked me to come with you to the Shire, or anywhere else on Arda, I would follow you. Dís and the boys can live without me, but I don’t want to live without you.”
“Bilbo…”

“I mean it,” Bilbo said and leaned in to touch his brow to Thorin’s. “Depending on what you would want, we could stay here in Erebor, or go to Ered Luin, or the Shire. Or travel. Whatever you want.”

“But what about what you want?” Thorin pulled back and licked his lips. “If you’ve not been able to do what you want for all these years, how can you now decide that you’ll do whatever I want? I don’t -”

“Because what I want is you.”

Stunned and speechless all Thorin could do was to stand there like a Troll having been turned to stone and gaze into smiling hazel eyes. Not until Bilbo chuckled and kissed him did the spell break and Thorin wrapped his arms around Bilbo’s shoulders and discovered that when two people were grinning, kissing was not the easiest thing in the world. But it was still one of the loveliest.

- 

It was with a groan of relief that Thorin sank into the warm water.

“Shame we don’t have any soap,” Bilbo muttered as he walked down the steps to join Thorin in the large sunken marble tub. “Getting the heating working was easy enough and same for the piping, but I suspect that if there was any soap to be found either Balin or Dori made away with it before I could. I bet if we check in the other baths they will be there, soaping themselves up and snickering.”

“I don’t care,” Thorin murmured. “You and your people are amazing to have made this. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

At one end of the tub the water was deep enough that Thorin thought it might go over his head if he would stand there, but at the other, the end Bilbo was just entering, the floor of the tub was steps that you could either use as a bench once you felt you’d gone far enough, or you could continue on further down into the water.

Where Thorin had chosen to settle the water reached up to his collar bones, and he hunched a little further down to make the water envelope his shoulders as well.

“Move down another step instead,” Bilbo prompted and ran his hand through Thorin’s curls as he walked past him. “Do that and you’ll end up slipping further and when you’re coughing up water you’ll be sorry.”

“I can’t imagine being sorry right now,” Thorin sighed. He allowed Bilbo to move him so that the blond could slip in behind Thorin and lean against the wall of the tub; Thorin leaning back against Bilbo.

Beneath the water Bilbo’s hand slid up Thorin’s arm, then down over his smooth chest. “You’re thinner than you were before.”

“Do we really need to talk about this now?” Thorin said drowsily. “It’s nothing a few meals won’t fix. All of us are leaner compared to when your Company was busy emptying my pantry.”

A hum was all the reply he received and Bilbo’s hands continued to stroke along Thorin’s skin. As
his hand brushed against Thorin’s ring where it hung from the mithril chain Thorin startled a little and pulled away.

“Did I hurt you?” Bilbo asked worriedly. When he tried to slip out from behind Thorin to check for any bruising Thorin stopped him.

“I’m fine,” Thorin promised and raised his right hand from the water to show Bilbo his palm, now free from the cloth bandage. “This was the worst of it and as you can see it’s healing nicely.”

Bilbo took Thorin’s hand in his own and pulled it back to press a kiss to it. “If I find you’re concealing any injuries you are going to be in deep trouble.”

“I only find myself in deep water,” Thorin said and chuckled at Bilbo’s sigh.

They settled down again, one of Bilbo’s arms around Thorin’s waist, the other holding Thorin’s hand; their joined hands resting at Thorin’s thigh, and Thorin’s free hand slowly stroking along Bilbo’s lower thigh and over his knee. Even though they were completely bare there wasn’t anything particularly stirring about their situation. It was just a relief to have Bilbo so close to him, to be warm, and Thorin blinked slowly, his eyelids feeling very heavy.

He wasn’t sure when he closed them but when he opened them again Bilbo was sitting in his lap, his arms twined around Thorin’s shoulders.

“Did killing make you feel good?” Bilbo whispered against Thorin’s lips before claiming them in a kiss.

“Bilbo?” Thorin managed when he got a chance to speak again. “I- ”

“You can tell me,” Bilbo promised. “It’s all right.” Bilbo raised himself up on his knees and when he sank back down again Thorin gasped and his hips jerked up into Bilbo’s tight heat.

“Bilbo,” Thorin breathed and clutched at Bilbo’s back. “Bilbo.”

“You can tell me. Tell me everything. Tell me what you want. Your heart’s desire. Your biggest wish.”

Bilbo pushed Thorin backwards and he tumbled down onto a plush, well-stuffed mattress. Thorin’s hands came up to clasp at Bilbo’s hips and his husband smiled and leaned down to kiss him.

“Tell me.”

“Thorin?” Bilbo rubbed his palm over Thorin’s stomach and Thorin’s eyes blinked open. “Darling, don’t fall asleep in the bath.”

“Not sleeping,” Thorin murmured and tilted his head back to press a kiss to Bilbo’s neck, rubbing his cheek against Bilbo’s beard. “But what did you say just now about me telling you something?”

“I didn’t say anything.” Bilbo laughed softly. “You are falling asleep. Come on, perhaps we ought to get up before we turn into prunes.”

“Not quite yet.” Thorin pressed another kiss to Bilbo’s skin, nipping ever so slightly. “How about you move your hand just a little lower?”
“Oh, hello,” Bilbo snorted as he wrapped his lovely fingers around Thorin’s erection. “This is apparently not sleeping.”

“Wasn’t sleeping.” Thorin pressed back against his husband and sighed contently.

—

“Bilbo! Balin!” Bofur came running out from one of the side passages leading into the room just before the great hall that they had taken to use as a common room. The great hall still had a slight problem of having a dead Dragon in it, but Bilbo hoped that it would be quickly dealt with as soon as Dáin and his people arrived. To try and cut it up before then was likely only going to make the situation worse.

Bofur’s shout made Thorin look up from the dried meat that he was making himself eat; meat Nori had given him with a pointed look before nudging him towards the nearest chair. Doubtlessly asked to do just that by Bilbo which was why Thorin hadn’t protested beyond a sigh.

“Dwalin! Anyone!”

“Anyone here,” Nori said and raised his hand. “And also Thorin. Going by the grin on your face I’m guessing that the mountain isn’t about to collapse on us, so what’s the shouting about?”

“I think I’ve found the Arkenstone,” Bofur breathed and opened his hands to reveal a sparkling jewel. Nori was on his feet and at Bofur’s side almost instantly.

“Durin’s balls,” he swore reverently. “I think you’re right.”

Casually leaving the rest of the meat on the table Thorin rose as well and went to look at the jewel.

At first glance it seemed to be white but then Bofur moved it slightly and light from a nearby candle fell on it, making it sparkle and shimmer with all the colours in the rainbow and some Thorin felt sure he’d never seen before. It was extraordinarily beautiful.

“Where did you find it?” Nori asked, his hands half way raised as if to grab the jewel.

“I literally stumbled over it,” Bofur laughed. “Or that’s a lie I guess. I stumbled over a shield and landed with this an inch in front of my nose. Could hardly believe it.”

“You shouldn’t be in the treasure room by yourself,” Nori said absently. “What if you had fallen and hit your head?” And in his next breath, “Can I hold it?”

“My head is at least as hard as anything down there,” Bofur scoffed. “And of course you can,” he added and bowed his head slightly. “Master Nori, saviour of our King and betrothed to our trusted Captain. Who would ever hesitate before handing you a priceless -”

“Oh shut your gob,” Nori sighed and accepted the jewel from Bofur.

“Just getting my story straight,” Bofur said innocently.

“It’s no joking matter,” Thorin said gruffly. “If it is suspected that things are not the way that Bilbo asked us to -”
Bofur waved his hand dismissively. “I know, I know. ‘s just us here now, I’ll behave when it’s not.”

“Best way to lie is to lie all the time,” Nori said, somewhat distractedly. “Lie even when you’re alone. Lie almost until you believe it yourself.”

“Only it’s not much of a lie is it,” Bofur argued. “I’m just to tell people that I find you a decent enough bloke and that Dwalin is mad about you. It’s just the part about the oh-so dramatic way you saved Bilbo’s neck that’s a bit of a sidestep from the truth.”

“Right,” Nori agreed, now clearly not listening, and Thorin snorted because the Dwarf now appeared to be petting the stone.

“Keep an eye on him will you,” Bofur asked and patted Thorin’s shoulder. “I’ll go find Dwalin and tell him he’s got some competition.” He paused. “Any idea of where I can find him?”

Thorin shook his head. “But Bilbo and Balin are with the ravens. Lord Dáin’s reply has finally arrived. They’ll be here within a fortnight. Bilbo was just going to reply.”

“Here’s hoping the Dragon will not have started to stink by then,” Bofur nodded and with a final pat on Thorin’s shoulder he sauntered off.

“I take it there is something special with this stone?” Thorin asked when Nori merely kept staring at it.

“It’s the Arkenstone.”

“And what is that?”

“Bilbo didn’t tell you?” Nori blinked at Thorin. “It’s the King’s jewel. The heart of the mountain.”

“This explanation is not really explaining much,” Thorin said drily. “I can see that it is a jewel. And gems usually come from the inside of a mountain. Is it a diamond?”

“It’s unique,” Nori said and shook his head. “It was found generations ago, deep inside of Erebor. It’s beyond price. When Smaug came it was fixed to the royal throne, but when Dwalin and I checked earlier it was missing. Smaug must have collected what treasures he could reach from throughout the mountain and brought it all down to the treasure chambers.”

“The throne room is big enough to room a Dragon?” Thorin asked and Nori’s lips twitched.

“Ask Bilbo to take you. You won’t like it since you’re so fond of railings.” He held the stone out to Thorin. “Best if you take this I think. Before I decide to run off with it and make for the horizon.”

“You wouldn’t,” Thorin said, but accepted the stone anyway. It was heavier than it looked and was oddly warm. Probably since both Bofur and Nori had held it. “And what am I supposed to do with it now?” Thorin asked.

“Preferably not lose it,” Nori suggested. When Thorin stuffed the stone into the pocket of his trousers the auburn haired Dwarf covered his eyes. “Well that’s one way of doing it I suppose. Hobbits. No respect.”
“Mine,” Bilbo purred as he stroked Thorin’s erection, working the loose skin up and down over the glans.

Thorin tried bucking his hips upwards but found that he couldn’t move. Nor could he reach out and touch his husband. It was as if he was stuck in one of the big spider webs in Mirkwood, only he could see that he clearly wasn’t.

The golden light in the room made Bilbo looked even more golden than he usually did. His skin, his hair, even his eyes seemed to have a golden sheen, and Thorin desperately wanted to touch him.

“You’re mine,” Bilbo repeated and leaned in to lick a warm wet line up Thorin’s stomach. “Tell me that you’re mine.”

“I’m yours,” Thorin gasped. “I’m yours.”

“Good,” Bilbo said throatily and his eyes flashed. “Very good.”

When Thorin woke up his heart was beating like a drum in his chest and there was a duller echo further down.

He couldn’t remember what had happened in the dream, but that’s not to say that he didn’t have a fairly good idea regarding the nature of it.

The room was almost entirely dark and Thorin could just barely make out Bilbo’s shape next to him. His husband was sleeping, and Thorin really shouldn’t disturb him. Not since it was likely the middle of the night still. It would be horribly selfish to deny Bilbo a good night’s sleep.

Moving slowly as to not wake Bilbo, Thorin pushed the blankets away from himself.

As he wrapped his hand around his aching cock he couldn’t help but hiss at an unexpected coolness.

He was wearing his ring, Thorin realised. The cold spot was merely the metal touching his own blood-warm flesh.

At least he’d not been sleepwalking again, he mused.

When Bilbo sighed and shifted Thorin froze, not sure if he hoped that Bilbo was waking up or if he hoped that he’d remain asleep. But the Dwarf settled down again soon enough, leaving Thorin at his own mercy.

All it took was four tugs to bring golden sparks dancing in front of his eyes.

“You still haven’t told me what you want,” Bilbo said and let a handful of golden coins rain down on Thorin’s chest. “Slayer of Spiders, Orcs, and Dragons. Is that what you want? You did enjoy it.”

Thorin grunted as Bilbo speared into him, and shivered as more of the coins fell on his chest. Not
from cold, no quite the opposite. Each coin was as warm as Bilbo’s touch, and wherever they touched him they made his skin tingle.

“Or perhaps this?” Bilbo asked and put more of his weight on Thorin, pushing him deeper down into the golden treasure below, pushing deeper into him. “The Arkenstone? All the treasures of this world? No?”

“No,” Thorin panted. “No, I won’t want that. Bilbo, please -”

“Shame,” Bilbo murmured. “Either of those would have been easy enough.” He pulled away, slapping away Thorin’s hands as he stretched to touch him.

“Bilbo,” Thorin pleaded and reached for him again. He jumped when arms came from behind to hold him still.

“This?” Bilbo asked and there was a strange echo to his words. Thorin struggled against the hands holding him, but relaxed when a familiar voice shushed him. As he turned his head he found that the one holding him was none other than his husband, and when he turned his head back, he found none other than his husband again.

“You want this,” that Bilbo said. “But is pleasure what you want most of all?”

Thorin’s cry as Bilbo started moving again was quickly silenced when the one holding his arms leaned down to kiss him. When a warm mouth sank down over his neglected erection Thorin groaned into the kiss, his fingers scrambling over coin and gems to find something solid to hold on to.

When he managed to open his eyes again, not even knowing when he’d closed them, it was to the sight of honey-coloured locks bobbing up and down as Bilbo sucked him. Bilbo pulled back and turned his head up. He licked his lips, golden eyes smiling brightly up at Thorin.

“What would you give to have this?”

Not waiting for an answer, one Thorin couldn’t have given anyway since Bilbo was still kissing him, Bilbo took him back into his mouth and swallowed.

Bilbo gripped Thorin’s hips and drove forward in long rolling thrusts. “Interesting…”

Thorin wanted to ask what it was that Bilbo found interesting but as quickly as the thought had appeared it was gone again. Feeling that he was close Thorin squirmed, but Bilbo wouldn’t let him move, and he kept sucking on Thorin’s tongue, and -

“Daddy?”

“What is it, darling?” Bilbo asked and looked up from the book he was reading.

“Can I go out and play?”

“Of course,” Bilbo nodded, smiling at the little girl when she cheered and ran out into the garden.

“Who is she?” Thorin asked and looked at the small blond girl picking flowers. They were in the middle of a field, and the sky above them was blue and endless.
“Our daughter,” Bilbo said and took Thorin’s hand.  

“She is?” Thorin looked at the honey-blond hair, so much like Bilbo’s or like his own mother’s. And at wide hazel eyes and a freckled nose. Grass stained knees and dirty palms. She looked up and smiled, and Thorin smiled back and waved at her.  

“Isn’t she precious?” Bilbo asked as he pressed his hand over Thorin’s heart.  

“Yes,” Thorin agreed, not taking his eyes of his daughter. “Precious.”

Chapter End Notes

<3 diemarysues
Chapter Thirty-one

Chapter Notes

The irreplaceable diemarysues is currently away from the net, so this be not betaed. Yes, you may panic.

“Stop sulking,” Thorin overheard Fíli tell his brother.

Thorin had been lying outside at the feet of one of the two giant statues guarding Erebor’s gates. Getting up on the platform had been easy once he'd found the steps that had been carved into the stone, and it was a good place to rest in the sun. A good place to think.

He had been trying to remember a dream that he’d had the night before. But it hadn’t been long before his thoughts had spiralled in other directions.

Thorin had woken up feeling almost indescribably happy, but he couldn’t really remember what had happened in the dream. There’d been green fields, green hills, all full of flowers. That was all he remembered. But dreaming about being back in the Shire… that wouldn’t make him happy. Thorin didn’t understand why it should make him happy at all. But perhaps he dreamed about it because Bilbo had offered to go there with him. The offer had certainly made Thorin happy, even as it had scared him a little.

Bilbo thought that it was no more than what Thorin had done, and indeed, Thorin had left his smial, a few remaining relatives, and the Shire to follow Bilbo across the world; even before falling in love with him. But that could hardly compared to leaving a place that had been his family’s home for generation, to leave his family. What if they left and Bilbo regretted it? Would it be good enough if they just returned to Erebor, or would Bilbo come to resent him for making him leave in the first place? But that Bilbo would even offer…

“I’m not sulking,” Kíli said, and even though Thorin couldn’t see him the young Dwarf did sound rather sullen.

“Brother, you’re not fooling anyone. You’ll meet her soon enough.”

Fíli and Kíli had to be standing just below Thorin, close enough that their voices drifted up even with the nearby waterfall thundering against the rocks in the background.

“No I won’t,” Kíli said glumly. “They won’t be allowed to come here before we’re settled. And that’ll take ages. And I can’t exactly scarper off to Mirkwood can I?”

“Well, no,” Fíli admitted. “And I agree that it’ll take quite a while to get this place properly sorted out.”

“Thank you,” Kíli said drily. “Thank you, brother. I love being right.”

There was a short silence, then Fíli snorted. “Not to say that the Elven King’s face wouldn’t be a
“sight if we invited him here while there’s still a dead Dragon in the main hall. But that’s beside the point I was trying to make.”

“There’s a point?”

“If you don’t want me to share my wisdom with the less fortunate…”

There was the sound of a scuffle, and a grunt and then:

“Fine,” Kíli said, sounding a bit winded. “Tell me, oh wise one.”

“The first thing you should know is that it doesn’t matter how long your arms are if all you’re going to do is flail at me with them.”

“You fight dirty.”

“I fight dirtier,” Fíli pointed out. “And only because you didn’t bother going to as many lessons with Nori as I did. Else you would know what to do too.”

“Learning the bow was more fun.”

“And since we’re back to the subject of Elves—”

There was another scuffle that ended with the bright sound of laughter. Thorin smiled to himself, a smiled tinged at the edges with sadness. Perhaps if he’d grown up with a brother they would have been like Fíli and Kíli. It was a nice thought.

“Really,” Fíli said. “The Elves won’t come here, but Uncle will want to make allies. To form bonds as quickly and strongly as possible. Both with the Elves and with the Men of Lake-town. I think he plans on going there, and inviting the Elves along.”

“Did he tell you this?”

“No. Not really. But he’s been muttering about that Master they had in Lake-town. I think he’s been sending ravens to the Men.”

Bilbo had done just that, and Thorin was rather impressed with Fíli’s reasoning. The lad had a good head on him when he chose not to use it for mischief making.

“Men,” Kíli repeated. “Not the Elves.”

“Just wait and see,” Fíli said. “Even if I’m wrong, you could send ravens to her. Meet somewhere half way between Erebor and Mirkwood.”

“That’d be like sneaking around,” Kíli said morosely. “She deserves better than that.”

“It’s not sneaking around if both Uncle and King Thranduil knows about it.”

Only then did it occur to Thorin that eavesdropping wasn’t exactly a proper thing to do. He should have alerted the boys to his presence right away. To do so now… that would just make things terribly awkward.
“How can you be so sure she's the one for you? How do you know?” Fíli’s voice was almost too quiet for Thorin to hear over the waterfall.

“I'm not sure at all,” Kíli said and Thorin could hear the smile in his voice. "I know what you, all of you, must be thinking. That I've only met her, talked to her, a few short times." He laughed softly. "I've never even kissed her. But I know I love her. I know it as I know my true name."

They were both quiet for a short while, or perhaps one of them just said something too softly for Thorin to hear.

“I'm happy for you, Kíli.”

“Thank you. It means a lot to me to have your support.”

“Of course. Unless you fall in love with an Orc…”

“Arse. Do you really think I should send a raven to her?”

“Would you like to get a message from her?” There was a pause. “Then she ought to like one from you.”

Kíli snorted. “I'll go shake Ori down for his pen then. We can try and climb the statue later.” Thorin eyes widened. That was fortunate.

"Maybe…” Kíli continued. "Maybe she’d be able to come with the food they promised us. Even if it’s not really part of her duties.”

“Maybe,” Fíli agreed. "Though instead of bothering poor Ori for a pen you could hunt down a study room? Only… the ink will probably have dried up…”

“Can't you just add water to it?”

“How should I know?”

Their voices faded as they wandered off, back towards the gates.

Thorin remained at the feet of the great Dwarven warrior, shifting to move one arm behind his head. If the warrior had once been a living person, he was now immortalised in stone. Never to be forgotten until the stone crumbled. Perhaps not even then.

Thorin turned his ring round and round between the fingers on his free hand. Kíli was young. But he’d sounded very sure that he loved the Elf. Only… Elves were immortal. Kíli could live for centuries still, but what was a couple of hundred years to someone immortal? His captain might have been thousands of years before the great stone statue was even carved. And she might live long after it had turned to dust.

Ever since marrying Bilbo, and perhaps a little while before; once he’d known that there was really nothing more he wanted than to spend his life with his Dwarf, Thorin had been quietly, secretly, and incredibly relieved that he was likely to die before Bilbo. It was not fair, but as he did not wish to live in a world without his husband it was a stroke of luck that he likely would not need to.

Even if Thorin grew as old as the Old Took, Bilbo was still likely to live longer. There was not such
a huge difference between them. They would likely be able to grow old together and Bilbo’s hair would turn from gold to silver, the crow’s feet at his eyes would deepen, and he would very likely be every bit as lovely as he was right now.

If Thorin grew as old as the Old Took… then they’d have almost 90 years together. It was not an insignificant number of years, but the idea of it still seemed terribly brief. Then again, better to be happy about the years that they did get, instead of worrying about those they would not.

Perhaps… Perhaps that was what the elf thought about Kíli too. As with everything else, time would tell.

- 

The girl crawled into Thorin’s lap and hid her face against his neck.

“Papa didn’t want to play with us,” she said, punctuating it with a sniffle.

“Don’t be sad, precious.” Thorin stroked his hand over his daughter’s long curls. “Your Papa is very busy. Sometimes he can’t play. Being king is a lot of work. He’ll play later.”

“No he won’t,” the girl said and fist her hand in Thorin’s shirt. “He doesn’t want to play with me.”

“He loves to play with you,” Thorin assured.

“You love me, don’t you, Daddy?” Big hazel eyes looked at him; his daughter was close enough that he could spot flecks of gold shimmering in the brown and green.

“Of course I do,” Thorin promised, returning his daughter’s smile when she beamed at him. She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

“Good,” she whispered.

- 

Thorin caught Bilbo looking at Dwalin and Nori with a pleased, almost smug, smile on his face, and the Hobbit snorted.

“Matchmaker.”

“They did all the work themselves,” Bilbo protested. “They just needed a little nudge to cross the finish line.”

“Matchmaker,” Thorin repeated. “You told me yourself how you put the thought in Dwalin’s head in the first place.”

“I did not.” Bilbo shook his head. “I just… pointed out how he had the idea in there. Truly.”

Thorin glanced back at the two Dwarfs. At first glance, the silver around Nori’s neck was the only thing revealing that something had changed.

Nori was sitting crossed legged on a table, casually smoking. A trained eye would reveal that it was Dwalin’s pipe that he was using, but even the owner of an untrained eye could have put two and two
together based on Dwalin’s glare at said pipe. But again, only the one with a trained eye could see the amused glint in that glare.

As such, Thorin wasn’t terribly surprised when Nori grinned up at Dwalin and patted the spot next to himself on the table. Nor when Dwalin snorted and sat down on a chair instead, only to wrap his arm around Nori’s waist and pull him down into his lap.

“I keep the chain you gave me inside my shirt,” Thorin murmured. “Nori does not do the same with Dwalin’s. Am I doing something wrong?”

“Tell me why you keep it in your shirt?” Bilbo asked instead of answering Thorin’s question.

“Because-“ Thorin hesitated. “Because it’s private. It’s mine. Because you gave it to me.”

Bilbo smiled at him. “That sounds like a good reason to keep it in your shirt.”

“But Nori-“

“Has his own reasons, I’m sure.” Bilbo took Thorin’s hand and very gently brushed his thumb over the still tender skin on his palm. “It is more common to display the chain to those around you. But not everyone does this. Some never even exchange chains. It’s not the most traditional of things, not to do it, but it happens. Some exchange other things, some nothing.” A small smile came to Bilbo’s lips. “Some give a chain and in return they get a long thought lost home in return.”

“I take it you’re not upset any longer?”

Bilbo snorted. “There are no more Dragons around for you to get much too close to, so I’m trying to let the matter go. Still, you gave me Erebor.” Bilbo lifted their entwined hands and pressed a kiss to the back of Thorin’s. “Thank you, and never, ever do it again.”

A chuckle escaped from Thorin and he shook his head. “I’ll do my best.”

“Uncles!”

Fíli and Kíli rushed into the hall, but since they were grinning there appeared to be no cause for alarm.

“Come spar with us!”

“We’re bored.”

“Mahal save us all,” Nori drawled and leaned his head against Dwalin’s shoulder.

“We can use sticks and you can fight against us,” Kíli offered.

“Where did you get sticks?” Bilbo asked. “There aren’t any trees near Erebor anymore.”

The boys looked at each other and then back at their uncle.

“Well-“

“A chair accidentally broke.”
“It was clearly not holding up well, having been here for all those years.”

“So we took it upon ourselves to test the other ones in the same room.”

“We have many sticks now,” Fíli concluded and nodded, both he and Kíli wearing innocent expressions.

Bilbo and Thorin snorted at the same time.

“Exactly which room was this?” Bilbo asked.

“I’m not sure really,” Kíli admitted. “It looked like a dining hall, but it wasn’t anywhere near the kitchens or the living quarters. By the south west wing and then left at the statue of the lady with the scroll?”

“Ah, the guard’s dining hall,” Bilbo nodded, and Nori laughed.

“Excellent choice, lads.”

“Behave,” Dwalin scolded.

“Always,” Nori said and grinned up at him.

When they kissed Fíli and Kíli studiously ignored them in favour of turning pleading eyes at Bilbo and Thorin.

“We’ve not had a good practice in ages,” Kíli said. “And it’s even longer since we got to spar with you, uncle Bilbo.”

“That reminds me,” Fíli said and tilted his head. “I never asked you Thorin, but what happened to your Elven blade? I don’t even remember when I last saw it in your hand.”

“I lost it in the Goblin caves,” Thorin said. “I’m sure the Goblins will be very happy with it.”

Kíli snickered. “You should have seen them when they found uncle’s sword. It wasn’t very funny at the time, but now I can see the humour in it. They looked like the cooks do when they’ve found a dead mouse in the flour sack.”

“Which was why I was nice and didn’t leave it there with them,” Bilbo said mildly. He sighed and got to his feet. “Let’s not get your sticks go to waste. Thorin, are you coming?”

“Sure,” Thorin agreed. “Considering the way Dwalin thrashed me last time—“ he looked towards where Dwalin and Nori had been sitting but only found an empty chair. “Where did those two go?”

“I don’t know where they went,” Kíli murmured. “But I wish I didn’t know what they went off to do.”

“Says the one who used to have a crush on Nori,” Fíli said. He looked thoughtful. “Do you particularly favour redheads then?”

“I was not even forty at the time.” Kíli shoved his shoulder into Fíli’s. “It doesn’t count. And I’m
now voting we switch up the teams. Me and Thorin against you and Bilbo.”

What this meant in practice was that when they’d gone down into the dining hall and the sticks had been handed out Kíli immediately focused on trying to hit Fíli with his, leaving Bilbo and Thorin staring somewhat amusedly at each other, hands wrapped around pieces of broken chair.

“Shall we?” Thorin asked, quirking an eyebrow and bowing slightly.

“We’ve never gotten around to sparring much, have we?” Bilbo asked as they began circling each other. During their ‘testing’, the boys had cleared a fairly large section of the room, so there was ample space for them to move around. Especially since Kíli and Fíli were already rolling around on the floor, having abandoned their bits of chairs for a wrestling match. The torches they’d brought along flickered merrily from their sconces, making all shadows waver and dance against the walls.

“No, because you handed me off to your nephews right away,” Thorin pointed out. “And then Dwalin took it upon himself to supply me with bruises.”

“They’re better teachers.” Bilbo’s eyes flickered right and his body angled itself ever so slightly, so when Thorin was suddenly whacked on his left shoulder he was entirely unprepared. Bilbo grinned. “But that’s not to say I don’t know a thing or two myself.”

“I have seen you fight.” Thorin smiled slightly as he feigned a thrust and then followed it up with another that Bilbo just barely deflected. “The first time, with the Trolls, I was very impressed, believe me.” And distracted enough that one of the Trolls had been able to grab him, but no point in mentioning that.

“Not so much on the second time I guess,” Bilbo said and rolled his eyes. “Taking Azog’s mace to the chest required no specific skills.”

“It was my fault for distracting you.” Thorin shook his head. “I should have told you about my ring as soon as we met up again.”

“We’ll call it even since you then proceeded to save me,” Bilbo said and attacked.

Since it was unlikely that they would do any real damage to one another the fight quickly got more physical than if they’d fought with steel. The chair leg obviously gave Bilbo a much shorter reach than he was used to; it was much more like the one of a long dagger than that of the Elven long sword. This evened out the odds somewhat as most of Thorin’s practice had been done with his own sword and the elven one, and neither of those had been that much longer than the piece of wood he was now holding. He was used to having to get close, Bilbo was not and it took a few lunges for the Dwarf to learn the reach of his new ‘weapon’.

Even so, it wasn’t all that long before Bilbo knocked Thorin’s stick out of his hands.

“Yield?” Bilbo asked, brandishing his own stick at Thorin in a manner that wasn’t even the least bit threatening considering Bilbo’s teasing smile.

With a grin Thorin slipped Bilbo’s chain over his head and slipped the ring on his finger without bothering to remove it from the chain first.

“I’m fairly sure this is cheating,” Bilbo protested as Thorin disappeared.
“I need some sort of edge,” Thorin said. “I’m a Hobbit. Without a stick. Facing down a powerful opponent.”

“I’m a Dwarf with a stick,” Bilbo snorted. “I’m not sure-“

“A mighty Dwarven king,” Thorin corrected. “With a stick. Though technically I think these are too thick to be sticks.”

“I’m not doing this if I can’t see you,” Bilbo said and shook his head. “I might hit you somewhere I don’t intend to.”

“If you can hit me,” Thorin said as he snagged the chair leg from Bilbo’s hand. Bilbo tilted his head.

“It’s a very strange thing to see something just vanish into thin air.”

“That’s not sparring!” Kíli called from the corner he and Fíli had ended up in.

“Is that a table leg?” Bilbo asked.

“The table happened to break?” Fíli offered and awkwardly shuffled the table leg slightly behind his back.

“You didn’t hear the table break?” Kíli asked.

Seeing as Bilbo was distracted Thorin quietly moved around him and then let the ring slide off his finger; quickly slipping the chain over his head again.

“Yield?” he questioned as he wrapped one arm around Bilbo’s chest, the other one… well the plan was to twist it up behind Bilbo’s back, but that didn’t work out so well as Thorin abruptly found himself lying slightly winded on his back on the floor.

“It just occurred to me that we’ve not trained you in hand-to-hand,” Bilbo smiled down at him and reach out a hand for Thorin to take.

“Apparently not,” Thorin agreed, and instead of pulling himself up he instead yanked on Bilbo’s arm, pulling him down on the floor as well.

“That’s definitely not sparring,” Kíli protested when Thorin rolled over to lie on top of Bilbo, straddling his hips.

“Yield?” Thorin asked and leaned down for a kiss.

Bilbo hummed thoughtfully as he reached up to cup the back of Thorin’s head. “Very well.”

“I’m closing my eyes now,” Fíli said. “Tell me when it’s safe.”

“Perhaps you should go somewhere else and wait?” Thorin suggested, chuckling when both boys scrambled for the door, all broken furniture parts hastily thrown aside.

“So,” Bilbo said when they were alone. “You cheated.”

“You still won,” Thorin defended. “You had me on my back.”
“That only means you’re not very good at cheating.” Bilbo frowned. “Have you done any training with Nori? That would probably be-“

“I think Nori is a little busy at the moment,” Thorin murmured. “Would you like to be a little busy as well?”

“Only a little?” Bilbo teased. “I have seen you without clothes before.”

“Funny,” Thorin said drily.

“If you kiss me I can’t talk,” Bilbo offered and tilted his head up. As Thorin leaned in again Bilbo suddenly hissed and squirmed beneath him. “What is that?”

“What?” Thorin asked, pulling back, sitting back on Bilbo’s hips. “What’s wrong?”

“Your ring,” Bilbo said and reached out for it. “It touched my skin and it felt as cold as ice.”

Thorin quickly covered it with his hand and let it slip back inside his shirt. “Yes, I’ve also noticed that it often feels oddly cool. But ice?”

Bilbo shrugged one shoulder. “I guess not or you would have wriggled about a whole lot more just now. But it was definitely cold.”

“Probably the contrast from getting warmer during the sparring,” Thorin suggested and a small smirk crossed Bilbo’s lips.

“Perhaps you would be so kind to help me out of some of my clothes then?”

“Gladly,” Thorin said and leaned in.

“Maybe it’s not actually gold,” Bilbo said just before their lips touched. "Could be some mithril there, it doesn’t transfer-" Thorin laughed.

“Do you really want to talk about my ring now?” He didn’t bother waiting for a reply, instead close the last inch of distance between them. From the way Bilbo’s hands slid into his hair to keep him from moving away, Thorin figured that Bilbo was in no particular hurry to talk about any rings.

“You are afraid of me,” Thorin whispered as he saw the fear in Bilbo’s eyes.

“I'm afraid of you.” Bilbo took a step backwards and another one. “Of course I am. You could do anything to me with that ring.”

“I would never!” Thorin protested. He followed Bilbo, who kept backing away. “Bilbo, please.”

Thorin didn’t see the hole in the ground behind Bilbo until it was too late.

As his foot only found air Bilbo’s eyes widened even further, the white clearly visible all around the hazel, and flailing with his arms to try and keep his balance proved useless. By some miracle Thorin managed to snag the sleeve of Bilbo’s shirt as he fell, but it immediately began to rip in the seams.
“You never should have told me,” Bilbo said.

“Bilbo, take my hand” Thorin, now lying flat on his belly on the ground reached out with his free hand. “I can pull you up.”

“Daddy!” his daughter screamed, from somewhere nearby. “Daddy help!”

“You need to save her,” Bilbo said, slipping a little further down still as the shirt continued to rip.

“Give me your hand and I’ll pull you up,” Thorin urged. “Quickly.” He looked over his shoulder to try and find his daughter, but he snapped his attention back to Bilbo as he felt a hand take his. Only it wasn’t Bilbo.

“It’s ours!” the creature from the caves hissed as he clawed at Thorin’s arm. “Give it to us.”

“Never,” Thorin spat and released the grip he had on the creatures shirt while simultaneously shaking his arm to try and make it let go.

“Thorin. Thorin, wake up. Thorin!”

Thorin’s eyes snapped open to find Bilbo leaning over him, only for a second it wasn’t Bilbo but the creature with blue eyes filled with malice. The Hobbit blinked rapidly, and then it was Bilbo again.

“A nightmare,” Bilbo supplied and gently stroked his fingers over Thorin’s brow. “You were, well not trashing about because you were hardly moving. But you seemed very agitated.” Bilbo hesitated slightly. “Do you dream about the Dragon?”

“No,” Thorin said hoarsely. “No, it was- about the Goblin caves. They must have been in my mind because of Fili question about the Elven blade. I’m sorry for disturbing you.”

“Don’t be.” Bilbo continued to stroked his fingers over Thorin’s brow and forehead. “Do you think you will be able to go back to sleep?”

“I am not a child that needs coddling,” Thorin protested and turned his head to the side.

“Something I am thankful about because I’d not marry a child,” Bilbo replied. “It is not as if I offered you warm milk and a story, Thorin. I just wanted to know if there’s anything I can do to help.”

Thorin’s ire disappeared as abruptly as it had risen. “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“Quite all right,” Bilbo promised. He let out a soft chuckle. “Though I feel the need to point out that by our laws you are only barely counted as an adult.”

“Luckily, I’m not a Dwarf,” Thorin grumped.

“I don’t know, you’d look handsome in a beard.” Bilbo leaned in to kiss the corner of Thorin’s mouth as he yawned. “Let’s go back to sleep. We can discuss your beard in the morning.”

“Funny.”

“I love you.”
“And I you.”

Bilbo's breaths quickly evened out, but for Thorin it took longer to fall asleep again. Compared to the Goblin caves dreaming about the Shire had been much more pleasant. And it was rather unfair that he’d forgotten most of that dream when he so clearly could remember those round blue eyes glaring up at him.

Tightening his arm slightly around Bilbo, Thorin buried his face in the Dwarf's hair. And soon he was sleeping again as well, and dreaming. Eyes flicking back and forth beneath his eyelids.
Interlude Fourteen - Fíli

Chapter Notes

It's aliieeeive!

<3 diemarysues, thank you as always for helping me have this story make sense

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“They can’t be allowed to come here before -”

“Yes, yes, before we’re settled.” Balin waved his hand dismissively and Glóin frowned at him.

“Are we discussing this or not? If I will not be heard I have no need to be here.”

“We are discussing this,” Bilbo said firmly. “I think what Balin means is that we are all already in agreement that neither the Elves nor the Men will be invited to our halls yet.”

“Then can we get to what you actually wanted to discuss?” Óin asked. “Not much to discuss if we’re already in agreement, lad.”

“King,” Dwalin muttered, not that Óin heard him.

Fíli shifted a little restlessly where he sat on the table he and Kíli had pushed into a corner of the room.

It was not the one of the official meeting rooms but it was fairly clean, had many chairs if not quite enough (something he and Kíli were not to blame for), and was close to the main hall. Which was why it had been chosen as their meeting hall until such a time that the use of one of the official ones would not require climbing over rubble and across floors that might collapse.

King.

How strange but at the same time not for Dwalin to feel the need to point out that it was indeed Bilbo’s title. It was not strange to think of his uncle as his king, of course it wasn’t. Only… it had never seemed to hold as much weight as it did at the moment. And that was strange in and of itself.

The Dragon was dead and Erebor was theirs again, but nothing had changed. Not yet. But everything would, that was the truth of it. To be king of Erebor would not be the same as being king of Ered Luin…

Ered Luin had been prosperous and comfortable, but not rich. Not like Erebor– and not only in material wealth but also in the promise of returning to its former glory.

Before Smaug there had been trade with the Men of the nearby settlements, but Fíli’s mother and Bilbo had both said it did not even begin to compare with the bustling commerce between Erebor and Dale, and even between Erebor and the Elves of Mirkwood. Traders had come from far, far away to visit the markets of Dale, to buy Dwarven made crafts and sell their exotic wares, and now
they likely would again.

Ered Luin hadn’t had an army, just guards. But Fíli didn’t doubt that Erebor would have one. There would be coin enough to pay for it and people enough to recruit – many Dwarfs would wish to return to what had once been home and many more would ask for permission to settle, would want to make a new home.

Fíli did not have even a tenth of his father’s stone sense, but putting his hand on any of Erebor’s walls still gave him the distinct impression that Erebor was to Ered Luin what Ered Luin was to a place like Thorin’s Hobbit hole in the Shire. If Fíli really concentrated he could feel, if not quite understand, the sheer vastness of it. The depth and the endless halls called to him, even with his very limited talent for sensing it. Yes, there would be plenty of space for everyone.

A large population and strong trade with allies and armed forces meant that Erebor would quickly grow to have the same power it had under the rule of Fíli’s great grandfather, the kind of power that Bilbo had never wielded in Ered Luin. The kind of power Fíli felt sure that his uncle didn’t actually desire in the slightest.

Under different circumstances and a different king, they might have been gathered here to come up with a strategy to fortify against an eventual attack from their would-be allies, to defend the wealth inside the mountain now only protected by the fourteen of them, but Fíli felt sure that it wasn’t what Bilbo had in mind. Not primarily at least.

“I would talk with you about the Elves and Men, and I would have your opinions when it comes to our alliances with them,” Bilbo said and let his eyes rest on each of his companions in turn.

As his uncle’s gaze fell on him, Kíli hurriedly straightened from his slouched position and Fíli traded an amused look with Bilbo when Kíli wasn’t looking.

“Um.” Ori held up his hand and waved it a bit awkwardly. “Not to sound ungrateful, but are you sure you want all of our opinions?” As everyone turned to look at him Ori flushed a little but he held his head high. “What I mean is that, um, well I’m not exactly the type of person you’d have on your council so -”

“You’re wrong,” Bilbo said and smiled at him. “I guess we can start with this. I plan on giving any of you who wish it a seat on the council, as well as -”

“Bilbo,” Bofur said and covered his eyes. “Do not say you mean to make us all nobles. If you do I’ll never talk to you again.”

Fíli hid a smile behind a cough as his uncle looked most put-out.

“It’s supposed to be an honour,” he said and crossly folded his arms over his chest. “It’s certainly not out of the question as it’d be a fitting reward at the end of a quest such as -”

“Punishment you mean,” Nori muttered. “If you try to make me a noble and or put me on the council I’m stealing Dwalin and running away. I’m going to be involved in enough politics as it bloody well is.” He gave Dwalin an annoyed look. “And it’s all your fault.”

“You kissed me first,” Dwalin said evenly, and Nori’s frown faded a little.

“If we could get back to what we were talking about before,” Bilbo said and sighed.
At his uncle’s side Thorin moved, almost reaching out, perhaps to curl an arm around Bilbo’s waist or touch his hand but hesitating at the last moment. The Hobbit glanced at Bilbo, looking for… something, Fíli wasn’t sure what exactly, but Bilbo was too busy looking at Bofur and Nori to take notice.

Fíli had already promised himself that he would do what he could to make things easier for Thorin. He did not doubt that the Hobbit would walk through fire for Bilbo - going up against Smaug had already proved that he was *literally* be prepared to do just that - but it didn’t mean that becoming royal consort to a Dwarven king would be pleasant for a Hobbit smith.

Nori had a point about politics, even if Fíli rather thought he exaggerated more than a bit.

Politics was a game with tiresome rules that often changed in the middle of play, but such things as councils was a necessary evil unless you wanted someone to end up with absolute power, and Fíli didn’t think that Nori would like that much either. But if you didn’t even know the starting rules you were not going to win.

“My offer stands,” Bilbo said firmly. “So think about it, and come and talk to me about it. But what I wanted your opinion on today is how to best secure our alliances. I thought to invite ourselves to Lake-town to discuss such things and suggest the Elves join us. I’d like to send ravens as soon as possible to have everything arranged by the time Dáin arrives as he needs to sit in on the meeting as well. Meetings, if my last impression of the Master of Lake-town will be proven to be true.”

Fíli casually elbowed Kíli in the side and shot him a quick smile when he turned his head. “What did I tell you,” he whispered, smiling wider when Kíli flashed him a grin and bumped their shoulders together. He had known that their uncle wouldn’t just sit idly by and wait for Dáin.

“Why can’t we just wait for Dáin to get here and then invite them once we no longer have a dead Dragon in the main hall?” Glóin asked. “It’s one thing not to want them hanging over us when we are so few, but if the ravens speak true then our cousin is hardly coming alone. What’s the rush?”

“I don’t want to give the Men too much time alone with their thoughts,” Bilbo explained. “We can’t afford to show ourselves as weak to them. Thranduil I trust to stand by his word and honour the agreement we made in Mirkwood, the Master of Lake-town on the other hand -”

He was not allowed to finish his sentence as what he already had said caused a brief uproar - several of the Company felt the need to point out that Thranduil had *already* betrayed their people once and even if he hadn’t Elves just couldn’t be trusted anyway.

Bilbo let them vent for a short while, then nodded at Bofur who put two fingers in his mouth and gave a whistle loud and shrill enough to make the hair in your ears curl up. That was at least how it felt like for Fíli.

“Elves are *not* less greedy than Men,” Dwalin said grumpily. “If that’s what you’re thinking.”

“Perhaps not,” Bilbo said. “But if this Master would like to acquire a fortune during his lifetime he has considerably less time than Thranduil to go about it. Which means that he might act in another way entirely than the King of Mirkwood.”

“He’d not want to wait for the trade to start you mean?” Fíli asked. “And try something else instead?” After all it would likely be some time before anyone’s coffers were filled from trade
agreements; Dale was still in ruins and Lake-town had not exactly been a lively centre of commerce.

“Yes,” Bilbo agreed. “That is part of it. But there’s also the matter of how Thranduil absolutely doesn’t want war, and if he tried to steal from us, he would have it. And not only does he not want war, what he wants is the sort of peace we’ve not had in the north for generations. The moment he allowed us to leave Mirkwood he decided to become our ally in more than just name, and I while trust that he did so to further his own aims I also trust that is what will make him honour his word.”

“But if he killed us now, then wouldn’t he have just as much peace as if he stays our ally?” Bombur asked. “And gold besides? I’m not saying that he would kill us, but, erm – “ The large Dwarf squirmed a little. “Why wouldn’t he? Have the cake and eat it too.”

“Dán would go to war for us?” Kíli offered. “Which - I guess he would do if the Men attacked us as well. But why would the Men want war?”

“Because they think they’d be able to win it,” Glóin said with a sigh. “Few start fights thinking they’re going to lose.”

“I don’t know for sure,” Bofur said. “But there seemed to be a fair share of guards in that town of theirs. Maybe enough for an army.”

“Yes,” Bilbo agreed. “And you don’t even need an army to make battle with 13 Dwarfs and a Hobbit.” He leaned ever so slightly closer to Thorin. “If Erebor is restored to what it once was, even if it takes years and years to get to that point, we will be an invaluable ally. Thranduil stands alone in the north at the moment. In a forest full of foes, as we discovered for ourselves, and then Orcs and Goblins close by as well. But the Master of Lake-town might not think that what I promised him is enough gain for himself.”

Bilbo sighed and his shoulders slumped slightly. “And if that is the case I expect him to start scheming about how to correct this.”

“I think Bard would make a much better Master,” Bofur said. “He was obviously trusted by -”

“Staging coups amongst our neighbours is not something we should do,” Balin pointed out.

“It’s something we should not be seen doing,” Bofur argued, before nodding at Nori. “And I’m not saying we should kill him – just send Nori and a bit of river water if we have any left and then he won’t even remember –”

“Has Bard given you any indication that he would agree to being their leader, or that he would indeed be elected as leader if the current Master had to step down?” Balin asked mildly. “Because I doubt we have enough water left to make half the town lose their memories. Not to mention that they will notice if it happens to more than one person.”

Here Fíli did not miss the short flash of guilt on Thorin’s face, because he did use some of the water on Balin before. Thorin didn’t really like to talk about the time he’d spent alone with Smaug, and Fíli didn’t really blame him. If it had been him and Kíli in the same situation he would gladly have poured water down his brother’s throat if it had meant keeping him away from the fate of being killed by a Dragon.

Even if Kíli forgot him… it would still be better than him being dead.
“We never talked about it, no,” Bofur admitted. “Maybe Nori can check with Bard first?”

“Right,” Dwalin scoffed. “And tell the humans that we are willing to meddle in their business? If Bard ended up as their Master or whatever they call it, he’d never trust us again. And rightly so. He’d go to sleep every night wondering what’ll happen if we grow displeased with his decisions.”

“I’m sure there’s still some use to be had from the water,” Bilbo told Bofur. “But using it as a weapon seems ill-advised.”

“Terribly convenient though,” Bofur sighed and leaned back in his chair. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt what we were talking about.”

“Then we can go back to your question, Glóin,” Bilbo said. “Have I given a good enough reply for why I don’t want to wait for Dáin and a Dragon-free mountain before sending requests for a meeting?”

“Aye,” Glóin agreed. “Fine. Just don’t ask me to come along and play nice with the Elf. I’m not suited for that.”

“We’re not all going are we?” Dwalin asked.

“No,” Bilbo said. “That would be foolish.”

Dwalin looked slightly mollified, at least until Bilbo smiled at him.

“But I will of course need to have you along.”

“Figures,” Dwalin snorted.

From that point not much more was decided beyond them all agreeing that a meeting would be held in Lake-town as soon as Dáin had arrived, Men and Elves willing.

“Great,” Nori said and grabbed Dwalin’s hand. “If there’s nothing else?”

Bilbo shook his head.

“Then let’s make our escape before we’re ennobled.” He tugged at Dwalin who gave him an amused look.

“I’m already a noble. And by agreeing to marry me you -”

“Shush,” Nori protested. “I’m repressing that.”

Chuckling Dwalin allowed Nori to cart him off.

“Don’t go looking for us in a while,” Nori said just before he went through the doorway.

“I’m sure you’ll come around eventually,” Bofur called after them. “Just don’t do it on my bedroll!”

Bifur snorted, and Bofur gave him an innocent look, and Dori received one too for good measure.

Fili wasn’t sure if Bifur and Dori were courting yet. They were - he had trouble figuring out what they were doing, but he assumed they were still falling in love. Something like that. They didn’t
really touch very often, but they talked a lot. But judging by Kíli’s feelings for the Elf captain that part was not always required before you fell in love.

“And on that note,” Bilbo said and got to his feet. “I think we’re done. I’ll likely be near on Ravenhill if anyone wants to talk to me. About things. Like accepting council positions.”

“Nope,” Bofur said cheerfully. “Absolutely not.”

-

Fíli had always imagined being in love would be a little like swallowing a lantern. When his parents looked at each other they had a certain light in their eyes that wasn’t there otherwise. And every time Kíli had a crush in the past it was if he’d shone a little brighter.

Desire wasn’t light as much as it was the heat from the lantern, or so Fíli supposed.

What he had told Bilbo and Thorin hadn’t been entirely true. He’d never been in love, but he had lain with someone. Once. To see what it was like.

It - if he eventually would get children from it, it would be worth it. But other than that he did not see the point, and he did not understand the way Nori and Dwalin looked at each other like they’d like to crawl into each other’s skin.

Kissing was… fine. A little strange, and best when tongues stayed well out of it. But Fíli had rather quickly figured out that kissing was never expected to stay as kissing. And he did not want to trick anyone.

It would be cruel to marry someone who looked at him like Nori looked at Dwalin, only for them to realise that he wouldn’t be able to look at them in the same way. The best thing would be to marry someone like him, if such people existed, and if not someone who at least knew what to expect from him.

“What are you thinking about? The meeting yesterday?”

Kíli handed him some of the Elven bread.

“I’m thinking about the future actually,” Fíli said. “We’re here. We’ve done it. Only, that’s just the beginning isn’t?”

“Yeah, this is not at all like in Ori’s stories,” Kíli said and leaned against Fíli’s shoulder as he took a bite of his own bread. “The heroes are supposed to live happily ever after right after slaying the monster. There aren’t supposed to be meetings.”

The heroes were probably not supposed to talk with their mouth full of food either, but Fíli decided it was not the time to point that out to Kíli.

“You’ll get to meet your lady,” Fíli said instead. “Probably.”

A dreamy smile. Kíli’s eyes were bright, and Fíli couldn’t help but smile as well.

“You think uncle will allow me, us, to go then?”

“Probably.”
“Is probably your word of the day?”

“Probably,” Fíli agreed.

“Arse.”

They looked at each other and Fíli could see Kíli’s mouth twitching in a reflection of what his own did.

“Probably,” they chorused, and then burst out laughing.

With his brother safe and happy by his side Fíli felt sure that he knew what love was. But not - not that other side of it. Not the sudden, overwhelming part. Perhaps this made him even more broken, but he was pretty sure he preferred it like this.

That night Fíli woke without being sure why. Then a shadow moved in the doorway and Fíli reached for the dagger beneath his pillow.

“I need to find her.”

“Thorin?” Fíli whispered as to not wake Kíli. “Thorin is something wrong?”

Instead of answering the shadow that was Thorin moved again; with a look towards his brother sleeping in the other bed Fíli slipped out of his, wincing as his bare feet met cold stone, and followed Thorin.

“She’s lost,” he heard Thorin murmur as he continued down the hallway. “I need to find her.”

“Thorin,” Fíli called, but softly as everyone else was sure to be sleeping. He did not get a reply so instead he hurried his steps. The Hobbit had to be sleepwalking and while Fíli had heard that you weren’t supposed to wake sleepwalkers, it wasn’t safe for him to be wandering around like this in Erebor. The halls were dark enough that Fíli had trouble seeing which meant that Thorin must be all but blind. That he’d not walked into a wall yet was likely due to luck.

Not knowing if touching Thorin would startle him badly Fíli instead opted to put on an extra burst of speed to put himself in Thorin’s way.

“Thorin, wake up.”

“Fíli,” Thorin breathed and reached out for him, and for a moment Fíli believed that he had indeed succeeded at waking him, but the lost expression on Thorin’s face proved him wrong. “You’ll help me, won’t you?”

“Help you with what?” Fíli asked, his frown deepening at the sheer desperation in Thorin’s voice.

“She’s lost,” Thorin said. “Your uncle, he –” Thorin fell silent and Fíli waited a few moments before slowly curling his fingers around Thorin’s forearms, just in case Thorin was very much startled by being awakened in the middle of a hallway. Or in case he’d not wake up before someone shook him.

“Thorin?”
“Fíli?” Thorin sounded surprised, and a lot more awake than he’d just done. “What’s going on?”

“You were sleepwalking,” Fíli explained, gently tugging on Thorin’s elbow to get him to turn around. “Come on, let’s get you back to bed before Uncle misses your snoring.”

“I –” Thorin followed as Fíli started to walk down the hall. “Don’t tell your uncle, I do not want to worry him.”

“Has this happened before?” Fíli asked. “It’s not safe. If you end up in some part of Erebor that –”

“It’s – you don’t need to worry,” Thorin promised. “I – it has not happened before, and I don’t expect it to happen again.”

Fíli hummed. “What were you dreaming of? You were looking for someone. A lady.”

“I do not remember,” Thorin murmured.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for the lovely comments I’ve gotten since the last update :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!