Child of the Earth and Sky

by orphan_account

Summary

Certain events in Bilbo’s life were always destined to come to pass, but the will of Belladonna Took is not to be trifled with, and her choice may yet change the lives of many.

This is the story of how Bilbo became the kin of the Eagles of Manwê, and all that happened after.

(Original idea and prompt from Ewelock’s amazing art, eva4art's gorgeous follow-up piece, and reddresscloudysky’s excellent speculation on tumblr).

Notes

I have yet to read the Silmarillion. I will make every effort to keep this as accurate as possible, but if you do see any glaring errors, please let me know.

With thanks to bgtea!
Belladonna

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There are some in Middle Earth who still speak of the Old stories, the ones that tell of of the world’s making. They speak of Eru and his Valar, of the will that was given to all of the Free Folk of Middle Earth, that bright and fickle thing that sets them apart from the twisted creatures of Morgoth’s design. They say that, while all of the Free Folk are masters of their own fates - for better or worse - there are sometimes parts of a person’s life that are so set in stone they may as well be laid out in the stars, so linear and certain are these fractions of a person’s life. This is a comfort to many in hard times.

So it was for Bilbo Baggins. Though he was graced with that tricky thing called choice later in his life - a choice that would affect many more lives than he realised - this gift was meant to be offered when Bilbo was firmly in respectable bachelorhood. The first third of Bilbo’s time on Middle Earth was supposed to be filled with plenty, with the everyday ordinary things that make up a life that was blessed and peaceful. This is the way it goes, those who still whisper of Eru Ilúvatar would say - this is how it is, and not even the Valar can change it.

But no one had reckoned on Belladonna Took.

This is how Bilbo grew up.

He grew up a true fauntling of the Shire, strong and healthy, rosy cheeked and in love with all that was green. But there was something that set Bilbo apart, even in his earliest years, something that was overlooked by Bungo but not by Belladonna, who watched her child with ever-sharp eyes. Bungo was happy enough to see a flourishing son, and Bilbo’s eagerness for learning and reading caused Bungo to turn a blind eye to most of Bilbo’s behaviour.

Belladonna said nothing of her musings. There was no need to cause a fuss, and if there’s one thing she hated, it was causing a fuss. Still, she steered Bilbo as best she could in his early years, and when he began to show a tendency to wander off - even without his playmates - she took him aside and started to teach him plant-lore, so at the very least he wouldn’t accidentally poison himself in his wanderings. She also took particular care to impress upon him the danger large bodies of water could be to Hobbits. She sat with him, late at night up on the grassy hill behind Bag End, side-by-side on an old blanket, a mug of hot tea for each of them, and showed him the stars above so that he could always find his way home.

When Bilbo reached his tweens Belladonna began to worry. Bilbo would wake bright and early every day, and would be off out so fast he never had time for breakfast, something that always caused Bungo no small amount of alarm.

‘Where are you off to?’ Bungo would call when Bilbo was already half-way out of the door.

‘Nowhere in particular!’ Bilbo would always shout back.

When he was younger it had been Elves, always Elves, but now Bilbo considered himself too old for such childish notions, or at least too old to say it out-loud to his father.
Belladonna knew exactly where Bilbo was going. She could probably even say precisely which path Bilbo was taking, her son walking in his mother’s footsteps and likely not even knowing it. With every passing month Bilbo steadily began to push himself further and further away from Hobbition, as far as he dare go, out to lush, quiet meadows, swaying fields of golden wheat and woods heavy with the presence of life, branches arching high overhead and turning the yellow sunlight a cool green. There was wonder to be found in the Shire, a beauty all of Yavanna’s own, but still Bilbo wandered ever-further, stretching out the miles between Bag End and the unknown, to the blank spaces on the map, always wondering what was beyond the next hilltop.

Every evening Bilbo would return without fail, mud splattered as high as his knees, cheeks red with the day’s exertion, and his eyes alight with joy.

Bungo would shake his head, huff around his pipe, and make some attempt at telling Bilbo off, even just for the mud that was inevitably tracked through the entranceway. But it would always be a half-hearted effort - as un-Hobbitly as Bilbo’s behaviour seemed to Bungo’s eyes, he could not begrudge his only son his adventures, especially in the face of Bilbo’s obvious happiness.

Gandalf came to visit late in summer one year, quickly quieting any murmurs of discontent with his liberal use of fireworks that so enchanted the younger Hobbits. Belladonna, always happy to see her old friend, was made happier still when Bilbo would not stop talking about the latest bangs, fizzes and pops he had seen with his friends. He even managed to persuade Bungo out to the Party Tree one night, to sit and have a picnic and watch Gandalf’s magic in action. Belladonna needed no persuading, and laughed fondly with Bungo when they both gasped at the largest explosions.

Belladonna turned to Bilbo on her left after a particularly spectacular shower of gold rain, to see the lights of the fireworks light up Bilbo’s features. His face was upturned towards the heavens, gasping in delight at the display, grinning fit to burst. But his gaze remained skyward long after the light of the firework died out, his expression of delight fading to be replaced by a fierce longing that Belladonna, with an inward sigh, recognised only too well. Belladonna watched her son watch the sky, and her thoughts drifted to a box tucked away at the bottom of a chest, back in Bag End.

The next day Gandalf took his leave of the Shire with promises to return, promises that Belladonna feared she would not live to see fulfilled. Gandalf had never had a proper sense of the time allotted to short-lived species. Bilbo was sad to see Gandalf go, but Belladonna knew exactly how to cheer him up. She drew him to one side later in the day, and asked if he would like to learn a new language.

‘What is it, mum?’ asked Bilbo, ‘what’s it called?’

‘It doesn’t have a name, Bilbo,’ Belladonna replied.

Bilbo looked even more curious, if that were possible, his young face brimming with the eagerness of the young.

‘It’s the language of my family. A secret language,’ she went on, skirting around the truth, ‘would you like to learn it? It’s very different from Elvish or Westron.’

‘Of course I want to learn it! When can we start? Can we start now? Please?’

When Bungo came into the family study that evening, it was to find his wife and child conversing happily in clicks and trills. He raised his eyebrows, shook his head in fond exasperation, and left them to it.
There were some, though, who began to whisper about Bilbo. Not his playmates, thank goodness, who all thought Bilbo brave and perhaps a bit of an idiot, which for tweens meant that Bilbo was hero-worshipped, for a while. No, the gossip came from parties who thought themselves well-meaning, who liked to talk behind the family’s back, though never in front of Belladonna - her sharp tongue and terrible temper was well known throughout the Shire. But words like improper and disreputable still managed to reach Belladonna and Bungo’s ears, causing Bungo to worry and fret and Belladonna to soothe her husband’s fears over late night fireside talks. Belladonna did little to tamper down the gossip, or to rein in Bilbo’s actions. What was life without a little scandal, after all? Besides, Bilbo seemed unaffected by any of it, and that was what mattered the most, and by and large Bilbo knew happiness and peace, and how to laugh at hardships, and Belladonna was glad for it.

And then the Fell Winter came, and the Hobbits knew true fear.

It bore down on them with the all ferocity winter could muster, a cruel blizzard whipped up seemingly from nowhere one grey, dull day, and suddenly the Shire was under several thick feet of snow. Hobbits, though not used to hardship, mustered themselves to action after a few days in a daze, during which the most commonly heard phrase was ‘where did all this snow come from? Can you believe this weather?’ Their larders were well-stocked, but rationing quickly caught on as it grew apparent the bad weather was not going to let up in a matter of days or weeks. Colds and flu spread among the youngest and the oldest. Bilbo was in bed for a week after he caught a particularly bad strain of flu, but like many of his age he was made of hardy stuff, and recovered quickly. Others who were more elderly were not so fortunate; although their years were long, there was still great sorrow among the Hobbits of the Shire as those who should have lived out their last years comfortably were taken in the dead of winter. The Hobbits grew leaner with every passing week, and there seemed to be no end to the accursed snow that increasingly sealed them inside their own homes.

Few ventured out during those dark days. Then there came the howling of wolves, their piercing cries high and terrible to Hobbit ears, and no one went out at all. The Baggins family found themselves trapped in their own home with the only news of the outside world rumours of terrible beasts that had torn apart a poor Hobbit not far from their front door. They took comfort from each other, wrapped up in front of the hearth, too subdued to talk, Bungo’s brow furrowed with worry as he stared into the fire, Bilbo curled up at the foot of his father’s chair, nose in a book. He wasn’t reading it as far as Belladonna could see - he had not turned a page in half an hour, and his eyes kept flicking towards the doors and windows. Bilbo was almost of age, now, and Belladonna was proud of the young Hobbit who sat before her. She could take a moment for pride, she thought - any small moment of happiness in this endless winter should be cherished.

On one of the darkest nights, after the cry of wolves sent them into the grip of fear, tense and huddling together and listening for every hint of a sound until they were sure the danger had passed, Belladonna went alone to her old wooden chest and unlocked it. She burrowed down under the books, hand-drawn pictures and broken pieces of jewellery that had never been mended until her fingers brushed a long thin box of varnished wood. She drew it out and marvelled as she always did at the warm wood, the dim light of her candle causing the orange-brown tones to almost glow with a warmth of their own. Belladonna opened the lid and in the half-dark took her fill of looking at the long feather held within, burnished gold and wondrous in her hands, and thought about the future.

But all things pass, as they always do sooner or later, and soon the great wolves were met in battle by the Rangers from the North who had come too late for some but were still a welcome sight to the exhausted Hobbits. At long last the winter loosened its grip and receded, and the revealed green vegetation had never looked so glorious.
But winter had sunk its claws into Bungo, and it would not let go, even with the first stirrings of spring. He was taken ill with a fever even as others rejoiced in winter’s end, exhaustion and worry taking its toll on his body. Bilbo seemed sure that he would be up on his feet in no time, and he sat by his father’s bed and told Bungo of the all things he had learned whilst stuck inside. Belladonna stood in the doorway of the bedroom, and did not correct Bilbo’s hopeful assumptions. Her heart was already crying out in anticipated sadness, and later that night her worst fears were realised when Bungo fell into a sleep from which he did not wake.

Bilbo had never known real grief, and Belladonna did her best to comfort him in the following weeks, but she was only half there most of the time - sometimes her mind would wander and she would come back to herself hours later and find she was sitting in Bungo’s chair, her hands wrapped around the varnished box so tightly her knuckles creaked when she loosened her grip. There were some in the Shire that had always questioned her love for Bungo, even after years of happy marriage and after Belladonna had bore him a child. In it for his money, they had said. And yet Belladonna had loved Bungo like no other, and she knew she was proving it now. She was fading fast. There was no time to regret this. It was time to make plans.

She wrote a letter to Gandalf and hoped it would get through in time. If her plan worked it would be the greatest scandal the Shire had ever seen. Belladonna delighted in that. If she were to die, then let her have the best sending off she could muster. Bilbo knew something was going on, and Belladonna despaired at keeping things from him, especially when he was still grieving. He was confused and hurt at her withdrawal, and terrified, too, that Belladonna was following Bungo. His father’s death had opened Bilbo’s eyes to reality, and a little of Bilbo’s naivety and innocence had died with Bungo. If things were left as they were, he would be alone soon, and Belladonna would not have that. Bilbo had never been taken by any of the lads or lasses that had attempted to court him, though there had surely been some dalliances in his tween years. There would be no little fauntlings running the halls of their smial, and no family for Bilbo save distant cousins who were quickly becoming respectable Hobbits and shedding their adventurous airs. But Bilbo would have a family after Belladonna died. She would see to that. It might not be the family Bilbo was expecting, but it would as true a family as any found in the Shire.

A letter arrived in the post one autumnal day, and Belladonna had her answer. They would arrive in five days, and then her son would face a choice. It had come not a moment too soon - there was little life in Belladonna these days.

‘Bilbo,’ Belladonna called to her son, ‘Bilbo, come here.’

‘What is it, mum?’ Bilbo said as he rushed into the room, ‘do you need something? Cup of tea? are you warm enough?’

‘I’m fine, sweetling,’ Belladonna lied easily, ‘come sit with me.’ Bilbo took the seat opposite her, concern wrinkling his brow.

‘There’s something I need to tell you,’ she said to him, ‘and some of it will be hard to hear. But you’ll have to be strong for me, can you do that?’

He reached out and took one of her cold hands in both of her own, fear flickering over his young features. ‘I can try, but what are you talking about, mum?’

‘We will be having some visitors, soon. They will be unlike anything you’ve seen before, Bilbo. Ha! I can’t wait to see your face,’ she smiled ruefully and the thought, ‘they’re old friends of mine, from when I was a young Hobbit like you and went off on an adventure of my own. Their King owes me a favour,’ and Belladonna continued even over Bilbo spluttering, ‘their King!’, blithely continuing, ‘and you will be given a choice. Listen Bilbo. This is important. I’m sorry to push this on you when
you’re so young, but I am to going to be around much longer, I fear.’

‘Mum,’ Bilbo whispered quietly, startled by her sudden admission. Neither of them had spoken their fears aloud until this moment, ‘don’t say that, please don’t -’

‘It’s the way it is, sweetheart. I’m so sorry I couldn’t live to see your coming-of-age. No, don’t try and deny it,’ she said as Bilbo shook his head and tried to hold back a sob, ‘We both know what’s happening. But I will not die without first giving you this.’

Bilbo bit his lip, trying to stem the flood of tears, but he couldn’t hold back a few fat drops from rolling down his cheeks.

‘You have a chance at knowing another family,’ she told him, ‘not many people get that. These visitors will - ha! - well, I suppose they’ll take you under their wing. They will provide you with love and protection, if you want them to. Not only that, but you’ll get to go out there and see the world, Bilbo! You’ll get to see the mountains and the great woods and things that you could only dream of, things that aren’t even to be found in your books. It’s what you’ve always wanted. I know that. You’re Bungo’s child, but you’re mine too, and I would never have wanted you to stay in the Shire and never have your own adventures.’

‘I don’t understand,’ Bilbo burst out suddenly, ‘I don’t want a new family, I want you here, mum, that’s all I need, never mind adventuring!’

‘Well,’ Belladonna said with a small smile, leaning back into the embrace of what would always be Bungo’s armchair. ‘We shall see.’ She was breathless from their conversation, and she could feel a great weight lifting from her chest. Not long now. Bilbo did not understand, but he would soon. She was loath to leave him like this, but she had done her best.

‘You may wish for things, Bilbo, but that doesn’t mean they’ll come true. I can’t stay with you much longer - that won’t change. In the coming days you’ll be faced with a choice: stay here in Bag End and live an ordinary life - which is no bad thing, let me tell you. Or you can choose to go with our visitors let your world open up. It’s your choice. You must know that I will not think less of you, should you choose to remain in the Shire.’

Bilbo was crying out-right, unable to hold back his tears any longer, clutching at her hand as though he could press warmth back into her numb fingers.

‘But enough of that, now,’ she said to him, gripping his hand back as tightly as she could. ‘Tell me one of your stories, Bilbo, if you would. You have such a good way of spinning a tale, have I told you that?’

In spite of his raw grief, Bilbo managed a watery smile. ‘Mum, you say it at least once a day,’ he said weakly, but he obliged her all the same, and sat with her through the long night until she fell asleep with Bilbo curled up by Bungo’s chair, a shawl over his shoulders, still clinging to his mother’s hand. In the morning, when he was woken by the clammy sunlight filtering through an overcast sky, he found that what little warmth had been in Belladonna’s hand the night before had vanished, and she would not wake when he tried to rouse her.

And so Belladonna was laid to rest back into the good earth, from which all Hobbits were thought to have come from. Bilbo watched his mother’s burial with eyes unseeing, and would not be consoled by any of the numerous numbers Hobbits who attended the funeral.

Three days later, the Eagles of Manwê descended on the Shire.
The next chapter will have actual eagles, I promise. Please let me know what you think!
Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure if he was in his right mind. If he had had any common sense to begin with, then it had almost certainly been left behind in Bag End.

The wind was rushing by at a truly alarming rate, pushing his hair back from his face and stinging his cheeks and eyes. His hands were frozen stiff despite his thick leather gloves, and Bilbo feared they would be permanently stuck in their current clawed grip. His calves, thighs and back ached with the effort of staying in place. The ground below - when he dared look - was so far away that he could only see the largest settlements and forests, and dark smudges across the land that gave vague impressions of landmarks that should have taken him days - weeks, even - to traverse on foot.

But more terrifying than the height or the speed was the huge eagle on whose back he sat. Bilbo wasn’t entirely sure if said eagle wouldn’t turn around at any moment and decide he was a tasty snack.

He was cold. He was hungry. He was simultaneously exhausted and terrified. Why had he ever thought this had been a good idea?

It had all seemed so simple yesterday morning.

The day before.

Bilbo rose early to a cold and empty Bag-End and, without much conscious thought, began to make himself a cup of tea. The loss of his mother and father were still such recent occurrences that, half-asleep, he found himself turning around to ask if his father would like some bacon with his scrambled eggs, the question dying on his lips as he was confronted by an empty kitchen. He stood there, mug of tea in hand, looking around the room aimlessly and tapping the fingers of his spare hand against his thigh.

And then there came a knock at the door.

More relatives with tokens of sympathy, Bilbo thought disconsolately. Probably another Took cousin who thought Bilbo could be cheered up with yet another pie. While Bilbo appreciated the food, which was always mouth-wateringly delicious, he did not want five or so well-meaning relatives pottering around Bag End, looking at him with pitying eyes and making vague suggestions that he come and stay with them for a while. Bilbo would never take them up on their offers; living in Bag End was a lonely affair, but at least at home he did not have to put on a brave face. He could be as miserable as he liked, here. Besides, there was the matter of the rucksack currently propped, fit to burst, up against the entranceway hall, quietly waiting to be used.

For a moment Bilbo contemplated ignoring his visitor, but then there was yet another knock - odd sound, Bilbo thought to himself, far heavier in tone than the smart raps on the door he usually had. With a sigh Bilbo put down his mug and walked reluctantly to his front door, attempting to put some semblance of a smile on his face before opening it. He looked out, and then looked up, and then up again.
There was a giant eagle on his doorstep. Rather rudely, Bilbo shut the door in its face.

Bilbo leaned against the inside of his front door, his heart going a mile a minute, terrified out of his mind. An eagle had knocked on his door. His mind seemed completely unable to process this fact. His vision was spinning, and he felt so light-headed that he thought he might faint.

There came a shrill, piercing sound through the heavy wood of the door. Against all reason or sense, it’s meaning filtered through Bilbo’s haze of terror.

‘Son of Belladonna! Son of Belladonna, we have come to pay our respects!’

‘That’s not possible,’ Bilbo said aloud to himself, ‘that’s - that’s not possible.’

But it was. Another sound followed, this one more of a low trill, ending with a high, long note, and Bilbo understood this one, too.

‘We will not eat you, Son of Belladonna. We are here to take you away, if you want us to.’

Bilbo breathed in great lungfuls of air, still skirting the edges of a panic attack. I can understand it, Bilbo told himself, and the rationality of the thought allowed Bilbo to get a grip on his fear. They were speaking his mother’s language, her secret language. How?

His breath caught in his throat as sudden realisation flooded him from head to toe. His mother had lied to him - or at least she hadn’t been telling the whole truth. It had never been the language of her family, it had been the language of the eagles. This is what she had been preparing him for, perhaps for years. These were the visitors she had called on before her death. Visitors that Bilbo had just shut his door on.

An aching wave of grief replaced the lingering vestiges of fear and panic. Longing for his mother’s presence, for her no-nonsense explanations and kind smile, overwhelmed him for a moment. He let his head fall back to hit the door with a thunk in an attempt to keep the tears falling from his eyes.

There was another knock, gentler this time, but it still managed to rattle the door. Starting a little, Bilbo stepped away and, with no small amount of trepidation, opened the door again.

The eagle was still standing in exactly the same place. It towered over Bilbo, so large that it had to place its long, wicked-looking talons a little awkwardly one above the other on the steps that lead to Bilbo’s smial. Its feathers were richly coloured, dark brown until they hit the light, where they turned a lush shade of gold. The eagle peered down at Bilbo over its sharp curved beak with fierce eyes whose gaze Bilbo struggled to meet.

‘Son of Belladonna,’ it called out again, the shrill sound so loud it almost hurt Bilbo’s ears, ‘I am-’ and here the eagle sing-songed something that Bilbo could only guess as ‘Deas. We are honoured to meet you, though I am sorry it is not under better circumstances.’

There was a long pause before Bilbo remembered himself. ‘Bilbo Baggins, son of Belladonna and Bungo. At your service.’ He gave a short bow, and then gasped a little when Deas snapped his beak closed suddenly.

‘No, Bilbo Baggins,’ Deas corrected. ‘We are at yours.’

There it was again. That use of ‘we’. But Bilbo saw no sign of any other eagle. Did they simply use pronouns differently? Bilbo wondered.

A second screech answered his musings. Bilbo quickly becoming tired of jumping nearly out of his
skin every five minutes, but he had no time to be annoyed before another eagle, almost as large as the first, appeared above him. This second one was perched on top of Bag End, peering down at Bilbo with only his head in sight.

’And I am Solas, also at your service, Bilbo Baggins,’ said the eagle atop Bag End.

’Are there any more of you?’ Bilbo blurted out before he could stop himself.

’No, just my brother and I,’ said Deas with a series of whistles and clicks, ‘Bilbo Baggins. We are here to take you away, if that is what you wish.’

’So I was right, then,’ Bilbo said hesitantly, ’you are friends of my mothers?’

’We are,’ confirmed Solas.

A sudden movement caught Bilbo’s eye. The spectacle at Bag End had not gone unnoticed, it would seem, for Bilbo could clearly see the top of Hamfast Gamgee’s head over the rose bushes in Mister Gamgee’s garden. In the same moment Bilbo chose to look over to his neighbour, Hamfast had apparently gathered his courage enough to stand up and wave at pair of gardening shears in Bilbo’s direction with a shaking hand.

’Y-you alright the-there Mister Baggins?’ He called to Bilbo, his face white, eyes wide and flickering uncertainly between Bilbo and the eagles.

Bilbo almost laughed. The image of Hamfast Gamgee attacking eagles armed with nothing but gardening tools was an absurd one, but Bilbo was heartened by his gardener’s display of courage in the face of such overwhelming odds.

’I’m alright, Hamfast!’ Bilbo shouted back, ‘these eagles are...well, they’re my friends,’ this was said with some amount of uncertainty, but neither eagle disputed Bilbo’s words. ‘Nothing to worry about!’

’You sure?’ Hamfast all but squeaked, staring at Bilbo as if he were mad.

’Yes, it’s fine!’ said Bilbo, as much for his own reassurance as Hamfast’s.

’What will be your choice, Bilbo Baggins?’ Deas interrupted, and neither eagle had even acknowledged Hamfast’s presence. They probably did not even consider him a threat. ‘Will you do as your mother wanted, and come away with us?’

’Where will we go?’ Bilbo asked, ‘and how will we get there?’

Deas drew his head back and opened his wings a fraction. ‘We will take you to our home, far over the mountains. As for how, you will fly with us, of course, on our backs.’

’Oh right. Of course,’ Bilbo muttered, although he would have liked a more specific destination than merely, ‘over the mountains’.

Well, then. What to do? Stay here and be suffocated by relatives, at least for the foreseeable future, but live a comfortable life? Or do what he had always dreamed of, although he had never conceived of any adventure quite like this.

When he put it like that, there was only one real choice. A grin started to spread across his face. His cheeks, unused to the expression after so long, ached with the effort, but it was a good ache.
'I'm coming with you,' Bilbo told Deas in his own language, shaping the correct sounds easily on his tongue and taking joy from it. 'I'm coming with you but just - just let me sort a few things first.

'Of course. We will wait for you, Bilbo Baggins.'

'Oh, just Bilbo, please!' he said as he rushed back inside. Gloves - he would definitely need gloves. And a scarf. Bilbo hurried to fetch both from his dresser, before all but running back to the entranceway to pick up his pack and two things from the side table. The first was a sign with ‘Gone on an Adventure’ written in neat script across the front - this he hung on his front door. The second was a letter that he ran to give Hamfast - Deas obligingly hopped aside to let him pass. Bilbo sprinted down the lane and pressed the envelope into his gardener’s hand.

'Read that, it’ll explain everything! See you...well, see you when I get back!'

Hamfast had no time to respond - Bilbo was already rushing back to stand in front of Deas.

'Ready!' he said. Deas inclined his head and then lowered his neck and body to the ground, wings spreading a little to keep his balance. Bilbo stared at the eagle for a moment before he realised he had to get on. He reached out with a shaking hand and took a handful of soft feathers in his grip, wondering if he was pulling too hard, but Deas seemed not to notice, or mind. With little grace, Bilbo heaved himself onto Deas’ back, seating himself just above the joints of his wings. It was a precarious position that relied on Bilbo’s balance, and his heart fluttered with a rising sense of trepidation. Already the ground looked very far away.

'Be sure you have a firm grip, Bilbo,' Deas said.

And that was the only warning Bilbo received before Deas spread his wings, the great span of them unfurling, feather over feather, and Bilbo marvelled at the huge wingspan that seemed to stretch on and on, Deas’ pinion feathers catching the morning breeze. Behind them, Solas was doing the same, but with a arching cry that Bilbo could only describe as a yell of excitement.

Deas braced, and then leapt, his huge wings beating the air, causing the grass on the top of Bag End to lie completely flat and sending Hamfast Gamgee ducking for cover, the letter still tightly clenched in one hand. Bilbo’s stomach lurched as he was borne aloft, and he dug his gloved fingers deep into Deas’ feathers. Fear and exhilaration were mixing together in his stomach to fill him with a feeling that was more like giddy excitement. He was flying! Bag End and the green lands of the Shire were quickly falling away from him, but Bilbo let out a bark of laughter, because he could still see Lobelia making her way up the lane. The nosy busybody was gaping outright at Bilbo and the eagles, a tray of some sort of food falling from her hands to land on her feet. She had probably been intending to stop by, offer him some food and make another attempt at stealing his spoons. Well, Bilbo wouldn't have to worry about that, now. He wouldn’t have to worry about much of anything, save for the heady speed of an eagle's flight.

The eagles banked, Deas a little higher than Solas, and Bilbo hung on for dear life. But he did not fall as the eagles turned, and he did not look back as the eagles took him East.

Now

Bilbo’s stomach grumbled loudly. He had spent the majority of the journey desperately hungry. Neither of the eagles had seemed particularly inclined to eat or rest - they had spent most of yesterday
and all of today eating up the miles with long, effortless beats of their wings. They had obligingly stopped twice so far - once for lunch and again for the night, but although Bilbo had come prepared with a bedroll and food to spare for the journey, he had barely gotten any sleep last night, and the lack of regular meals was dampening his initial excitement for the journey. He had been simply unable to drift off - the hard ground and the strange, unsettling presence of the eagles had seen to that. Though he knew in his mind the eagles would do him no harm, his body did not. He had spent the entire night in a tense ball, flinching at every rustle of feathers, unable to take his eyes off Deas and Solas huge, hulking forms. His muscles, already pushed to the limit by yesterday’s flight, were now all but crying out in pain. When they landed again, Bilbo was unsure if he would be able to even get down without assistance. He couldn’t even say that the view was particularly nice - if there were any famous landmarks below, then he wouldn’t know - they had risen that morning to bad weather, dark clouds threatening rain and obscuring the land below.

All in all, this was not what he had been expecting from his adventure.

All of a sudden, Deas dipped low, steadily losing altitude, and the sight that greeted them when they broke the cloud cover swept all of Bilbo’s irritations clean from his mind.

The Misty Mountains, which had earlier been nothing more than a suggestion on the horizon, rose up before them, vast and desolate, their peaks jutting like the teeth of a dragon into the sky. Bilbo had truly found the meaning of the word ‘breathtaking’. As Deas swept low, his previous steady pace quickening, Bibo took his fill of those snow-filled peaks, the mountain range stretching out as far as Bilbo could see, more than he could take in at a single glance, better than any of the paintings or illustrations he had seen in books.

One of the peaks was approaching with alarming speed, but Deas banked right, sweeping past, and Bilbo gaped as a vast valley was revealed, a silver thread of a river winding away into the far distance. The eagles drew themselves level again, and Bilbo found himself looking upon his new home.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Bilbo learns the true meaning of the phrase 'culture shock'.

Thank you very much to everyone who has commented, kudo'd or bookmarked! It was all very much appreciated, especially as this is my first work! I hope to keep to regular updates, so the next chapter should be up in the next two days.

Good grief, I never thought my childhood love of golden eagles would be used for this. Life is full of surprises.
The Eyrie

Chapter Notes

Please note that there is some blood and gore in this chapter, and (brief) depictions of animals being killed.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The eagles' Eyrie was a veritable fortress of sprawling shards of rocks on the steep walls of the valley. Towers of stone stood out here and there, crafted by countless centuries of wind and erosion. It was sparse, with little vegetation – a desolate place as first glance, but with every passing second Bilbo could see more and more signs of life among the slate grey of the rocks – circles of branches that must be nests, tucked into the most sheltered nooks and crannies. There were other eagles emerging now, too, turning their head up at Deas and Solas’ approach, calling out to them in welcome.

Deas swooped and twisted through the towers, and came to land along with his brother in the deepest part of the Eyrie, on a flat plateau shaped in a rough circle. Another eagle, bigger in size than any Bilbo had seen until now, stepped out from under a lip of rock on the far side of the flat platform.

‘Welcome, son of Belladonna,’ said the eagle.

Deas and Solas dipped their heads in respect, and Bilbo slid from Deas back to stand on shaking legs.

‘Bilbo Baggins, at your service,’ Bilbo bowed.

The eagle flicked his piercing gaze over to Bilbo. He could see that there was a jagged scar across the eagle’s beak, a dark discoloration just below where the beak met his skull.

‘I am Grumach,’ said the eagle, ‘King of the eagles. I am glad you chose to take up our offer, Bilbo.’

‘Th-thank you,’ Bilbo stammered, unsure as to how to address what was apparently eagle royalty. He suddenly and desperately wished he wasn’t still wearing the same outfit he had left Bag End in. He tugged at his jacket, trying in vain to straighten out the wrinkled material. They were also gathering quite the crowd – they were now almost surrounded by curious eagles.

‘We would offer it a thousand times, Bilbo, and still we could not repay your mother for her bravery. Your journey has been hard on you, I’m sure. Take your rest, now. My son, Lord Gwaihir, will show you to your nest. We will put you with the younglings - fledgling eagles who I believe are your own age. I hope this suits.’

Bilbo was a little overwhelmed by this display of generosity, but he was curious, too, as to how Belladonna had come to be held in such high regard by the eagles. He held back on his questions for now, though, and Gramach was a little too intimidating to bother with such things. Bilbo made a mental note to ask Deas about it later.

‘Of course it suits....er, your majesty. Thank you, I’d be glad to take the youngling’s nest.’

Gramach clacked his beak. ‘Gwaihir! Come, show Bilbo to your nest.’
Another eagle hopped onto the dais, and now that Bilbo was looking for differences to differentiate the eagles from one another, he saw that Gwaihir was of a similar colouring to his father – a brown bordering on light gold, and he was noticeably smaller than his father and Deas.

Gwaihir said nothing to Bilbo, merely bowed to his father before turning and stalking away. Bilbo blinked at the abruptness of Gwaihir’s behaviour, and then hurried to follow, bowing to Gramach again quickly, thanking Deas and Solas profusely for carrying him here, grabbing his pack and all but running after Gwaihir. The other eagles shifted out of his way without asking, Bilbo slipping and sliding over loose stone in his pursuit of Gwaihir. He was quite out of breath by the time Gwaihir stopped in front of a sheltered enclave. There, Bilbo found himself looking upon the largest nest he had ever seen, as easily as big as Bag End. It was currently occupied by three other eagles, all of whom perked their heads up at Bilbo’s approach.

‘He’s here!’ one of them cried, and what followed was a flurry of movement, the eagles pushing and shoving at each other in their effort to reach Bilbo first.

‘Hello, Hobbit!’ said one, only to be shoved by another.

‘No, that’s not his name, stupid!’

‘Well, what is his name?’

‘If you let him speak-‘

‘Are a boy hobbit or a girl Hobbit?’

‘A girl Hobbit! You can tell be-‘

It was like dealing with his Took cousins. Like herding cats, Bilbo remembered overhearing one of his Aunts say.

Bilbo took a deep breath and said, very loudly and clearly, ‘my name is Bilbo Baggins, and I am a boy Hobbit. But you can just call me Bilbo.’

They quietened for a moment, before starting all over again.

‘I am Luaithre,’ chirped the eagle on Bilbo’s left, her sing-song voice and dappled plumage distinguishing her from the others.

‘I’m Tuit, and what are these,’ said an eagle to Bilbo’s right with odd white patches here and there on his chest, leaning over to tug on Bilbo’s jacket sleeve with his beak.

‘What – that’s -‘ Bilbo tried to brush him off, but the third eagle spoke up.

‘And I am Landroval, brother to Gwaihir, son of Gramach.’

‘Tuit, stop that,’ Luaithre shooed at Tuit, inadvertently brushing Bilbo in the process. Landroval, who was even lighter in colour than Gwaihir, stepped closer, shy but eager to see Bilbo, and Bilbo found himself a little overwhelmed.

‘Be careful not to squash him, younglings,’ a stern eagle voice said from one side. Deas was perched on the lip of the nest, giving them what Bilbo could clearly see was a mildly disapproving glare.

‘Bilbo,’ Deas continued as the young eagles instantly quietened, and Tuit stopped trying to tug at Bilbo’s sleeve, ‘you eat more often than we eagles do. You’ll find that the berries and flowers of the
plants around this nest are edible, if you are hungry.’

Bilbo almost sagged in relief, a worry lifted from his mind. He had enough supplies in his pack to last another day, but this was reassuring news.

‘Thank you, Deas,’ Bilbo said.

Deas inclined his head solemnly. Tuit chose that exact moment to lean over and nip at Deas’ tail. The older eagle completely ignored him.

‘We are to go hunting tomorrow,’ Deas continued. Tuit, undeterred by the lack of reaction from Deas, nipped his tail feathers again. ‘Would you like to join us, and watch?’

Bilbo, trying to stifle a laugh at Tuit’s antics, said, ‘yes, although I’m not sure what good I’ll be? I mean, I can’t hunt.’

At this admission Gwaihir gave a scathing shriek.

‘But you can accompany the younglings and watch from a distance. You will come to no harm,’ Deas said. Tuit made one last ditch attempt to provoke Deas, but as he leapt forward for another peck, Luaithre, who had finally tired of his antics, casually spread her left wing and knocked Tuit clean off his claws.

Bilbo had to cough to cover his laughter. Tuit made a rather undignified squawk and righted himself. ‘Well,’ said Bilbo to Deas, ‘in that case then yes, I would be honoured to accompany you.’

Deas tilted his head to one side in acknowledgement, and then took flight.

‘You’ll love the hunt,’ Luaithre told Bilbo as soon as Deas had gone, ‘we’re not old enough to take part, not yet, but we can watch and learn from the elders. It’s so wo-‘

‘And what good would that do?’ Gwaihir interrupted, addressing Bilbo for the first time. There was little that Bilbo could read in the eagles’ beaks or eyes, but he was learning to take note of their body language, and Gwaihir’s was not exactly friendly at that moment. ‘Where are his claws, where is his beak?’ Gwaihir demanded. ‘He has no wings to speak of, and far too much fat!’ With each question he gave Bilbo a hard shove with his beak, sending Bilbo stumbling back a few paces each time. The last of these was particularly rough, knocking the wind from him.

‘Gwaihir!’ Luaithre shouted in warning, Tuit adding his own, less vocal protest.

Fat? Bilbo was a perfectly acceptable size for a Hobbit! Flustered, he snapped back, ‘yes, I don’t have any of these things, because I’m not an eagle!’

‘Hah!’ Gwaihir sneered, ‘I have no idea why my father thought to take you in like a stray warg pup whining for its mother, Hobbit, but he’ll come to his senses soon enough. Until then, try not to be too much of a burden. I am certainly not going to carry you.’

And with that, Gwaihir took flight, taking care to flap his wings directly at Bilbo, so that Bilbo was thrown to the floor of the nest. With an apologetic look, Landroval followed after his brother.

Well that had been thoroughly unpleasant. Bilbo picked himself off the ground and, in as dignified manner as he could for a Hobbit that had just been pushed around as easily as a newborn kitten, he brushed himself down. He tried not to look at Luaithre and Tuit, who had both gone very quiet.

Bilbo found that, absurdly, he was blinking back tears. He felt as though he were suddenly seeing
things clearly for the first time since his mother’s death. What was he thinking? Gwaihir was right. He was no eagle. How had he ever thought he could be accepted by these creatures?

Still not looking at two remaining occupants of the nest, Bilbo turned and walked away, out to the little ledge that jutted out into open air. There he sat down, wrapped his arms around his knees, and tried to hold back from crying, instead concentrating on the incredible view – the valley a sight to behold in the dying light.

Luaithre and Tuit gave Bilbo his space, which was greatly appreciated, and he spent a largely miserable evening staring at the view, the gaping hole in his chest that had been carved out by his parent’s death causing him more pain than he could say.

By the time Gwaihir and Landroval returned to the nest to sleep, Luaithre decided Bilbo needed company to shake him from himself.

‘Bilbo?’ she said, as she came to rest next to him.

‘Oh, hello Luaithre,’ Bilbo said, barely giving her a glance, ‘I’m sorry, but I’d like to be alone, if you don’t mind.’

Luaithre gave him a look. ‘I think you’ve had quite enough-’

‘I think this Hobbit will be the one to decide that, thank you very much,’ Bilbo snapped at her, ‘and not some bird-brained eagle sticking it’s nose where it doesn’t belong!’

In the space of a moment, Bilbo’s anger was swept away by regret.

‘I’m sorry, Luaithre,’ Bilbo apologised quietly, ‘I shouldn’t have spoken so harshly.’

‘If those were harsh words for a Hobbit, then I fear your reaction to an eagle’s version of harshness.’

‘I think I’ve already experienced that,’ Bilbo said, glumly.

Luaithre gave a caw of disgust, ‘ah yes, Gwaihir, the-‘ and here she let out a screech that Bilbo could not translate, but he guessed it to be something terribly rude, ‘don’t mind him. He’s young and foolish and thinks he has something to prove.’

‘Apparently Gwaihir thinks I have something to prove, too.’

She huffed and shuffled her wings. ‘You have nothing to prove, Bilbo. Gwaihir is just...well, I suppose he thinks he has a lot to live up to. He is from a line of Kings, a line of eagles whose great deeds will still be being told at the Unmaking of the world. He’s too eager for greatness.’ Luaithre paused, and then added with an air of cheekiness, ‘it does not help that his wingspan is smaller than Deas’.

Bilbo hummed in thought. He had noticed that Gwaihir was slightly smaller than Deas, but he had thought it was because the eagle was still young. Gwaihir must have a – quite literal – inferiority complex. Curious, he asked, ‘does that matter, then? The size of your wingspan?’

Luaithre gave the eagles’ version of laughter, ‘this is quite a rude topic, you know, for eagles,’ she said, ‘but it shouldn’t matter. All that does is your speed, your agility, and the strength of your claws. You’ll see tomorrow, on the hunt.’

‘Ah yes. I’m looking forward to that,’ and as he said it, he realised he actually meant it, and was not just saying it to be polite. But to see the eagles in action, not just on a long distance journey, to see
them swoop and glide and pinwheel in the air in the most elegant of dances – Bilbo suspected he was half in love with flying already. If only he could get over his persistent fear of heights.

‘You should be resting, Bilbo. Tomorrow will be along day for everyone. Don’t take Gwaihir’s words to heart – I’ll carry you tomorrow, for as long as you like. You are not a burden,’ she said, this last part accompanied by a friendly shunt with her beak to Bilbo’s shoulders. The action was one of greatly restrained strength, but still it sent Bilbo sprawling and having to right himself once again. ‘Come on, to the nest with us.’

She turned and partly hopped, partly fluttered back to the youngling’s nest. Bilbo hurried after her – his ascent took far longer, and when he finally managed to slide down the sides of the nest between two sleeping eagles, she was already fast asleep on the other side. Bilbo shook his head and set about laying out his bedroll a little way away from her. He truly hoped that none of the eagles would shift in the night – they would squash him easily if they had half an inclination to. Bilbo huffed a laugh to himself at his own morbid sense of humour. Imagine, the eagles waking up tomorrow, looking around for their Hobbit, looking under wings and talons, and finding Bilbo squashed flat like a pancake after a clumsy eagle had rolled on him in the night.

His acute hunger made itself known once more, and Bilbo set about filling his empty stomach. He made a late meal of stale sweet bread filled with dried fruit and ate the last of the nuts. While not nearly as full as he would have been eating dinner back in the Shire, the food at the very least stopped the gnawing sensation in Bilbo’s stomach. It was all washed down with the last of the water from his water-skin.

Bilbo climbed into his bedroll. Worryingly, he was already starting to shiver. Though the eagles gave off quite a fair bit of body heat, the nest did not keep out the cold mountain winds, and in some places it was very drafty. As quietly as he could, Bilbo tried positioning his bedroll in several different places, but each seemed colder than the last. Eventually he resigned himself to another cold, sleepless night, until a small coo reached his ears.

It was Luaithre – she had obviously been woken by Bilbo’s shifting, but she did not appear angry. Instead, she merely blinked at him and opened one wing out invitingly.

Bilbo considered the offer for a long moment. His certainty of being flattened would increase if he slept under Luaithre’s wing, but on the other hand, it was very cold.

In an instant, Bilbo was on his feet, blanket around in shoulders, and slipping under her wing. There, in the dark embrace of odd-smelling feathers, he found himself wonderfully warm, and he fell quickly asleep to the steady sound of a friend’s heartbeat.

Bilbo was woken the next morning to what seemed like the every eagle in the Eyrie screeching. He opened his eyes to be confronted with darkness, and he blinked blearily at it for a few moments, uncomprehending, before the dark shadow in front of his eyes shifted and drew back. Oh, of course. He had slept under Luaithre’s wing last night. He took stock of his body – surprisingly, the bruises and muscle pains from his journey had faded into a background ache, probably helped by a long, uninterrupted night’s worth of sleep.

There was no time to linger a moment longer – Bilbo looked around to see at least half a dozen eagles already in the air, with the rest still in the nests but adding their voices to the morning song. The sun’s position on the horizon indicated that it could be barely considered dawn. If this was to be
Bilbo’s wakeup call every morning, then it was a good thing Bilbo was such an early riser by nature. The rest of the young eagles were readying themselves to take off, and Luaithre was impatient as the rest of them.

‘Come on, Bilbo!’ she said to him, ‘quick, on my back, we don’t want to be left behind!’

Bilbo scrambled to climb onto her back, no less graceful in his ascent than any of the other times he had scaled Deas’. He realised, belatedly, that he had not even had time to change into fresh clothes, and he probably smelt to high heaven. It was too late for any of his usual morning routines now, though – Luaithre crouched low, spread her wings, and threw herself into the cold, cool mountain air. Bilbo wound his fingers around her feathers, and they joined the rest of the eagles circling the Eyrie, Bilbo’s heart juddering every time they came so close to another eagle it seemed like their wingtips would brush, but Luaithre proved she was far too agile to let that happen.

There came another high cry, and Bilbo saw Deas taking flight from another nest. They had obviously waiting for him – the eagles already aloft broke formation, wheeling away to head towards the river cradled at the bottom of the valley. Luaithre joined them, falling in behind Tuit. With quick flicks of his wings, Deas soared above them, taking a position roughly at the head of the pack. They seemed to be on a bearing leading them further east, out of the valley and into what looked like open plains, into wide green spaces that were more familiar to Bilbo than the rocky steeps of the Eyrie.

They travelled in utter silence. No eagle made a single noise save for the rush of the wind beneath their wings. Bilbo let out a breath. Despite his empty stomach and the dirt that clung to his skin and clothes, his heart was soaring. He still feared the height – his stomach twisted itself in knots each time he happened to glance directly down – but he trusted Luaithre not to throw him off, and the golden brilliance of the sun, steadily filling the canvas of the sky, was casting everything in a hazy, beautiful sheen.

At least an hour had passed by Bilbo’s reckoning when Deas stretched his wings to their fullest extent, tilting a little to catch an upward breeze that took him higher into the sky. At least half of their group followed – the rest, which Bilbo realised were the younger eagles – turned in rapid descent, heading for a stony outcrop. There they landed near the crest of the hill, hidden from the grasslands that spread out as far as the eye could see, hemmed in here and there by rocky slopes, like a shallow basin.

Bilbo glanced upwards – the other eagles had disappeared into the clouds. Unsure what was going on, he started to dismount, but Luaithre gave him a look over her shoulder, and Bilbo ceased his movements. It was very quiet. Not even Tuit moved. Focusing his gaze out over their hiding place, Bilbo realised the focal point of their attention. In the far distance was a huge herd of deer, grazing peacefully on the plains. Bilbo could just make out the silhouettes of the closest deer, and was astonished to realise that they were much bigger than any deer Bilbo had seen in the wilder parts of the Shire.

Every breath from his lungs seemed too loud. He tensed in reaction to the expectant atmosphere, waiting for something, although he knew not what. The quiet stretched on until Bilbo began to count time in the measure of his heart beat.

Suddenly, at the far end of the basin, three eagles broke cover and plummeted from the sky, their descent so rapid Bilbo almost missed it, and when they reached the moors they smoothly shifted their fall into a glide, skimming the ground so narrowly Bilbo thought for one split second they would crash. The deer had been alerted – at the first sign of movement they began to turn in a wave, as one, to flee in the other direction, in a stampede heading directly towards Bilbo. But the eagles were gaining on them rapidly, and Bilbo’s jaw dropped as, without warning, the remaining eagles copied
the first attacker’s movement directly above Bilbo’s head. These three passed so closely to Bilbo and the other’s hiding spot that Bilbo had to cling on to Luaithre so the back draft from their wings would not sweep him clean off his seat.

The result of this aerial pincer movement could only be described as carnage. The attackers nearest Bilbo drove into the ranks of deer, their open talons easily ripping into their prey, though some deer tried to busk and twist to escape. The eagles furthest away were almost as successful – Bilbo saw one close its claws on empty air, its intended prey proving too swift for it to catch. The remaining deer scattered away at top speed, but Bilbo clearly saw Deas and Solas proving their worth by taking out a second deer each.

It all happened so quickly – a flash of feather, a spray of blood, and then the carcasses of nine deer were lying in the grass.

The younglings took flight again, crying out in happiness to their brethren. They flew over and landed next to the victorious hunters, who were already digging into their meal with aplomb.

Luaithre barely spared Bilbo a moment to slide off to the ground before she, too, was plunging her beak into the side of a massive stag. Bilbo stood back, trying to keep away from the flurry of movement surrounding the kill. All it took was one glance at the closest deer, with its stomach spread out over the glass and its blood still pumping from the gaping wound, coupled with Luaithre turning around with an entrail dangling from her beak, and Bilbo’s stomach rebelled.

’Would you like some, Bilbo?’ She asked him.

Bilbo was too busy emptying the contents of stomach to immediately answer.

’Well, how was I supposed to know refusing food is a grave insult?’ said Bilbo much later, when the eagles had flown taken their fill and flown back to the Eyrie. Two of the eagles had carried the spare kills back with them, and they had deposited them in other nests, to be devoured by the waiting eagles. Bilbo could still hear the sounds of ripping flesh, and his empty stomach contracted again at the noise, though it held no more food.

The reaction of the eagles to Bilbo’s polite ‘no, thank you,’ when he had finally stopped throwing up, had been frosty, to say the least. Luaithre had been barely able to look at him since then. As it was, her head was slightly bowed and her gaze averted, although she was at rest to Bilbo’s immediate right. Bilbo huddled a little lower into his blanket, feeling thoroughly miserable, and slightly ashamed, although by Shire reckoning he had done no harm. He hadn’t felt this bad since he had spilt ink all over his father’s favourite book.

’Now you know,’ Deas said bluntly from Bilbo’s left, ‘Luaithre should have never have offered you such a thing, though I am sure she was only trying to be inclusive.’

Luaithre said nothing to this, but her head lowered a little further. To Bilbo’s amusement, she seemed quite in awe of Deas, and nothing like her usual talkative self.

’The hunt is important to us,’ Deas went on, ‘we eat but once a month, and we hunt twice. We rotate who goes out, and the rest stay behind to guard the Eyrie. To be offered food from that precious kill is no small thing, Bilbo.’

’But I can’t eat raw meat,’ Bilbo protested belligerently, ‘I’d just have thrown up after eating it,
which would have been worse!’

‘Perhaps in future it may be wise to take some of the meat back to the Eyrie, and cook it here, if you
cannot handle it raw.’

‘I don’t have my flint and tinder,’ said Bilbo, glumly. Then, quietly, he added, ‘I’m not even sure
why my mother thought to send me here.’

Luaithre nuded him gently in sympathy.

‘Neither do I,’ Deas said, ‘but the only way of finding out is to stay. If you would like, I will take
some time tomorrow to train you. You will need to learn some way of getting down from the Eyrie
without our help.’

From Luaithre’s small, surprised trill, Bilbo guessed this was quite the offer.

‘Thank you, that’d be appreciated,’ Bilbo accepted gratefully, taken aback once again at the kindness
to be found in such fierce creatures.

‘Tomorrow, then,’ said Deas, and took flight.

‘Would you like it if I showed you to our stream? So you can bathe?’ Luaithre asked. Bilbo
wondered if he really smelt that much.

‘Lead on,’ he said.

Chapter End Notes

There will most likely be one more chapter of Bilbo and the eagles, and then the
dwarves will have their say at long last.

Thank you once again for all your comments, kudos and bookmarks! It's really pushing
me to write faster than I've ever written before.
First Names

Chapter Notes

Warnings for blood and violence again. Last chapter with the eagles, then the Dwarrows get their say.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo should have really stopped being surprised by now, but the eagles continued to prove themselves unpredictable in entirely new ways. As Bilbo was now finding out, Deas’ version of training was not close to anything Bilbo could have imagined.

‘You want me to what?’ Bilbo yelled at him from his perch. Deas continued to glide lazily in large circles in the clear blue sky above Bilbo.

‘There are only two ways to get down from the Eyrie,’ Deas called down to him, ‘the first is to fly. The second is jump. Unless you are hiding wings, only the second option is available to you.’

‘But-but how?’ spluttered Bilbo. He crouched low, balancing on the balls of his feet, as a particularly strong gust whipped past. A shiver went up his spine and the skin of his forearms broke out in gooseflesh. All Bilbo could see below him were more jagged chunks of rocks, leading all the way down into the valley below like giant, broken steps. He could not see a way to even walk down, let alone jump. One wrong move and Bilbo would be dashed on the rocks, dead in instant. The hard stone of the Eyrie was hardly forgiving stuff to a Hobbit’s body.

‘It’s not as far as you think it is,’ Deas told him.

‘Says the giant bird with two huge wings,’ muttered Bilbo to himself. His right foot slipped a little, and Bilbo watched in morbid fascination as a few pebbles were dislodged, bouncing down to the next rock and breaking up into little pieces.

‘You are strong, Bilbo. You can do this. Fear is the only thing holding you back.’

Bilbo let out a high, slightly hysterical laugh, ‘that and a sense of self-preservation!’ he shouted back at Deas.

Deas did not reply, and his silence seemed expectant. Bilbo took three deep breaths, his head swimming. ‘Alright,’ he said quietly, ‘alright, you can do this,’ he shuffled forwards, until his toes were curled over the edge, ‘no, no, no, I really can’t,’ Bilbo stumbled back a pace, back into relative safety.

But then Deas cried out, high and piercing, and Bilbo felt something lift up in him in response. Through his fog of fear he thought: I can do this.

He bent his knees, and jumped.

There was a moment in which he was in complete, terrifying free-fall, before he hit the next rock down. Deas was right – it was a shorter drop than Bilbo realised, and he rolled at the impact. He landed in a crumpled heap, but he was miraculously unharmed - merely a little dusty.
Bilbo laughed, adrenaline pumping through him. He ran to the edge of the next rock, considered the
drop, and jumped again. Another impact, another roll. He would surely have bruises later all over his
body, but Bilbo didn’t care. His fear had largely been chased away by giddiness, and he leaped from
the next two ledges with only the barest amount of hesitation.

His quick descent down the valley wall was halted suddenly by a sheer cliff. There were no more
steps to be found below, and Bilbo’s forward momentum and high spirits almost caused him to jump
without thinking, catching himself just in time.

This new height caused his fear to come rushing back. Bilbo was gasping, completely out of breath,
his hair and clothes sticking to his sweat-slicked skin as he considered this last obstacle. If Deas
wanted him to get down to the valley on his own, Bilbo would have to climb from here. There was
no other way down.

‘Last part, Bilbo,’ Deas told him as he swooped past Bilbo at such a range Bilbo could have reached
out and brushed Deas’ pinion feathers with his fingers.

Bilbo had to strain to hear Deas’ next words – the wind had picked up in the last few moments, and
was now so strong it was tugging at Bilbo’s clothes and buffeting him to one side.

‘Last jump,’ said Deas, ‘I will catch you this time.’

Bilbo blinked. He must have not heard that correctly – or perhaps he had mistranslated Deas’ words.
Deas could not be suggesting Bilbo jump.

‘Deas!’ Bilbo shouted back over the screaming wind, ‘you can’t be serious!’

‘I am. I will not let you fall, Bilbo. You need to learn how to do this,’ Deas shrieked back in
challenge. ‘Trust me!’

Bilbo did trust Deas – the eagle had given him no reason not to. But this was life and death. His
burgeoning friendship with the eagle did not cover situations like this.

‘Er,’ said Bilbo, ‘I don’t think I’ll- it’s not for me-’

‘Jump, Bilbo!’ Deas banked and turned back to fly past Bilbo again, hugging the rock face, but
Bilbo was too distracted by the movement he caught out of the corner of his eye.

Another eagle – not Deas – was rapidly approaching. As the eagle drew near, Bilbo realised it was
Gwaihir, and Bilbo watched in confusion, and then with a growing sense of dread, as the eagle
landed directly behind him. Gwaihir stalked forward, head lowered and wings slightly outstretched,
quickly taking up what little space was available on the cliff, and Bilbo, with the open space behind
him and the huge eagle bearing down on him, felt so trapped he could almost hear the cries of
wolves, the biting cold of a blizzard, and smell his mother’s perfume.

Gwaihir was trying to make him fall, Bilbo realised. The eagle reared his head and let out a
deafening screech, so loud it made Bilbo’s ears ring.

But Bilbo did not stumble back and tumble from the cliff, as Gwaihir had intended. Bilbo felt like
prey, like a rabbit pursued by a wolf, and so fearful it felt like ice was pumping through his veins, but
the memory of his mother had given him the strength to stand his ground. Gwaihir drew back, clearly
surprised, and the eagle watched as Bilbo met his sharp gaze without flinching.

Bilbo did not say anything. His response to Gwaihir was this: he turned from eagle, and threw
himself off the cliff.
For five, horrifying seconds, Bilbo fell, body unsupported, fingers grasping at nothing, feet without a firm footing, and then he impacted into Deas’ back. With blind instinct, he grasped Deas’ feathers with every bit of strength he possessed. His shoulder was wrenched painfully, almost out of its socket, as it took the weight of his body, and the force with which he broke his fall was so hard Bilbo saw stars. His mind went blank, until Deas tilting to the right to compensate for Bilbo’s angled landing brought him back to himself. He had done it. Perhaps not the most graceful landing in the world, but Bilbo didn’t care one jot.

Back on the cliff, Gwaihir was staring at Bilbo with an expression Bilbo thought identical to Lobelia’s sucked-lemon face she would always make whenever Bilbo caught her trying to smuggle silverware out of Bag End.

Bilbo let out a whoop of happiness, and Deas echoed it with his own. He readjusted his position on Deas’ back, making himself more comfortable, and Deas took them on a leisurely victory lap around the valley.

While Deas glided effortlessly on the thermal winds, Bilbo caught his breath and calmed down a little. He felt a little dizzy, but it was not enough to deter him from enjoying the flight.

‘Not that I mind,’ Bilbo started, breaking the comfortable silence, ‘but why are you training me?’

He could not think of a reason, aside from a more exciting way for him to start a flight. Bilbo clambering onto an eagle’s back every time they needed to travel could hardly be called fun for either party.

‘Tell me, Bilbo,’ said Deas, ‘do you want to be useful to us?’

Bilbo had not expected the counter question. He mulled it over for a few moments, before replying, ‘of course I do, but I’m not exactly sure how much use I can be. I’m only small. Well, I’m only small in comparison to you – I’m quite tall for a Hobbit, you know.’

‘Being small has nothing to do with it. Your size does not equal your worth. If you wish to be useful, then you will need to learn how to hunt and how to fight. Improving your balance and strength is the first step. Not to mention showing you how brave you can be.’

Bilbo was quiet. Deas sounded so certain, and Bilbo wanted to contradict his words, to say, I am not brave, not even close, to admit I think I ran away from the Shire because I thought it would make things easier. But he kept his fears to himself, and said nothing.

After Bilbo’s actions on the cliff, Gwaihir began to treat Bilbo with something approaching begrudging acceptance, but he made no overtures of friendship, which Bilbo tried not to take to heart. In the next few weeks Bilbo found himself becoming fast friends with Luaithre, Deas, Tuit and even Landorval, and as winter approached on icy winds, Bilbo spent the last days of autumn in something resembling a routine. He would train with Deas whenever the eagle did not have guard duty – Bilbo came to quickly realise that, although the eagles had known peace for many years, they were ever-vigilant with their territory, and the older eagles all did that fair share of watch duty at key points in the valley. Occasionally, when Bilbo was in need of the kind of restful, undemanding quiet
Deas could provide, Bilbo would sit with him. Bilbo was sure his eyes were of hardly any use to Deas, but he had never been made to feel unwelcome.

For the rest of the time Bilbo found himself alternating between helping maintain the Eyrie and spending pleasant days with the younger eagles in the foothills of the Misty Mountains, and though they wandered far and wide, they always made sure to stay well within the eagle’s territory. They would engage in play, far rougher and much more dangerous than anything Bilbo had taken part in when he was a fauntling. Though not allowed to participate in the hunt, the young fledglings required food more often than the adults, and so could practise their hunting skills on small prey. Bilbo would forage for new edible plants, or sit on one of the eagles’ backs and simply enjoy the flight. He had learnt how to bend his body to the eagle’s movements instead of simply hanging on for dear life, and eventually it became a much more comfortable affair.

In the evening, they would return to the nest, Bilbo slipping away to wash off the day’s dirt and sweat in the mountain stream that flowed through the Eyrie. Dusk had quickly become storytelling time – on the second night of Bilbo’s stay with the eagles, Luaithre had begged Bilbo for stories about his home land. Bilbo had laughed at the picture they made – four huge predators huddled up in the nest, and one little Hobbit telling them stories as though they were no more than Hobbit children, and he had told the eagles so.

‘Someone would think you young chicks wanting a bedroom story!’ he had teased, and despite his reservations about telling such fierce beings stories about the quiet Shire, he relented. He told them of the Shire’s rolling green hills and lazy rivers, and of the land’s good and flourishing Hobbits who loved all things that grew. He told them of his childhood, of the pranks he had played and the adventures he had had, and of the complicated familial relationships that bound up every Hobbit in the Shire, for better or worse. The fledglings, to his astonishment, lapped up every story and always demanded more. Luaithre in particular seemed to take great pleasure in any great scandal Bilbo related, and they were always horrified whenever he mentioned Hobbit smials.

‘You live underground?’ Tuit said in astonishment the first time Bilbo had described Bag End, and the rest of the eagles had shuddered in horror. Bilbo tried to explain to them how cosy Bag End was, how welcoming, but they had all shuddered their feathers and said they couldn’t dream of a home that was not high up in the wide, open sky, with no roof save a covering made of stars. Bilbo had tried not to take offence.

One night, when every other eagle in the nest save Luaithre was fast asleep, Bilbo’s storytelling was returned in kind.

‘His mother was killed by a warg, you know,’ Luaithre said quietly. ‘We live long lives, Bilbo, and we do not experience death often, and so when it does come to us, it comes to us all the harder.’

Bilbo knew he could not compare his lifespan to an eagle’s, but Luaithre’s words had struck a chord within him. His parent’s deaths had been sudden and shocking after a life that had known little sorrow.

‘Gwaihir was very young at the time,’ Luaithre continued, ‘and the King grieved for a long time. He is still grieving, I think. It has made Grumach...overprotective, of all the young eagles. We’re not even allowed to take part in the hunt.’

‘How did it happen?’ Bilbo asked. He could not imagine anything being able to take down these strong birds.

Luaithre flexed her claws. ‘Wargs,’ she all but spat, ‘a pack of them brought the Queen down, and they need a pack, the cowards – she was one of our fiercest fighters. They are the vilest creatures in
all the land. If I could kill every warg – sink my claws into their flesh, paint my beak with their blood – I would be satisfied.’

Beside her, Bilbo shuddered. The fury of the eagles was a terrifying thing to behold. After a few moments, Luaithre relaxed and let the anger drain from her.

‘But let’s talk of better things,’ she said, ‘you have been telling us so much of your life Bilbo, would you not like to learn about ours?’

Bilbo smiled, his enthusiasm returning, ‘I would love to,’ he admitted, ‘tell me, do you have family names?’

‘What’s a family name?’ Luaithre replied, which answered Bilbo’s question.

‘It’s like Baggins, for me. That’s my family name. It tells people who I’m related to, I suppose.’

‘Oh!’ Luaithre nodded her head in understanding, ‘well, yes we have something a little, but....’ she leant close to Bilbo and said in a whisper, ‘it’s a secret.’

‘It is?’ Bilbo was even more intrigued, now.

‘Yes! It’s very secret. You see, Bilbo, the names you know us by are our outer names. They are the names we give to the outside world. They are known as our second name. The first is much more private, told only to family members. Our First Names reveal who we really are, as close as you can get to revealing the very essence of yourself. That is why they are so secret.’ Luaithre looked very proud of her explanation.

‘They’re only told to those considered family?’ asked Bilbo quietly.

‘Exactly, they’re-’ Luaithre suddenly caught Bilbo’s meaning and quickly added, ‘oh no, Bilbo, you mustn’t think that! You are considered family, by all of us. But you must understand, hardly anyone knows our First Names. Even Gandalf only knows Grumach’s, and they’ve known each other for centuries, thousands of years, even!’

‘It’s okay, Luaithre,’ Bilbo told her, because she looked so agitated he felt he had to reassure her. ‘Really, it is. I understand – there are some things kept private, even between family members,’ he managed to smile, ‘although in the Shire, they always come out. We’re terrible gossips, you see.’

After a few more assurances that Bilbo was not offended, Luaithre went to sleep, Bilbo tucked up in his usual place under her wing to keep warm. But sleep did not come to him, and he spent many hours awake in the dark, listening to Luaithre’s heartbeat and missing his mother and father more intensely than he could say.

There was another incident that reminded Bilbo of the fact that, no matter how much he learnt of the eagles, there would always be some minor misunderstandings. Bilbo had often complained, very loudly and creatively, about his lack of fire. This was by no means any of the eagles’ fault, but occasionally the longing for something as simple as tea became so acute he couldn’t help but rant. And besides that, Bilbo missed eating meat. Although he could now accompany the eagles on their hunt without throwing up (though it had taken a while), he couldn’t cook it, and had been subsisting on a rather boring diet of fruit, berries and plants since he had arrived. If he could just have any amount of fire, he had whined one evening, he could make something that amounted to the food he was used to. Most of the eagles nodded along sympathetically, but some took it upon themselves to help Bilbo in more literal ways.

One bright day in late autumn, Tuit disappeared for a morning without a word as to where he was
going. For the entire time Tuit was gone, Bilbo worried, but his fears of Tuit being taken by wargs were banished when he recognised Tuit’s silhouette on the horizon that afternoon, swiftly approaching the nest.

‘Here he is!’ Luaithre chirped, ‘probably got lost again. Wait...what has he got in his talons?’

The other eagles were turning to look, now, and Bilbo squinted, trying to see what Luaithre meant. But as Tuit drew nearer, it quickly became apparent what, or rather who, Tuit was holding.

‘Is that—is that a man?’ Bilbo spluttered, as shocked as the others, who were all making low noises of surprise.

It was a man, dangling limply from Tuit’s claws. When he reached the nest, Tuit gently laid the man out on the floor of the nest, before taking his usual perch.

‘Bilbo!’ Tuit said happily, oblivious to their stunned silence, ‘I’ve brought you something to help with your fire problem. I got you a farmer! I saw him making fire, so I thought he might be able to make some for you, too!’

‘You-you fool,’ Gwaihir hissed, quicker to recover than the rest, ‘have you any idea what you’ve done you idiot!’

Luaithre let out a string of creative curse words in Tuit’s direction, which Bilbo dutifully tuned out. He was more concerned about the Man, who, as Bilbo drew nearer, turned out to be a boy, perhaps in his late teens. A teenager that had apparently passed out. Bilbo didn’t blame him.

Bilbo ignored the tongue-lashing Tuit was receiving over his head, and instead placed a steadying hand on the teenager’s shoulder as he began to stir. He watched in fascination as the boy took a few sleepy blinks, before remembrance suddenly lit up his eyes, bringing him back to full consciousness.

He scrambled away from Bilbo to huddle in one corner of the nest, his eyes wide and face pale.

‘It’s okay’, Bilbo soothed, ‘they won’t eat you. There’s just been a little misunderstanding.’

As Bilbo was the only one he could understand, the boy’s gaze stopped darting around fearfully and instead fixed on Bilbo.

‘Where a-a-am I?’ he managed to get out.

‘Where a-a-am I?’ he managed to get out.

‘A long way from home, I imagine. But don’t worry, we’ll get you back there soon enough,’ Bilbo paused. He had no idea how to explain any of this. ‘My friend, the eagle who carried you here, wanted you to make some fire for me. That’s why you were taken.’

‘It wasn’t to eat me?’ said the boy incredulously. He looked like he might pass out again.

‘No, it wasn’t,’ Bilbo confirmed. At once the boy dug into his battered coat and drew out a tinder box and some flint. He threw it at Bilbo’s feet.

‘There! Have it! I don’t care, just please take me back home!’

‘Alright, alright, just a moment,’ Bilbo said with raised palms, trying to calm the boy down. He stood and turned to the still arguing eagles, taking a moment to smile at where Landroval was huddled up much like the human boy, staring worriedly at the other eagles.

‘I’m sorry to interrupt,’ Bilbo shouted at the top of his lungs. He had found it was the only way to be
heard when the eagles were like this. ‘But I think we need to get him home.’

They stopped arguing at once and turned to him, but not without Luaithre first hitting Tuit over the head with her wing.

‘Yes,’ she said tersely, ‘we do, before Deas finds out—’

‘Before Deas finds out what, exactly?’ said another voice.

Bilbo was always amazed at how quietly Deas could fly. He wished fervently that he was any measure of skill in drawing – he would have loved to have been able to put down on paper the reactions of the three young eagles to Deas’ sudden appearance.

It took some persuading, but the boy was eventually convinced to climb on Deas’ back behind Bilbo. Deas flew more steadily than Bilbo had ever known him to, even during Bilbo’s journey to the Eyrie, but the boy spent the entire flight alternatively gripping Bilbo’s shoulders too tightly or grabbing handfuls of Deas’ feathers, and staving off what sounded like the beginnings of a panic attack.

Deas landed a short way away from the boy’s home – Bilbo would walk him the rest of the way, it was decided. It was probably for the best, as Bilbo thought they had terrified enough people for one day.

The boy’s home was a small hamlet in the lower foothills, nothing more than a handful of houses and farmland. As they walked towards it, Bilbo attempted to converse with the boy, who had both his arms tightly wound around his middle, and looked relieved to be on the solid ground once more.

‘What’s your name?’ Bilbo asked him gently.

‘Jeth,’ the boy replied, and said no more.

‘I’m Bilbo Baggins. Nice to meet you.’

‘What are you, Bilbo?’ Jeth asked bluntly. ‘I haven’t seen anything like you before.’

‘I’m a Hobbit.’

‘Do Hobbits normally live with eagles?’

Bilbo laughed. ‘No,’ he said as they reached the hamlet, ‘they don’t. Say, you couldn’t do me a favour, could you? I need a few things and I’m willing to pay.’ Bilbo held up a pouch full of coins. Jeth gave him an incredulous look, but he relented to Bilbo’s simple request, and ducked into one of the houses for a few moments, before emerging with Bilbo’s asked for items. He thrust them into Bilbo’s hands.

‘Here,’ he said, ‘just take them and go, please. I’ll have no more part in this...this madness.’

But Bilbo managed to press the pouch of coins into the young lad’s hands. It was far more than the items were worth, but Bilbo didn’t mind. He had little use for it at the moment, anyway.

‘Fine,’ Jeth sighed, taking the money, ‘but please, tell your eagles not to do it again? We’re not meant to go flying, not like Hobbits.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m sure he won’t be doing it again,’ said Bilbo firmly. ‘Goodbye Jeth. I’m sorry about the day you’ve had. I hope we meet again, under better circumstances.’
Jeth nodded and turned to enter his home once more, muttering, ‘yes, goodbye, Mad Bilbo Baggins.’

The insult would have stung had Bilbo not lived with eagles, who were all far blunter with their words. Bilbo turned to make his way back to where Deas was waiting, looking over his purchases as he walked.

He had in his hands a long hunting knife, two large swatches of dark brown cloth and another of leather, some needle and thread, and a heavy winter cloak. With any luck, he might find the coming days a little bit more comfortable because of Tuit’s idiotic actions.

Tuit, much to his dismay, was banned from the hunt for two months and told not to leave the nest for two weeks. Bilbo found himself feeling sorry for Tuit in the second week of his consignment to the nest, and would sit with him and work on his new clothes. Bilbo’s Hobbit clothes had proved too soft for living with eagles, and were torn and stained beyond repair. He set about making his own with the rough cloth he had bought, and Tuit seemed fascinated by the whole process, though he would try to unpick the stitches if Bilbo looked away for even a second.

Now able to make fire, Bilbo could finally accept the food offered from the hunt. He would take meat from the most unspoiled carcass and wrap it up to be cooked later, over the fire Bilbo would set up near the mountain steam. The taste of slightly charred venison had never tasted so good. He also took to practising his knife-throwing skills, the eagles watching on in amusement as he attempted to get the hang of it. The hunting knife he had bought had a surprisingly good balance to it, and a sharp enough edge that it would bury itself into the wood every time Bilbo managed a particularly good throw. But as Bilbo’s coming-of-age day drew near, not even his busy, exhausting days or the company of the eagles could ward off his growing sadness. He could not help but think of what his coming-of-age would be like in the Shire, with his parents. As he was their only son, they probably would have put on an outrageously extravagant party, a fact he quietly admitted to Gwaihir one night.

On the day of his coming-of-age, the eagles surprised him once more.

‘We have gifts for you, Bilbo! Isn’t that what happens? You give gifts?’

Bilbo, astonished and so pleased he felt as though he could fly all on his own, did not correct them, ‘yes, I suppose that is what happens, but you didn’t have to! You’re all too kind.’

‘It’s no trouble,’ Landroval told him quietly.

Gwaihir snorted, ‘we wanted to, moron. Not be quiet and let them give you your presents. Tuit might explode if you don’t accept his soon.’

Tuit all but leapt forward, ‘Here, Bilbo,’ he said after he dropped something at Bilbo’s feet, ‘I found this and thought it might be useful!’

Bilbo shook his head and eyed him fondly, ‘Tuit the magpie,’ he laughed, and crouched to see what Tuit had gifted him.

It was a long spear, Bilbo saw, perhaps one-and-a-half times his height, with a solid wooden shaft and a wickedly sharp leaf-shaped metal point. Bilbo hefted it in his hands, testing the weight. The grain of the wood felt right against his grip.

‘It’s brilliant, thank you Tuit. I’ll have to learn how to use it, now!’

‘Here’s mine,’ Luaithre said, impatient to have her turn. She placed a small package down on the floor of the nest, her gift wrapped up in the scraps of material left over from Bilbo’s newly made
clothes. Bilbo wondered if she had done that on purpose – wrapped it up like any other present
would be in the Shire. He quickly opened it, and saw in surprise that inside were several long,
beautiful feathers, all of Luaithre’s dappled gold colouring.

‘I’ve been collecting them for a while,’ Luaithre admitted, ‘I thought you might like to decorate your
new clothes.’

‘Now you have claws and wings,’ Tuit put in, ‘you’re a proper eagle, now.’

Bilbo looked at all of them, unable to tell them how thankful he was. Before he could manage to
express himself, Landroval nudged him a little to get his attention.

‘My present’s not here,’ Landroval told him, ‘it’s down in the woods at the far end of the valley. I
know how much you miss your tea, and none of the plants on the mountain have been suitable. I’ve
seen the faces you make when you taste them,’ Landroval trilled, laughing, ‘but I think this one
might make tea.’

‘Thank you, Landroval. Thanks all of you,’ Bilbo gave each of them a hug, throwing his arms
around their necks as best he could, each eagle hooking their beaks over his shoulder and returning
the embrace.

‘My present’s not here either,’ Gwaihir spoke up, ‘it’ll come later. Come on, into the sky with us,
you need to learn how to use that spear of yours, Bilbo, and I’d like to have a good laugh at your
attempts to do so.’

‘Oh, thanks,’ Bilbo laughed, knowing not to take Gwaihir’s words to heart. Gwaihir’s present was
made clear that same evening, when they returned to the nest to find the King waiting for them, Deas
and Solas flanking him either side. Bilbo jumped off Tuit and into the nest, acknowledging the
King’s presence with a bow. He had not had much contact with Grumach, but the eagle had always
been kind to him whenever they had spoken. But his presence in the nest was unprecedented.

‘Greetings on your coming-of-age, Bilbo,’ said Grumach.

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘I think it’s time I told you the story of Belladonna the Brave,’ the King said getting straight to the
point, ‘I should have told you sooner, Bilbo, but it slipped my mind until someone reminded me last
week.’

Bilbo glanced over at Gwaihir. He was stubbornly refusing to look in Bilbo’s direction.

‘That would be wonderful, sir, if you have the time to tell it.’

‘Of course. I have heard you tell stories of your own around sundown – I would like to hear some of
these for myself, but for now let us tell you one of our own.’

It was the perfect evening for such a telling. A storm was brewing in the distance, and dark clouds
were rolling off the mountains. Bilbo sat between Tuit and Deas, and listened with rapt attention to
Grumach’s tale. The King told of a dark night, many seasons ago, when a goblin had done what the
eagles had thought impossible – it crept into the Eyrie one night, and stolen an egg. There was
nothing more precious to the eagles in all the world than an egg – chicks were such a rare occurrence
that they were always cherished and a cause for great celebration. For such a thing to happen was a
terrible tragedy to the eagles – they searched high and low for the egg, but found no sign of it or the
goblin that had stolen it. Not a single eagle rested that night – they flew further and further away
from the Eyrie in the hopes of finding it.
But though they did not know it, the egg had been found, and the egg was being protected. Belladonna Baggins, with Gandalf in tow, had stumbled across a pack of goblins, and after the resulting battle in which Belladonna had slain her fair share of the repulsive creatures, they had found the egg and carefully wrapped it up for safekeeping. The goblin pack had not been alone, however, and Bilbo listened in awe as Grumach told him of the long, terrifying night Belladonna had spent trying to protect the egg from the vicious onslaught of goblins, until the rising sun brought with it the eagles to dispatch with the last of the attackers. Belladonna had been considered a friend of the eagles from that day on.

‘Would you like to see the chick your mother saved?’ Luaithre asked later that night, when the story was over, and lead to him a nest that lay in the very heart of the Eyrie, not far from the youngling’s nest. There, Bilbo found an eagle at rest for the night, with the youngest, fluffiest eagle Bilbo had ever seen, fast asleep and tucked up under his mother’s wing.

‘This is Beleram,’ Luaithre said as quietly as she could, ‘and his mother, Lasair. Lasair, this is Bilbo Baggins, Belladonna Baggins’ son.’

Bilbo was taken aback when Lasair bowed to him – not a mere tilt of the head, which was the usual acknowledgement of Bilbo’s presence, but the kind of bow that was only reserved for the King.

‘I am honoured to meet you, Bilbo Baggins,’ said Lasair, ‘and Beleram would be, too, were he awake.’

They spoke for a while in hushed tones, before Bilbo and Luaithre retired to the nest. Bilbo curled up asleep that night, surrounded by eagles on all sides, with a smile on his face. For the first time, he felt at home.

That winter was harsh and bleak, but Bilbo weathered it with the help of his winter cloak, new clothes, and the warmth the eagles provided. He now found himself entertained by the eagles – since the King’s telling of the tale of Belladonna the Brave, dusk had become a time for the eagles to tell their stories, too. Bilbo was enchanted by every single telling, listening with his full attention to stories of the eagles’ creation, of their part in the War of the Wrath, and of their King and the greatest eagle who had ever lived, Thorondor.

Bilbo was changing more and more with every passing week. He grew strong and stronger still – he emerged from winter a far hardier creature than the Hobbit that had entered it. Gone was the fat that had padded out his middle, replaced with lean, hard muscle. His feet were now so tough that not even the sharpest rock could harm them, the palms of his hands covered in calluses from climbing cliffs, trees and gripping the spear. He could now leap onto – and off – an eagle’s back not only without fear, but with something approaching grace. His hunting skills had improved, too, and he had lost all squeamishness for the act. His first kill – a rabbit, struck down by his throwing knife – had not been clean, and the animal had clearly been in a great deal of pain as it died. Bilbo had not made the same mistake twice – now, when he killed, it was as quick and clean as he could manage.

On a whim he had sewn the feathers Luaithre had gifted him into the shoulders of his new clothes, taking Tuit’s words a little literally, but he thought the gorgeous feathers complimented the brown fabric well, and he made one of them into a necklace with a strip of leather, cut very thinly. He wondered what his fellow Hobbits would think of him, were they to see him now – but there was no time for such thoughts. Life with the eagles was always busy and filled with enough challenges to keep him occupied, and as spring bloomed bright and beautiful in the valley, covering it with
thousands upon thousands of blossoms, Bilbo could admit to himself that he was happy in his strange new home.

The next five years passed in much the same fashion, and somewhere along the way Bilbo had begun to speak the eagle’s language on a daily basis, until it became the only language he spoke. During these years he learnt more of the eagle’s ways than any other being – save Gandalf – had ever been privy to. He learnt to attune his ears to the song of the mountain, to the whispers through the trees, to stalk with a silent tread over any landscape, and know that the strength of his arm could be trusted to throw his spear and find its target in the beating heart of his prey. He learnt of their skylore, that they had a thousand different words for describing the winds, each of them subtly different, and that when they loved they loved fiercely and completely, a sentiment that Bilbo found himself returning. In those five years he had come to consider them family, just as Belladonna had said he would.

But change is a fickle thing, and arrives when it is least wanted.

Change came one summer’s day, when Bilbo and the young eagles were resting out in the plains after a morning’s worth of hard flying. They were lazing around in the heat, most of the eagles in a light doze, with Bilbo quietly showing Landroval the properties of a plant he had found deep in the woods. Landroval had always had a strange fascination with plants – unusual for an eagle – and was always willing to hear more of Bilbo’s extensive botanical knowledge.

From one moment to the next, the lax atmosphere was replaced by tension when Tuit raised his head to the horizon and remarked,

‘Is that smoke I see?’

It was, and even Bilbo could see it – a bare wisp of black smoke rising into the achingly-blue summer sky.

Their calm vanished and, without a word of agreement between them, they moved as one, taking off in the direction of the smoke, Bilbo grabbing his spear and running to jump on Luaithre’s back without breaking his stride.

There was no time for gliding – the eagles beat their wings and set a fast pace, Bilbo narrowing his eyes in response to the speed. A niggling of instinct was worming its way into Bilbo’s stomach, a fore-warning he had learnt to pay attention to, and as the eagles soared over the last hill and saw the source of the black smoke, Bilbo’s uneasiness was confirmed.

It was Jeth’s hamlet, although the blackened, burnt-out houses could hardly amount to anything, now, let alone a hamlet. Some were still on fire, sending out great plumes of smoke, but Bilbo had eyes for none of this. His gaze was fixed on the lumps here and there, which, as the eagles came to land, he realised in horror were the bodies of people.

Bilbo slid off Luaithre and took a few steps into the village. Everywhere he turned there was a new horror to be found – there were corpses everywhere, slumped in doorways or lying where they had fallen out on the street, probably killed as they had tried to flee. The wounds on each one were horrific, and Bilbo flinched away from more than a few.

There was blood everywhere. Bilbo was stepping through it even as he tried to avoid the bodies. It was silent in a way Bilbo had never known, an oppressive silence that weighed heavy on his heart. The eagles behind Bilbo said nothing. No one said a word as they took in the scene.

A sudden noise caused Bilbo to spin around, spear at the ready, ready for an attack, but he quickly
lowered it. A young woman was slumped against a wall, her face covered in blood and dirt, her hands pressed to her midriff. Bilbo quickly went to her side, but it soon became apparent that there was nothing he could do for her – her clothes were all but drenched in blood from the wound. She looked at him with terrified eyes, pain contorting her young face. Bilbo reached out to clasp her hands in some measure of comfort, but it was too late – the light was dimming from her eyes, and she died before Bilbo could say a word.

There was another body not far from her – when he finally tore his eyes away from her, he saw a man face-up on the ground, a knife in one outstretched hand. It was Jeth – the boy had become a man in the time since Bilbo had seen him last, he features changed and sharpened, but not enough to stop Bilbo from recognising him.

‘Who would do this,’ murmured Luaithre at last, coming to stand behind Bilbo. She sounded as lost as Bilbo felt. ‘Who would do such a thing?’

‘It was wargs,’ Landroval said, ‘look at the bite marks. Wargs and-’

‘There!’ screamed Gwaihir suddenly, exploding into movement, flinging himself into flight.

‘Gwaihir!’ Luaithre called, but he was tearing away at such a speed, heading for the crest of the hill where Bilbo could see the hulking form of animal he had never seen, but could recognise at once. A warg stood atop the hill, looking down on them, and Gwaihir clearly had every attention of killing it, but he wasn’t going to do it alone.

‘Luaithre!’ Bilbo said, and in a moment she had lowered her head for him to climb on, spreading her wings to chase after Gwaihir, Landroval and Tuit following close behind. They flew through the air at their top speed, pushing themselves faster with every wing beat, powered by fury, and atop Luaithre Bilbo tightened his spear in one hand.

They did not catch up to Gwaihir. The warg had turned and fled, and Gwaihir had turned his flight into a dive. The warg was quick, its sprint over the land faster than anything Bilbo had ever seen, clearly heading for the relative safety of the nearby woods, but it was not fast enough to outrun an eagle with its prey in sight. Gwaihir bore down on it, opened his talons and sunk them deep into the warg.

But the warg had not been alone. In horror, Bilbo watched as another warg appeared out of the dark of the woods, this one with a rider atop it, a rider that was drawing back the arrow notched to its bow. Bilbo tried to cry out, to warn Gwaihir, but it was too late – the arrow was let loose, and thudded into Gwaihir’s chest.

Gwaihir tumbled to the ground in a flurry of wings and feathers, and cried out in pain. Bilbo felt as though the arrow had pierced his flesh, too – his heart stuttered in his ribcage, but there was no time to take stock – Gwaihir was downed, and vulnerable, and still more wargs were charging from the trees, and one of them was heading straight for Gwaihir. Bilbo didn’t even need to say anything – Luaithre knew exactly what to do. She dove, skimming low over the ground, but bypassed the charging warg – instead she flew over its head, to strike at another warg behind it. But Bilbo was in motion before that – running the length of Luaithre’s spine to leap off her back, high into the air, drawing his arm that held the spear back and then driving it deep into the warg’s neck.

The warg howled, and bucked and twisted, but Bilbo planted both feet on the creature’s flank, holding on gamely to the spear lodged in its neck. Gripping the spear in both hands, he pushed off with his feet, using the warg as a springboard, wrenching the spear free in a spray of black blood and sending Bilbo to the ground. The beast was in its death throes, but Bilbo had no time to watch it fall – he turned and sprinted the remaining distance to where Gwaihir was attempting to get up. All
around them was chaos – Landroval and Tuit had joined Luaithre in battle, and the air was rent with the sounds of their battle cries, the howling of wargs and the screech of orcs.

‘Stay still you-’ let it be known that Bilbo had picked up a fair few curse words in the language of the eagles, but Gwaihir still convulsed and twisted in pain and frustration.

‘Gwahir, stop!’ Bilbo shouted, ‘I need to get the arrow out, so stop moving!’ and at last Gwaihir relented, his chest heaving with each breath he took. Bilbo put both hands around the arrow – even this small thing causing Gwaihir to involuntarily flinch with pain – and with all his strength, hauled it from Gwaihir’s chest. The eagle all but screamed in pain, but his ordeal was not over yet, for Bilbo saw that the arrow top was stained not only in blood, but a thick, vile-looking substance that was now oozing from Gwaihir’s wound. Poison.

The sound of paws alerted Bilbo to an attacker, and he spun around to meet it head on, dodging the warg’s charge by flinging himself to the left just in time to avoid the snapping jaws, rolling to his feet, slashing out with his hunting knife to open up the warg’s haunches, and thrusting the arrow into the creature’s eye.

Bilbo was back at Gwaihir’s side as fast as his legs would allow, pushing aside the feathers around the arrow wound, fearful at Gwaihir’s rapidly quieting cries. If Bilbo wanted Gwaihir to have any chance of survival, he was going to have to draw the poison out. The sudden realisation was startling in its clarity, and with sure movements and not a shred of hesitation, Bilbo began to suck the poison from the wound.

Blood filled his mouth, not much different in taste from Bilbo’s own, but there was something else in there, too, so repulsive it almost caused Bilbo to retch. But he managed to spit out the blood on the grass, and returned to the wound to repeat the action. For the first few times Bilbo did this, there didn’t seem to be any affect, but by the tenth time, he was sure that he could taste more blood than poison. It was working.

But Luaithre and the others could not keep all their enemies at bay. A warg and rider charged at Bilbo, and with a snarl he took up his spear to meet it. The warg was travelling at such speed Bilbo barely managed to dodge it, scoring the point of the spear along the warg’s snout as he did so. The warg growled, more angry than hurt, and Bilbo had to meet its rider’s sword swing with his spear, his arms shuddering with the strength of the blow. He leapt back a few paces as the warg turned to him once more with lightning speed, drawing back on its hindquarters to launch itself at Bilbo with claws and teeth.

Bilbo bared his bloodied teeth, held the spear up, and did not move. He drove the spear home into the roof of the warg’s gaping mouth, let go of the spear, sidestepped the warg’s flailing head, drew the hunting knife from its sheath on his waist, and let it fly. The orc’s head was flung back from the force of the knife embedding itself into its neck. Warg and rider died with furious snarls.

He rushed back to Gwaihir’s sides and resumed his task. Two more mouthfuls, and Bilbo could taste nothing more than blood. He would have sagged in relief if his own blood was not singing with battle fury, but there were no more enemies to face – Luaithre, Tuit and Landroval had proved themselves in battle, and were a glorious sight to behold as they mercilessly rooted out the last of the wargs and orcs from the battlefield. One or two were lucky and escaped, but most fell prey to the eagles’ talons and beaks.

Bilbo recovered his spear from the body of the warg, along with his hunting knife. For half a second he wanted nothing more than to give chase to the wargs, even into the woods where the eagles could not follow, to kill every last one of them. Then Gwaihir gave a soft murmur, and whatever fierce thing had been awakened in Bilbo passed.
After an hour’s rest, Gwaihir managed to limp to his feet, and then fly, although he was clearly weakened and had to glide very slowly back to the Eyrie. The other eagles and Bilbo stuck close to him on the way home, so close their wingtips sometimes brushed against each other. Tuit had flown ahead, and the battle-weary eagles were met halfway by twelve eagles, lead by Deas, who escorted them the rest of the way home.

Bilbo could not tell you what happened next. He was overcome by exhaustion as soon as they landed, the adrenalin that had kept him going wearing off now the danger had passed. He merely remembered the sound of the eagles crying out as one, in fury, in worry and in sorrow, Gwaihir sent to rest and sleep off his wound in their nest. Bilbo came back to himself standing before the King, and though may say the eagles were stern, cold animals who felt little emotion, Bilbo knew better – Grumach’s whole countenance was one wrought of fear, of grief and of a steadily growing anger.

‘Bilbo,’ said the King. They were surrounded on all sides by what seemed like every eagle in the Eyrie, save Gwaihir, ‘we would call you Bilbo the Brave from this day on, had your mother not already taken the title! Instead we name you eagle-hearted, eagle-friend to the end of your days, and even beyond that. You have proved yourself in battle – all of you have – but not only that, you have saved my son. I can never thank you enough, but what I can do is right a wrong.’

Bilbo, swaying on his feet a little, blinked in confusion. ‘A wrong, sir?’ he said, ‘I cannot recall you ever doing anything wrong by me. You have been nothing but kind.’

‘No, Bilbo,’ Grumach disagreed, ‘we have. You have lived with us for six seasons now, have lived with us as any other eagle would. You have shared in our happiness, and our sorrow, and weathered many a hardship alongside us. But never, during all that time, have we told you our First Names.’

A murmur went up among the other eagles, a quiet sound of agreement. Bilbo watched, too stunned to say anything, as the King stepped forward, bowed his head, and said,

‘Bilbo Baggins, he of the eagle-heart, I give you my First Name. I am The-Light-That-Strikes-Through-The-Clouds.’

The word the King spoke for his First Name was abstract, and nearly untranslatable into Westron, but Bilbo knew the eagle’s language as well as he knew his own, and he knew the meaning of the name completely.

Deas stepped forward and said, ‘Bilbo, I am honoured to call you my friend. I give you my First Name. I am The-Song-Through-The-Grass.’

Bilbo barely had time to acknowledge this with a thank you before Luaithre, Tuit and Landroval were all stepping forwards.

‘I am The-Breeze-That-Stirs-The-River,’ said Luaithre.

‘I am The-Hush-Of-Falling-Leaves,’ said Landroval.

‘I am The-Dance-Of-The-First-Fall-Of-Snow,’ said Tuit.

It went on and on, until every eagle in the Eyrie had gifted Bilbo with their First Name, and Bilbo was almost overwhelmed by the gesture.

‘Eagles of Manwë!’ cried out the King, ‘I wish this gesture of family were taking place on a better night than this one, so troubled are we by this news of wargs with riders. I ask you know, cry out! Raise your voices, for we are now at war, and we will not rest until every orc and warg knows the sharp edge of our claws!’
As one, the eagles lifted their voices, and Bilbo called out the sky with them, his heart thudding in his chest. They were at war. Bilbo was at war. There was no turning back, now.

The eagles were true to their word, and although Bilbo would not immediately join them in battle – the poison, though he had ingested very little, confined him to the nest for three days – the next two years were filled with warfare. The wargs and riders tried their best to destroy other villages of Men in the Misty Mountains, but the eagles would not let them. When they flew into battle, Bilbo went with them, armed with spear and knife, riding on Luaithre or Gwaihir. The young eagles had shown that they were more than capable of taking part in the war, and though Bilbo suspected that the King regretted the decision sometimes, and would like nothing more than to hide them away until the war was over, he nevertheless let them join the other eagles in bringing down destruction on their enemies.

Bilbo became adept at quick, lightning-fast strikes, deadly in their effectiveness. He would jump from an eagle’s back, deal out damage, and be picked up again by another eagle. He was also useful for when the wargs tried to hide in the woods, using it as shelter for the eagles. Bilbo would be waiting for them, high up in the trees, and he used all his cunning and guile to kill as many as he could before he was spotted.

He gained many scars during this time, one of them particularly gruesome – a strange, white warg had managed to land a full strike against Bilbo’s side during one particularly gruelling battle. The eagles had feared the worst, and Bilbo had been at death’s door for many days before he had stubbornly recovered against all the odds, though he was left with three long white scars down his right side.

There were bright moments, too, when they were afforded some measure of respite, sometimes for a whole month as the wargs went back to whatever hole they had crawled from to lick their wounds. But they would always return, and in greater numbers, until there seemed no end to it.

Victory was hard-won. By the time Bilbo had become battle-weary, he and the eagles could finally say that they had driven the wargs and orcs out of their territory, and killed almost all of them. After one of the last battles of the war, which was more of a clean up of the remaining wargs still foolish enough not to turn tail and run, Bilbo found himself standing before the wide, still waters of a great lake, staring at his reflection.

There was blood all over him – most of it the dark shade that came from orcs and wargs, thank goodness. His hands were stained with it. His face was lean and sharp, and he was dressed in rough brown clothes with leather vambraces. A necklace with an eagle’s feather hung about his neck. He didn’t recognise himself. There was no sign to be found of the bright-eyed Hobbit that had arrived at the Eyrie all those years ago in the tired face that stared back at him. He was filled with a bone-deep exhaustion that he knew had been creeping up on him for many months now. This was not what his mother had wanted for him, and he knew his father would be horrified. Had he really gone so far? Was there anything left behind of the Hobbit he had been before, or had two years worth of battle driven all of that away? Suddenly, he longed for his books, for his armchair, to speak Westron again. But above all, he longed for the kind of peace and safety that could only be found in the Shire.

Luaithre drew near. ‘Bilbo?’ she said, ‘are you ready to go back, now?’

Bilbo was quiet for a moment, before he turned to the eagle he considered a sister and smiled sadly.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but not to the Eyrie. I think it’s time I go back to the Shire.’
Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: the Dwarves meet their Hobbit, and both parties think each other a little strange.

Thank you once again for all your responses to this story, in whatever form they might be. I never expected to get this response when I first started writing, so every comment, kudo and bookmark means a lot to me!
The Hobbits of the Shire had never been able to come to a unanimous agreement over what had happened the day Bilbo Baggins disappeared from the Shire. Some said that Bilbo had had debt problems, and that the eagles’ appearance and supposed kidnap had simply been a cover story. Others, quite unfairly, claimed that Hamfast Gamgee had been at his store of moonshine, despite the early hour, and had dreamed the whole thing up. And the more gruesome-minded of among them say that Bilbo had been gobbled by the eagles as a tasty snack.

And yet, it had been the only other witness to the event, Lobelia Sackville-Baggins, who would relate anything close to what really happened that day.

‘I saw it all,’ Lobelia would always say when people asked her what had happened, ‘and I am telling you now, that Bilbo went with those vicious animals of his own free-will. He is as mad as his mother, though I doubt he is still alive.’

But there was one thing most could agree on – whatever mess Bilbo Baggins had gotten himself into, he was almost certainly dead. So imagine their surprise when one late spring day five eagles came to land above Bag End.

In his garden down the road, Hamfast Gamgee dropped his gardening shears in shock.

Parting ways with the eagles was perhaps one of the hardest things Bilbo had ever done. When he had announced his intention to leave, there had been dismay, and great sadness among the eagles. It was particularly hard on the fledglings, though Gwaihir admitted he had known it was coming. Tuit had complained, loudly, until Landroval, who had shed his reticent ways in the eight years Bilbo had known him, had spoken up and told Tuit to stop making things more difficult.

He had left the Eyrie with every blessing the eagles could give to him. Deas would fly him back to the Shire, it was decided, but then the fledglings had insisted on accompanying him, too. No one had disagreed.

After two days worth of travel, during which Bilbo was convinced they were going the long way around on purpose, but kept his suspicions to himself, they landed in the fertile lands of the Shire. With a heavy heart, Bilbo said goodbye to the eagles, embracing each of them in turn, as tightly as he could manage, trying to commit every sensory experience to memory – their smell, the soft feel of his feathers against his cheek, the heaviness of their beaks as they hugged him back, and the way the sunlight backlit their figures to give them a noble bearing. The eagles did not linger – it was not their way. They took flight one after the other, soaring high into the sky. They did not look back.

Bag End was jarringly unchanged. Bilbo had transferred ownership of the smial to Hamfast Gamgee for the duration of his adventures – the letter he had given to Hamfast before rushing off with the eagles had stipulated that the Gamgees could use the smial as they saw fit until his return. It had also contained a clause which ensured that, if Bilbo did not return after ten years, he should be declared dead and Bag End given over wholly to Hamfast. Bilbo had ensured this with all the exactness and care with words his father had taught him, so that not even the Sackville-Bagginses could find a loophole in the letter, though Bilbo was sure they had tried.
But Bag End had not been used at all while Bilbo had been away. He had wandered the halls the first night of his return, brushing his fingertips over books and plates and trinkets, and marvelled at the lack of dust. Hamfast must have been in regularly to clean, Bilbo realised, and he made a mental note to reimburse the gardener who had gone above and beyond his duty. Word spread quickly of his return, as it always did with fresh scandal, and within an hour of his landing there were knocks at the door. Bilbo ignored all of them.

Those first weeks in the Shire were strange in ways Bilbo struggled to describe. He slept little – he had the softest, most welcoming bed money could buy, but he could not sleep on it. He had given up that first night and slept on the hardwood floor, but even this had left him restless, constantly reaching out during the night, searching for the brush of feathers against his hands.

His fellow Hobbits simply did not know what to make of the newly returned and very not-dead Bilbo Baggins. At first, they had demanded to see him, to know that the rumours were true. Then, all at once, they took to keeping their distance, even when Bilbo ventured out to the market, and the phrase ‘mad Bilbo Baggins’ reached his ears more than a few times. At first, Bilbo did not care. He revelled in the solitude afforded by being an outcast, save for the occasional evening spent drinking moonshine with Hamfast. It was the only thing Bilbo could really take much happiness in, for those first few weeks. He found he was seeing the Shire and even Bag End as though through a stranger’s eyes. Westeron felt wrong on his tongue, and sometimes he stumbled over words should have known, slipping into the eagle’s language without realising it. He felt no connection to anything, not even his father’s armchair. Bilbo had changed, but the Shire had not changed with him, and he wondered if it was possible to experience culture shock for the place that had raised you.

After two months, Bilbo shook himself out of the shock and stupor he had fallen into. He decided to wage an active campaign against the gossips of the Shire, to claim back, no matter how hard it would prove to be, the respectability that his father had taken such pride in. He put on respectable Hobbit clothes, made sure he never went out without a handkerchief, invited what seemed like every family in the Shire over to his house for tea, and never spoke a word to anyone of where he had been.

It was a lengthy process. Most accepted his invitation simply so they had new gossip to relate, but Bilbo parried every invasive question about his disappearance, and eventually his guests stopped asking. Eventually, Bilbo became eccentric rather than mad, though the latter was a title still used more frequently than Bilbo would have liked. Bilbo buried himself in books and Hobbit-ly pursuits. He took pride in his smial, feeling as though every item was another touchstone for his Hobbit side. With Hamfast’s help, he grew a garden that was the envy of the Shire, and if there was one thing Bilbo found he could take real pleasure in, it was the feel of the good earth between his fingers and under his nails.

But there was a tight knot that sat atop Bilbo’s chest, and it would not be eased no matter how many pipes of Old Toby Bilbo would smoke. There were times when taking a hold of great clumps of wet earth in his garden was not enough, and his hands would twitch and long for the familiar grain of wood of the spear he had left behind.

When Bilbo could finally claim to be respectable once more, he took up his hunting knife and vanished for a whole day into the lands around the Shire. With a silent tread he stalked prey through the woods, and returned to Bag End later that night with a crony of three rabbits over his shoulder. The next week he did it again, but slept outside on the soft floor of the woods. The knot in his chest would loosen a little every time he did this, and rabbit stew became a regular meal at Bag End.

And if Bilbo would find himself looking east on occasion, or searching the sky for familiar silhouettes - well. He never breathed a word of it to anyone.
There was a man coming up the lane, approaching Bag End with the steady gait of someone not in any great rush. No, Bilbo corrected as the stranger drew near. Not a man at all.

Gandalf the Grey stopped before Bilbo, leant on his staff, and smiled in Bilbo’s direction.

Bilbo paused, and laid aside his knife. The rabbit in his hands, half-skinned, was put on the bench beside him.

‘Good morning, Gandalf,’ Bilbo said with a smile, meeting the wizard’s gaze.

Gandalf’s eyebrows rose. ‘Bilbo Baggins, you remember who I am?’

‘Of course I do,’ said Bilbo. He might have forgotten Gandalf, so long had it been since the wizard visited the Shire, but the many of the eagles’ tales had included Gandalf. He saw no reason to tell Gandalf this, though. ‘I would not forget such a good friend of my mother’s, or the maker of such excellent fireworks!’

Gandalf huffed and shook his head, ‘well then, my dear Bilbo, I am glad I made such an impression on you, and I will get straight to the point.’ Gandalf leant in, as if imparting a great secret, and Bilbo found he couldn’t help but lean forward, too. ‘I am looking for someone to share in an adventure.’

Bilbo felt his heart still. The next part of the conversation passed in a blur, but Bilbo distinctly remembered saying ‘no’ very clearly, several times, before he all but slammed the door in Gandalf’s face, retreating into the safety of Bag End.

Bilbo’s right hand clenched, expecting a spear that was not there. If he knew Gandalf, he knew that this wasn’t the end of it, and he resolved to say no again when the wizard returned, but louder.

Bilbo was right. It wasn’t the end of it. That night he found his home, a home that he had only just become reacquainted with, invaded by Dwarves. When the first had arrived, broad-shouldered and blunt with his words, Bilbo had reacted with instinctive good manners, but had not taken his eyes off of the Dwarf. Dwalin had stepped forwards into Bag End, presumptive in his welcome, and if Bilbo had reacted with ingrained good manners before, now it took every scrap of self-restraint not to lash out at Dwalin’s invasion.

Dwalin had swept past him, unaware or uncaring of the violence Bilbo had almost meted out on him. Bilbo had taken a few moments to compose himself, horrified at the fact that he had come so close to injuring another person who had done nothing wrong save being a little rude. He was so shocked at himself that he let the next few in without complaint, even when one of them scraped his boots off on his mother’s glory box.

They were everywhere, now. Everywhere he went they were disrupting more of his carefully constructed peace, trampling over rugs, nosing their way through rooms where they didn’t belong. Gandalf wasn’t much help, when he arrived, and Bilbo felt himself becoming steadily more angry with every morsel of food eaten.

The final straw was seeing one of the younger Dwarves juggling his mother’s teapot collection. This Dwarf was young, dark haired and bright-eyed, and merely grinned when he spotted Bilbo.

‘Put those down, master Dwarf,’ Bilbo growled. The Dwarf stilled his movements, stopping juggling for a moment, but did not apologise.

‘Come, Master Boggins,’ said the Dwarf cheekily, ‘it’s only a bit of fun, see – I think I can juggle
Bilbo snapped. His hand flew to the small of his back, where he had hidden his knife after the first arrival at Bag End, drew it out and flung it lightning fast in the Dwarf’s direction.

The knife struck home in a wooden support beam an inch from the Dwarf’s right ear. The smile vanished from his face.

‘Put them back, or so help me I’ll-‘ Bilbo was distracted suddenly by the sight of another Dwarf making off with his prize tomatoes, and darted after them.

Kíli remained, frozen in place. Slowly, he turned to look at the knife stuck deep in the wood with wide eyes. The knife was so close his breath was misting the metal blade.

‘Kíli!’ said his brother with great cheer after Kíli had replaced the teapots and returned to the dinner table. ‘Come on,’ Fíli said, slinging his arm around Kíli’s shoulders, ‘have some of this cheese, it’s mouldy, but-‘

‘Fíli,’ hissed Kíli, having finally found his words, ‘I think the Hobbit just tried to kill me.’

Fíli barked out a laugh, ‘what!’ he said incredulously, ‘what are you talking about?’

‘I’m serious, Fíli,’ Kíli said insistently, ‘he threw this knife right at me, he almost took out my eye – over some teapots!’

‘You have had far too much to drink,’ Fíli laughed, ‘lay off the ale for a while, would you?’

‘No, really, I think he might be like a-a Hobbit assassin or something! Maybe this is why Gandalf wants us to hire him?’ but Fíli had clearly made up his mind, and merely laughed at Kíli’s theories about Hobbits who were secretly trained killers.

Bilbo thought the evening could not get any worse. But worst of all by far – the icing on the cake – was the final visitor to arrive at Bag End.

Thorin Oakenshield might be the leader of this rowdy Company, but Bilbo’s first impression of him was not a good one, by any means. Bilbo hardly ever felt small – even during his time with the eagles he had not felt as small as he did when Thorin looked down his straight nose at him.

‘Axe or sword?’ Thorin asked him, and Bilbo almost laughed in his face.

Neither, Bilbo wanted to snarl back at him, would you like to see exactly what I can do with a spear? As it was, Bilbo could feel his top lip curling back, bearing one incisor, but responded with a quip about conkers instead. He was shaking by the time Thorin and the others, now subdued in their leader’s presence, began explaining the whole madcap scheme. Bilbo could feel something stirring inside of him, something that he had hoped to lock away by surrounding himself with the half-familiar things in Bag End. But now the smial had been invaded, all his stability thrown into disarray, and Thorin Oakenshield’s challenging words had reawakened his fiercer side. The mention of a dragon and the possibility of death had merely given him an excuse to flee the room.

Gandalf came to sit with him, and gave him what could only be described as a disapproving, fatherly look, to ask when Bilbo had become so attached to trinkets.

Since they became the only tethers I have to being a Hobbit, Bilbo thought to himself, but he said nothing and wrapped his hands around his mug of tea.
‘Bilbo, I find myself a little confused,’ Gandalf admitted, ‘you have done this once before – disappeared from the Shire, run away to go on an adventure. Why is this so different?’

Bilbo snorted. ‘My last adventure didn’t exactly turn out as planned, Gandalf,’ he said. If Gandalf had no knowledge of what Bilbo had done during his time with the eagles, of the war Bilbo had waged, then Bilbo was not going to tell him.

‘Adventures rarely do,’ countered Gandalf, ‘that is what makes them adventures. Besides, don’t you want to see the mountains again? To see the eagles?’

Bilbo turned away, closing his eyes, ‘I can’t deny that I would like that, Gandalf, and that I long to see the mountains again. But it’s taken me so long to recover from my last adventure. I can’t do it again, Gandalf, I’m sorry, but I just can’t.’

With that, he retired to bed. He laid on his bed in the dark, staring up at the ceiling and listening to the sound of voices lifted up in a solemn song, a song that stirred the embers of the fierce fire that had been awoken that evening. Sleep did not come to him for many hours, until Bilbo finally gave up on the bed and slept on the floor.

Bilbo woke the next day slowly, which was very unusual for him. For a few moments, he didn’t remember anything of the night before, but then it all rushed back. He crept through Bag End on his tiptoes, until he was sure he was alone.

There was no sense of elation at being left in peace. There was only a numbness, a lack of any feeling until his eyes alighted on the contract, which had been carelessly discarded.

He stared at the empty line where his signature should be. His heartbeat was very loud in his ears. The mountains were calling to him, and a restlessness deep in his heart was making his skin itch. He felt exactly as he had before, all those years ago, in the scant moments before he had taken the plunge and had said yes to Deas. But this time his fear was not of the unknown, but fear of himself. Dare he do it again, knowing that he might once again become that instinctual animal that had thought nothing of taking another life?

But no, thought Bilbo with sudden certainty – he was an eagle-friend, hailed as eagle-hearted. He could control himself, he could do this, go wherever the path may lead. He was strong enough to weather whatever it may bring.

He went from standing stock still to a flurry of movement from one moment to the next. He packed a bag in a rush, though he took care to pick up his flint and tinder, shoved in clothes and anything else to hand he knew was going to be useful. Excitement was causing his heart to pound faster, and a silly grin to lit up his face.

Bilbo threw open the chest at the end of his bed and paused. There, at the bottom of the oak chest, were the clothes he had made while with the eagles, feathers still decorating the shoulders and back of the jacket. When he had first come back to the Shire, Bilbo had packed them carefully away. Although he had no real need of them, in a spur of the moment decision he grabbed these clothes, too, but he unpacked his backpack so he could hide them at the very bottom of the pack.

At last, Bilbo shouldered the backpack and slipped his knife through his belt, tutting at the deep notch the knife had left behind in the wood. Impatient to be gone at last, Bilbo forgot to lock his front door – he dashed down the lane at top speed, Hamfast Gamgee calling out to him as he sprinted past.
‘Where are you going, Mister Baggins?’ he yelled.

‘I’m going on an adventure!’ Bilbo shouted back as he leaped over the fence, ‘again!’

Chapter End Notes

Just to let you know, I am not intending on re-writing The Hobbit. The main focus from here on out will be on the changes/scenes I think will happen as a result of Bilbo's time with the eagles - the major events of the film/book may be mentioned when needed, but for the most part I am more concerned with writing 'original' material, if you see what I mean.

I had such a lovely response to the last chapter. Thank you all so much! I hoped you like this one, too.
How to Scare a Dwarf

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo had never really known how uncomfortable travelling could be when you didn’t have eagles to hand to quickly whisk you from one place to another. Sleeping on the hard ground was not something that would have bothered him all those years ago with the eagles, but after so long in the Shire Bilbo’s body was well and truly confused by what it was sleeping on. Bilbo’s bedroll had the misfortune of being neither his bed at Bag End, his floor at Bag End, or the eagles’ nest. Worst still, Bilbo found himself waking during the night, as he had not done in many years, expecting to be surrounded by the huge sleeping forms of slumbering eagles; instead, he would wake to find himself penned in on all side by noisily snoring Dwarves.

Worst still was the horse riding. Although his mount was undoubtedly a lovely animal that Bilbo quickly became fond of, it was not an eagle. Bilbo’s muscles were used to riding on an eagle’s back, not a horse’s, and made their unhappiness known. He would go to bed with aching thighs and a locked-up lower back, and rise the next day to being the process of getting back on his horse when he could barely raise his legs to walk.

At least the food was good.

As for the company – well, Bilbo was making progress on that front. When he had first joined them, the majority of the Dwarves had treated him with courtesy, but nothing more. There had been no real effort on their parts to make friends, so Bilbo had taken it upon himself to try and get to know them, at the very least. He was going to be travelling with them for a while, and he refused to be the odd one out for the entire journey. Some, like Bofur and Bombur, were easy to talk to - Bofur in particular seemed friendly and much more willing to talk than the others, as all Bilbo had to do one night was sit beside him and ask what he was whittling. Bofur’s sense of humour was a little inappropriate, as it had been in Bag End, but Bilbo found himself half-scandalised, half-laughing along to Bofur’s jokes all the same now he wasn’t annoyed over the Dwarves eating him out of house and home. Bofur’s brother was similarly easy-going, and Bilbo often helped him with the evening meal, talking to the Dwarf about spices and herbs and recipes, and trying to convince him of the merit of mushrooms.

Then there was Ori. Bilbo had had to make a special effort to talk to Ori, but it had been worth it in the end. The Company was a large one, and it had taken a little time for Bilbo to learn all of their names, and he had also observed them all interacting with each other, and thought that he now had a clearer understanding of who was related to whom. Ori in particular had stuck out during Bilbo’s study of the Dwarves - he seemed to be almost permanently in possession of a book in the same way the other Dwarves kept their weapons close. Another book-lover, then. Bilbo could definitely relate to that. The fact that Ori was fussed over and so closely watched by his older brothers was not, as it turned out, a deterrent for Bilbo’s attempts at friendship. Dori seemed to think Bilbo a very respectable gentle-hobbit, even going so far as to tell Bilbo this himself and compliment him on the wine selection he had helped himself to back at Bag End. Bilbo had to cover a laugh with a coughing fit.

It took a little patience on Bilbo’s part, but shy Ori eventually started to respond to Bilbo’s questions.

‘I’m the Company’s scribe, you know,’ Ori admitted, twirling his pen through his fingers, ‘but I’m really young for the role. I’m not sure why Thorin agreed to me coming along.’
‘I’m sure there was a reason,’ said Bilbo, though he couldn’t fathom anything about Thorin’s motivations. The Dwarf was a total mystery to him. ‘But is that usual, then? Having a scribe on a journey like this?’

‘It is! It’s traditional. It’s always been done. If we succeed...when we succeed, my account of the journey will be added to Erebor’s library for future generations. It’s a very prestigious role.’

‘So this is what I see you doing every evening? Writing?’

‘And drawing,’ Ori admitted.

‘Really? Can I see?’

Ori looked very reluctant, so Bilbo schooled his face into the most pleasant, unthreatening expression he could manage. Ori seemed to be sizing him up, trying to discern if Bilbo would be the type to criticise his work. But after a moment’s uneasiness, he relented.

‘Well, alright,’ he said, ‘you can see one I did yesterday, but it’s not very good! I had to stop before I could finish it because it started raining.’

Ori passed him a loose page that had been tucked into the middle of his book. It was a picture of Bofur, beautifully detailed. Some of the shading was unfinished, but Bilbo could clearly see the likeness, and Ori had perfectly captured Bofur’s warm eyes and mischievous, dimpled smile.

‘It’s remarkable, there’s no other word for it,’ Bilbo said, ‘I’ve never had much skill in drawing, but I admire those who do.’

‘You really think so, Mister Baggins?’ Ori said, searching Bilbo’s face for any signs of teasing, ‘I have to record each of the Company, but I want them to be the best drawings I can possibly manage.’

‘I’m not lying, Master Ori. It looks exactly like Bofur, it’s-‘ and Bilbo felt so relaxed and at ease at that moment that he accidentally trilled in his effort to try and express how talented Ori was. Horrified that he had slipped into another language without even realising it, the tops of Bilbo’s ears began to burn in embarrassment, but Ori was looking at him with nothing but curiosity with a dash of confusion.

‘Was that another language?’ he asked.

‘Er, yes,’ Bilbo admitted, a little flustered, ‘it is, it’s...the language of my mother’s family,’ he said, and immediately winced. He could not believe he was repeating the same lie his mother had uttered to him, so many years ago.

But it worked – Ori’s confusion cleared. ‘Oh! How interesting! I thought all Hobbits spoke Westron?’

‘Well, they do,’ Bilbo agreed, ‘but my mother taught me a second language when I was very young. It’s a...secret language, I suppose, that only Hobbits on...her side of the family know.’

Ori nodded, ‘it’s like Khuzdûl, then. You don’t have to explain any further, Mister Baggins – I understand. We Dwarves are very secretive about our language. I’m sure you are with yours.’

Bilbo sighed in relief. ‘Thank you, Master Ori. But please, just call me Bilbo.’

‘I will if you call me Ori,’ said the Dwarf with a hesitant smile, which Bilbo returned. Thankfully,
their conversation then turned away from languages and towards other subjects. Bilbo learnt that some of the tales he had been told as a young fauntling were Dwarvish in origin, and he and Ori spent the rest of the evening chatting away amicably about the differences in their respective versions of the myths.

Thorin Oakenshield knew every single member of his Company. Perhaps he did not know all of them personally – Bofur, Bifur and Bombur were relatively unknown to him, for example – but he knew what each of them was capable of. Thorin could quite easily reel off every skill of every member of the company, could name the trade they practised, what subjects they were knowledgeable in, what weapons they carried, their fighting styles, and their weaknesses. He knew Dori was the strongest physically in the Company, that Balin had the best eyesight, that Bofur’s knowledge of mines and ores was unparalleled, and that Fíli was weak on his left side and needed to work on his footwork. Thorin could fill a whole book with what he knew of the Company, if he was so inclined, with a chapter dedicated to each member. It was his duty as leader, and Thorin took duty very seriously. If he were to lead these Dwarves, then he needed to know their every strength and every weakness, and whose knowledge he could call on if needed.

If Thorin were to write such a book, then one chapter would be much smaller than the others. It would probably amount to no more than a page in length, perhaps even just a few lines. It would read: ‘Bilbo Baggins is a Hobbit and the Company’s Burglar, though he has shown no skills that would indicate he deserves that title. Skills: caring far too much about silly things like handkerchiefs. Weaknesses: almost anything you could think of.’

Such a summary may seem a little harsh, but Thorin had taken a good look at Bag End during their short stay there. He had seen evidence of a decidedly ordinary life in the cosy home the Dwarves had invaded for an evening - Bag End had been full of knickknacks and unnecessary things, frivolous items that served no purpose. Bilbo was clearly the kind of Hobbit that had never wanted for money, and had probably never known hunger, or hardship, or war. The Shire had been a place of plenty – Bilbo’s larder was evidence enough for this, but the land Thorin had seen as he attempted to find Bilbo’s smial had seemed fertile, the Hobbits rich in a way Dwarves had never been. They had probably never had to choose between eating for the first time in two days to give them energy for a hard day’s worth of labour or giving their share of rations to their children so they wouldn’t be so hungry that night.

Thorin’s summation of the Hobbit’s usefulness was only confirmed when Bilbo decided to join them on their quest. The Hobbit had first complained about riding his horse and then had had the cheek to demand he be allowed to go back for a handkerchief, of all things. Bilbo seemed to have no skill save annoying Thorin. He was a terrible horse rider, too, and didn’t seem to be able to grasp that you had to steer the animal, not let it go wandering off wherever it pleased. On the night Balin had recounted the tale of Azanulbizar to the Company, Bilbo had flinched at the sound of orc cries, despite being in no danger – hardly the sign of a great warrior. He was also particular about the strangest things – when Nori had triumphantly brought back a fine set of birds after a good evening’s hunting, Bilbo had refused to partake in the evening’s meal, despite how hungry Thorin knew the Hobbit had to be. The Hobbit’s stomach had rumbled unhappily all night, but he had looked queasy every time Bofur had kindly tried to encourage him to take just one bite.

And yet, despite Thorin’s set-in-stone beliefs about Bilbo’s skills, as the Company began to make its way into the mountains the Hobbit continued to contradict Thorin’s certainties, almost as if he were doing it on purpose. Firstly, there was the matter of the knife Bilbo carried with him at all times. Thorin had never actually glimpsed a time when Bilbo was without it. He even slept with it in one hand, perhaps copying every other member of the Company, as no Dwarf among them would go to
sleep without a weapon within easy reach. The knife, when Thorin had managed to get a good look at it, was a long hunting knife, utterly ordinary in its make. It probably had a sharp edge, but the handle and small hilt spoke of subpar craftsmanship, made by someone who was concentrating more on the blade than the weapon as a whole. But this itself was strange – why would a rich Hobbit like Bilbo, obviously intent on keeping himself safe on the quest (despite the lack of any skill in weapons handling) choose to purchase something that was so clearly second-rate, even to untrained eyes?

Thorin’s understanding of the Hobbit took another blow when the Company was afforded a rare chance to bathe. They had been riding next to a river for many days, but the current had simply been too strong and the waters too deep to use it for anything else other than re-filling their water skins. At long last, the river took a few twisting turns and then widened out to become shallow enough for them to wash in it in safety. The Company all but sagged in relief when he called for them to set up camp for the night next to the river – there were still a few hours left of daylight, and he could have kept them going, but despite most of the Company being experienced travellers he knew not to pass up a chance at refreshing body and mind. He would increase their pace tomorrow to make up for it, he decided, and they would be well-rested enough by then to justify it.

Kíli and Fíli all but jumped from their mounts as soon as the words left Thorin’s mouth, tearing down to the river and shedding clothes as they went, sending them scattering left and right. The rest of the Dwarves followed at a more dignified pace, though Bofur took great delight in throwing his boots over his shoulder, uncaring as to where they fell – one hit an indignant Dori. Thorin noted that neither Gandalf nor Bilbo were joining them – Gandalf’s reluctance was understandable, as Thorin had no idea if wizards even had to bathe, but Bilbo was steadfastly looking away from the undressing Dwarves, focusing instead on unpacking his bedroll.

‘Are you not joining us, Mister Baggins?’ Thorin asked.

The Hobbit was refusing to look at him now, too, though Thorin had not removed any clothing.

‘No, I think I’ll stay and start to set up camp if it’s all the same to you,’ Bilbo mumbled into his pack, ‘I might bathe later, when the river is less...crowded.’

Suit yourself, Thorin thought. Perhaps the sight of so much flesh had made him so flustered. Hobbit did seem to be such fussy creatures, he mused as he joined his brethren at the river, laying out his clothes on the rocks to wash. They seemed to be offended by the strangest things.

Bilbo chose to slip away and wash while dinner was being cooked. Most of the Company were sitting around dressed only in their trousers, waiting for the rest of their gear to dry out, but Bilbo had not returned by the time the evening meal was ready to be served. Irritated that the Hobbit’s sense of propriety had made him miss dinner, Thorin took it upon himself to go and fetch Bilbo himself.

The murmur of low humming reached his ears as he came to the river, and in the half-light Thorin could see Bilbo hip-deep in the water. Bilbo spun around at the first sounds of Thorin’s approach and hurriedly attempted to hide himself behind the rocks bordering the water, but not before Thorin had caught sight of his chest and back. He stared up at Thorin in surprise and more than a little embarrassment.

‘Dinner is ready,’ Thorin told him, and tried to surreptitiously catch another glimpse of Bilbo’s skin as he spoke, to confirm what he had seen moments before, ‘if you don’t want to sleep hungry tonight I suggest you stop dallying and hurry back to camp before Bombur eats it all.’

Thorin turned back to camp without another word, and as he walked back he mulled over what he had seen in the split second before Bilbo had managed to hide himself. Thorin’s eyes, like any Dwarf’s eyes, were blessed with excellent vision in dim conditions, sharp enough to see that Bilbo’s
upper body and midriff had been nothing like he had expected from a soft Hobbit. There had been little of the fat that the Hobbits had seemed to favour around their middle, and what little there was would most likely fall away over the course of their journey. No, Bilbo had appeared to be surprisingly lean for one who sat about all day. But it was not this that had taken Thorin by surprise, but rather the numerous scars that covered Bilbo’s skin. They had all been of varying size and thickness, from nicks that littered his upper arms to a long jagged scar that curved over the top of Bilbo’s left shoulder, and most shocking of all were the three long lines running in parallel to each other, glimpsed as Bilbo twisted away, spanning the length of Bilbo’s right side.

The other scars could have been explained away – evidence of a clumsy existence, perhaps, or Bilbo’s ineptitude with farming tools. But the three scars down Bilbo’s side had clearly been made by an animal, and had most likely been deep enough to threaten Bilbo’s life. Thorin’s life that had ensured he was well acquainted with all sorts of scars, and he knew when a scar indicated a wound that had been deep enough to kill.

None of it made any sense. With every step Thorin took back to camp, he found himself becoming more and more frustrated. Everything about Bilbo, from the knife to the scars, were conflicting with his view of the Hobbit as a soft and gentle-hearted creature unused to hardship, who would most likely turn tail and run at the first sign of danger. But what else could Bilbo possibly be? How could Bilbo be anything other than the fussy Hobbit that Bag End had indicated?

By the time Thorin had taken his first bite of food – not really tasting the stew – he had rationalised it all. The hunting knife had to be an heirloom, something Bilbo had sentimentally held on to despite its obviously inferior make. The scars were the result of a wild animal attack – the Shire could not be completely without predators, and Bilbo might have foolishly wandered too far one day out of the safety of his homeland’s green fields.

Yes, thought Thorin as he bedded down for the night, this was exactly what had happened. He steadfastly ignored the little voice in his head that pointed out that the claw marks running down Bilbo’s side were far too large, too far apart to have been dealt out by an ordinary wild wolf.

By the time Kili had almost convinced himself that what he had seen in Bag End had been a flight of drunken fancy, the Company had begun to leave behind the gentle, rolling hills of Bree, and were now travelling over some increasingly harsh ground. He had kept a close eye on Bilbo, but had found nothing that indicated the Hobbit was nothing more than a fussy bookworm, which would explain why he had become fast friends with Ori. The knife that had supposedly nearly taken Kili’s eye out was nearly always with Bilbo, close to hand, and Kili tried not to flinch each time Bilbo’s hand drifted anywhere near the handle. He was being ridiculous, he told himself. Fili was right, Kili had had too much ale at Bag End, and he had merely gotten too swept up in the excitement.

Still, though, Kili would admit that Bilbo was a little odd. Or perhaps he was entirely ordinary for a Hobbit – Kili didn’t know, Bilbo was the first Hobbit Kili had met and he had no basis for comparison. Kili did wonder, though, if all Hobbits liked the rain as much as Bilbo did. On a particularly rainy day, when the majority of the Company was miserable after hours of being soaked through and rain water running down the backs of their necks, Kili caught sight of Bilbo. The Hobbit was wandering off the trail again, inattentive as to where his horse was taking him, but Kili was not paying any attention to Bilbo’s poor horsemanship. Instead, he was wondering why Bilbo did not look miserable, or irritated, but rather at peace. How anyone – Dwarf or Hobbit – could look so serene in the middle of such a deluge was beyond Kili. Bilbo wasn’t even hunkered down on his pony, hiding under a cloak or hood – his face was instead turned upwards, into the rain. He remained like this, eyes closed, until Dori complained about the downpour and Bilbo turned to ask Gandalf
about the rest of his kind.

Hobbits, Kíli decided, were very strange creatures.

But Thorin and Kíli were not the only ones who had noticed odd things about their Burglar. Dwalin was sitting on duty one night early on in their journey when the most extraordinary thing happened.

He was in a strange state of relaxed watchfulness that comes from years of performing the duty. His axes were close to hand, and although a casual viewer would see a Dwarf not really paying attention to his surroundings, in reality Dwalin was alert to every sound and every sight his sharp senses could pick up. It was a quiet night, and Dwalin could hear nothing but the hooting of owls nearby and the sounds of the Company asleep behind him.

This was why, when a small voice said, ‘good evening Mister Dwalin,’ from about two feet away, Dwalin almost jumped out of his skin.

His hands were on his axes in a moment, his body automatically shifting around to counter the threat, only for him to freeze in his attack as he was confronted by nothing more dangerous than a Hobbit. A Hobbit who had instinctively reacted in much the same way as Dwalin had. Bilbo had shifted his feet into a loose battle stance that would allow him to quickly dodge any attack, balanced on the balls of his feet, knees bent, and his hunting knife in his hands.

Almost simultaneously, they both realised how ridiculous they must look, and the tension drained from their poses. Dwalin lowered his axes, staring at the Hobbit. Bilbo sheathed his knife, looking more than a little sheepish.

‘I’m sorry for startling you,’ he told Dwalin simply, completely unaware of the impossible act he had just committed, ‘I didn’t mean to sneak up on you.’

Dwalin stared some more. He was unable to process how, exactly, Bilbo had snuck up on him. It just didn’t happen. No one snuck up on Dwalin, not even Dis, and she had the quietest tread of any Dwarf Dwalin had ever known. But, apparently with little effort on Bilbo’s part, the Hobbit had managed to do just that.

‘Well,’ Dwalin said gruffly, at a loss for words, ‘I don’t think you’ll be doing it again.’

Bilbo let out an awkward laugh, ‘no, I don’t suppose I will,’ he said.

‘Was there something you wanted, Mister Baggins?’ Dwalin said after Bilbo continued to stand there, shuffling his feet.

‘Yes, I was just...well, I was wondering if I could sit with you, while you were on duty.’

Dwalin gave him a look. Bilbo hastened to continue, though he did so with a rueful smile, ‘well, our leader thinks I am not capable of standing guard over the Company. Probably thinks I’ll fall asleep, or something.’

Dwalin did not dispute this. Thorin had made his opinions on the Hobbit clear to Dwalin only the previous night. ‘Weak’ had been the favoured word during that conversation, quickly followed by ‘useless’.

‘But,’ Bilbo went on, ‘I’d still like to help. If that means sitting with someone else, well. I don’t
Dwalin considered this. He could find no fault in Bilbo’s simple request – no, he even found himself grudgingly impressed. To give up even an hour of precious sleep on a journey as tiring as theirs was not something to be laughed at. Then there was the fact that Bilbo had attempted to defend himself against Dwalin armed with nothing more than a knife. Bilbo had clearly been afraid when Dwalin had turned on him, but he had held his ground. Dwalin could admire that.

‘Aye, you can join me, then, if you like,’ Dwalin agreed at last, ‘just don’t fall asleep on me.’

Bilbo laughed, properly this time, all his awkwardness gone. ‘I promise I won’t, Mister Dwalin,’ he assured. ‘Thank you.’

They did not talk for rest of the watch, but neither minded. A surprisingly companionable silence fell over the two of them, until Gloin came to relieve them.

On the whole, Bilbo was relieved that those first few weeks of the journey passed by in relative peace. There had been no sign of whatever violent thing had been spurred back to life inside Bilbo back at Bag End, and for this Bilbo was glad. He hoped that it stayed that way. He had made sure to bring things with him that reminded of him of the Shire – the loss of his handkerchief had been a bit of a blow, as no self-respecting Hobbit would go out without one, and he had left behind a particularly nice one that his mother had made for him. But, for the most part, Bilbo was satisfied that the violence he had almost unleashed on Dwalin had not made a reappearance.

Some habits, though, Bilbo thought safe enough to indulge in.

The Company was steadily making their way through some very steep ravines, and often their camp would be set up near the edge of a great drop, as it was now. There was always an odd hour after dinner but before bed, when there was nothing more to do around camp for the night, and most used the time to look over their gear, work on whittling or other projects, or to see to their weapons. It was strangely quiet that night – usually the Dwarves could be counted on for song, or the kind of comfortable chatter that comes from a large group of people being comprised of old friends and acquaintances. But the day’s ride had been particularly hard, and conversation, when it came, was subdued.

Perfect, then, for Bilbo. He slipped away from camp and came to sit as far away as he could from the glow of the fire, dangling his legs over the edge of the cliff. The drop below was not inconsiderate, but Bilbo paid it no mind. Instead, he closed his eyes and stilled his body, going lax for the first time all day, a calm sweeping over him, loosening the tension in his muscles gained from riding.

The valley below provided the perfect acoustics – Bilbo listened with a trained ear to the sounds of the wind as it rushed and whistled its way through over the slopes and sharp drops. He named each and every breeze, picking out even the slightest differences between the winds. He had always loved the eagle’s language and their sky-lore, and it was a skill he did not want to lose. He had often tested himself like this in the Shire, out in Eastfarthing Woods when Bag End became a little too confining.

Of course, Kíli chose that exact moment to walk past. He stopped, looked at Bilbo sat on the cliff, and said, ‘what are you doing, Master Baggins?’

Bilbo sighed, shoulders slumping. ‘Listening to the wind, Master Dwarf,’ he replied without turning around.
‘To the wind?’ said Kíli and then, apparently before he could help himself, ‘well, what is it saying?’ He put his hand to his mouth to muffle his voice and said in hushed tones, ‘WooooooBilbo Baggins smells and Kíli the Dwarf is the best looking out of the whole Companywooooo!’ Kíli folded his arms over his chest and nodded, ‘yes, it does impart secrets, doesn’t it? Or maybe it just tells the truth.’

Bilbo was fighting back a smile, ‘no,’ he said with an air of great patience, ‘the wind has a song all of its own, Master Dwarf, if you have the patience to listen for it, which I sincerely doubt you do.’

It was exactly the wrong thing to say if he wanted to be left alone. Immediately, a look of determination lit up his face, as Kíli took Bilbo’s words as a challenge and came to sit next to Bilbo on the cliff.

‘I have plenty of patience, Master Baggins. I just choose not to show it, most of the time. So, how do you do this?’ he asked, ‘is there some sort of technique?’

Bilbo tried to not chuckle at his eagerness. How a nearly full-grown Dwarf, probably still armed to the teeth even though it was almost time for bed, could look so much like an overgrown puppy was beyond Bilbo.

‘Well, let’s start you off with the easiest way, first, shall we? Put your hands to your ears like this. It’ll help,’ Bilbo said, cupping his hands around his ears in demonstration, ‘can you hear it now?’

A look of intense concentration passed over Kíli’s face. After a few moments, he slumped, ‘no,’ he admitted with a scowl, ‘I can’t hear anything interesting at all, just Bofur’s terrible whistling.’

Bilbo nudged him a little, ‘it’ll take longer than that, you know. Try and concentrate a bit more.’

Kíli huffed, but closed his eyes and tried again. This time, he did not complain after the first ten seconds, but instead his young face relaxed into some semblance of calm. He let out a little, ‘oh’ sound of understanding.

His brother chose that exact moment to bring both his hands down onto Kíli’s shoulders and say, ‘what are you doing, little brother?’

His concentration gone, Kíli turned to give Fíli a look, ‘well, I was using Bilbo’s secret technique to listen to the wind singing,’ Kíli said, ‘but now you’ve ruined it.’

‘Singing?’ Fíli huffed a laugh.

‘That’s not quite what we were-‘ Bilbo started, only to stop when Fíli fixed him with a serious look.

‘Can you teach me?’ Fíli asked without a shred of teasing.

When Thorin and Dwalin came back to the camp after fetching the last of the firewood, the three backs of Bilbo, Kíli and Fíli gave them cause to stop what they were doing and stare.

Thorin raised his eyebrows at the scene before him. His two nephews and the Company’s Hobbit were sat on the edge of the cliff - completely still - Kíli and Fíli with their hands cupped around their ears. Even as Thorin watched, not a single one of the three made a sound or even fidgeted a little. He shared a look with an equally bemused Dwalin. In all honesty, neither of them had ever seen Kíli and Fíli this still outside of sleep. Thorin’s first immediate reaction was to call out for them, to tell them they needed to stop whatever it was they were doing and get their rest, as it was late and they had watch duty later on. But for some strange reason he instead found himself leaving them to it and turning away to his own bedroll. If they were falling asleep on their horses tomorrow then they
would have no one to blame but themselves, Thorin decided.

But, unfortunately for Bilbo, not all of his habits had such a pleasant result. A few days after Bilbo had taught Kíli and Fíli how to listen for and distinguish all the different types of wind, he could not resist a bit of tree-climbing when the Company passed through a thick patch of forest. Bilbo had spent a few minutes simply taking in the air and admiring the view from the tree’s uppermost branches before he started to climb down. His help would be needed for dinner, soon, and Bilbo didn’t want to shirk one of the few duties Thorin trusted him with.

He climbed down a few branches, until he wasn’t too far from the ground. He was still at a fair height, but Bilbo had jumped from higher before. Without a thought, Bilbo slipped from the branch, landing in a crouch on the ground.

A startled noise reached his ears. Kíli, who had been passing under the tree with his arms arm full of firewood, was lying sprawled on the forest floor, gaping at Bilbo.

Bilbo sighed, regretful. Clearly, he was making a habit of scaring Dwarfs. He would have to be more careful in future. ‘I’m sorry, Kíli-‘ he started to apologise, but Kíli was already turning to storm back to camp. He wouldn’t look at Bilbo for the rest of the evening.

It was made worse, when, the next morning, Kíli had had to rouse Bilbo from slumber after the Dwarf’s dawn watch. Kíli and Fíli always took their watches together, but this had been the first time they had taken the dawn watch. Fíli had gone to tend to the horses, and told Kíli to wake the Company, ignoring Kíli’s protestations that he didn’t want to wake the Company, and why did Fíli always have to take the best jobs?

Bilbo had not reacted well to being suddenly jerked awake. He came back to full consciousness with his knife to Kíli’s throat. Horrified, he quickly scrambled off of Kíli and threw aside the knife. This hadn’t happened before – no one had ever bothered to try and wake Bilbo, and he usually woke before anyone thought to. And why did it have to be Kíli of all people? Bilbo still felt bad about throwing his knife at Kíli in Bag End, and he thought he’d been making progress with the young dwarf.

Great, Bilbo thought as Kíli stared at him. Well done, Bilbo Baggins. You’re really making friends now, aren’t you?

Chapter End Notes

So I had some unexpected free time yesterday and finished this earlier than I expected.

Shout-out to all the amazing commenters and to everyone who’s bookmarked or kudo’d this. You're all great.
Aside from scaring Kíli and surprising Dwalin, the journey so far had been relatively uneventful. Bilbo was thankful for this, but he also felt a little prickle of forewarning up his neck. In his experience, trouble was almost guaranteed to follow. It was bad enough that they had chosen to set up camp near the burnt-out shell of a farmhouse – the sight of it had sent a shudder of dread through Bilbo, and an echo of old guilt. It looked far too much like the houses he had seen before, during the war, when they hadn’t been able to get to a village in time to defend it from orcs and wargs.

But trouble came instead when Bilbo was sent on an entirely ordinary task.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Bilbo, two bowls of stew in hand, looking between Kíli and Fíli.

Fíli glanced at his brother, then Bilbo, then back to the ponies. He looked distinctly uncomfortable.

‘We’ve lost two ponies,’ he paused, and shot a look at Kíli as though expecting his brother to say something, but Kíli continued to stare forwards.

‘I’m not quite sure how, though,’ Fíli continued.

‘How can you-’ started Bilbo, incredulous, but was cut off when Kíli suddenly spoke up.

‘There’s a light!’ He said, and darted towards it. Bilbo put aside the bowls and followed on behind Fíli, the three of them coming to a stop when the trees started to thin out. They crouched low, hiding in the undergrowth, and were astonished by the sight of something huge and hulking pushing its way through the forest with little care for the plants, a struggling pony under each arm.

‘What...was that a troll?’ gasped Bilbo.

‘It was,’ said Fíli grimly. Kíli still hadn’t said a word, and Bilbo caught Fíli giving his brother an irritated glare.

‘Right, Mister Baggins! Time for some burgling!’ Fíli clapped his hands together and gave Bilbo a shove forward, towards the trolls. ‘We’re right behind you, aren’t we, Kíli?’ He gave his brother a jab in the side with his elbow.

Kíli, apparently roused by this, grinned at Bilbo weakly, ‘yes, Mister Baggins! Off you go,’ and joined Fíli in pushing a resisting Bilbo forward.

‘What? No, this is not-’

‘If you get into trouble, just shout for us,’ Fíli said, cutting Bilbo off.

‘I am not-’

‘We’ll be right here,’ Kíli put in, and they both turned and would have disappeared into the forest, had Bilbo not reacted so fast. He grabbed them by the scruff of their necks - it took quite some amount of effort to stop them, strong as they were, but he just about managed it.

‘Now wait here, you two,’ he hissed, ‘this is a terrible plan, you do realise that, don’t you?’
‘What’s wrong with it?’ said Fíli, indignant.

Bilbo hummed and pretended to give this some thought before he snapped, ‘pretty much all of it, you twit! Suppose I get the ponies loose, what then? I’ll be stuck in the middle of a clearing with three trolls, and I think they’re going to notice their dinner stampeding off!’

‘Oh. Well, I suppose I hadn’t thought that far ahead,’ Fíli conceded grudgingly.

‘Of course you hadn’t. Right, here’s what we do. I sneak in, you’ –here he pointed to Fíli – ‘need to make a distraction, I cut the ponies loose and I try and slip away in all the commotion.’ He turned to Kíli and said, ‘and you go back to camp and rouse the others. There’s no way this is going as planned and we may need back up,’ Bilbo finished with a sigh.

‘Alright,’ nodded Kíli, ‘let’s go with Mister Baggins’ plan.’

‘Good, see you soon,’ Bilbo said and slipped away into the dark.

‘Hold on,’ frowned Fíli after Bilbo had disappeared, ‘how am I going to make a distraction?’

The trolls, when Bilbo crept close enough to free the ponies, stank enough to cause Bilbo’s stomach to roil with every breath he took, but he kept himself going with the thought that he would be out of there soon. When Bilbo did not want to be noticed, there were few things in the world that could spot him, and three rather stupid trolls were not among them. All Bilbo had to do was wait for Fíli’s distraction, whatever that was, and then he could make quick work of the ropes that kept the ponies enclosed.

Bilbo waited. And waited. His right knee was starting to cramp from staying so still for so long. Bilbo resolutely ignored it. Where was that blasted Dwarf? He had tried to filter out the troll’s conversation up until now, but the longer Bilbo sat hidden, the more he found himself listening to what they were saying.

All of a sudden, a voice interrupted the surprisingly inane conversation over ingredients, and shouted, ‘I think that stew needs a bit more meat!’

‘oo said that?’ squawked the one called William.

‘I did!’ And Fíli leapt from the tree line.

Bilbo could curse. This was Fíli’s idea of a distraction? Brave, maybe, but terribly stupid. Bilbo knew he had to make the best of it, because as silly as Fíli was being, the distraction was working. Quickly, Bilbo started hacking at the rope.

‘Lookat this, Bert! More food fer the pot!’

‘Yes,’ Fíli said at the top of his voice, ‘I am very tasty!’

The ponies were free and needed no prompting from Bilbo to move – as soon as the gate was open, they bolted towards freedom.

‘And ‘e just wandered in!’ said Bert the cook.

‘Ooh I do like a bit o’ Dwarf,’ William punctuated this by licking his warty lips with a long tongue.
‘Well don’t jus’ sit there! Grab ‘im!’

Fíli was standing his ground, even in the face of the two huge beasts making a grab for him. Bilbo started forward, knife in hand, heart gripped by fear, ready to come to Fíli’s aid, but there was no need – with a fierce battle cry, the rest of the Company charged from the trees, and the odds shifted in their favour.

The Dwarves were truly something to behold in battle, and Bilbo took a moment to marvel at the deadly dance playing out before their eyes – every single Dwarf seemed to know where the other was at any given moment, using each other as springboards to attack, some defending blind spots while others swung out at the trolls’ joints and weakest points. Thorin and Dwalin in particular drew Bilbo’s gaze – whirlwinds of flashing blades both, perfectly in tune with each other.

But not all of them were so well defended. The trolls were fighting back, dealing out devastating blows, and one of them was drawing closer to Fíli.

Fíli, who was distracted – just for moment – by Kíli stumbling backwards after narrowly dodging a huge fist. Bilbo didn’t even hesitated – he sprinted forwards, far faster than the troll’s heavy swing, and he reached Fíli just in time to shove the Dwarf out of harm’s way.

The troll’s hand slammed, open handed, into Bilbo’s side. It sent him sprawling, stars flashing over his vision. The pain was immediate, like being hit in the head with a sledgehammer, and Bilbo blacked out for a few moments.

When he came to, he was upside down and dangling directly above the stew pot. If Bilbo had thought the trolls had smelt then it was nothing compared to whatever was cooking in the pot.

Blearily, and with his ears ringing and his head pounding, Bilbo tried to focus on what was in front of him. A figure came into focus against a hazy background - Thorin was staring up at him with a downright murderous expression, firelight flickering over his features.

A thought trickled through Bilbo’s foggy mind. No, Bilbo thought, don’t put down your weapons for me. This was accompanied by a surge of energy; the knife was still in his hand – he had instinctively held on to it, and with a great effort Bilbo plunged it into the troll’s finger, and then promptly passed out.

How on earth Bilbo managed to talk his way out of the highly absurd situation that followed with a concussion would forever be a mystery to him. He’d had enough semblance of sense left in him to attempt to stall for time, but not enough to stop from saying ‘you should....skin them first!’

And the part about the parasites. Bilbo was sure there were some in the Company who would be grumbling about that for a while, even if Bilbo had saved their life. Averting his eyes from where the remaining Dwarves were dressing themselves, Bilbo retrieved his knife from where it had been flung, half-hidden on the forest floor. With the blade safely back in its sheath, He followed Gandalf to the troll’s hoard, and leant on shaky legs against the entrance to try to stop the world from spinning.

He was still grimacing when Gandalf presented him with a dusty sword.

‘Here, Bilbo,’ Gandalf said, ‘I think it's time you armed yourself.’
Bilbo squinted at him. ‘I don’t need a sword, Gandalf. I doubt I’d know how to use one. Besides, I have my knife.’

‘Your knife is not enough. Take the sword, though I hope you never have cause to use it,’ said Gandalf, giving him a keen look from under bushy brows, ‘but better to have it, just in case.’

Reluctantly, and mostly just to make Gandalf leave him in peace, Bilbo took the offered sword.

‘And remember, Bilbo,’ Gandalf placed a hand on his shoulder, gaze utterly serious, as if trying to impress upon Bilbo the importance of his next words, ‘true courage is about not knowing when to take a life, but when to spare one.’

Bilbo flinched. Gandalf’s words had struck far too close to the truth, though the Wizard likely did not know it. Perhaps that made him a coward, then, for during his time with eagles he had not cared for any of the lives he had taken. He had destroyed them without guilt or remorse, and had been glad for it.

The sword, under the dust and filth, was clearly no ordinary sword - even Bilbo could see that. He put his hand around the hilt and drew it free from the sheath, and the shining blade that was revealed was a wonder to behold. Still, no matter how fine the weapon, it was not his spear, and far too short for the kind of fighting Bilbo was used to.

‘It glows blue when orcs and goblins are near,’ Gandalf told him, and those were the last words they spoke to each other for quite some time, for then there came a great commotion from the trees, and all hell broke loose.

One of the most important things for a leader to understand was to know when you are outnumbered, and knowing when retreat was the best – and only – option left open to you. It is not a cowardly thing, Thrór had once said to Thorin, as many will tell you it is. Instead, it is the mark of a great leader, to place the lives of your fellow Dwarves above some senseless desire for glory at any cost.

This did not mean Thorin had to like it.

The Company and one Wizard ran, full-tilt – over the moors, ducking behind a rocky overhang for some momentary shelter. Thorin quickly yanked Ori back when he continued running into open ground, the young Dwarf not realising the Company had halted. They were too exposed here on all sides, and Thorin could scarcely believe they were putting their faith in one crazed Wizard and his sled of rabbits.

The sound of snarling and claws scraping on limestone reached his ears. Thorin looked deliberately over at Kíli, whose bow was already in one hand. Kíli nodded, acknowledging the unsaid command, his whole body tensing as he slipped an arrow from his quiver. Deep, low growls, almost on top of them now, sent a shudder through Thorin, though he did not show it, but there was something primal about being hunted by wargs that tugged at a deep-seated fear in his mind.

Kíli’s arrow struck true, nevertheless it was not enough to slay both warg and rider – both were dispatched quickly, but not before they gave their position away. Glancing up from the dead warg and orc, Thorin happened to catch sight of Bilbo’s expression before they broke cover again. To his surprise, there was no fear to be found in the Halfling’s face, only vicious satisfaction. Thorin had no time to ponder the strangeness of this reaction – they were being surrounded on all sides, and
Gandalf vanished into thin air from one second to the next.

Thorin had only a few moments to feel vindicated over his suspicions that Gandalf would abandon them, because Gandalf quickly made his presence known again. They had an escape route after all – Thorin still took offense at being called a fool by the old Wizard – but now Kíli was bravely – but stupidly – holding his ground.

‘Kíli!’ Thorin roared at him, using his nephew’s name as a command. Fíli hovered behind him, ready to dart forward if he was needed. Thorin’s heart was pounding far too fast inside his chest, and at last Kíli let off another arrow and turned to retreat, yet even as he ran the wargs were gaining on him. He wasn’t going to make it. Thorin clutched his new blade tight and readied himself to defend his foolish nephew.

And then the most extraordinary thing happened. Two wargs, in full charge and far too close to Kíli for comfort, suddenly stopped from one moment to the next. They awkwardly ground to a halt – one almost overbalanced in its attempt to stop its headlong charge. Thorin watched in amazement as they took a few great drags of air in through their slitted nostrils and then, contrary to their fearsome riders’ wishes, they turned and fled.

There was no time to contemplate their good fortune. Kíli was safe, rushing past Thorin and tumbling down the hole, quickly followed by his brother. Thorin turned to follow, and all but tripped over Bilbo, who had been standing behind him, the Hobbit’s short sword held in far too lose a grip in front of him.

Thorin growled at him, ‘move, Halfling! Down into the tunnel with you!’ and he all but shoved Bilbo down into the dark, into safety, following the burglar’s descent with not a moment to spare.

Bilbo could not understand why the Dwarves were so offended by even being in Rivendell. The beauty of the valley and the pervading sense of peace aside, the Elves had likely just saved their lives. Surely, that counted for something? But the Dwarves had responded to the hospitality offered by Lord Elrond with a gruffness that veered into downright rude. As a Hobbit, Bilbo was offended on behalf of Lord Elrond. You just didn’t turn down the offer of food and shelter, no matter how mean the offer was, and Lord Elrond’s offer was nothing of the sort.

Bilbo was ushered, along with the other Dwarves, into a wing in what seemed like Lord Elrond’s own house. They were given a room each, and when Bilbo glanced in at them as he passed he saw that these were not the kind of shabby guest rooms where the owner had attempted to hide all of their worst furniture, but instead every single one was a lovely, spacious room full of light, and each had a beautifully made bed covered in fine fabrics, with matching desk and chair.

Óin appeared at Bilbo’s elbow, ‘I think you’d better come with me, laddie,’ he said, ‘you’ve some injuries that need seeing too.

‘Oh, there’s no need,’ Bilbo assured, ‘I’m perfectly fine.’ He promptly yelped as Óin poked at his bruised side.

‘That’s what I thought. Come along, now,’ said Óin in a voice that brokered no arguments. Bilbo found he had little energy with which to argue the point, and his side did ache.

‘Shirt off, please,’ Óin instructed as soon as they were in the room.
‘I’d rather leave it on, if it’s all the same to you,’ said Bilbo quickly. The look Óin sent his way told Bilbo exactly what the Dwarf thought of that, but he allowed Bilbo to sit and merely hike up his shirt on his injured side rather than remove it entirely. To Bilbo’s dismay, his skin had become a mottled blue-black, covering the entirety of his flank. Óin un-slung his pack from his shoulder, drawing out a pot of ointment. Bilbo cringed at the thought of someone seeing his scars, but Óin thankfully did not call them to attention.

‘I’ll need to check for broken ribs,’ Óin told him, and Bilbo nodded. He was uncomfortable allowing someone so close, especially when Bilbo was relatively unable to defend himself. He knew such tension was unnecessary – Óin was a member of the Company, after all, but Bilbo couldn’t help the instinctual reaction. Fortunately, Óin’s touch was impersonal and utterly professional, which helped Bilbo to relax a little.

‘Your ribs are not even bruised. You were lucky,’ said Óin, and began to apply the cooling ointment.

After a few minutes, Óin declared him finished, ‘but stay where you are, Mister Baggins. I will make you a poultice for your head wound.’

Óin began putting together ingredients from his pack into a bowl, asking Bilbo questions as he did so. Had Bilbo experienced dizziness since the initial blow? Was he having trouble walking? And on and on.

Half-way through, Glóin came in, muttering something about needing to ‘stay close,’ and ‘not go wandering off’ around these ‘tree-loving bastards’.

Bilbo raised his eyebrows, sorely tempted to remind Glóin who, exactly, had taken them in at great expense. But then Glóin sat down heavily on the chair and took out a locket from inside his tunic.

Glóin caught Bilbo’s curious glance. The anger drained from his face, and he smiled. ‘Ah, Mister Baggins,’ he said, ‘would you like to see my lovely wife and child?’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Bilbo politely. Beside him, Bilbo caught Óin very deliberately putting aside his ear horn.

Amused, Bilbo quickly discovered why Óin wanted no part of the conversation. Glóin could certainly wax lyrical about his wife and child. But Bilbo was a Hobbit, and he was used to listening to others ramble on, and well-practised at pretending to be an attentive listener. He knew exactly when to make encouraging noises and when to look impressed while tuning out the entire conversation.

At last, he was spared by the call for dinner. Glóin left the room in far better spirits than which he had entered, clapping his hand down on Bilbo’s uninjured shoulder before he left.

‘Thank you for listening to my brother,’ said Óin when Glóin was out of earshot, ‘he rarely gets a chance to talk about Gimli and his Beloved like that, and I know he misses them both dearly.’

‘It was no trouble,’ Bilbo said.

‘Still, you have my thanks all the same. Place this against your head wound,’ said Óin, passing him the finished poultice, ‘and try and keep it pressed there for most of the evening. You should make a full recovery with a little rest.’

‘Thank you, Master Óin.’ The poultice was wonderfully cooling as soon as Bilbo pressed it to his head. ‘Say,’ he went on as a sudden thought struck him, ‘is this your trade, then? Healing? I must confess I didn’t know.’
‘It is my trade, though I have two and am also a banker,’ said Óin as he started to put away his tools.

‘I have heard tell that the Elves are great healers,’ Bilbo began carefully, ‘will you discuss your trade with them while we’re in Rivendell?’

Óin gave him a look which was mostly irritated, but Bilbo could detect some sadness there, too.

‘Not a chance, lad. There’s nothing an Elf,’ and he all but spat the word, ‘could teach a Dwarf.’

He left Bilbo alone in the room to puzzle the story hidden behind his words.

Dinner was a pleasant affair – Balin insulting Bilbo’s new sword aside – full of beautiful music and delicious food. Óin’s poultice had worked wonders, and by the time they retired back to the rooms the throbbing pain from his head wound had all but abated. None of the Dwarves seemed inclined to take any of the rooms, instead stubbornly sitting outside on a large balcony. Bilbo would certainly be taking full advantage of his room in the hope that the luxurious looking beds might provide him with a good night’s sleep. For now, though, Bilbo was content to sit with the Dwarves until he could no longer stave off the call of sleep.

A pair of boots suddenly filled his vision. Bilbo looked up to find Fíli standing before him with his arms crossed.

‘Right, Mister Baggins, come with me, if you please,’ Fíli said, and without so much as a by your leave grabbed Bilbo’s shoulder – luckily the uninjured one – dragging him out of the room. Bilbo, completely thrown by the Dwarf’s behaviour, let himself be towed along, until Fíli lead them to a small, secluded chamber.

Kíli was sat on a bench, looking thoroughly miserable. Fíli firmly pushed Bilbo down to sit beside Kíli.

Fíli huffed, ‘I would like to make it known that the two of you are ridiculous.’

‘Hey, now-‘ Bilbo began to protest, indignant.

‘No, you are,’ Fíli said firmly, ‘Mister Baggins, Kíli had been terrified of you ever since we met you.’

‘You have?’ said Bilbo, incredulous. Kíli was refusing to look at him and was instead looking at his boots.

‘So, to sort this all out, I’d like you to answer a few questions, please,’ continued Fíli. Baffled, Bilbo could only nod.

‘Thank you.’ Fíli squared his shoulders. ‘Mister Baggins, are you or are you not a Hobbit assassin?’

Bilbo stared at him. When he failed to respond, Fíli prompted,

‘Well, are you?’

He was actually being serious, Bilbo thought in the privacy of his own mind. This wasn’t a prank. He gaped at Fíli for a moment more before managing to get out, ‘Why on earth would you think that?’
Fíli gave him a look. Bilbo recognised it almost immediately – it was the same look he had often caught Thorin giving him – part frustrated glare, part utter exasperation, as if Bilbo existed just to make their life difficult.

‘No,’ Bilbo denied. He couldn’t believe what he was about to say. ‘I am not a Hobbit assassin.’

Fíli nodded. ‘Good! Next question – are you trying to kill my brother?’

‘What-no! No, of course not! That’s utterly absurd-‘

A satisfied smile was making itself known on Fíli’s face. ‘There you are, Kíli. You can stop avoiding Mister Baggins now.’

Bilbo turned to Kíli, ‘you’ve been avoiding me? Because you thought I wanted to kill you?’

Kíli gave them both a mulish look and said, ‘this is stupid, of course he’s going to deny being an assassin! And you can hardly blame me for thinking it, he’s tried to kill me three times, now!’

Had tried to kill-? Oh no. At last, it all made sense. Bilbo supposed that, if you were Kíli, it really did seem like Bilbo had been trying to kill him.

‘But that would make me the worst assassin in the world! I’ve failed every time!’ Bilbo put his head in his hands. ‘I can’t believe I’m having this conversation.’

‘I never said you were a good assassin,’ Kíli shot back, ‘did those teapots really mean so much to you? Is this some sort of vendetta?’

‘I do not have a vendetta, and besides, I could make a good assassin thank you ve-‘

‘Is it a great insult in the Shire, juggling your host’s teapots?’

‘Well maybe it is! And you got mud-‘

Their argument was halted when they both realised that Fíli was laughing at them.

‘Oh shut up Fíli,’ Kíli said half-heartedly, ‘you’re not the one who’s had to put up with multiple murder attempts.’

Bilbo puffed up at that, indignant, but Fíli managed to gasp, ‘but it’s just so ridiculous! Hobbit assassins!’ and he was off again, almost bent double now in laughter.

Bilbo felt the beginnings of a smile curling the corners of his mouth. Beside him, Kíli began to laugh, and Bilbo couldn’t help but follow suit. Well, now that Fíli mentioned it, the whole thing was a touch funny.

Soon all three of them were wheezing, gasping for air in their giggling fit. Even Kíli joined in, holding his sides until the laughter abated and he could breathe again.

Bilbo chuckled and wiped a few tears from his eyes. ‘Mister Kíli,’ he said, still huffing from laughter even as he spoke, ‘I sincerely apologise for making you think I was trying to kill you.’ He held out his hand for Kíli to shake.

Kíli grinned, ‘apology accepted, if you accept mine for accusing you of being a Hobbit assassin.’ Bilbo nodded, and shook his hand.

‘You are both idiots,’ Fíli informed them from where he had ended up slumped on the floor by Kíli’s
feet. Kíli gave him a kick to the ribs. Fíli barely seemed to feel it.

‘But I have my own apology to make, Mister Baggins,’ Fíli said, looking at Bilbo.

‘Whatever for?’ Bilbo blinked.

‘I haven’t yet thanked you for saving me, when we were fighting the trolls. Although you really shouldn’t have. It was a bit stupid of you.’

‘I should’ve just let you be hit? If this is the way Dwarves say thanks, remind me not to do it again,’ Bilbo said, wryly.

‘No, I do thank you for it, but you should have let me take the hit. I saw you with Óin earlier – let me guess, you’re covered in bruises? Nothing broken, I hope?’

Bilbo shook his head, ‘no, just some bruising.’

‘Dwarfs are made of stronger stuff than Hobbits,’ Kíli piped up. ‘Some say we were made from the rock itself. The hit wouldn’t have harmed Fíli as much as it did you. Might’ve knocked some sense into him,’ he added, and now it was his turn to be kicked.

‘It’s never helped you,’ Fíli said to Kíli, ‘and you were dropped on your head as a baby.’

‘I’ll remember to push you into the way of any attacks in future then,’ Bilbo said before the brother’s bickering could escalate.

‘See that you do,’ Filli gave him a small grin.

‘But, going back to you trying to kill me,’ said Kíli, ‘how do you know how to throw knives?’

Curse the curiosity of younglings. Bilbo scrambled for an explanation.

‘Yes,’ Fíli was now looking at Bilbo, too, ‘Kíli said you throw knives almost as well as I do.’

‘Um,’ said Bilbo. He had no idea what to say when being looked at by two young, expectant faces. He didn’t want to lie again – he had felt bad enough lying to Ori.

‘I’m afraid I can’t say,’ Bilbo said, though he knew this would not satisfy either of them. ‘It’s a very long story. I’ll tell you, one day,’ he added quickly as similar expressions of discontent passed over both their faces. ‘I promise. Just...not right now.’

‘But, do you have other skills?’ Kíli said insistently, ‘Dwarves don’t generally hide things they’re good at, Mister Baggins. We tend to boast, you see. Do Hobbits hide their talents?’

‘No, no,’ Bilbo hastened to correct, ‘nothing of the sort. But I’m afraid that, aside from throwing my knife and climbing trees, I’m not really that good at anything else. As your Uncle is continually reminding me.’

Bilbo had meant for that last part to be said in jest, with a dash of self-depreciating humour. Instead, he just sounded a little sad.

The brothers exchanged a look.

‘You mustn’t take our Uncles’ words to heart, Mister Baggins,’ said Fíli.

‘Yes, he’s often harsh. And tough. He’s a bit like old leather, really.’
‘What we’re saying is – he sometimes takes his time warming up to people.’

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. ‘In my case, I think I may have to wait until the Remaking of the world for your Uncle to warm up to me, let alone say something nice.’

He was whining now, but he could not stop himself. Thorin’s obvious displeasure at having Bilbo as the Company’s burglar was hardly something he could ignore, and he suddenly realised that it had been wearing him down a little.

Kíli threw a companionable arm around Bilbo’s shoulder.

‘He can be kind, you know.’

Bilbo gave him a dubious look.

‘When the occasion calls for it,’ said Kíli.

‘I saw him being kind, once,’ said Fíli.

‘Liar! You must be confusing him with someone else!’

‘No, I did. It was ten, no, twenty years ago, now, on midwinter’s eve...’

‘Alright, alright,’ Bilbo said with a laugh. It was impossible to be down around these boys.

Fíli levelled him with a more serious look. ‘But without jesting, Mister Baggins, I assure you Thorin is one of the kindest Dwarves we have ever known.’

Beside him, Kíli had quietened, too.

‘I believe you,’ Bilbo said just to assure them, still smiling.

Fíli was unappeased by Bilbo’s words. ‘No, truly,’ he insisted.

‘I can still remember the excuses he would make up as to why he didn’t have to eat,’ said Kíli quietly, and his brother picked up the thread of the narrative.

‘I remember that. It was a hard winter, that year. He’d come home from a day in the forge and make up the most ridiculous excuses for not eating dinner, and I mean truly ridiculous - he was never very good at lying to family. The excuses used to drive mum mad. There would always be more for us, those nights.’

‘And he would always help other families in need of help, no matter who they were. Even if he had no obligation to help them,’ Kíli added.

Bilbo, suitably chastened, watched as both Kíli and Fíli’s gazes went a little distant. ‘Oh,’ said Bilbo, ‘I hadn’t realised...was it that bad, after you...after the dwarves left Erebor?’

Fíli shrugged. ‘I have no idea, Mister Baggins. Neither me nor Kíli were born in Erebor, and I think we were protected from most of the hardships during the years the Dwarves wandered, before we came to settle in the Blue Mountains. But still, no matter how hard our parents or Thorin worked to make sure we didn’t know how desperate those times were, we knew something was wrong all the same.’

Bilbo said nothing, absorbing Fíli and Kíli’s words. He could not reconcile his image of Thorin as the proud, forceful leader of their Company with the Uncle Fíli and Kíli were describing.
‘I’m sorry,’ Bilbo said helplessly. It seemed completely underwhelming – his apology in the face of the years of suffering the Dwarves must have experienced, but he felt he had to try all the same.

Kíli smiled, ‘thank you Mister Bilbo. But it’s all in the past, now. Soon, we’ll have a new home, one grander than anything we could ever dream of!’ He flung out his arms to punctuate this.

‘But first we have to get there,’ Fíli pointed out, but this did not dampen Kíli’s optimism. Privately, Bilbo couldn’t help but agree with Fíli. It was one thing to be optimistic, but there was the small matter of a dragon between them and their goal. He would have pointed it out, but he had another question that was waiting to be asked.

‘Are your parents both back in the Blue Mountains, then?’

‘Mum is,’ confirmed Fíli. ‘She...wasn’t very happy with us going on the Quest. Or Thorin agreeing to let us come.’ He gave a shudder, as if remembering something terrible.

‘And she couldn’t come with us, which made matters worse,’ Kíli agreed.

‘Are Dwarf women not allowed to go on adventures?’ Bilbo asked, knowing exactly what his mother’s reaction would be to being told she was not allowed to go on a Quest.

Kíli looked confused at this for a moment before he clicked his fingers and said, ‘of course, you wouldn’t know Mister Baggins! We have far less Dwarf women to Dwarf men, you see, so women are highly treasured, and children are rarer still. A child is the most precious thing in Dwarven society.’

Bilbo hadn’t known this, but he soaked it up all the same.

‘Men are rather more disposable than women,’ Fíli said dryly, ‘so you see why adventuring is the domain of male Dwarves.’

‘Come now, you’re not disposable,’ Bilbo was startled by how easily Fíli had said such a thing, as if he really was of little consequence. Fíli and Kíli merely ignored his protest.

‘Not that we’ve left mum undefended,’ Kíli said, on a roll, now, ‘Dwarf women are taught from birth how to fight, just like the men. They are supposed to be the last line of defence for the children.’

Fíli hummed in thought. ‘Yes, I’ve never understood Men,’ he said. ‘They keep their women at home but none of them are allowed to take up arms! It’s ridiculous. Highly impractical.’

Perhaps Belladonna would have liked Dwarven society after all, thought Bilbo.

‘We’re barely of age,’ said Kíli, ‘but we wanted to come because Thorin needs our help.’

‘But we know we’re young—’

‘—hence all the shouting,’ Kíli finished.

‘I’m sure he appreciates it,’ Bilbo said, and inwardly he couldn’t help but admire these two brave young Dwarves, although what he had said rang a little false. He had seen no evidence of Thorin treating Kíli and Fíli like nephews – he had always barked orders out to them as if they were any other member of the Company. He had even been curt with them, on occasion. If Balin hadn’t informed Bilbo that Thorin was Kíli and Fíli’s Uncle, then Bilbo would have never guessed.

‘I’m sure he does, too,’ Fíli smiled at Bilbo, and for a moment he looked his age, not the confident
youth Bilbo was used to. ‘But to bed with us all. Kíli needs his beauty sleep.’

‘I do not,’ Kíli said immediately, but he moved to get up all the same, ‘if anyone needs some beauty sleep – and desperately, I might add – it’s you, Fíli. Have you seen your hair lately? It’s a disgrace to Dwarf-kind.’

‘Oh, and this coming from the Dwarf whose hair looks like a bird’s nest,’ Fíli countered.

All three of them retired to their rest, Kíli and Fíli bickering all the way. Bilbo couldn’t help but smile at the brother’s banter – they barely paused to say goodnight to him – and it was a smile that lasted until he reached his room.

On a balcony not far from where Bilbo was readying for bed, another, entirely different conversation was taking place.

‘I never thought I’d see this,’ said Dwalin, coming to sit beside Thorin, ‘Dwarves of Erebor, accepting the hospitality of Elves.’

Dwalin might have said that they were hiding behind their mother’s skirts, were he a Man. But the analogy didn’t fit for Dwarves - Dwarf women tended to be armed to the teeth at all times, and so hiding behind your mother was likely the safest place to be and a smart move besides.

Thorin grunted his agreement and let out a fine curl of smoke from between his lips.

‘Strange times,’ he said off-handedly, though such a blithe phrase did not even begin to cover the discomfort he felt at being in Rivendell.

They lapsed into an easy silence. Thorin knew Dwalin had something on his mind, and knew his friend would speak when he was good and ready. After a good long while, Dwalin proved Thorin right when he turned to Thorin and said,

‘I think you’ve got the burglar all wrong.’

Well, Thorin had not expected to Dwalin to come out with that. Thorin gave him a side-long look.

‘You hafta admit, you have been a touch harsh with the Halfling.’

Thorin resisted the childish urge to say ‘have not’, and let Dwalin speak his piece.

‘I know you think he’s weak,’ and Thorin couldn’t help but snort at that, which Dwalin ignored, ‘and I did, too, at the start. But look at what he’s done, Thorin. He snuck into a camp full of trolls armed with nothing more than that tiny knife he carries. He stood his ground against the wargs – but more impressive than that, he stood his ground against me.’

Thorin took one last drag of his pipe and tapped out the ash on the bench, uncaring of the mess he made. Dwalin had quietened after his surprisingly passionate outburst.

‘You seem to have grown fond of the Halfling,’ Thorin observed, ‘should I expect to see a courting braid and bead in the burglar’s hair soon? Your tastes always did run towards the small and feisty.’

‘Oh shove it, your Royal Lowness,’ said Dwalin gruffly, pushing his shoulder into Thorin’s. Dwalin would have never said such a thing in front of the Company, but now, with the Company asleep,
Dwalin could be Thorin’s friend and say what he liked.

‘You know it’s not like that,’ Dwalin said.

‘If you don’t have a courting bead with you, I could lend you one of my own,’ offered Thorin, ‘I could lend you two, if you like. I’m sure it’s not the kind of thing the Hobbit would carry around, and you’ll need something pretty to show off your new suitor. What about a blue one, to compliment the silver of your beard?’

Dwalin’s next shove would have sent a lesser Dwarf sprawling. As it was, Thorin merely gave him an amused glance.

‘Be serious, you—’ and Dwalin slipped into his own language for a moment, because sometimes Westeron wasn’t good enough to insult an old friend.

‘I am being serious,’ said Thorin, losing his air of teasing, ‘I see nothing to endear me to Mister Baggins.’

‘Then you’re a fool,’ Dwalin said. Thorin was truly tired of being called that so many times in one day. ‘You’re not even trying to look past what’s right in front of you.’

‘Are you sure you do not wish to court the burglar?’ Thorin asked, seriously this time. He had not seen Dwalin this animated in defending another in a very long time.

‘No,’ Dwalin ground out, becoming impatient, now, ‘all I’m saying is that you’re gonna look like an arse when you finally realise you’ve been overlooking the Hobbit’s strength.’

‘I’m sure I will,’ Thorin said, voice as dry as dust.

Dwalin glared, fed up with his friend’s stubbornness. ‘You’ll see, Thorin. The Hobbit has a vein of mithril running right through him,’ he told Thorin, using an old Dwarven phrase. He then ruined it by adding, ‘balls o’ steel, too.’

Dwalin took his leave, slapping Thorin’s shoulder in lieu of a good night. He left Thorin sitting on the bench to mull over what he had said.

If Bilbo knew he was being talked about, there would be no space to contemplate it in his mind. He had gone to bed exhausted, the last two day’s worth of madness finally catching up on him. But his brain simply would not let him sleep, racing a mile a minute with all he had seen and learned. He had been distracted enough with meeting the Elves, with Rivendell and with Kíli and Fíli, but now, with nothing else to hold his attention, he began to recall the gut reaction he had had when the wargs had attacked them.

No matter how much Bilbo tried to twist and turn away from the thought, he kept coming back to the echo of what he had felt when he had first heard those warg cries. There had been fear, of course – no sane Hobbit went up against such creatures without feeling fear – but there had also been a hungry fury, a desire to kill, to take his new sword and slash through flesh and muscle and bone, to watch in satisfaction as dark blood stained the ground.

Bilbo shivered, and curled up into a tighter ball on the bed. One hand had found its hand to the necklace around his neck, to wrap around Luaithre’s feather for some measure of comfort.
'We were made to kill evil, Bilbo,' Gwaihir had said once, when he and Bilbo were recovering from their first battle in the nest, feeling thoroughly sorry for themselves. 'It was the reason we were called into being. Is it really such a bad thing that you felt the urge to destroy such repulsive creatures?'

'But you’re an eagle,' Bilbo said, shivering under his blanket. 'You’re supposed to feel that way. I’m a Hobbit. We’re not supposed to kill – I shouldn’t want to kill. Not only that, but I shouldn’t want to kill an enemy that was fleeing!'

Gwaihir fixed him with a sharp look. 'Those wargs, the ones that managed to escape – do you really think they will suddenly renounce their ways? That they will do no more harm to the Free Folk of this world?'

'Well, no-' Bilbo conceded reluctantly.

'You are doing yourself a disservice,' Gwaihir said, 'and proving your stupidity in the process. My father once told me that battle reveals our true selves. If Hobbits are not supposed to feel this way, then what does that make you?'

Gwaihir had gone on to declare Bilbo a Hobbit-Eagle, half-joking, half-serious. But such an easy assertion gave Bilbo no comfort in the present day. He fervently wished he had some of the certainty the eagles had always seemed to possess. There had been no second guessing for them. He, in turn, had always felt so certain when he was with them – Gwaihir’s assurances had done much to soothe his fears that night. But years later, curled up in Rivendell and surrounded by Dwarves, Bilbo pushed his fingers through the fine strands of Luaithre’s feather, and worried.

Sleep, when it came to him, was far from peaceful.

Chapter End Notes

There was suppose to be more (!!) in this chapter, but I had to cut it in half. But I know exactly what’s going to happen next chapter, so hopefully it won’t take too long to write.

With regards to the whole Your Highness/Your Lowness thing, I subscribe to Terry Pratchett’s reasoning that everything would be opposite with the Dwarves. So for Dwarves, dark is better than light, Low is better than high, and so on. If you love Dwarves, I’d really recommend Pratchett’s books, especially ‘Thud!’.

I cannot express how lovely it is to see this story being kudo’d and bookmarked and commented on. If I could invite you all over for cake and tea/coffee/something a bit stronger to say thanks I would.
Three Conversations in Rivendell

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry for the lateness of this chapter!

I think the next chapter might be the one that a lot of readers have been looking forward to. I’m only sorry it’s not coming sooner, but this chapter really needed to be included. This will be the last day in Rivendell.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Somehow, Gandalf had managed to persuade Thorin to stay another night in Rivendell. How he had accomplished this was a mystery to Bilbo, but he was thankful for the extra day of rest all the same. The Dwarves seemed content to stay in their allocated wing, but Bilbo thought this a ridiculous inclination. He simply could not fathom how the Dwarves could have time to spare in a place like Rivendell and not want to go exploring. One day Bilbo would find out precisely why Elves and Dwarves were so at odds, but for now he had a whole day of exploring ahead of him, and the prospect of stumbling across Rivendell’s library, wherever it may be.

Bilbo spent most of the morning wandering through sunlit halls, each beautifully decorated with intricate, flowing architecture and wall murals. Often the house would open up to colonnaded vistas, quiet garden courtyards or spectacular views of the river, and Bilbo would have no choice but to pause and take in the view for a while. He was thoroughly lost, but he was so enthralled by what he saw that he didn’t much mind. If this really was Elrond’s house then it was more like a manor than any house Bilbo had known, so large and endless did it seem. It was also slightly eerie – Bilbo had yet to see an Elf on his travels that was not a guard, and he wondered if they were all hard at work elsewhere. By lunchtime, he knew it was time to ask someone for directions, but he didn’t want to bother any of the stern-looking guards.

From one moment to the next, Bilbo found himself in a large hall with a wondrous wall painting. As Bilbo drew closer he realised he was looking at the depiction of Isildur at the moment of his triumph over Sauron, which would make the broken sword behind him...

‘The shards of Narsil,’ said a soft voice from behind him. Bilbo let out a startled yelp and spun around, hand going to his sword automatically.

Lord Elrond was standing a few paces away, a light smile hovering around the edges of his mouth. Bilbo relaxed and slipped his hand away from his sword, but his heart was racing. He hadn’t even heard a whisper of Lord Elrond’s approach, and Bilbo wondered how long the Elf had been standing there without him even noticing.

‘Good morning, Bilbo Baggins,’ said Elrond in his steady voice.

‘Good morning, my Lord Elrond,’ Bilbo replied politely, wondering if he should bow or not.

‘You seem to have wandered far from your Company,’ Elrond went on, saving Bilbo from his internal dilemma over niceties.

‘Yes, I’m sorry, it’s my first time in Rivendell, you see,’ Bilbo hastened to explain, ‘and I wanted to
see the library and just...ended up here. I’m sorry if I’m intruding.’

‘Not at all. You are welcome to wander wherever you please within these walls, but if it is the library you are looking for, it’s in the other direction.’

‘Ah,’ said Bilbo. He could feel the tips of his ears turning red.

‘But I would be happy to escort you, if you like.’

‘Oh, no! I wouldn’t want to be a bother, I’m sure you have better things to be doing!’

‘It’s no trouble,’ Elrond assured, ‘I would not be a very good host if I let my guests get lost not once but twice. Please, follow me. The library is a particular point of pride for me, and I welcome any chance to boast about it.’

‘Well, then, if it really is no trouble. Thank you,’ Bilbo said, and hurried to keep up with Elrond’s long strides. To Bilbo’s dismay, it seemed he had not been far off his goal – he might have even walked past it once before. The sight of the library, though, was enough to sweep any embarrassment from Bilbo’s mind.

‘I take it, then, you are fond of books,’ Elrond said behind him, amusement lacing his tone. Bilbo barely heard him – he was staring in wonder at the large circular hall that had opened up in front of him, light falling from the huge glass skylight above, illuminating the two stories worth of bookcases. Here and there Bilbo could see other Elves drifting in and out of the rows, or sitting with great tomes in front of them on the wooden desks that filled the middle part of the hall.

‘I think I could spend a thousand years in here,’ Bilbo admitted quietly.

Elrond came to stand next to him, chuckling at Bilbo’s enthusiasm. ‘I think that was the reaction I was hoping for. The librarian will be able to assist you with anything you wish to find. Just try not to get lost,’ he said with a teasing smile.

Bilbo smiled back. He was sorry he did not have more time to spend in the library – Thorin would almost certainly demand that they move out tonight, or tomorrow morning if they were lucky.

‘Forgive me, Master Hobbit, but I think there is something that marks you out from other Hobbits I have known,’ Elrond said, snapping Bilbo out of his musings. Bilbo found himself at the centre of the Elf Lord’s attention, fixed with a keen, steely gaze, as though Elrond were searching for something, some sign to be found in Bilbo’s features.

‘Perhaps it is that I am in the Company of Dwarves?’ Bilbo said lightly.

‘No,’ said Elrond, and his previous kind smile had slipped from his face. Gone was the Elrond of moments before, the Elrond of quiet smiles and the warm demeanour that complimented his rich, soft clothing. He now looked more like the Elf Bilbo had first seen on the steps to Rivendell, the one cloaked in armour, with orc blood staining his gloves. Bilbo tried to resist the urge to back away.

‘No,’ said Elrond again, as if confirming something to himself at long last, ‘you, Bilbo Baggins, are the first Hobbit I have ever met that has the mark of Manwë on your being, alongside that of Yavanna.’

Bilbo frowned. ‘I do? I’m sorry, but I’m not quite sure what you mean by that.’

‘You have spent some time with the eagles, have you not?’
‘I have.’ Bilbo saw no harm in confirming this.

‘I was informed of this by Mithrandir, but I did not believe it until this moment. The eagles do not make friends easily, Bilbo. It is almost unheard of for them to accept one who is not of their species. But against all the odds....they have declared you an eagle-friend.’

It was not a question. Bilbo could only nod hesitantly, unsure as to where this was going.

‘Mithrandir has no knowledge of this – or, he suspects but has not yet had it confirmed, but I can see it as clear as day, now. It is a remarkable thing.’

‘But...I thought Gandalf was an eagle-friend?’ Bilbo gave a small, self-depreciating laugh, ‘there’s nothing remarkable about me.’

Elrond’s smile returned, softening his previously stern countenance.

‘On the contrary. Mithrandir may be a friend of the Eagles of Manwë...but tell me, Mister Baggins – did the eagles give you a First Name?’

Bilbo could only stare at Elrond in shock. He had never uttered a word of this to anyone. He felt as though Elrond’s sharp intuition had pierced him straight through to his very soul, and it was a deeply discomforting thing. Elrond seemed to sense his unease and waved one hand as if to banish it.

‘I will say no more if you do not wish me to continue,’ he said, ‘but know that this is unprecedented. Take hear t in your Naming, Master Hobbit. There is power to be found in names, and you will need yours, I fear, for the road ahead.’

‘Thank you, my Lord,’ said Bilbo in hushed tones.

‘I will leave you to enjoy our library, and speak not a word of this to anyone – you have my word. I am sorry to have brought up such a subject, but I could not hold back on my curiosity,’ Elrond said with a wry smile.

‘Not at all. Thank you for your hospitality, sir.’

Elrond inclined his head and turned to leave. Bilbo took a great breath to calm himself, but then Elrond paused on the library’s threshold.

‘Bilbo...’ he started, but then trailed off. Bilbo thought the Elf’s eyes looked a little distant, as though he were not looking at Bilbo at all. He seemed at once to be very old and very sad, and Bilbo was suddenly struck by how many Ages the being in front of him must have endured.

‘My lord?’ Bilbo prompted. Elrond was giving him such an achingly sad look that Bilbo could feel an echo of it inside his chest. Then Elrond blinked slowly and whatever was troubling him passed like the clouds being swept aside to show the sun, and he shook his head.

‘No, Mister Baggins, it is nothing,’ Lord Elrond said, and left Bilbo alone in the too-quiet library.

The encounter with Elrond had unsettled Bilbo. No one knew about Bilbo’s Naming. Bilbo hadn’t even said it out loud to himself, nor had he written it down – it was far too private to risk it being put down on paper. How on earth had Elrond known? The sense of peace he had gathered while on his
wanderings around Rivendell was gone, now, and he hadn’t even been able to properly enjoy the library. He was too consumed by questions to feel anything more than a distant pleasure in running his hands along the spines of the books on the shelves. The librarian had been helpful and welcoming, but Bilbo left after barely an hour, too wound-up by then to settle into the library and enjoy the atmosphere. Perhaps he would come back one day, and not leave the library until someone dragged him out.

He made his way back to the wing that had been allocated to the Company for the duration of their stay. A quick check on the Dwarves confirmed that they hadn’t left without him, and so Bilbo took himself to a wide, open balcony not far from where they rested. Here, he had every intention of practising his swordplay until the restless itch just under his skin had been worked out of his system.

He drew out the blade, taking care with the grip, this time, and not just grouching about the fact that it wasn’t his spear. He took a few experimental swings, testing the balance and weight of it, when he became aware that someone was approaching – he could hear the distinctive tread of one of the Company stalking down the corridor that lead to the balcony, and could even identify who it was just from the sound of their footsteps. They came to pause on the threshold, and suddenly Bilbo had a spectator.

He decided to ignore them, instead focusing on his footwork, trying to puzzle out how to block and parry with the sword. If the onlooker wanted to talk, then that was up to them, but until they broke their watchful silence, Bilbo was going to carry on with what he was doing.

After a few more swings of the sword, the Dwarf did just that.

‘That is the worst sword-stance I have ever seen,’ Dwalin informed him.

Bilbo sighed, and lowered the sword’s tip. He turned to Dwalin and said, ‘thank you for that helpful piece of advice.’

‘No, truly,’ Dwalin said, ‘I’ve trained plenty o’ swordsmen in my time, and that one really takes-‘

‘Is there a reason you came here? Other than to insult my swordsmanship?’ Bilbo interrupted, giving Dwalin a look. He wasn’t in the mood for the Dwarven brand of helpful advice at that very moment.

Dwalin might have smiled under his bushy beard – Bilbo couldn’t tell.

‘Nah, it’s not that bad,’ said Dwalin, coming forward to stand in front of Bilbo, ‘you just need to shorten it a bit. Look, mirror me,’ he said, and mimed holding a sword in front of him, placing his feet into position. Bilbo copied him.

‘Better,’ grunted Dwalin, and then, without warning, he drew one of the ever-present axes from his back and lunged at Bilbo.

Instinctively, Bilbo shifted back and raised the sword above his head to block the blow. Although Dwalin had been clearly holding back, the force of it still shuddered through his arms. He stared at Dwalin.

‘Is there any reason why you’re attacking me?’ he asked of the Dwarf, ‘was my stance really that bad?’

Dwalin withdrew the axe. ‘You’ve got to learn somehow. Not bad, for your first block, but can you counter?’

And the axe was lashing out again, this time an upwards diagonal swing. Bilbo blocked this, too,
catching the axe just below the hilt, pushing it away with as much strength he could muster, and lunging for Dwalin when the move opened up the Dwarf’s body for attack. But Dwalin recovered quickly and blocked the stab with his axe, knocking the sword aside. All at once, and without another word between them, they were fighting out-right. Dwalin did not draw out the other axe from his back – something Bilbo took offence to, but the Dwarf proved himself to be fast enough with just one axe that Bilbo didn’t complain aloud. Privately, he could admit that he needed this. The sword may not be his weapon of choice, but he would almost certainly need it for the road ahead.

Dwalin was fast with his axe, and Bilbo was unused to his sword, and so the first few steps of the fight were heavily in Dwalin’s favour. But Hobbits can be adaptable when they want to be, and Bilbo even more so, and he quickly adjusted to the sword, forcing himself to concentrate on the weapon in his hands, rather than one whose length he could change at will simply by shifting his grip closer or further apart.

They clashed and danced and weaved around each other – Bilbo kept Dwalin at a distance, though the other kept trying to corner him, but Bilbo ensured that the axe swings, when they came, could be easily knocked aside by the tip of Bilbo’s sword. Bilbo knew he could not win this impromptu fight through strength – Dwalin’s blows almost certainly could not be stopped physically by Bilbo, but he could change the axe’s direction enough to leave room for his own counter. Not only that, but Bilbo took full advantage of his size and agility; Dwalin was fast with his swings, but moved slowly, and Bilbo took every opportunity he could for quick, darting attacks that would have him retreat to a safe distance before Dwalin could properly counter.

Bilbo’s brow was beginning to break out in sweat.

‘Not bad, Halfling,’ Dwalin told him as Bilbo skilfully dodged a blow aimed at Bilbo’s stomach with the butt of the axe.

Bilbo grinned at him, enjoying the fight more than he would care to admit, ‘what’s with all this Halfling rubbish?’ He blocked a vicious upswing, turning it aside, the axe would have fallen dangerously close to his body had he not leapt away. ‘I’m not half of anything!’

Bilbo punctuated that with a jab to Dwalin’s unprotected side, which Dwalin had to dodge. The Dwarf grinned, and suddenly the pace increased, the tempo speeding up and Bilbo with it, until Dwalin struck out, lightning-fast, hitting Bilbo’s wrist and then twisting the sword away from his slackened grip.

There was an axe to Bilbo’s throat, resting at the junction between throat and neck. Dwalin stared down at him, triumphant.

‘Not bad, lad,’ he said, ‘but you’ve lost this one.’

Bilbo smiled and said, ‘no, I think this one’s checkmate, actually.’

Dwalin became aware of the hunting knife pressing against his stomach, ready to gut him at any moment. He stepped back, releasing Bilbo and barked out a laugh.

‘Not bad at all,’ he told Bilbo, resting the axe against a wall. Inwardly, he was trying to work out how Bilbo had managed to get the knife out so quickly. He hadn’t even seen Bilbo’s hands move.

Bilbo sheathed the knife, retrieved his sword and placed that back in its sheath, too. Like Dwalin, he was a little out of breath, and came to stand beside the Dwarf and lean against the balcony railings.

‘We’ll make a swordsman out of you yet,’ Dwalin told him, and reached into his tunic to draw out a
small metal canteen. He uncapped it, took a swig, and offered some to Bilbo.

Bilbo took it without a word and knocked back a sizeable gulp. It was alcohol, which Bilbo had expected - its taste was decidedly earthy with a hint of honey. It was so strong it burned the inside of his mouth and throat as it went down. Bilbo did not react to it, and Dwalin’s eyebrows rose. He had obviously been expecting Bilbo to choke, cough, splutter or any manner of embarrassing things. But if he thought this was strong, then Dwalin had clearly never tried Hamfast Gamgee’s moonshine.

‘You’re a strange one,’ Dwalin remarked. Bilbo waited for the ‘but’, expecting it to follow, but Dwalin seemed content to leave it at that.

‘Says the Dwarf who cuddles his axes at night like a child would a teddy bear,’ Bilbo quipped back.

‘Nothing strange about that. Perfectly natural.’

‘If you say so,’ said Bilbo lightly, taking another sip of the canteen – smaller than his first, now he had nothing to prove – and handed it back to Dwalin.

‘You’re alright, Halfling,’ said Dwalin.

‘Is it really so hard to say Bilbo? I know you can do it,’ Bilbo said before he could stop himself, irritated that Dwalin seemed unable to say his name.

Dwalin gave him a side-long look and then said, very deliberately, ‘you’re alright, Bilbo.’

Bilbo snorted indelicately through his nose, ‘there we go. I knew you could do it. You’re alright too, I suppose, Dwalin. For a Dwarf.’

Bilbo was hoping that Dwalin would pick up on the teasing tone, and thankfully he seemed to. Bilbo’s previous anxiety had been all but beaten out of him. He felt tired, and he welcomed the feeling. Tired meant he might get a decent night’s sleep that night, and that he might not think too much of troubling things before then.

There was a question on the tip of his tongue, waiting to be asked. Bilbo hoped that as he and Dwalin had shared a watch or two together and had now sparred, Dwalin might be amenable to Bilbo’s curiosity.

He never managed to answer the question, though, because just as Bilbo turned to ask it, his ears pricked up. He could hear another Dwarf approaching, and he knew exactly who this was, too. His body tensed up from its previous loose sprawl on the balcony.

‘Dwalin. What are you doing?’ Asked Thorin of his friend, completely failing to acknowledge Bilbo’s presence. Thorn had apparently been on his way back to the wing, and had probably heard the clashing and banging of their fight all the way down the corridor. Dwalin turned around to look at him.

‘Just giving the Hobbit-‘

‘Bilbo. Bil-bo.’

‘Bilbo a few pointers on how to handle his sword,’ Dwalin gave Bilbo a nudge, his voice laced with insinuation that Bilbo immediately picked up on. He glared at Dwalin, and tried not to blush, though his traitorous ear tips were probably failing him on that front. From the thoroughly unamused look Thorin was now giving Dwalin, Bilbo could guess Thorin had caught the innuendo, too. Dwalin had the gall to look amused and pleased in the ensuing awkward silence.
It was a silence Bilbo decided he’d had enough of. He resisted the urge to make a quip about all the noise they’d made, but he thought better of it in Thorin’s presence. Instead he merely said, ‘I have no need of any pointers on swordplay anymore, Dwalin, so I’ll be off-‘

‘No no lad, stay,’ Dwalin pressed a heavy hand against Bilbo’s shoulder, all but pushing him to the floor, ‘this was your spot to begin with, after all, and swords are more Thorin’s area than mine. Maybe you can give him a few tips, Thorin?’

And with that, he left, probably chuckling to himself all the way.

Thorin’s glare at his friend’s retreating back promised retribution. Bilbo tried not to shuffle his feet. This was the first time in a while that he and Thorin had both been alone together, and while Bilbo had not been actively avoiding him, he had been glad that there had been very few occasions in which Thorin could demonstrate his dislike of Bilbo on a one-to-one basis.

Thorin seemed ready to bid Bilbo goodbye and follow Dwalin out, but Bilbo was suddenly gripped with the urge to talk to him. Kíli and Fíli had been insistent that Thorin was a good Uncle. Sure there was a side to Thorin Bilbo had yet to see? Perhaps if they could just talk civilly for once, then the journey ahead might be made a little easier.

But of course, the first thing out of his mouth was not an insightful observation bound to spur on conversation but instead the utterly inane, ‘are you liking our stay here in Rivendell?’

Bilbo winced. Thorin merely stared at him. Why had Bilbo’s mouth decided that was a good question? Of course Thorin wanted out of Rivendell, and fast – he had made such a thing all-too clear from the very beginning. Bilbo hurried to clarify.

‘I mean, are you feeling well-rested? Er, enjoying the food, perhaps?’ Oh heavens, that was even worse. He was a disgrace to Hobbit-kind – Hobbits were supposed to be good at small talk, but here he was stumbling over his words and unsure of what he was even doing. But there was something about being the sole attention of Thorin’s steely-blue gaze that made Bilbo nervous without Thorin having even to say anything.

Thorin glanced in the direction Dwalin had disappeared to, and then said, as if the words were being forcibly drawn from him, ‘I am feeling well-rested. Although the surroundings could be better.’

‘And the food...it could have more meat in, I suppose.’

Thorin’s expression gave nothing away, but Bilbo could detect the slightest hint of awkwardness in Thorin’s bearing. Perhaps Bilbo was not alone in his mortification at this terrible attempt at a conversation. The observation bolstered Bilbo a little.

‘Yes,’ said Thorin, shortly, and then reluctantly added, ‘the Elves seem far too fond of greens for my tastes.’

Bilbo thought back to Glóin’s insults only the day before, and there was something in the way that Thorin had said this that rankled Bilbo. ‘Well, I suppose when you’re surrounded by greens, that’s what ends up on the plate,’ he observed mildly. The valley Rivendell was situated in seemed lush with greenery, after all, and most of what Bilbo had eaten so far had been delicious and filling.

‘I wouldn’t know.’

Bilbo stared at him for a few moments, before he caught on. ‘Oh, of course,’ Bilbo said, ‘I suppose, being Dwarves, you don’t have many things that grow underground?’
‘You suppose many things,’ Thorin said, ‘but yes, Erebor itself had no greenery at all to speak of.’

Ah. Erebor. Bilbo had no idea if they had suddenly lurched into decidedly painful territory for Thorin. As carefully and frivolously as he could manage, Bilbo said, ‘perhaps you could change that, then. When you get it back. You could redecorate the place – I’m sure there are some types of plant that would live underground.’

Nothing outwardly changed about Thorin’s expression, but Bilbo felt Thorin’s disapproval regardless.

‘And why would we want to do that?’

Thorin had apparently decided to take Bilbo far more seriously than he had intended. ‘Well, I suppose you might have to grow food to feed your people, but besides that, there’s lots of reasons for growing plants.’

‘Growing plants and crops is not the domain of Dwarves, Mister Baggins,’ Thorin said before Bilbo could expand on the uses of plants. ‘We Dwarves are more concerned with engineering, and craft.’

‘Well, yes. But plant-lore is just as important as craft. I mean, the medical-’

‘We would have no time for such frivolous pursuits. Farming is for Men, and is highly practical, but the growing of gardens is for those who lead boring lives, and who have little talents or interest in anything else.’

Now it was Bilbo’s turn to stare. He couldn’t quite believe what had just come out of Thorin’s mouth, and in such a flippant manner. If Bilbo’s intention had been to coax a conversation out of Thorin, then he had succeeded, but the subject matter was not exactly to his tastes. Thorin’s features had lifted a little while talking of Erebor, and his eyes were lit with enthusiasm. But Bilbo took no notice of any of this, nor did he take satisfaction in getting what he wanted.

‘Now, the pursuit of minerals, of ores and-’

‘Excuse me, but what did you say about gardens?’

Thorin blinked, surprised at being interrupted. ‘I said it was a hobby-’

‘A hobby?’ Bilbo snapped, completely riled up, now.

‘Yes,’ Thorin’s confusion was plain on his face, ‘it is a pastime for gentle folk-’

‘Gardening is just as worthy as mining,’ Bilbo said with gritted teeth.

Thorin huffed, as though Bilbo had said something funny. ‘Come, now, Mister Baggins, you cannot be serious. Gardening is nowhere near the level of mining.’

Bilbo could listen not a moment longer. He cursed at Thorin in the eagle’s language, naming Thorin something exceedingly rude that does not bear repeating, before storming away.

Luaithre would have been so proud.

Thorin watched him go, utterly nonplussed. He honestly had had no intention to offend, but clearly the Hobbit found something to take affront to in his words. Surely Bilbo could see the merits of creating things over...ah. Thorin cast his mind back to the Shire and recalled that every Hobbit he had seen on his way to Bilbo’s house had had a garden.
But the foot in his mouth aside, had the burglar just *trilled* at him?

Chapter End Notes

One a side note: in case anyone was wondering, Elrond’s claim about Bilbo having the mark of Yavanna on him does not necessarily mean that the Hobbits were made by Yavanna. I know that’s a very popular concept (and I love it for various reasons) but this is not something that I’m applying to this story. The origin of Hobbits in this story are still a mystery, but I think that their lives are so wrapped up in the land a love of growing plants and flowers that they are somewhat ‘favoured’ by Yavanna, or at the very least looked on kindly by her. Hence the mark.

To all those who have kudo’d or bookmarked, or left some pretty amazing comments: thank you. Very much. I hope you’ve enjoyed this chapter.
Chapter Notes

The excellent MapleShark has made some sound mixes for this story! You should really go and listen to them, because they’re all lovely and just pitch-perfect for what I had in mind for certain scenes. This one’s is Bilbo curled up under Luaiythe’s wing in the Eryie: http://naturesoundsfor.me/Nesting_Owls2 and this one is for Kili’s observations of Bilbo on horseback in the rain: http://naturesoundsfor.me/Ponies_in_Deluge and last but not least, this is Bilbo lost in memories of riding an eagle in a heavy rainstorm: http://naturesoundsfor.me/Flying_Rainstorm

Small warning – they’re so soothing you may actually fall asleep listening to them.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo was sad to leave Rivendell behind. He could not help but pause to look back one last time, taking in the sight of a place that, for the most part, had given him welcome and a sense of peace. The light of the rising sun was just beginning to fall on the richly coloured rooftops of the Last Homely House, casting it in a golden glow. Bilbo took a moment to imprint the image onto his mind, before turning to join the rest of the Company in their hard climb up the steep mountainside.

He regretted having to turn his back on Rivendell, but there were mountains ahead of him and their high peaks called to him, leaving him with such an aching longing that he was unsure how he had ever thought the gentle hills of the Shire would satisfy him.

The road underfoot and ahead was a difficult one and the weather seemed to worsen with every step, but Thorin ploughed on, setting an almost relentless pace that the Company matched without complaint, though there were often quite a few sighs of relief when a halt was called for the night. It was almost as if Thorin wanted to put as many miles as possible, as quickly as possible, between them and Rivendell. The harsh weather and howling winds did not bother Bilbo, but the hard march had taken its toll on what should have been a well-rested and happy Company, and there was little chatter or song for the most part.

The mountains rose up ever higher, and they were rising with them. On their third day of travel the sky shifted from bright blue to pitch-black in a matter of moments, to leave the sky overcast and roiling with lightning. A heavy rain began to fall.

The stone giants were just the icing on the cake.

Bilbo had thought he had seen all there was to see of the Misty Mountains. But as he clung onto the stone wall behind him for dear life, he wished he could say that was still true. He could barely see the duelling giants above them – they were just colossal shadows highlighted by the flashes of lighting, too huge for the mind to comprehend but inspiring more than enough fear in him to set his heart racing with dread.

A shower of shattered boulders – each shard twice as big as Bilbo – rained down on them from above. The ground below them was moving, and Bilbo’s hand automatically flew to the person on his immediate left, which turned out to be Bofur. The Dwarf looked as terrified as Bilbo felt, both of them bucking and swaying, trying to keep up with their unsteady perch. Others around them were
calling out, in surprise, in fear, but nothing compared to the anguished cries of Kíli and Fíli as the path split in two and separated them from each other. Bilbo’s heart cried out with them.

Their path was rapidly disappearing. Bilbo wound his hand around the material of Bofur’s coat, the rough fabric grounding him in the madness. He felt like an ant – powerless, and as though he could be all but snuffed out in a moment. *I can’t die here.* The thought floated around and around in his terrified mind. Another crash of rock above their heads, another beat of thunder, and the rock face was rising up to meet them.

Miraculously, that was how they survived – they managed to scramble onto the new bit of path presented to them before the stone giant fell away into the abyss below. Bilbo grabbed a handhold and just held on, Bofur doing the same beside him. But some were not so lucky. Ori, to Bilbo’s left, was thrown onto the path only to have part of it give way below him. Bilbo didn’t hesitate – he abandoned his safe handhold to grab the back of Ori’s coat and heave him into a better position onto the path. Ori was safe, Bilbo was not – he slipped from the path, managing to hold on by his bare fingertips. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. If he fell now there would be no eagle to catch him. *He could not die here.* There was a commotion going on over his head, the sounds of shouts and curses, and Bofur’s hand landed on Bilbo’s shoulder, but he could not save Bilbo on his own. With little regard for his own safety, it was Thorin who swung down to save Bilbo, lifting him back onto the cliff edge before being hauled up himself by Dwalin.

Bilbo lay where he had fallen, gasping for breath. Bofur, patted his shoulder. ‘We thought we’d lost you, there!’ he said cheerfully, though his voice shook.

‘Mister Baggins has been lost ever since he left home,’ snarled Thorin through the rain, ‘he should never have come.’

The words washed over Bilbo. There was no room to process Thorin’s words in Bilbo’s mind for the moment, but they remained lodged in Bilbo’s heart and would not budge.

It was a thoroughly shaken and utterly soaked Company that made its camp in the cave they found not far from the stone giant’s battleground. Their spirits would have been lifted by a fire, had Thorin allowed them one. As it was, they rolled out their bedrolls on the stone floor and started to settle down for the night with little talk passing between them.

A tug at Bilbo’s sleeve caught his attention. Ori was standing off to one side, picking at the loose thread around his collar.

‘Thank you, Bilbo,’ he said, eyes bright with relief and gratitude.

Bilbo managed a smile for him. ‘It’s alright, Ori. You would’ve done the same for me.’

Ori launched himself at Bilbo, giving him a quick, crushing hug that Bilbo attempted to return before Ori stepped back and went to join his brothers. On any other night, Bilbo would have noted with wry amusement that Dori was giving him a suspicious look, but Bilbo was too tired, drained emotionally and physically to give it much thought. The rain had washed away all of his good humour.

He made his way towards the back of the cave – nodding to Dwalin along the way – to reach two particular Dwarves that he wanted to know for certain were alright. Kíli and Fíli were sat together, which was not that unusual, but their pale faces and the quick, darting glances they kept shooting towards each other spoke of a lingering fear.

Bilbo patted both of them on the shoulder, the simple physical contact doing a great deal to reassure
him they were both okay. Kíli attempted to smile at him but it turned into more of a grimace, and Fíli clasped his hand to Bilbo’s shoulder for a moment. There was no real need for words.

As tired as they were, most of the Company fell asleep within the hour. Bilbo sat and listened to the deepening breaths and the rhythmic snoring. He was trying to focus on the Company, but his mind kept flashing back to the moment in which he had almost toppled from the cliff and Thorin’s harsh words. He had no idea what he was doing here. For one mad moment he seriously contemplated packing up and abandoning the Company to walk back alone to Rivendell. He dismissed it with a scoff just as quickly as the thought had arrived. If there was one thing his time with the eagles had revealed to him, it was that he had the conviction to see things through to the end.

A dozen more thoughts flitted around his head, until Bilbo couldn’t think at all. The cave was too small, too cramped and stuffy. He needed air. Just a few minutes outside would do.

As quietly as he could manage, he got up from his bedroll. Kíli and Fíli had drifted closer to each other in sleep and Fíli’s hand was grasping Kíli’s forearm. Bilbo wondered if this was how they had slept when as children. They were just so young, the both of them; Bilbo’s heart ached just from looking at them. He took care to step past them and Bifur - there was a whole Company full of Dwarves between him and the cave’s entrance, but this was not a real obstacle for Bilbo. He could see that Bofur was sat near the entrance – perhaps Bilbo could sit with him for a while.

The sensation of eyes on Bilbo’s back caused him to pause and turn towards the source. With a jolt Bilbo realised he was not the only one awake – Thorin was sat off to one side on his bedroll, his gaze dark and judging.

_He has been lost ever since he left home._

Bilbo could have turned and left, could have looked away and gone to sit with Bofur. Instead he found himself opening his mouth to say,

‘I know you doubt me. I know that won’t change. But whatever you might think of me, I am here to see this through to the end.’

It was all coming out in a rush and Bilbo couldn’t hold back the flow of words. Thorin said nothing, but neither did he try to interrupt or halt Bilbo’s speech, so Bilbo continued in a low voice so as not to wake the Dwarves.

‘I don’t know what giving your word means to the Dwarves, but for a Hobbit – for me – it means you keep it, no matter what. Because...because I think Erebor is as much a home to you as it is a kingdom. At least, I think it is for Kíli and Fíli, even though they’ve never seen it. And I know a little of what that’s like, to feel homeless. So I will help you, if I can.’

He let out a breath. How he had thought it a good idea to speak his piece standing among snoring Dwarves was a mystery. Embarrassment was creeping over him. Thorin continued to sit so still it was as if he were carved from stone, but as Bilbo watched the Dwarf’s eyes dragged slowly down Bilbo’s body, to land on the sword at Bilbo’s belt. Bilbo snapped his head down to see a sliver of blue peeking out from the space between sheathe and hilt. Slowly, he drew the sword from the sheathe and blue light lit up his face and hand.

Bilbo and Thorin’s eyes snapped back to each other, but they only had half a moment to share their horror. Thorin rushed to his feet, calling the Dwarves to arms, to wakefulness, and yet even as he did so it was too late – the floor spilt open beneath them, and they tumbled into the darkness.
Their landing knocked the air right out of Bilbo’s body. He was luckier than most and had fallen on poor Bombur, who had taken most of the fall. There were stars in Bilbo’s vision and he strained for breath, but the eagles had taught him to never stay down for too long – a grounded eagle was a vulnerable one. He staggered to his feet well before the rest of the groaning Company, and not a moment too soon – a veritable swarm of goblins, chittering and schreeching were almost upon them. Bilbo punched the first that drew near full across the jaw, but three more took its place.

They were overwhelmed between one breath and the next. The Company could do nothing against such overwhelming numbers and on such cramped ground there was simply no room to fight properly. The goblins weighed them down, grasping at arms and legs and jumping on their backs. The Company fought back as best they could, but the goblins seemed not to care if they were thrown from the platform, and no matter how hard Bilbo fought with kicks and punches, they were powerless not to be swept along by the hoard.

Bilbo’s sword was taken from him, his knife along with it. Strong fingers with sharpened nails dug into his back and shoulder, giving him no choice but to move forward. Beside him Kíli was trying to flinch away from his captives, but to no avail.

Bilbo had never felt so helpless.

They were taken further into the bowels of the mountain, down rickety bridges and past endless numbers of yet more goblins that stood and jeered at them as they passed, whipped into a frenzy by the Company’s capture.

They were halted in front of a great throne, on which sat the largest and most repulsive Goblin Bilbo had ever seen. The Company’s weapons were thrown unceremoniously into a heap before the Goblin King. Bilbo was half-hidden behind Dwalin’s bulk and couldn’t really see much of what was going on, but from the brief look he got of the Golbin King, Bilbo was glad of this. He didn’t want to have to look at the King’s ugly face any more than he needed to. Without a word between them, the Company closed ranks, taking what little comfort they could in each other’s presence.

At the King’s command, they were searched. Bilbo lost three brass buttons from his waistcoat, but the Company suffered this indignity with the minimum amount of fuss. However, their ordeal did not stop there. Bilbo’s heart lurched in his chest when Ori was threatened with torture. Not on my watch! Bilbo roared internally. This new escalation was unravelling Bilbo. His control had already frayed at the edges, and he felt now as if he could fly apart at the seams at any given second. A goblin with a twisted resemblance to a face snarled at him. Bilbo bared his teeth back and head butted it. The goblin slunk away, but Bilbo received a scratch across his cheek from another goblin for his troubles.

But then Thorin was stepping forwards, every inch the King he was fighting to be. He stood tall and remained unbowed even under the taunts of the goblin King. Admiration stirred in Bilbo when he caught a glimpse of Thorin’s broad back through a gap in the Company.

The sound of clanking and creaking reached their ears, and the Company stirred uneasily from their stalwart stances. A rhythmic drumming was picked up among the goblin hoards, singing of breaking limbs and shattered bones. They huddled closer together.

All of a sudden, Bilbo caught sight of a goblin chewing on his pack while another rummaged through the contents. Incensed, Bilbo surged forward, hitting one in the kidneys and laying into the other, the action inadvertently causing Bilbo to fall out of the cover provided by Dwalin’s back. Dwalin tried to come to Bilbo’s aid, but the scuffle immediately caught the attention of the goblin King.
‘You!’ snapped the King, pointing straight at Bilbo, ‘bring him forward, let me see him!’ and Bilbo was shoved forward to stand next to Thorin, to the dismay of the Company.

Bilbo straightened his spine and glared at the goblin King, angry and eager for a fight.

The King grinned, his fleshy beard pulling with the movement. ‘Well well well,’ he sneered, ‘I never thought I’d live to see the day. Yes, I know exactly who you are.’

And the King spat out a word in orcish, a word Bilbo had not heard in many, many years, one that was uttered with as much disgust a goblin could muster:

‘Light-bringer!’

Now they were in trouble.

‘What a pretty pair you make!’ the king crowed. Bilbo could feel Thorin shooting him a questioning look but he did not turn to meet it. A goblin kicked Bilbo in the back and he lashed out automatically. As he attempted to defend himself, Bilbo’s foot accidentally caught the hilt of Thorin’s sword, drawing it free a little from its sheath.

The reaction the revealed blade was immediate. Where there had been victory before, there was now fear and anger. The goblins turned on them with whips and beat them with sticks. Bilbo was brought to the ground by a sharp series of blows that made him cry out in pain. He struggled to get back onto his feet and another hit landed on his shoulder, settling his flesh alight in a blaze of agony. The sounds of the Company struggling and Ori crying out filled his ears. Bilbo jabbed his elbow into a goblin’s stomach, for all the good it did – a blade slashed too close to comfort to his neck, and it was only a matter of moments before it would find its mark.

And then, unstoppable and unrelentless, there came a wave of white light and an explosion of power. Dwarf, goblin and Hobbit were all thrown to the ground, blinking away the bright light, utterly dazed.

Through the haze stepped a very familiar sight. Gandalf.

‘Take up arms!’ he cried, ‘Fight! Fight!’

Bilbo needed no further prompting. He shoved away a goblin that had half toppled onto him and grabbed his sword and knife, the Company doing the same around him, and within the space of a few breaths they were fighting tooth and nail for a way out.

Bilbo would remember little of the battle that ensued. He was moving on pure instinct – there was no time for moral deliberations, now – they were fighting to escape, fighting to survive, and his limbs moved without any instruction from his mind, falling easily into the fray without a second thought. Some things would later stand out in flashes of remembrance – he would recall fighting alongside Kíli and Fíli, bringing up the rear, with Thorin and Gandalf forging a way forward. He certainly remembered flinging his knife with not a moment to spare, the weapon landing inches away from Kíli’s head to kill the goblin that had gotten too close to the Dwarf. They shared a small, brief grin at this, until necessity dictated that Bilbo retrieve his knife and they turn back to the battle at hand.

Miraculously, and despite what seemed like a whole mountain’s worth of goblins trying to hinder their escape, the Company burst out into the sunlight with not a single member seriously harmed.

They ran down the mountainside a little ways until it sunk in that they were not being pursued. Each and every one of them was panting for breath – even Gandalf looked winded. Bilbo put a hand against a tree and took in great gulping breaths, trying not to look at the blood stained sword in his
‘Well,’ said Bofur as he came to stand with Bilbo, ‘that was unpleasant.’

‘You don’t say-’ Bilbo started sarcastically, but he was cut off by the blood-curdling sound of a wargs howl. Another howl joined it in song, and another and another. A warg pack, Bilbo thought with renewed horror. A warg pack far too close for comfort.  

‘Out of the frying pan,’ said Thorin.  

‘Into the fire. Run!’ barked out Gandalf.

But they quickly came to realise there was nowhere to run to. The sound of huge claws pounding over the earth reached their ears – the pack was upon them already, and Ori had to strike one with his borrowed war-hammer before he was lifted into the trees by his brothers. One more warg tried to bite Bilbo in half, but he jammed the sword square between its eyes, wrenched the blade free and quickly scrambled up into his own tree to sit on a branch just below Fíli.

There was no way out. The wargs were scratching and clawing at the bottom of their trees, tearing up the wood as though it were nothing more than paper. Then, a fresh horror. From between the trees a huge white warg stalked forward – the sight of it sent an echo of old pain flashing across Bilbo’s right side and dredged up dark memories of blood, and battle, and the eagles’ crying out in sorrow and anger. It was the warg that had almost take his life, and as for the orc that sat astride it-

‘Azog!’ Bilbo heard Thorin gasp out in disbelief behind him, ‘it cannot be.’

The huge pale orc raised his mace and the wargs rushed forward with renewed vigour, setting upon the trees once more, taking off whole branches with their snapping jaws in their haste to get to the Company. The trees shuddered and shook under the onslaught, and Bilbo clung on the best he could, desperately hoping none of the others would fall and be torn to shreds by the waiting pack.

With an almighty groan, Bilbo’s tree began to topple. The world lurched sideways and the falling tree caused a domino effect, until only one was standing with all of the Company hidden in its branches. Still, the wargs jumped and snapped, and Azog watched it all with a cruel, satisfied smile.

Bilbo longed for his flint and tinder, to start a fire as he would have done in similar situations back in the war. No sooner had he finished the thought then Gandalf was passing them lit pinecones. Bilbo took no small amount of pleasure at launching them at the wargs below. The dry undergrowth caught alight immediately, and soon red flames were roaring into life, sending black smoke twisting into the air. The wargs retreated a few precious paces. Fíli and Kíli were cheering, but their small victory was short lived. With one last earthy moan, the final tree overbalanced, thankfully caught from falling any further by just a few strong roots, the Company only hanging on through fast reflexes and pure luck. Bilbo himself was dangling in from the main trunk, holding on to the bark with aching arms. His heart stopped when he heard Dori call out to Gandalf and fall from the tree, and it felt as though his heart could only resume beating when he saw that Gandalf’s staff had caught Dori and Ori.

Smoke stung Bilbo’s eyes and stuck in his throat. He was out of ideas.

All ideas, except one, and Thorin was taking it. Bilbo watched in dismay as the Dwarf stood up on the tree trunk slowly, settling his balance, eyes straight ahead and focused solely on Azog, sword and shield out at the ready. He was going to buy them time. The sudden realisation shot through Bilbo, jolting him back into awareness.

No! If Thorin thought that he would do such a foolish thing alone, then he was out of his mind.
Bilbo’s hands scrabbled on the bark of the tree – he needed to get up, right now, but the bark was too
dry, too brittle – it broke off in his hands when he tried to get a grip. He grasped for a good hold
desperately, nails scraping over wood, the skin of his palms scratched and split open by the
unforgiving surface, trying to twist his body to get his foot onto the branch – there! – he had it now,
and heaved himself onto the tree’s trunk. But he was too late to save Thorin from the first onslaught,
the Dwarf’s charge easily cut short by the white warg, sending Thorin sprawling, unprepared for the
devastating swing of Azog’s mace that landed squarely on Thorin’s chest.

Fear and fury were waging a war inside of Bilbo, but he was in control of it, now. There was one
thought that was riding high above the rest, one thought that steadied his hand in the face of almost
certain death: Thorin must not die. Bilbo found his balance in no time at all, following Thorin’s path
down the tree, sword in one hand, knife in the other, running full-tilt. The huge, powerful jaws of the
warg were on Thorin faster than a heartbeat, but Bilbo wasn’t far behind – he flicked out his left
hand and let fly the knife without breaking his run. The warg snarled as the knife scored a line across
his snout and in a fit of anger tossed Thorin’s body to one side as though he were no more than a rag
doll. Thorin hit the ground hard and did not move, vulnerable to other wargs and riders who had
started forward at Azog’s command.

But they never reached him - Bilbo got there first, plunging the sword deep into the temple of the
closest warg, where the skull was weakest, before it was even aware it was being attacked. Bilbo
drew out the sword from the warg’s head to meet the mace of its rider, turning aside the blow and
stabbing the orc with such force that the orc’s armour provided no resistance.

Afforded some measure of space by his reckless attack, Bilbo retreated, back towards Thorin –
Thorin, who was struggling to his feet, using his sword as a lever and bearing his teeth in pain.

‘Stay down, you idiot!’ Bilbo snapped at him over his shoulder, and didn’t bother to spare another
glance to see if Thorin had taken heed of his command.

Bilbo’s heart was beating too fast, a rapid staccato beat in his ears. Three more wargs and their riders
stalked closer, their low snarls promising bloodshed. Bilbo tightened his hold on the sword, hands
slick with blood, and did not budge.

And then, through the heaving columns of smoke, through the roaring flames and the dark clouds of
the sky, Bilbo caught sight of a familiar shape winging its way across the bright silver disc of the
moon.

Bilbo smiled. It was not a particularly nice smile.

To the astonishment of thirteen Dwarves and one wizard, a spear fell – as though from heaven – and
impacted point-first into the earth two feet from where Bilbo stood. Bilbo sheathed his sword and
tugged the spear free. The wargs had reared back the spear’s sudden appearance, and now they
pawed the ground with their forepaws, unsure. In the foggy recesses of their mind, the wargs
dredged up a half-buried memory; the figure in front of them – wreathed in flame, small in stature,
spear in hand – was now familiar to them. For them it was deeply and instinctively associated with
two things: death and eagles.

Recognition sparked two disparate reactions. One warg yelped and backed away, crashing into its
fellow, the third attacked out of fear, foolishly spurred on by its rider’s cruel blade. It was quickly
dispatched by the point of Bilbo’s spear, which flashed out once to pierce the warg’s chest, then
again with the blunt end to sweep the orc clean from its seat and off of the cliff. More wargs were
rushing forward to take their place, but the Dwarves had found their footing at last and roared into
battle to Thorin’s aid, who had worryingly slumped into unconsciousness behind Bilbo. The
Dwarves pushed the wargs back, uncaring as to their own safety, their fear for Thorin lending their
attacks a powerful but desperate edge.

But they inadvertently cleared a path for the white warg and its pale rider. Bilbo stood firm in front of Thorin, all but rooted to the ground. He met the terrifying gaze of Azog head on and did not flinch. The warg reared back, preparing to leap.

Luaithre’s claws missed warg and rider by a hairsbreadth, the warg having to twist and snap to dodge her attack. An eagle’s battle-scream rent the air and Bilbo turned to see Landroval snatching up a warg in each claw. All around Bilbo the eagles were plunging into battle, singing out in joy and with terrible fury, defending the Dwarves and fanning the flames with their wings. Bilbo was relieved down to his very bones when he saw Deas plucking Kíli and Fíli from danger, the other Dwarves quickly receiving the same treatment. He lowered the point of his spear a little. Though this was not the most ideal of reunions, his heart was greatly gladdened to hear and see his family once more, and he felt lifted by their calls, like the feeling of coming home at the end of a long, exhausting day.

The warg pack was trying to retreat, but they had rushed forward onto the cliff too eagerly in their pursuit of the Company and they now could not back up or turn around to flee on the narrow strip of land, and were all but tripping over each other in their haste to escape. They were easy pickings for the eagles. But Bilbo could not spare a moment’s more attention for the on-going battle – Gwaihir clicked at him in greeting, and came to hover over the cliff. The eagle paused for half a moment, asking a question of Bilbo, and Bilbo nodded in answer. With more gentleness than anyone would think those great claws capable of, Gwaihir took a hold of Thorin’s unconscious body, lifting him away from danger.

A snarl reached Bilbo’s ears. He spun around to see Azog and his white warg readying for another attack, in spite of the flames separating them from Bilbo.

It was time to go. Without another backwards glance, Bilbo whistled out a name and took a running jump from the cliff. Luaithre was there to catch him, as she always was.

There was little reason to enjoy the flight or be thankful that his family were with him once more. The strange assortment of Dwarves, eagles and one wizard and a Hobbit flew away from danger and towards the dawn, but Thorin did not stir in Gwaihir’s claws. Fíli called out to his Uncle, but to no avail. Bilbo sat atop Luaithre and let his body fall into the familiar movements of flight while with he prayed and hoped and wished with all his being that Thorin would be alright.

They alighted atop a jutting hill of stone, Bilbo slipping off of Luaithre without a word to her, his eyes not drifting from where Thorin lay. Luaithre took off again, returning to the sky to circle the Company along with the rest of the flock, giving Bilbo some space for the moment.

Bilbo’s worst fears for Thorin were never realised, and the night had yet to stop granting them miracles. Gandalf leant over Thorin for a few moments, and when he sat back, Thorin’s eyes fluttered open.

Bilbo let out what seemed like all the air in his body in utter relief. The stubborn Dwarf staggered to his feet with a little help from Dwalin and Kíli, refusing to stay down for long. But then Thorin turned to Bilbo, and the giddy smile that had been tugging at his lips faded when Thorin’s eyes alighted on Bilbo. Thorin looked furious.
‘You! What were you doing?’ the rest of the Company were shooting worried glances between the two, but Thorin was not finished. ‘You nearly got yourself killed! Did I not say that you would be a burden?’

Bilbo could hear Gwaihir’s outraged cry at that, though the eagle was flying high overhead.

Thorin went on, delivering the final blow, causing Bilbo more hurt than a whole night’s worth of battling.

‘That you would not survive in the wild? That you had no place amongst us?’

Bilbo swallowed. He found that he could not raise his eyes to meet Thorin’s look.

‘I have never been so wrong in all my life,’ finished Thorin, and Bilbo found himself swept up in a rough embrace.

Oh, thought Bilbo. The spear fell from his listless fingers to clatter to the ground. The rest of the Company was laughing and cheering in the background, and Tuit was whistling away cheekily in the sky, but Bilbo’s attention was solely on the arms wrapped around him and the soft fur and long hair pressing against his cheek. Thorin hugged in the same way he did most things – with his whole heart behind it, and Bilbo hastened to return the tight embrace, putting his arms around as much as Thorin as he could reach. Bilbo’s heart was soaring, and his giddy smile was back in place.

After a long moment, Thorin stepped back. The smile that was gracing the Dwarf’s features lit up his whole face, and Bilbo couldn’t help but stare for a moment, slightly dazed by all that had happened. Thorin’s eyes drifted away from Bilbo’s, to look into the distance over Bilbo’s shoulder. The Company quietened and drifted nearer, a hush falling over them, and Bilbo could see why. There, on the horizon, he could see a sharp peak jutting into the sky, its form hazy in the purple and pink wash of the sky, but it was unmistakable for the Dwarves.

‘Erebor. The Lonely Mountain,’ said Gandalf, ‘the last of the great Dwarf Kingdoms of Middle Earth.’

‘Our home,’ Thorin breathed reverently, giving Bilbo a meaningful glance.

They would have stood and stared for a while longer, but the eagles’ patience was finally at an end. With a sharp cry Luaithre and Gwaihir heralded their approach to the Carrock. Thorin and the Company backed away to give them space to land, and were astounded when Bilbo laughed and ran to embrace them both.

‘Luaithre! Gwaihir!’ he said as he gave Luaithre a proper greeting, throwing his arms around her neck.

Thorin watched, mystified by this turn of events. A quick look at Dwalin assured him he was not alone in his confusion. When the eagle lowered its great head towards the Hobbit, Thorin flinched forward in an aborted movement – rescuers the eagles may be, their beaks were awfully sharp. His fears were unfounded, however – the eagle merely seemed to be returning the embrace.

‘Bilbo?’ Thorin said, his voice heavy with an unaired question.

Bilbo turned back to look at him. Gold suited him, Thorin thought distantly as he took in the sight of Bilbo bathed in the light of dawn, offset against a backdrop of warm gold feathers.

Bilbo’s grin gentled into a soft smile.
‘I think it’s time I told you my story,’ he said to Thorin.

Chapter End Notes

Coming soon in Child of the Earth and Sky: Explanations! Family reunions! Eagles being cheeky! Confused Dwarves! And maybe, just maybe, Thorin and Bilbo have a civil conversation.

I'm not sure about that last one, actually. It might be too far-fetched.

I'd like to thank the academy everyone who has read and kudo's and commented and bookmarked, I really wouldn't have kept going or had the courage to keep posting chapters without such a lovely response.
A Moment's Respite

Chapter Notes

This, uh, got a little long. I also promise that the next chapter will move things along a bit more. For now, I hope you enjoy this very lighthearted chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘You...know these creatures?’ said Dwalin. The Company was gathered around, as close as they could, and most of them looked on the cusp of bursting out into a string of questions.

Bilbo looked bemused and a little overwhelmed at their obvious curiosity, but he nodded in assent. ‘I am honoured to count them as my friends,’ he said softly, and then stood up a little straighter to gesture at each of the eagles in turn. ‘May I introduce you to Luaithre and Lord Gwaihir, Prince of eagles. Luaithre, Gwaihir – this is Thorin Oakenshield and his Company. And Gandalf, who you already know.’

Thorin inclined his head in acknowledgement, falling back on the comfort of protocol for such an unusual situation. ‘I thank you for our rescue,’ he said.

‘I told you, I told you he was-’ hissed Kíli to his brother, but was quickly shushed.

The eagle on the left, which was a little smaller than the other, let out a series of whistles. There was a moment’s pause, and then Bilbo startled in realisation and hastened to say,

‘Gwaihir says that you're welcome, but thanks are not needed.’

‘You understand them?’ Thorin said with quiet astonishment.

‘I do,’ Bilbo confirmed, shifting from foot to foot under all the attention.

‘Well,’ said Dwalin with a snort, ‘I’m sure you have a good tale to tell.’ This was met by general murmurs of assent by the Company, as well as a muttered, ‘quite the understatement, brother,’ from Balin.

‘And as much as I would like to hear our Hobbit’s story – and ask a few questions of my own,’ said Gandalf, shooting Bilbo a keen look from under lowered bushy brows, ‘I suggest we relocate elsewhere. The top of the Carrock is hardly suitable ground for setting up camp and listening to stories.’

This time it was the larger eagle that spoke. ‘Luaithre says they’ll stay with us,’ Bilbo translated, shooting Luaithre a relieved smile at the assurance that the eagles were not immediately leaving, ‘the eagles can watch over us while we rest.’

‘And then we will hear your story,’ said Thorin – not a question, but a statement.

‘You will,’ Bilbo promised.
As eager as the Company was to hear Bilbo’s tale, the practicalities came first. Gwaihir said there was a river not far from the Carrock which would be ideal for making camp, but first they had to make their way down the narrow path that wound its way around the edge of the stony outcrop. Gwaihir and Luaithre took off, informing Bilbo with mock-sternness that he had many more reunions to make when he reached the river.

The Dwarves did not ask for help from the eagles, and the eagles did not offer it – Bilbo quietly suspected that the Dwarves’ pride had been tested a little too far in the past two days, and they could not bring themselves to ask for help again. Even Thorin, who was still injured and moved as though still in pain, did not request even an arm to lean on or for a moment’s rest. Bilbo hovered behind him the whole way down, worried that the Dwarf was pushing himself too hard after such an ordeal, but Thorin kept up a steady pace and did not falter. The way down was not particularly steep, but it was long, and by the time they reached the ground they were all but swaying with exhaustion.

They made camp on a grassy slope that led down to the wide, slow-moving river, though camp was probably a loosely-used term for what they could do with such little supplies to hand. With their packs gone they could do nothing more than settle down on the soft, forgiving grass in a rough circle. Some of the Company were checking over what had been lost and what had not, while others merely sat in place, grateful for the rest and the time to attend to any minor injuries.

Bilbo did not immediately join them. The flock of eagles that had been hovering in the sky above them came to land not far from their makeshift camp, and Bilbo embraced each of them in turn. Most of them then took their leave – they had an Eyrie to return to and defend, but they chirped out their joy at seeing Bilbo before they took off, Bilbo smiling and waving as they winged away into the pale-blue sky. Then, only the fledglings and Deas remained.

‘Deas,’ said Bilbo after he had given his friend the greeting he deserved, ‘you are all a sight for sore eyes, you really are.’

‘It has been too long, Bilbo,’ Deas said, his tone holding a gentle admonishment.

Bilbo ducked his head for a moment. ‘I know. I...I always meant to see you again, but I just never thought it would take so long. I’m sorry.’

‘So you should be,’ said Gwaihir.

‘Don’t listen to my brother,’ cut in Landroval, ‘we’re just glad to see you.’

‘But don’t do it again!’ chirped Tuit, pushing his beak against Bilbo’s side so Bilbo had to shove him away with a laugh.

‘Anyway, as curious as those Dwarves seem to be about you,’ Luaithre said, ‘we’re more curious. What are you doing with a Company full of Dwarves this side of the Misty Mountains, Bilbo?’

‘Ah, well, you see we’re on this journey...’

The exchange between eagle and Hobbit was being observed from a distance by Thorin and Dwalin. Thorin’s oldest friend had sat beside him and joined in on Thorin’s watching of Bilbo and the eagles, but he said nothing to break the silence, and Thorin knew Dwalin was expecting him to speak first.

At long last the silence became so expectant and so weighty that Thorin sighed and said, ‘Go on. I know you want to say it.’
‘Say it? Oh, no, no. I don’t want to ruin a thing like this by saying a certain phrase *out loud,*’ said Dwalin. He sounded almost gleeful.

‘I think this day....this day will definitely be going down in the history books. I should make sure that lil’ scribe of ours gets it down, all the details – the day that Dwalin, son of Fundin, was proved right, and Thorin, son of Thrór, son of Thráin, showed the entire world just how much of an arse he had been.’

Beside him, Thorin let out a little groan. He had never met a Dwarf that could gloat as much as Dwalin. He resigned himself to it internally.

‘And, I mean, the *biggest* arse in all the Dwarf Kingdoms. When you’re crowned King Under the Mountain, they will call you King Thorin the Arse. No, actually, that doesn’t work. How about King Thorin the idiot-who-didn’t-listen-to-his-old-friend-Dwalin?’

‘How long are you going to hold this over my head?’

Dwalin appeared to give this some thought. ‘At least the next fifty years or so, I should think. Thing like this,’ he sniffed, ‘*s got legs.*’ Then, after a pause, he sobered. ‘When are you going to do it?’

Thorin didn’t have to ask what Dwalin was referring to. ‘Before this little impromptu story time. It’ll have to be done in front of everyone, of course. Even if that includes these...eagles.’

They lapsed into quiet again, watching Bilbo. They couldn’t hear anything of what was being said, but one of the eagles had clearly whistled something inappropriate because Bilbo raised his voice to say,

‘Oh, shut up you overgrown chicken!’

The sight of a slight Hobbit, hands on hips, telling off a huge predator as if it were no more than a naughty schoolchild, was likely to remembered forever more by Thorin as one of the more unusual things he had seen in his life. That, and the memory of Bilbo standing before him, spear in hand, ready to die to defend him.

With this last thought in mind, Thorin knew it was time to make his approach. He rose from his spot without a word more to Dwalin, and approached the gathering of eagles and one Hobbit.

Bilbo turned when he drew near and gave him a half-smile. The largest of all the eagles titled his head at him, and Thorin replied with an acknowledgement of his own.

‘Greetings, Thorin Oakenshield,’ said Deas, Bilbo translating the words smoothly now he was more prepared for it. ‘My name is Deas. I believe you have already met some of our more impatient kin.’

‘Ah, yes!’ Bilbo said, breaking away from translating. He hastened to make another round of introductions, hailing the two new eagles as Tuit and Landroval.

‘The rest of the eagles are returning to the Eyrie,’ explained Bilbo when Thorin cast a curious eye to the rapidly disappearing shapes of the eagle flock.

‘Yes, our kin return to our nests,’ said Deas, and Bilbo began to translate for him, ‘though they may try to seek out that white warg and rider on their way back.’

‘What?’ snapped Thorin at the same time Bilbo said, ‘really?’

‘Of course, Bilbo,’ said Deas, Bilbo relating it, ‘when have you ever known us to let a warg go
when there is still the possibility of destroying them?'

‘The orc – the pale orc,’ Thorin said, tensely, struggling to keep his voice level, ‘has committed terrible crimes against my family. He will know no other justice save that of my sword and my sword alone.’

Bilbo was beginning to look increasingly worried, but he kept up his translation.

‘If you would like to go after him as you are now, injured and outnumbered, then by all means, go ahead,’ said Deas, and Bilbo tried to keep his voice even as he related this, and not include the coldness that was creeping into Deas’ tone.

Thorin clenched his jaw so hard at this that it looked as if it hurt. He looked to be seriously on the verge of doing exactly that – abandoning his quest and going after his grandfather’s killer.

Then Luaithre spoke up. ‘If he does not meet an end on our claws and beaks,’ she said, ‘then do you truly think he will not continue to pursue you? Really, I thought Dwarves were sensible Folk, but you’re being-’

The mounting tension broke as Bilbo had to censor himself mid-sentence, his expression one of absolute affront as he turned to Luaithre with a glare to say, ‘Luaithre! I’m not translating that! Don’t be so rude.

Luaithre gave a little caw that sounded like the eagle’s equivalent of a huff. Thorin took a deep, calming breath. As much as he was loathe to admit it, the eagles were right. But he vowed then and there that when they met the pale orc again, it would be on Thorin’s terms, and he would emerge victorious no matter what. This seemed to settle the roiling, burning sensation in the pit of his stomach, something he had not felt in a long time, not since the aftermath of the Battle of Azanulbizar.

However, he was certainly not going to tell the eagles they were right – he had enough gloating to be dealing with from Dwalin for the time being. Instead, he changed the subject.

‘Mister Baggins. I think the Company is eager to hear your story, but before that I have something to ask of you.’

‘I think we can forgo the Mister Baggins, don’t you?’ said Bilbo lightly, though he still looked a little unsure of asking even this of Thorin.

Thorin nodded. ‘I think we can, Bilbo.’

‘Thank you...Thorin,’ said Bilbo, as though trying it out. Another eagle – Tuit, was it? – gave a small ‘coo’ and Bilbo shot it a look. ‘Shush, you,’ he said.

Ignoring whatever had transpired, Thorin turned to walk back to the camp, expecting Bilbo to follow. The Hobbit did exactly that, with the addition of the eagles who all came to rest a short, respectful distance away from the camp.

Thorin came to stand in the centre of the rough circle. Immediately, the Dwarves’ chatter quietened. A little confused, Bilbo stood a little way away from Thorin.

This was going to hurt, but Thorin knew his duty, and he knew what Dwarven culture required of him in these matters. ‘Bilbo Baggins,’ he said, and the Hobbit’s eyes snapped back to him, ‘I have done wrong by you. In recompense, I offer you this.’
Thorin drew out a small dagger from his belt, and put the edge of the blade against the root of one of the braids that framed his face. Around him, the Dwarves were wincing in sympathy and sucking in sharp breaths, but Bilbo darted forward before he could make his cut.

‘No!’ Bilbo said, hand outstretched as if to stop Thorin physically, ‘please, don’t!’

Thorin frowned at him. ‘I am asking for your forgiveness, Bilbo. Do you refuse to give it?’

‘What? Oh! You’re forgiven! Consider it forgotten,’ Bilbo waved his outstretched hand, ‘please, there’s really no need for this. Is this how Dwarves ask for forgiveness? By offering the wronged party a braid?’

‘Aye, that’s the way it’s done,’ put in Balin.

‘That’s—well. It’s not needed, really it’s not,’ Bilbo insisted.

Thorin lowered the knife, uncertain. He had not expected Bilbo to protest so much. ‘I have done you a disservice for the entirety of our journey so far. Would you wave that away so easily?’

‘But I’ve also done you a disservice. All of you,’ admitted Bilbo, ignoring the low sound one of the eagles made. ‘I’ve lied to you about my past and kept it a secret. Would you demand that I cut off a lock of my hair, too?’

There were general murmurs of discontent from the Company at this. The eagles held their silence, intrigued by the whole farce, and Gandalf merely smiled around his pipe.

‘Well, this is not how we do it in the Shire,’ said Bilbo, ‘for Hobbits, we just say, “I’m sorry” and move on.’

There was a pause. Thorin expected Bilbo to go on, but it seemed that was it.

‘Yes, let’s do it the Hobbit way,’ Bilbo smiled brightly, warming to the idea, ‘why don’t you just say, “I’m sorry”, and I’ll forgive you, and then I’ll say it, and then… hopefully you’ll all forgive me, too.’

Thorin relaxed a little from his tense stance. Against all reasoning, he found the edges of his mouth curling upwards. He quickly put a stop to it.

‘Very well then,’ he said, sheathing the knife. ‘We’ll do it your way, if that’s what you want. Bilbo: I’m sorry.’

‘Thank you,’ Bilbo said happily. ‘Thorin… everyone. I’m sorry, too.’

This was met by various shouts of acceptances from the Company at large, from ‘don’t think about it laddie,’ from Balin to a cheerful, ‘I always knew something was strange about you!’ from Kili. Bilbo’s smile remained through it all, until the Company quietened and he turned back to Thorin.

‘I forgive you,’ said Thorin, ‘though I really don’t think you should be apologising to me.’

‘That’s the most begrudging acceptance of an apology I’ve ever heard,’ Bilbo chuckled, ‘but thank you.’

‘If we’re quite done with all this back and forth,’ said Gandalf drolly, I think it might be time for us to hear what Bilbo has to say.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Bilbo said, looking around at his willing audience and clapping his hands. Thorin retook
his place next to Dwalin, and Bilbo came to sit next to him. Battered and bruised though the Company was, as tired as each of them were, they all leant forward regardless, eager to hear Bilbo’s tale.

Bilbo smiled softly to himself, lost in another memory for a moment as he thought how to begin. He looked up, at the gathered Company and the eagles, and said,

‘Like most things in my life, this story starts with my mother, Belladonna...’

So Bilbo told his story to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, from the choice presented to him by Belladonna to the end of the war, and all that had passed in between. Some parts were hard to speak of, but the nature of storytelling granted Bilbo a little distance from his subject, as though he were talking of someone else. The Company proved to be a good audience, and would often stop the story to ask questions until they were shushed by others who wanted Bilbo to continue. But they gasped and laughed in all the right places. Sometimes the eagles would insist on clarifying or expanding parts, so Bilbo would have to translate what they said, despite not all of it being helpful – Tuit’s additions consisted mostly of bad jokes.

Bilbo spoke for so long that soon night fell and he still had more to say. Glóin, against all the odds, still had a flint and tinder on him, and they lit a fire to guard against the night’s chill. At long last, Bilbo reached the story’s end, telling of how he felt he needed to return to the Shire after seeing so much bloodshed. Some of the Company nodded their heads in silent agreement to this. Bilbo’s voice had gone hoarse by the time most of the Dwarves had exhausted their curiosity, and, one by one, the Company fell asleep where they had sat, until the only two who were left awake were Thorin and Bilbo.

Bilbo did not say it aloud, but the Company reminded him of puppies, falling asleep after a long day of play. Hardy though the Dwarves were, the battle had taken its toll, and he suspected they would all sleep straight through until morning, safe in the assurance that there were five fierce eagles to watch over them.

Throughout his telling, Bilbo had not dared to look at Thorin more than a handful of times. He had felt the Dwarf’s steady attention on him the entire way through, but Bilbo had known he would stumble and falter if he were to glance Thorin’s way once too often. Now, though, Thorin seemed ready to ask his own questions, and Bilbo was left with no choice but to turn and look at him.

‘Are you sure you do not want my braid?’ Thorin asked, voice low and hushed. ‘I have never misjudged someone as much as I have you, and now I learn you are a warrior, too.’

Bilbo hoped that he had caught Thorin’s tone right – he suspected the Dwarf was not being serious with that first part. ‘Please, let’s not go over the whole apology thing again,’ Bilbo said, ‘I think I’ve heard enough “I’m sorrys” for one day. ’

Thorin looked away, into the fire. He seemed to be considering his next words carefully. ‘This is not a criticism, Bilbo,’ he said at last, ‘but...why did you decide to hide what you are? The success of this journey relies on this Company, on the strength of each of us. If we were to never find out what you can do with a knife and spear, the Company would be weaker for it. ’

The line of Bilbo’s mouth tightened. ‘I know,’ he said. ‘It was foolish of me. But, you see, when I came back from the war, I thought...’ Bilbo trailed off. He was venturing into very private, personal territory, here. Taking in a little breath, he dared to look at Thorin and say, ‘I thought I had to suppress what I’d become – the person I had to be in order to survive the war. I thought...I thought I had to choose, and for a long time I chose to be a Hobbit.’
Firelight was falling pleasingly across Thorin’s fine features, on his straight nose and high cheekbones. ‘And now?’ Thorin prompted.

Bilbo smiled. The knot that had always sat above his heart was finally loosening, unravelling altogether.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘I don’t think I have to choose. Now I think I can be both.’

When dawn broke the next day it was to a decidedly groggy Company. They may have gotten a good night’s sleep, but they now came to realise that there was another need to be dealt with – they were all, without exception, extremely smelly. Steadily they rose, stretched and started to make their way down to the river to bathe. But one of them noticed that the Company was short one burglar.

‘Where’s Bilbo?’ Thorin asked of Kili and Fili as they started towards the river. Thorin also took note that there was only one eagle with them, its head tucked under its wing, still fast asleep. Kili and Fili shrugged, neither of them really awake yet.

‘Probably gone to get some food,’ suggested Fili. ‘Good thing, too, because I am starving.’

‘Master Fili is correct,’ said Gandalf over Thorin’s shoulder, ‘Bilbo woke before all of you, washed and left with the other eagles to hunt. He will be back soon, I am sure. In the meantime, I suggest we all follow his example.’

Thorin was about to point out that he hadn’t been worried, but was rather more concerned with the fact that their guard had apparently disappeared all of a sudden without warning. But Gandalf was already turning away, and Thorin didn’t bother. The problem of the missing burglar solved, Thorin joined the rest down at the river.

They were fortunate – the river’s current was slow and it was shallow around the edges – perfect for bathing. The sun warmed them as they shed their clothes, each of them taking pleasure in the way the river washed away the dirt and blood to leave them clean. A single bar of soap was passed around, used for both their clothes and their bodies and hair. Braids were loosened and re-braided, clothes set out on the shore to dry. It had never felt so good to be clean once more, and it was a thoroughly refreshed Company that emerged from the waters to sit about on the river back and let the sun dry them out.

The Dwarves had, for the most part, put their dried clothes back on by the time Balin spotted four dark shapes in the sky, rapidly approaching. It was the eagles, of course, and on the back of one sat Bilbo. As they drew nearer it became apparent that two of the eagles held something in their claws – deer, Thorin realised – two huge stags that would go a long way to fill the stomachs of hungry Dwarves. When Gandalf had said hunting, he had really meant hunting, Thorin thought.

The sight of food heralded a great amount of cheering from the Dwarves, and some who had still been swimming about in the shallows – like Kili and Fili – scrambled to get out, eager to eat. The two deer were deposited away from the camp, Bilbo sliding smoothly off the eagle’s back to receive numerous pats on the back from the Dwarves, who also took care to thank the eagles. Quickly a fire was set up, and Bombur and Bifur set about carving up the carcasses.

‘Here, Bilbo,’ Bofur said, catching the Hobbit before he go and help, ‘I have a little something for you.’
‘You do?’ Bilbo said, and watched in astonishment and Bofur reached into his coat to draw out something that was a little damaged, but utterly unmistakable to Bilbo.

‘Bofur,’ Bilbo breathed, staring in disbelief at the revealed tunic, ‘I don’t...how on earth did you managed to hang on to that?’

‘Well,’ said Bofur offhandedly, ‘when I saw you fight for your pack so hard, I thought you might have something in there you’d want to hold onto. I can see I was right, by your expression.’

‘You...I don’t know what to say. Thank you.’

‘Ah, don’t worry about it,’ he said with a dimpled smile, ‘I wasn’t really thinkin’ straight, I just grabbed a hold of the first thing I found on the floor when Gandalf did his...magic thing.’ He wiggled his fingers, which Bilbo supposed was the universal sign for magic.

‘But still,’ said Bilbo, ‘thank you. Of all the things you could have held on to, this is the one I treasure the most.’ He frowned, dismayed by a sudden thought. ‘I do hope you didn’t lose anything important to you in rescuing this.’

‘Nah,’ Bofur said, ‘Dwarves tend to keep everything important to them actually on them. For instance, I’m sure Glóin still has his locket, and I’ve still got this.’ He raised his hand so that Bilbo could see the bracelet around his wrist, peeking out between cuff and glove. A thick band of leather was tied with silver clasps around his wrist, and on it sat what appeared to be a narrow cylindrical piece of metal, completely devoid of any decoration or engraving.

‘It’s a special hair bead,’ Bofur explained at Bilbo’s questioning glance, ‘you’d be hard pressed to find a member of the Company that doesn’t have one of those about their person. Take a look at young Fíli’s hair beads next time you see him – he wears his in his hair.’

‘It’s blank,’ Bilbo noted, which he thought unusual. He remembered the few occasions he had seen a hair bead up close – the clasps and beads had always been adorned with tiny jewels or engraved with complicated patterns.

‘It’s supposed to be. It’s a courting bead.’

Bilbo’s eye brows shot up in surprise. ‘Really? I didn’t know we were expecting to find romance on this journey as well as gold. I would have packed my best waistcoat.’

Bofur chuckled. ‘It’s for good luck,’ he said, ‘handy, too. You never know when you might bump into your true love. Mine’s made out of the first ore I found by myself, and like every other Dwarf I first put it on my coming-of-age day. Haven’t taken it off since.’

‘But why is it blank?’

‘So you can engrave it when you meet your beloved, of course! You’re supposed to show how much you know about them by decorating it with designs to suit them. Giving a courting bead is considered a sure sign that you want to court. Makes it official. The other party accepts by returning a bead of their own.’

‘Does that mean you’re engaged?’

‘Engaged? Ha, no! Not at all. Just that you’re courting. Dwarf courting can go on for months, even years. You exchange little things along the way – gifts and so on. And then...well, I’m afraid I can’t talk about the rest.’ Bofur shot him a look with a twinkle in his eye. ‘Why so curious, Bilbo? Any reason you’re so interested in all of this?’
Bilbo raised an eyebrow right back. ‘Yes, Bofur,’ he deadpanned, ‘this is my way of telling you that I have feelings for you. Very strong feelings.’

Bofur fluttered his eyelashes at him, ‘ah, Mister Baggins! Such a moving speech,’ he put his hand to his chest. ‘It was the stone giants, wasn’t it? Our eyes, meeting across the abyss...’

‘The flashes of lightning in the background...’ continued Bilbo.

‘Strong possibility of death,’ grinned Bofur, and they both shared a laugh.

Bilbo shook his head. ‘Anyway. Thank you. With my dagger gone, I’m even more thankful to have this.’

He clasped his hand to Bofur’s shoulder for a moment, and then it was time for lunch.

When they had all filled their stomachs to bursting with venison – which took quite some time – they lay about in the sun, overcome with a laziness that they had not been afforded the luxury of so far on their journey. The eagles, too, were relaxing – Landroval and Luaihre were cleaning their feathers, Deas was winging lazily through the sky high above them, and Tuit was on the ground, being sketched happily by Ori. Dwarf and eagle both seemed very satisfied by this arrangement, Tuit at being drawn and Ori at having such an unusual subject to sketch, though Tuit kept trying to eat Ori’s charcoal every time the Dwarf looked away.

Bilbo was leant back on the grass, sunning himself, when Fíli approached him.

‘Mr. Baggins!’ Fíli said brightly.

‘Just Bilbo please, Fíli,’ Bilbo said, shading the sun with one hand so he could look at Fíli.

‘Bilbo. I’ve been told you lost your dagger,’ Fíli leant in a little and whispered, ‘defending my stubborn Uncle.’

Bilbo sat up. ‘I have,’ he said. The dagger had been with him for a very long time, and he mourned its loss.

‘Then you should take one of mine. I have throwing knives to spare, and I think one of mine would suit you,’ Fíli said, reaching into his coat as Bofur had done. This seemed to be a day for presents, Bilbo thought, bemused, as he was presented with the hilt of a fine Dwarven knife.

Around them, the Company had tensed and chatter had stopped, the majority of the Dwarves trying – and failing – to subtly listen in on Fíli and Bilbo’s conversation.

‘I offer you this dagger as a friend,’ Fíli said meaningfully, giving an amused glance towards the rest of the Dwarves. ‘It’s the least I can do, after all.’

Bilbo smiled as the Dwarves’ attention drifted away from them, satisfied by this clarification. He was glad Bofur had told him of the exchange of gifts, now – otherwise he would have no clue why there had been such a sudden interest in Fíli’s actions.

‘Thank you, Fíli,’ Bilbo said gratefully, taking the dagger.

‘With your spear and sword and dagger, now you’re as well-armed as any Dwarf!’ piped up Kíli.
‘You certainly fight like one,’ said Fíli.

‘That you do,’ Dwalin said, ‘especially when it comes to protecting another.’ This last part was said with a glance in Thorin’s direction.

Bilbo took great delight in grinning at Dwalin and saying, ‘like a Dwarf? Perhaps. But then you don’t know how fiercely an eagle can protect its own.’

Dwalin gave a bark of laughter at that.

Landroval perked his head up, chirping out a question to Bilbo, Luaithre adding her own agreement a moment later.

‘Luaithre and Landroval are asking if anyone would like to go flying,’ Bilbo related to the Dwarves.

‘I was just about to suggest the same thing – it’s a fine day for it.’

Fíli visibly shuddered. ‘Thank you for the offer, Luaithre, Landroval. But I’d prefer to stay on the ground.’

‘Aye, Dwarves were not made for flying,’ Dwalin agreed, turnig back to the task of sharpening his axe.

And then Kíli surprised everyone by saying in a quiet but determined voice: ‘I’ll go.’

‘You will?’ Fíli said in astonishment.

‘I’d like to try it when one of us isn’t in mortal danger,’ Kíli said dryly.

‘Excellent,’ Bilbo said, pleased that one of them had taken up the eagles on their offer. He sprung to his feet and looked over to Luaithre and Landroval. ‘There’s something that I haven’t tried in a long while,’ he said, and asked something of the eagles in their own language, to which they replied happily.

Bilbo ushered Kíli along, explaining as they moved to an open patch of ground. Behind them Landroval and Luaithre were stretching their wings, preparing to take off. ‘Come along Kíli, to the river with us. We’re not going to be riding on the eagles’ backs. They’ll pick us up in their talons.’

‘Is that safe?’ Kíli said. His nerves were starting to show, his bravado of moments before slipping away.

‘Quite safe,’ nodded Bilbo, ‘I’ve done this dozens of times before. Now, here’s what going to happen...’

On the bank of the river, Fíli watched, stomach churning, as his brother was picked up by Landroval. Despite his nerves, he spared a moment to laugh at Kíli’s yelp as he was plucked from the earth in surprisingly gentle claws, Luaithre doing the same to Bilbo a second later.

The odd pair flew a fair height from the ground and then banked to turn back towards the river. Fíli looked on, heart in his throat, gasping when he saw Landroval swoop in close to the surface of the water – was the eagle doing to just dump Kíli in the river? – but no, Fíli’s fears were unfounded. Landroval flew Kíli close enough to the surface for the Dwarf to skim along the top in an odd parody of a run. Kíli was clearly enjoying it – Fíli could hear his whoops of excitement from where he stood, and Fíli relaxed slightly.

Bilbo repeated Kíli’s path, dragging his toes in the water rather than trying to run, Luaithre letting out
a series of sing-song noises that sounded like laughter. They did this twice more each before Kíli was deposited – unharmed – on the shores of the river.

Kíli was grinning fit to burst, ‘you have to try it, Fíli!’ he gushed, ‘it’s a little strange at first, but it’s so much fun!’ Behind him, Landroval chirped.

Fíli couldn’t help but return his brother’s smile, but he was still adamant that flying was not for him. ‘No, I don’t think so,’ said Fíli, and he shook his head. ‘Good, solid ground, that’s what I like.’

‘Are you sure?’ Bilbo said, having just landed.

Fíli turned to answer his question. As he did so, he was utterly unaware of the whispered conversation taking place between his brother and Landroval behind his back.

‘I’m sure,’ Fíli frowned, getting a little annoyed that no one seemed to be listening to him.

‘I was unsure at first, too, you know,’ Bilbo went on, shooting a look towards Kíli over Fíli’s shoulder. As quietly as he could manage, Landroval took off. ‘But then I got used to it.’

Kíli was now so full of glee he was hoping from foot to foot.

‘And that’s fine for you, but I don’t think I’m going to change my mind over this. I’d take a deep, dark mine any day over- urk!’

Whatever Fíli had been about to say was cut off as he was lifted clean off the ground by Landroval. The eagle turned a blind ear to Fíli’s protests – though he did fly much closer to the ground this time – and quickly and promptly deposited Fíli in the middle of the river.

Kíli was doubled over in laughter by this point. He was still laughing by the time Fíli had swum back to shore to emerge dripping and with a rather menacing grin on his face.

‘Brother,’ Fíli said. Bilbo was trying to hide his laughter behind his hand but failing miserably.

Kíli, sensing danger, took off at a run, dodging Fíli’s first grab for him.

‘Come here, brother dearest,’ called out Fíli as he chased after Kíli, ‘I want to give you a hug!’

Kíli was trying his hardest to dodge, he really was, but he was also still laughing, which hindered his attempts to escape somewhat, and so it wasn’t long before Fíli managed to forcibly draw him into a sopping wet hug. Kíli let out a series of squawks, trying to free himself.

They’re standing very close to the river, Bilbo thought to himself. Well, this was far too good of an opportunity to pass up. As quietly and as quickly as he could, Bilbo took up his spear, crept forward to where the brothers were standing on the very edge of the water, and tapped the butt of his spear against the backs of Kíli’s knees. He then gave them an almighty shove.

Both Dwarves overbalanced and fell into the water with a splash. Now it was Bilbo’s turn to gasp for breath, overcome by laughter. Kíli and Fíli sat up, pushing hair out of their eyes. They shared a glance, nodded to each other, and without a word sprung after Bilbo.

Bilbo ran, and not a moment too soon, Kíli and Fíli in hot pursuit. He probably would have escaped if not for Luaithre, who stuck out her beak to trip Bilbo up as he ran past her.

Kíli and Fíli were on him in an instant, lifting him easily between them.

‘Luaithre, you traitor!’ Bilbo called back to the laughing eagle, before he, too, was thrown in the
water by the brothers. Fíli and Kíli raised their arms in victory, still shaking with subsiding laughter.

Back at camp, Thorin had watched the entire prank play out with a smile on his face. He seemed to be doing an awful lot of that, lately - smiling. He wondered if he should be worried about it.

Chapter End Notes

The response to the last chapter was simply amazing. Thank you - if I could, I'd give all of you a big hug and then dump you in the river.
On the Edge of the Wilds

Chapter Notes

Okay, so the Company was supposed to get through a bit of Mirkwood in this chapter, but then Bilbo and Thorin started talking and...well, they just wouldn't stop. I blame them entirely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As welcome as the day of rest had been, it was time to move on. They had no packs, nor any provisions to speak of, and when they rose on the second day they knew they needed to find somewhere to replenish their supplies before they ventured into Mirkwood. The relaxed, lazy air that had permeated the camp only the day before was gone, replaced with a niggling worry over their lack of food. The eagles could hunt for them again, certainly, but as they prepared to leave it became apparent that not all of them would be joining the Company for the journey going forward.

‘I must return to the Eyrie,’ Deas said to Bilbo. Behind them the Dwarves were making a breakfast out of the last of the venison and preparing to leave.

‘Really? So soon?’ said Bilbo, trying and failing not to sound dismayed.

‘I’m afraid so. But do not look so worried! Do you really think, after so much time apart, that I will wait so long again to see you?’

‘I don’t think you could stop him,’ said Gwaihir.

‘Besides,’ Deas went on, a touch of humour entering his voice, ‘someone must tell our King of his sons’ rebellion.’

At Bilbo’s bewildered, ‘rebellion?’ Luaithre explained, ‘we’re coming with you, Bilbo,’ she said. ‘All of us, to the end.’

‘Father will understand,’ Landroval said simply.

‘Eventually,’ added on Gwaihir.

Bilbo blinked and looked at each of them in turn. ‘You’d do that?’

‘Of course we would,’ said Tuit, ‘would you expect anything else from us? Besides, we’re not letting you out of our sight so soon after finding you again!’

‘I suspect King Grumach knew this would happen all along,’ Deas said with a rueful shake of his head, ‘he will likely not be surprised.’

Bilbo gave a soft laugh. He was deeply touched – but really, he should have known the eagles would be not so quick to leave. ‘Thank you,’ he said, heartfelt, despite knowing the eagles had no need for thanks.

‘But we won’t be able to go with you through Mirkwood,’ said Luaithre.
‘No,’ Deas lowered his head, ‘I must warn you, Bilbo – there is a dark and powerful force at work in
the forest, and of late it has grown darker still. We cannot fly over it. Whatever influences the forest
pollutes the very air above it, too. Solas flew too close last month, and he has been greatly weakened
ever since.’

Worry clenched at Bilbo’s heart. ‘Is he alright?’

‘He is recovering. He will be well again, don’t worry – he’s strong.’

‘So we won’t be much use to you for this part of your journey, I’m afraid,’ said Luaithre, ‘but we’ll
fly north and circle around Mirkwood. It’s a long flight, and it may take us some time. I think it’s
likely you’ll beat us to the Lonely Mountain, but we’ll be there soon enough.’

‘For now, though, we’ll remain with you until reach Beorn’s,’ Gwaihir said.

‘Ah, yes,’ said Bilbo. Gandalf had told them that morning about the mysterious Beorn and the great
house that lay not far from where they had set up camp. ‘What do you know if him?’

‘Not much,’ admitted Deas, ‘but we have heard he can be moved to great kindness, if you catch him
at the right moment.’

That was a little heartening. Gandalf’s description of Beorn had been limited to telling the Company
not to anger him, and the wizard had taken great delight in deflecting all their subsequent worried
questioning.

‘I take my leave of you, now,’ Deas said, ‘goodbye Bilbo. Until we meet again.’

‘Goodbye, Deas,’ replied Bilbo, and stepped forward to have his forehead knocked gently by the
curve of Deas’ beak. He stood and watched as Deas took flight, stretching out his great wings,
circling higher and higher on the thermal airs until Bilbo could see him no more.

‘Don’t be sad, Bilbo,’ Luaithre said, ‘he’ll probably have to join us at the Lonely Mountain. King
Grumach will not want his sons to wander off without someone to keep them in check, and by
Manwë, I can’t do it alone. But besides that – why aren’t you wearing your tunic?’ This last part was
said with a tug at Bilbo’s shirt.

Bilbo tried to wave her away. He’d rather she didn’t tear his one remaining shirt at this point. If they
were going to meet Beorn, he’d like to be as presentable as possible, which was why he had decided
to wear his tunic, foregoing his waistcoat as the latter had lost most of its buttons. ‘Get away with
you, you’re as bad as Tuit!’ Bilbo said, ‘just give me a moment to put it on.’

He slipped it on over his shirt as the tunic was short sleeved, and, as the heavy fabric settled around
his shoulders, it felt as though this was the final piece to a puzzle that had long left been unsolved.

‘There you go,’ said Luaithre, ‘you look like Bilbo, now. We’ll fly above you, and guard your path.’
The others added their agreement, and with that the eagles took off with not a moment to spare – the
Dwarves were anxious to leave, and they were hoping to reach Beorn’s that afternoon.

The Dwarves’ reaction to his new clothing ranged from the bemused to the outright curious, and
Bilbo had to fend off a few inquisitive fingers tugging at the feathers, mostly from Kíli. Thorin
merely raised his eyebrow at him. As the Company moved forward in its customary straggling line,
Thorin somehow managed to end up walking beside Bilbo in the middle of the group – Gandalf was
leading them up at the head of the Company, as he knew the way.

‘Are your eagle kin to leave us soon?’ said Thorin as they walked.
‘Yes,’ Bilbo said, ‘but they’ll meet up with us on the other side of Mirkwood. Deas has to return to
the nest, though – he’s the King’s commander, and he’ll be needed to defend the Eyrie.’

Thorin took in this information for a moment, and then said, ‘it would be very handy if they could fly
us over Mirkwood.’

Bilbo snorted inelegantly at this. ‘They’re eagles, not packhorses,’ Bilbo said, trying not to feel
irritated on behalf of his kin. ‘Besides, they can’t. Mirkwood is too dangerous for them to fly over.’

‘Too dangerous even for an eagle?’

‘There’s something about the forest that forbids them from flying over it. Deas told me that his
brother, Solas, had been taken ill from flying too close.’

‘This is ill news,’ Thorin said darkly.

‘Yes,’ said Bilbo. ‘It is.’

They lapsed into a silence that, after a few minutes, began to border on uncomfortable.

‘Are you feeling well?’ said Bilbo, not just to break the quiet – he was still a little worried over
Thorin’s wounds.

‘I am. Óin looked over my wounds last night, and whatever magicks the wizard cast over me have
done their work. I am nearly mended.’

‘That’s good,’ said Bilbo. The awkward silence was back again, but thankfully not for long – Thorin
decided to break it this time.

‘Let me take a look at your spear,’ Thorin said.

Bilbo looked at him, bemused. ‘I think there was supposed to be a “please” in there, somewhere,’ he
said, but relented and handed the spear over.

Thorin looked it over for a few paces and gave a little ‘hmm’ in thought. ‘It’s an unusual blade, to be
sure. The wood of the shaft is Ash-‘ Bilbo decided not to say that he had already known this ‘-and
has been likely changed once or twice. And the spearhead is...old, and very sharp. This is good
work.’ He sounded a little surprised. ‘It’s very old,’ he said, almost to himself. ‘We don’t use these
rivets anymore,’ he tapped something near the spearhead that Bilbo couldn’t see. ‘Not since the
Second Age.’

‘It’s Dwarven?’ Bilbo said, incredulous.

‘It is,’ Thorin sounded oddly pleased. ‘Though I am not sure which clan it has come from.’

Thorin handed the spear back to Bilbo. ‘Well I never,’ said Bilbo, taking it in his hands once more.

‘How did you come by it?’

‘It was Tuit,’ said Bilbo, still staring at the spear. He felt as though he were seeing the weapon in a
whole new light. ‘He’s a bit of a magpie – he gifted it to me for my coming-of-age, though for
Hobbits that’s the wrong way around.’ At Thorin’s questioning look, he added, ‘Hobbits give others
gifts on their birthday.’

Thorin gave a little ‘hmm’ of understanding. The silence, when it drifted over them again, was a little
more comfortable this time.
After a few moments, Bilbo caught sight of Kíli and Fíli up ahead. The brothers were trying to smother their laughter but failing completely, and Bilbo could now see why. They had apparently been playing a game that involved putting as many flowers and clumps of grass – and was that a pinecone? – as they could in Óin’s hood without the Dwarf noticing. Poor Óin, who was walking a little ahead of Kíli and Fíli, had no idea what was going on.

‘They are quite the handful, aren’t they?’ said Bilbo fondly.

‘That they are,’ agreed Thorin, and Bilbo thought he could detect a shade of warmth to his words. ‘Their mother – my sister – is the only one that can really keep them in line.’

‘Your sister? Oh, of course – I knew they were you sister-sons, but I’ve never heard you speak of her.’

‘Yes - my younger sister. Her name is Lady Dís, and she is quite formidable.’

‘Well, she would have to be, with those two as sons!’ laughed Bilbo. ‘She lives in the Blue Mountains, doesn't she?’

Thorin nodded his assent. ‘I will ask her to look over your spear, next time I see her – she was always better at identifying a weapon’s maker than I.’

‘Will she join you, when Erebor is retaken? Will she come back to the mountain?’

‘I suspect she will, and no one will be able to persuade her otherwise, even if they wanted to. We will send out the word to our kin when we retake Erebor – I would think many will choose to return. I will need Dwarves to rule over if I am to be King, after all.’

‘And then what?’ Bilbo said. He had always wondered what was going to happen after Erebor was retaken, and now he had a chance to find out.

Thorin looked a little startled at the question, as though he hadn’t really thought of it before. ‘I suppose...I suppose we will re-open the mines again first of all, so we can trade. There was talk of a vein of mithril, in the days before the dragon came.’

‘And that’s...good, is it?’

Thorin didn’t seem to know what to do with his eyebrows – he frowned, then raised them both, then frowned again. ‘You don’t know what mithril is?’ he said, slowly. ‘Mister Baggins, this is a travesty. Allow me to educate you.’

Bilbo had a distinct feeling that he was about to be lectured on metals and minerals whether he liked it or not.

As they walked Thorin told Bilbo of the craftsmanship of the Dwarves, of how they could turn the most precious metals into something more wondrous still. How they could pull lumps of rock from the earth and chip away at them until they found the beautiful stone hidden inside, like a gift from Mahal himself, just waiting to be found. Thorin spoke of the deep, dark mines, tunnelling into the earth’s embrace, the revelation of finding the glimmer of gold in the pitch-black, the light at the end of the tunnel. Despite having no love for dead rocks or gold, Bilbo found himself listening with rapt attention to everything Thorin said. Thorin’s voice had become touched with a passion for his art, and for the first time conversation flowed between them easily, all the way to Beorn’s.
The day had continued to be extremely warm and humid, and by the time Gandalf halted the Company they were all sticky with sweat. Gandalf announced that they were on the edge of Beorn’s territory, and would have to be careful in making their approach. The land had begun to change in the last half an hour of their trek, and before them lay what seemed to be endless miles of flowering meadows, with huge bees weaving in and out of the clover. Luaithre landed soon after Gandalf had given his instructions to go in two by two, in five minute intervals.

‘This is where we part ways,’ she said to the Company. The three other fledglings were still circling in the sky above them. Then, on a more personal level, she said to Bilbo, ‘we will see you on the other side. Be careful, Bilbo. The road ahead is treacherous.’

‘So everyone keeps reminding me,’ Bilbo sighed.

‘We thank you for the aid and we will not forget it,’ said Thorin, ‘when we retake Erebor, we will gift you with gold, I swear it.’

Luaithre’s golden eyes turned to Thorin with a cool gaze. ‘Your offer is kind, I know, because Dwarves value their treasure. But eagles have no need for trinkets. Whatever we have done and whatever we will do in the future is done out of friendship. We do not need to be paid in gold and gemstones.’

Thorin looked as though he were about to say something snide, so Bilbo stepped forward and diverted Luaithre’s attention to saying good bye. He embraced her, and with one last nod to him, she rejoined her kin in the sky. The rest of the Dwarves added their voices in farewell as she left, though Thorin remained stubbornly silent.

‘Now, come along Bilbo,’ said Gandalf, ‘we shall go first, although I rather think you should take off that tunic of yours.’

‘Why?’ said Bilbo.

‘Because, my dear Hobbit, Beorn might be adverse to the eagle feathers you have so skilfully sown on it.’

Bilbo frowned, ‘but why, though? I didn’t know he was much for fashion, this Beorn.’

‘Nevermind,’ Gandalf said with a resigned sigh, ‘just be as quiet as you can, but above all: be polite.’

With that strange exchange done, Gandalf and Bilbo made their approach. The meadow grew thicker and thicker as they made their way in, and Bilbo caught sight of two horses watching them in the distance.

‘Likely telling Beorn he has visitors,’ Gandalf said to Bilbo as the two horses ran off.

They didn’t have to wait long to meet Beorn. Soon they crested a hill and a huge wooden house was revealed to them, its inhabitant standing before it, leaning on his axe. The mountain of a man hailed them.

‘Good afternoon,’ said Gandalf, and went on to explain their dire situation, though Bilbo noted the wizard referred to only the two of them, not to the Company waiting to join them.

‘I may give you aid, if you’d tell me this story of yours,’ said Beorn grudgingly after Gandalf had finished speaking his piece, ‘but what’s with this little fellow? You’re as small as my thumb and
wearing feathers on your clothes.’

Bilbo took offence to that, despite in truth barely reaching Beorn’s knees in height. But there was a tension in Beorn’s tone when talking of the feathers that made Bilbo wary. He decided to be honest and hope that would satisfy, but Gandalf cut him off before he could begin.

‘Oh, it’s a custom of Hobbits, you see,’ said Gandalf, ‘no animals harmed.’

‘A custom?’ Beorn said slowly.

This time Bilbo managed to speak up before Gandalf could start on whatever ridiculous untruth he was cooking up. ‘They’re from my friends,’ Bilbo said, ‘they were given to me as a gift. I count the Eagles of Manwë as my kin.’

‘You are their kin?’ snorted Beorn disbelievingly.

‘I am,’ said Bilbo, quietly but firmly.

Beorn fixed him with a fierce gaze, but Bilbo had lived with eagles for years, and eagles have the fiercest gazes of all. He did not look away.

‘Hmm,’ said Beorn after a long pause, ‘I have never met the Eagles of Manwë, but they have always kept a respectful distance away from my lands, and never have I known them take an animal from me,’ he grinned suddenly, revealing a mouth full of large, white teeth, ‘good killers of goblins, too. Come then, inside with you, and be quick about telling me this story.’

Gandalf and Bilbo both let out a breath and followed the changeable Beorn inside.

After the ridiculous events that followed and Gandalf had managed – through storytelling and cunning – to get the entire Company into Beorn’s hall, they were presented with dinner. The Company was united in its shock when they saw that their servers were to be animals. Beorn said something to the various sheep and dogs that were helping to serve, something in another language that made Bilbo’s sharp ears prick up. Strangely, Bilbo could understand bits and pieces of Beorn's commands, and could recognise some words here and there from the eagles’ language. But when he tried to speak to the sheep that was serving him in the eagles’ language, he received only a confused ‘baa’ in response, as well as a strange look from Nori, and he did not try again.

Beorn took his leave while the Company was feasting – there was still no meat, unfortunately, but they dug in all the same and did not complain as they had done in Rivendell. After the meal and when everyone was sitting around with full stomachs, smoking their pipes and relaxing before the hearth, Thorin announced that they would be leaving tomorrow afternoon, as soon as Beorn gifted them with supplies. No one was eager to move on, and Thorin’s declaration had muted the satisfied, happy feeling of being full and warm and safe. Bilbo settled down in his bedroll that night and rolled Luaithre and Deas’ words around in his head. As eager as the Dwarves were to press on and reach home, there was a dark path ahead of them; when sleep finally came upon him, uneasiness over the journey ahead followed Bilbo into his dreams.
The next day they could not leave immediately, much to Thorin’s frustration. Gandalf had informed them over breakfast – served again by animals – that Beorn had left to check on their story, and would probably not be back before lunch. At a loss for what to do, most of the Company drifted outside, to sit on Beorn’s porch or on the soft grass of his garden. Kili, Fili and Ori had come up with some sort of game that involved a lot of running about and then jumping on Ori to tackle him to the ground at random moments. Bilbo could hear Ori’s protests from where he sat, the young Dwarf insisting he should be told the rules again, or at the very least could Fili and Kili stop knocking him over?

‘They look like young tweens,’ Bilbo remarked as Thorin came to sit beside him.

‘They are not much older than that,’ Thorin said, ‘though, from what I hear, they are probably twice as old as you.’

‘Oh?’ said Bilbo, ‘how old are they, then?’

‘Kili is 77, Fili 82. I’m not sure about Ori – I think he might be 75.’

‘Ha! I knew Dwarves lived longer than Hobbits, but that’s extraordinary. I must seem like a child to you, being only fifty.’

‘Not really,’ said Thorin, ‘your grouchiness gives away your maturity.’

Bilbo spluttered. Had Thorin just made a joke? He tried not to gape at Thorin, settling instead for a small chuckle. ‘Says the grouchiest Dwarf of the lot,’ he retorted, and one corner of Thorin’s mouth lifted up in response.

They lapsed into silence for a while, watching as Ori managed to get his own back, taking Fili out in a spectacular tackle, roaring a battle cry.

‘Perhaps, now we have time to spare,’ started Bilbo hesitantly, ‘you can continue the lesson on Erebor?’

Thorin’s attention shifted away from the young Dwarves to focus on Bilbo.

‘I mean,’ Bilbo hastened to clarify, ‘I have no idea what Erebor looks like. I haven’t even seen an illustration of it in a book, and I’ve only caught a glimpse of the mountain itself, and that from a great distance.’

Thorin rubbed the back of his knuckles against his mouth. ‘It’s hard to describe,’ he admitted, ‘and I am not a great storyteller. But I think I can try another way. Ori!’

Ori turned at the sound of his name, neatly sidestepping Kili’s charge. ‘Yes, Mister Thorin?’

Thorin beckoned him over. ‘Do you have a pencil and paper?’ he asked when Ori had approached, and Ori nodded, rummaging around in the front of his coat. A pencil and a piece of paper were quickly produced, which Thorin took.

Bilbo raised his eyebrows, amused. ‘Do you have a pen and paper with you at all times?’ he asked.

‘You never know when you might need it,’ shrugged Ori, and was called back into the fray.

Bilbo shook his head. Practical Dwarves, he thought, fondly. Thorin was already sketching out something on the paper, adding in broad lines and marker points for certain features.
‘Are all Dwarves skilled at drawing?’

‘No,’ said Thorin, not looking up from his work. Even at this early stage Bilbo could see an outline emerging. ‘Ori is an artist, but most Dwarves are taught the skill of draughtsmanship for their work. It may not be as pleasing to the eye as something Ori would produce, but it will do the job.’

Bilbo kept quiet after that, watching Thorin sketch. He was fascinated by the way the drawing was emerging, Thorin steadily building up line after line until Bilbo could clearly see the subject of Thorin’s pencil. The gates of Erebor had been rendered onto paper – huge and imposing, flanked by two colossal Dwarf statues. A river wound its way out of the front gates and provided some sense of scale.

‘It’s amazing,’ Bilbo breathed, taking the offered drawing, ‘your illustration as well as the gates. They’re huge – I can’t even imagine it.’

‘I thought that was the idea of drawing them out,’ Thorin said, voice dry, ‘but if you’re surprised by this, then I wonder what you’ll be like when you see these are only one of three gates.’

‘Three?’ Bilbo’s mind could not comprehend three gates, all of a similar size to this one. He looked closer at the drawing, noting that Thorin had even included some of the complex architectural designs that decorated the gate’s columns. ‘I think I recognise this little design,’ said Bilbo unthinkingly, ‘it looks remarkably similar to something I saw in Rivendell...’

Thorin was giving him a look.

‘...a design the Elves obviously stole from the Dwarves! Sneaky Elves,’ Bilbo finished smoothly. The half-smile of before was nothing compared to what was now spreading across Thorin’s face, as though he couldn’t help it. Thorin ducked his head away a little, attempting to hide it, carefully schooling his features once more - but Bilbo caught a hint of teeth before he did so. Bilbo’s heart felt like it was being squeezed tight, and he tried to tamper down on his feelings of victory at coaxing a proper smile from Thorin.

‘But conniving Elves aside – three? Isn’t that a bit excessive?’

‘When have you ever known Dwarves not to be as prepared as they can be?’ Thorin’s expression darkened suddenly, ‘though no one can prepare for a dragon.’

‘So, what are the other two like?’ Bilbo said quickly, trying to steer the conversation away from talk of dragons. ‘Are they similar to this one?’

‘No, they are much more ornate,’ said Thorin, his scowl receding a little. ‘They are called the Sun and the Moon gates, for one is decorated in gold and the other in silver. But in size they are fairly similar.’ Thorin’s gaze went a little distant, ‘the Moon gate is particularly famous, because it was a gift from my great-grandfather to my great-grandmother.’

Bilbo blinked. ‘I’m sorry, but did you just say it was a gift?’

‘Yes, a gift. My great-grandfather took great pride in designing and commissioning the gate, and he was involved with most of the construction work, too.’

‘A whole gate. As a gift,’ Bilbo repeated, unable to get past this fact.

‘Yes,’ Thorin said again, amused by his shock, ‘it caused quite a bit of excitement, as you can imagine. My great-grandfather was courting my great-grandmother at the time, and Dwarves are known to give large and thoughtful gifts to their intended right before they propose.’
‘That’s...well, that’s quite the gesture,’ Bilbo said, at a loss for words.

‘It was. She responded by making him a full set of armour - the greatest armour that has ever been created in Erebor. She was not as rich as he was, you see, but she was a skilled blacksmith, and she poured all her knowledge and her love into creating a wondrous set of armour. So, you see, they each gave a gift that would protect the other. The exchange made many a Dwarf’s heart flutter, and the story is still told to this day.’

‘I never would have guessed,’ chuckled Bilbo, ‘that Dwarves were such romantics.’

‘We can be, if the urge strikes us,’ said Thorin, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. ‘I’m sure many others would share your view - the other Folk of this world seem to think us as cold and as heartless as the metals we mine. But any fool that spends some time with a Dwarf will know that not to be true.’

‘Well, this fool is glad to be proved wrong,’ said Bilbo. Then his lips curled into a cheeky smile and he gave Thorin a side-long look. ‘And you, Thorin? Are you one of those Dwarves whose hearts were set a-flutter by this tale?’

‘Very few young Dwarves have not gushed over the telling, and most take a trip to the Moon Gate specifically to see the skill of the design,’ Thorin said, which wasn’t really an answer at all. Bilbo would never have teased Thorin, before, but with this new and more approachable Thorin - who graced him with smiles - he felt he could.

‘Is the entire line of Durin like this? Are you all secret romantics?’ pressed Bilbo, and tried not to crow at Thorin’s resulting indignant huff.

‘It’s considered a virtuous trait, you know – to be romantic,’ Thorin said with a haughty look. ‘It’s why the story has been re-told so many times,’

‘You are one of those Dwarves, aren’t you? One of the ones who sighed happily at your grandfather’s gesture and went out of your way to visit the gate.’

Thorin was apparently choosing to ignore Bilbo’s wide grin. ‘No,’ he said, ‘I am not. And even if I was, the story loses its effect after your grandfather repeats it for the hundredth time over dinner.’

There was a beat.

‘And if I have visited the gate, it was only to admire my great-grandfather’s skill,’ Thorin added, and Bilbo couldn’t hold back anymore. He collapsed into laughter. The sight of Thorin, proud and dignified, saying this last part was too much, though Bilbo suspected he had only said it to make Bilbo laugh.

Thorin sat and waited patiently for Bilbo’s laughter to subside, but the half-hidden smile was back again, reassuring Bilbo that he was not alone in his amusement.

‘Thank you, Thorin,’ Bilbo said, and he wasn’t sure if he was thanking the Dwarf for the drawing, the explanation or the laughter. Probably all of them at once.

‘You’re welcome, Bilbo,’ said Thorin. He hesitated – a first for Thorin, Bilbo had never seen him hesitate before – and appeared to be on the cusp of asking Bilbo something when Fíli interrupted, shouting from the other side of the garden to request Bilbo’s expertise in identifying something.

Bilbo shot Thorin an apologetic look. Fíli seemed quite insistent on his presence.

Thorin all but rolled his eyes. ‘Go on. Fíli and Kíli will likely not let up until they’ve dragged you
out whatever they’re doing. But be ready to move the moment Beorn returns.’

Bilbo nodded and took his leave, jogging over to where Kili, Ori and Fili were all crouched around something. Thorin watched him go, and then returned to his paper, turning over the finished drawing so that he had a clean sheet in front of him once more. As the group of young Dwarves and one Hobbit inspected Beorn’s plants, Thorin found himself sketching something out absent-mindedly. The rough lines steadily started to reveal a breastplate on the page. Thorin cast a critical eye towards where Bilbo was leaning down – he could clearly see the far-too exposed line of the Hobbit’s neck even from where he sat. The tunic Bilbo was wearing would do little to protect him, and the Hobbit didn’t even own any chainmail to sit beneath it. If he were to wear armour it would have to be light, Thorin mused, warming to the idea and adjusting the breastplate’s design a little. If Bilbo’s fighting style was quick, flexible and based around fast strikes, then any protection would have to suit that. Shoulder guards might be out of the question, unless Thorin could ensure they wouldn’t restrict Bilbo’s movement, but vambraces might be useful. He added these to the paper, too. Perhaps he could even design a flexible collar to protect Bilbo’s neck. As for decoration, Thorin found it natural to draw out overlapping feathers on the breastplate, flowing around the shoulders and chest – the metal would be rose-gold in colour, with a lighter gold inlay for the feathers. He could continue the feather design with the vambraces, but, to indicate Bilbo’s Hobbit-heritage, the feathers could shift into leaves half-way down, with a few flowers budding around the wrist joint.

A burst of laughter from Kili caused Thorin to stop and realise exactly what he had been doing. A complete outline for a set of armour was now down on paper, and as Thorin looked at it he came back to his senses with a grimace. Shaking his head at himself, Thorin stood up with every intention of throwing the piece of paper into the fire – Mahal knew he would never hear the end of it if Dwalin found it.

Somehow, though, the piece of paper did not end up in the fire, but in the pocket of Thorin’s coat.

The conversation between Thorin and Bilbo had not gone unnoticed. Balin had observed Thorin and Bilbo’s exchange with a sharp eye and an amused smile. He tapped his pipe against his lip, considering the situation, and caught Ori as the young Dwarf tried to pass him.

‘Ori, lad,’ Balin said to him, ‘I have a task for you, if you’re amenable.’

‘What is it, Mister Balin?’ said Ori politely.

Balin gave a rather confused and hesitant Ori a set of instructions, but Ori agreed to it nonetheless. That done, Balin leant back and wondered where his brother had gone to, and if Nori had already started a betting pool.

Beorn returned just after lunch in far happier spirits than before - he had found their battleground and now knew their story to be true. He took great delight in showing them the warg and rider he had happened upon on the way back – the warg’s fur nailed to a fencepost, an orc’s head on a pole. He was also, thankfully, much more inclined to provide them with packs for the way forward, as well as advice for Mirkwood. They were instructed to never, ever stray from the path, and that they would likely not be able to find anything to eat once inside the forest. Water was more a problem, as even
the stream that crossed the path was polluted and they were warned not to drink from it, even if desperate.

They were each given a pack of food, a huge skin for water and a pony to ride as far as the edge of the forest, but despite now being much better prepared for the path through Mirkwood, it was a grim-faced Company that saddled up to leave Beorn’s that afternoon. The Dwarves promised to repay Beorn for his kindness, which Beorn waved off, much to their surprise. He stood by his gate, in the exact same spot Bilbo had first laid eyes on him, and watched them go, offering no farewell, nor any wishes for a safe journey.

Beorn had told them it would take four days of riding to reach Mirkwood, but they were eager not to waste any more supplies than they needed to outside of the forest, and so they pushed their mounts hard and managed to arrive at the very border of the forest on the evening of the third day. They made camp in Mirkwood’s shadow, each of them trying not to look at the path that wound away into the trees. Bilbo was unnerved to see that the path seemed to disappear altogether just a few feet inside the forest, and though he sat and stared for quite some time, he could not make out even the outline of a branch in the inky-black tunnel that lead away between the trees.

The next morning Gandalf announced that he could go no further with the Company. This, and the fact that they had to send the ponies back to Beorn, provoked a great deal of dismay and anger from the Company, but Gandalf would not be swayed on either front. The threat of Beorn’s wrath made them relent and release the ponies, but the Dwarves proved to be more stubborn over the matter of Gandalf’s apparent abandonment of them at a crucial and dangerous part of their journey. The argument came to an end Gandalf snapped at them and hinted that he had duties to the south that he had no choice but to fulfil. Begrudgingly, the Dwarves let him go.

‘I will see you again, Bilbo,’ Gandalf said as he mounted his horse. ‘Take care, heed my warnings and you shall emerge from the forest safe and sound before you know it.’

‘Goodbye, Gandalf,’ said Bilbo.

‘Don’t look so glum! There is only one route onwards and you are standing before it. But I trust you, Bilbo Baggins, to keep these Dwarves in line and keep them from wandering off into danger.’

‘I’ll try,’ Bilbo said doubtfully, and with one last goodbye Gandalf took his leave.

Slowly, and as if they could put off venturing into Mirkwood altogether, the Company packed up and started down the path. The trees, gnarled and twisted and choked with ivy, grew denser with every step, their great boughs blocking out the sun, until the Company found themselves walking in a strange half-light. But still the path seemed to grow ever-dark, and their hearts sank as they realised this was to be their path for however long it would take them to traverse Mirkwood.

Bilbo paused on the threshold – caught between light and dark – and looked back one last time. The green meadows, drenched in sunlight, already seemed so far away. He could still just about feel the warmth of the late summer’s day on his face, and he savoured it for a moment before he rejoined the Dwarves in their steady march forwards, into the cold and the gloom.

It was the last time he was to see sunlight for many, many days.
The next chapter will likely be a big one, and will probably take a lot of work, so I'm predicting it won't be out until Sunday or Monday evening. However, I appear to have no self-control when it comes to writing this story, so hopefully it won't take too long.

I am trying to research armour and weapons as I go along, but if anyone sees any errors, please let me know!

To the readers who keep coming back and commenting and kudo-ing and bookmarking: come here, let me bake you cake and biscuits and make you tea. Thank you.
The Sun Fades

Chapter Notes

Translations for the Khuzdûl can be found in the author's notes at the end of the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo cannot imagine a time in which Mirkwood was known as the Greenwood. Nothing that grew under the arches of the trees could be called green, and he looked in vain for a single plant that did not look diseased; his inner gardener was offended by the sight of trees and vegetation so twisted they were unrecognisable, but worst still was the lack of any sort of breeze. The air on the shadowed path was close and uncomfortable, unmoved by even the slightest stirring of wind, and Bilbo quickly began to long for the feel of a breeze – any breeze at all – passing over his skin and ruffling his hair. He found it was making him restless, and there was a constant niggling sensation at the back of his mind like he had forgotten something of great importance. His sharp hearing did not help matters – Mirkwood was quiet beyond belief, and with no wind to rustle the leaves the forest stood still and unmoving. There were no animal cries, no birdsong - the loss of birdsong was a particularly hard blow for Bilbo – he was so used to the natural, shifting sounds of the wild that he began to hear them of his own violation, and every time he would turn his head to hear the chirping of a bird a little clearer, he realised he was imagining it. This happened far too frequently for his peace of mind.

The Dwarves, at least, were faring a little better. The lack of light and the sense of being in an enclosed space made Mirkwood not too dissimilar to a mine, but the Dwarves shared Bilbo’s unease in a different sense, for even in the darkest, deepest mine there was still the sound of dripping water and a breeze that whistled through the tunnels and cracks in the rocks.

They had quickly discovered that even the comforting glow of a fire was beyond them – the wood of Mirkwood burnt with a sickly flame that quickly spluttered and died, no matter how much coaxing Glóin attempted. Sunset brought a new problem, for what little light had managed to fall through the thick overhead canopy dimmed and vanished altogether, leaving them in complete darkness. This was very unnerving for Bilbo, who found that his night vision – while sharper than an average Hobbit’s – was of no use at night, and he was all but blind. There was a great deal of bumping into each other and cursing that first night, as even the Dwarves’ excellent vision was challenged by the all-encompassing gloom. Bilbo had not been able to sleep much, his back crawling with the sensation of eyes that watched and waited from in amongst the trees.

Bilbo’s foul mood only worsened when found himself sneezing on the fifth day. Blast it all, to get a cold now! It had been so long since he’d last had a cold – after a brief spell of thinking about it, he realised that the last cold he had had was during the first winter at the Eyrie. Bilbo snorted - how unused to the harsh mountains he had been back then. He’d been miserable and stuffy-nosed for a good two weeks until he’d toughened up, shrugged off the cold, and started to revel in the bleak climate, not struggle in it. He would just have to do the same with his current cold, he decided. Mind over matter and all that.

There was a brief burst of sound as something scuttled through the undergrowth, then the forest returned to its eerie quite.

‘Gives you the creeps, doesn’t it?’ Bofur remarked, catching Bilbo’s wary glance at what lay off the
‘Just a bit,’ said Bilbo. ‘It’s just not natural, and I-’ the rest of his sentence was lost to a sneeze.

‘Oh no,’ Bofur clucked in sympathy, ‘not getting a cold, are we?’

‘We are indeed. Most inconvenient,’ sniffed Bilbo. He dipped a hand into his trouser pocket, drawing out a square of material.

Bofur’s eyes widened. ‘Is that-

‘It is,’ Bilbo smiled, using what had once been Bofur’s coat pocket to blow his nose. ‘It makes quite a good handkerchief.’

Bofur chuckled warmly and shook his head, the earflaps of his hat bouncing with the movement. ‘I cannot believe you’ve kept that. ’

Bilbo took on a tone of mock-indignation. ‘Of course I have,’ he said, ‘it’s like a good luck charm, now – it’s managed to survive orc and goblins and wargs and come out unscathed. Unlike me.’

Bofur laughed it off before he went to rejoin his brother and cousin, but Bilbo could tell he was touched and amused in equal measure by the gesture. The exchange caused Bilbo to smile until he sneezed again and his head began to pound. As he went to blow his nose, his gaze fell on what looked like water dripping down the bark of the nearest tree. Their water had been rationed ever since they had ventured into the forest, and so the sight of it caused his heart to lift a little. Unthinkingly, he reached out with one hand to touch it, only to gasp in pain and snatch his hand back – it was not water at all, but a black, viscous substance that burnt at the tip of his index finger and left the skin there discoloured. Bilbo resisted the immediate urge to stick the finger in his mouth – instead, wincing, he tore a little fabric from the hem of his shirt and wound it around the still-smarting finger.

That night, the nightmares started. Bilbo woke, gasping and shaking, staring out at the darkness and clenching his blanket so tightly in his hands his fingers ached. He could still feel the biting cold and hear the howling of wolves, ghostly teeth snapping at his legs and the back of his neck, the nightmare following him into the waking world. He had hoped he had left behind the nightmares in the Shire, but his surroundings had clearly reawakened the deep-seated fears and terrible memories he thought he had shoved deep down in his mind, never to be thought of again. Bilbo steadied his breath – which was a little raspy, because apparently his body thought having a cough on top of a cold was a good idea – and attempted to work out if anyone had overheard him. Dori was on watch duty, and gave no indication he had overheard Bilbo’s night-terrors, and it seemed that everyone else was still blessedly asleep. Still, the nightmare clung to him and made his body tight with tension, curled up into a tense ball and listening for any hint of an oncoming attack.

The nightmares became a regular occurrence. He was lucky he did not tend to scream or shout whilst in the throes of his nightmares, or someone would have surely heard him. As it was, he would wake once or twice a night – they seemed to be increasing in frequency – and would be unable to get to sleep for many hours in the aftermath. He did not allow his lack of sleep to cause him to falter – he kept pace with the Company and gave no sign of his sleep-deprivation save for the dark circles beneath his eyes. But his cold seemed to be wavering on the edge of something worse, occasionally wracking his body with shivers and making his joints and muscles ache. More worryingly, with each day that passed he found it more and more difficult to wake up in the morning, and there were times when he found it a struggle to breathe. The Dwarves were sympathetic, but there was little they could do for an ordinary cold. All of this together made for a very miserable and very irritable Hobbit.
And yet, it must be said that it was not all doom and gloom. The Company kept each other happy along the way, singing songs and bolstering each other’s mood as much as they could, and Bilbo was suitably distracted from his troubles on the evening of the seventh day when Ori approached him after dinner.

The young Dwarf looked very nervous and drew near Bilbo gingerly. Bilbo was confused by his behaviour – there was no reason for Ori to be hesitant around him by this point, especially now they were firm friends.

Ori said nothing and stood silently, book tucked firmly against his chest. ‘Are you alright, Ori?’ Bilbo prompted.

‘Yes - I’m fine, thank you Bilbo!’ Ori said in a rush. Then, with a steadier voice, ‘I was wondering, if you don’t mind, if I could perhaps ask you about Hobbits?’

Bilbo blinked. ‘Well, of course!’ he said easily, ‘but we’re not that interesting, really. There’s not much to know. Why do you ask?’

‘It’s for the...book,’ said Ori, ‘and I’m sure it’s...very interesting stuff! You’re so different from Dwarves, you see, so I thought it might be good to add it in. Bit of...background information.’

‘You’re welcome to ask me anything, Ori. Come, sit down and stop hovering,’ he said, not unkindly, ‘and let me bore you with Hobbit facts.’

Ori smiled in relief and did just that, opening his book and taking out a pen and ink.

‘Where would you like to start?’

Ori twirled the pen though his fingers, thinking. ‘What about...well, what’s the most important thing to Hobbits?’

‘That’s a number of things,’ Bilbo said with a self-depreciating smile, ‘including food, gardening and gossip. But family is fairly high on the list, too.’

‘I think we share the first and last of those,’ Ori said while he scribbled away in his book.

‘Yes, food,’ Bilbo gave a little despairing shake of the head, ‘if you Dwarves are particular about your meat, then it’s nothing compared to a Hobbit and his meal. It’s very important to us. I caused a bit of a stir when my cousin found out I ate just four meals a day, not seven.’

Ori stopped writing. ‘Seven?’ he said, agog.

‘Yes, seven,’ Bilbo said with a great deal of amusement at Ori’s expression. ‘It’s the standard number. But after I spent time with the eagles I found I couldn’t stomach much more than four meals. My family just couldn’t understand it. It doesn’t help that Hobbits view giving food and enjoying food as a sign of affection.’

‘And...love?’

Bilbo’s eyebrows rose. ‘Well, yes. In the later stages of courting it’s usual for Hobbits to make food for their intended.’

Ori was writing again, his eyes never leaving the page in front of him. ‘And what about the...the earlier stages? How does Hobbit courting begin?’
Bilbo’s eyebrows rose even higher. ‘It’s quite straightforward, really,’ he said, watching as a blush rose on Ori’s cheeks, ‘you talk and get to know each other, and then, to start courting officially, you give a flower to the other in front of witnesses. Most do it at a dance. To accept the offer, you just give a flower back, or ask for a dance – whichever is more suitable.’

Ori was quiet as he took all of this down.

‘What flower you choose is important,’ Bilbo continued, ‘but...that’s the way it’s done.’ He took a deep breath and said, very carefully, ‘Ori, is there a reason you’re asking me how Hobbits court?’

The blush was very obvious now. ‘No, no reason!’ Ori squeaked with a nervous laugh, ‘just scholarly interest.’

‘Ori, as flattered as-‘

‘Thank you, Bilbo!’ said Ori before Bilbo could finish sentence, ‘that’s really very helpful,’ he snapped the book shut and stood up. ‘Really, thank you very much! That’s enough to be getting on with, I think. Goodnight!’

‘Goodnight, Ori,’ Bilbo replied, utterly bemused. He watched the young Dwarf walk back to his brothers with a rising sense of trepidation. He truly hoped that Ori had merely been curious about Hobbit culture and had been simply been embarrassed about asking such questions, instead of the other option his mind had conjured up. It wasn’t that he minded the possibility of Ori having feelings for him, but he wanted to make it clear that he wasn’t interested in the Dwarf beyond friendship. Bilbo shrugged mentally. Ah, well – Ori was young. Even if he did have romantic inclinations towards Bilbo, he was sure to move on soon enough.

Romance had not been a feature of Bilbo’s life since he was a tween. He’d had the usual dalliances with other Hobbits of his age, something that was seen as perfectly normal and harmless, but after his return to the Shire Bilbo had not felt much inclined to look for a partner, and he hadn’t exactly been overwhelmed by suitors. Any Hobbit who might have thought of courting him were almost certainly put off by his reputation as a very eccentric fellow inclined towards adventures.

No, Ori’s strange inquiry was nothing to worry about, Bilbo thought to himself while he opened up his bedroll. In a way it was reassuring, because even in such an awful place as Mirkwood, the Company still had the potential for normal, awkward conversations.

‘Well, Master Ori, what did you find out?’ asked Balin the next day when the Company was on the march again.

Ori shot a careful look towards the front of the line to where Thorin and Bilbo were conversing quietly. He leant into Balin with every intention of relaying the information, but was stopped before a single word could be uttered.

‘What are you two gossiping about?’ Dwalin barged in.

‘Ah, Dwalin – you should listen to this, too. Ori here was just about to tell me some vital information that should help with the Thorin and Bilbo situation.’

‘What situation? They’re getting along fine, now.’

‘Well of course they are. We’re not talking about that! We’re talking about...you know – the situation.’ Dwalin still looked blank at this, so Balin sighed, lowered his head and gave Dwalin a significant look from under his brows.
Comprehension dawned at once on Dwalin’s face. ‘No,’ he said disbelievingly, ‘no.’
‘Yes,’ said Balin, thankful they were all on the same page.
‘Those two? No. Really?’ If he wasn’t careful, Dwalin would get whiplash from looking between his brother and Thorin and Bilbo so quickly.
‘It’s a little obvious,’ Ori said, ‘once you’ve seen the way they talk to each other.’
Dwalin let out a breath through his nose. ‘Well, wasn’t obvious to me. By my beard, I didn’t see that coming.’
‘Didn’t see what coming?’ added in another voice. It was Fíli, closely followed by Kíli, speeding up a little to join them.
‘Oh, I know what they’re talking about,’ said Kíli, ‘is this about Uncle being head over heels for our burglar?’
‘You two knew about this?’ spluttered Dwalin.
‘We’re young, we’re not stupid,’ countered Fíli.
‘Or blind,’ added Kíli.
‘Does anyone actually want to hear what I found out?’ Ori said to the world at large.
‘Found out about what?’
‘If you would give him a chance to speak, Kíli,’ said Balin sternly, ‘then Ori might be able to explain.’
‘Sorry, Ori,’ said Kíli, completely unrepentant.
Ori gave a little huff and said at last, ‘I found out about Hobbit courting habits, as per Mister Balin’s instructions. Hobbits exchange flowers like we exchange courting beads, and they do it in public. They also cook for each other, but that’s later on.’
Balin patted him on the back. ‘Good work, lad, that’s exactly what we needed to get started. Did Mister Baggins suspect anything?’
‘No,’ said Ori, looking everywhere except at the other Dwarves, ‘I’m pretty sure he didn’t. He-he thought I was asking because I fancied him – stop laughing, Kíli! – so I think he was a bit distracted by that.’
‘Excellent,’ said Balin. ‘Although, perhaps make sure you clarify the situation with Bilbo and reassure him it was purely for an academic purpose? We can’t be dealing with a love triangle on top of this.’
‘So we know the Hobbit likes flowers. So what?’
‘So, brother,’ said Balin patiently, ‘we can now advise Thorin on proper courting rituals if he ever decides to wake up and realise exactly what’s happening.’ Balin tugged at one of the ends of his beard thoughtfully. ‘It’s a shame, though, that Bilbo won’t be able to return Thorin’s proposal with his own sanbuzra sankherum,’ he said. He was referring to something that was very difficult to describe in Westeron, and so he slipped for a moment into Khuzdûl. The younger Dwarves nodded their heads in agreement to this, understanding perfectly, but Dwalin’s eyes bugged.
'Getting a bit ahead of ourselves, aren’t we?’ he said, flabbergasted.

‘When have you ever known Thorin not to see something through until the very end when he has his heart set on it?’ said Balin, and Dwalin could not dispute that. ‘No, I think we’ll be having a double celebration when we reclaim Erebor – one for the coronation, and one for a Royal Wedding. You mark my words.’

‘And you two, you’re alright with this, are yer?’

Fíli and Kíli shrugged. ‘Of course we are,’ said Fíli.

‘We haven’t seen Uncle this happy for a long time,’ said Kíli. ‘I even saw him smile yesterday. I almost fell over, it was such a shock.’

‘So now we have that sorted,’ said yet another voice, ‘would anyone like to amend their bets?’

They turned to find Nori hovering on the edges of their impromptu gathering.

‘Nah, I’m sticking with mine.’

‘Mine too.’

‘Suit yourself,’ said Nori.

‘You’re betting on this?’ scowled Dwalin.

Nori gave him a despairing glance. ‘Have been for a while. Glóin’s got good money on them finally confessing their undying love on Durin’s Day. Very romantic, but utterly stupid. I’ll almost certainly be collecting on his money.’ Nori grinned sharply. ‘Tis a hard job, but someone’s gotta do it. By the way, you lot couldn’t look more suspicious if you tried – good thing those two are so wrapped up in each other.’

‘Am I the only one who didn’t know about this?’ said Dwalin, utterly exasperated now. He was ignored by everyone except Ori, who patted him consolingly on one of his huge arms.

Up at the head of the line, Bilbo was doing what he did best: sneezing.

‘This cold of yours has gone on far too long,’ Thorin informed him.

‘It’s fine,’ Bilbo said, waving it off irritably. ‘It’ll go away soon, if it knows what’s good for it. I blame this forest entirely. It’s just so strange.’

‘I thought Hobbits were fond of all kinds of nature?’

‘We’re not particularly fond of nature when it looks like a warg threw up over it,’ said Bilbo, wiping at his sore nose with his handkerchief. He groaned, looking up at the canopy above them. ‘I want to see the sky again. Just an inch of it, even.’

‘I suppose you’re used to wide open spaces,’ mused Thorin, ‘but if you can’t imagine Erebor, then I can’t imagine what living in an eagle’s Eyrie was like.’

‘Ha! I’m sure you’d hate it, said Bilbo, ‘their Eyrie is high up, as high as you can be in the Misty Mountains, in amongst rocks and ledges that look like shattered glass at a distance. There’s very little shelter to be had. The landscape is harsh, and the weather unrelenting.’

‘You’re really selling it.’
Bilbo sent him a flash of a grin, ‘see, I said you’d hate it. But there’s a beauty to it, too.’ He smiled softly, lost in thought. ‘There’s nothing better than curling up, safe and warm in the nest, while the wind howls around you and the rain lashes down.’

‘A nest?’ said Thorin.

‘Well, what else did you expect an eagle to sleep in? I’ll admit it was strange at first, but sleeping under Luaithre’s wing—’

‘You slept under her wing? Forgive me, Mister Baggins, I didn’t know you were a cuddler.’ Thorin was smirking delightedly.

Bilbo could feel himself going bright red. ‘No—’

‘Have we been depriving you of this all along? Is this why you’ve been so grumpy recently—’

‘I have not—’

‘I could ask the Company if anyone would be willing to cuddle you tonight. Perhaps we can get a rota going.’

‘You will not—’

Thorin was laughing at him – a low sound produced from deep in his chest – no more than a chuckle, really – with a raspy edge to it as though it had not been used for a long time.

Bilbo gave a small indignant huff, his blush receding. ‘If you must know, Luaithre was very kind in allowing me to sleep under her wing. It was the only way I didn’t freeze to death in the dead of winter.’

Thorin held up a placating hand. ‘I’m sure,’ he said, reassuringly, though he was still smiling a little. ‘Please, continue.’

‘I hadn’t much more to say,’ Bilbo admitted and then heaved a great sigh. ‘But I do miss the sky. We used to sit in the nest and watch the thunderclouds roll over the mountains and light up the whole valley with great flashes of lightning. I thought I knew every shade of the sky before I left with the eagles, but my time in the Misty Mountains proved me wrong.’

‘I can’t understand that,’ Thorin said bluntly, ‘the sky is strange to us Dwarves.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. You looked so shocked, but it’s logical. We very rarely venture out of our mountains if we can help it – we’re not used to having a wide, open space above our heads. It makes me feel exposed.’

‘Now that I can’t understand. But you’ve lived above ground for many years now, haven’t you?’ said Bilbo, as delicately as he could manage.

‘We have. But it’s still strange. When I was growing up I hardly ever left Erebor – I didn’t see the point, and neither my father nor my grandfather encouraged me to leave. I was fifty five when I first stepped outside of the Lonely Mountain and journeyed to Dale.’

‘Fifty-five?’ echoed Bilbo incredulously.

‘Aside from the traders who did business in Dale, many Dwarves shared my aversion. We were very insular, in those days.’ Thorin paused and then said, with a great amount of difficulty, ‘I think...I
think it was because of my grandfather. He never really looked beyond Erebor, and I think our people followed his lead. I now think it was, perhaps, one of his failings as King.’

A hush fell over them. Bilbo knew how huge an admittance this was. To admit fault in his King, in his own family, was no small thing.

‘Maybe it was,’ said Bilbo at length, ‘I can’t say. But if that’s true, then don’t you think...don’t you think that now you’ve spent some time above ground, under the sky, you won’t repeat his mistakes?’

Thorin turned to him fully at that, attention solely on Bilbo and not on the path ahead.

Bilbo tugged at the hem of one sleeve. ‘It just seems like...like you’re balanced, now. You’ve seen the world, travelled far and wide. You have a bit of sky with you, if you like. You can bring that back to the mountain.’ Bilbo took a breath and said, ‘you’ll be a good King.’

Thorin’s gaze softened from its usual sternness. Bilbo even dare say he looked affectionate. Bilbo willed his heart to slow from its quickened pace.

Of course, Thorin then had to ruin it all by saying, ‘if you think I’ll forget about the cuddling if you say nice things, Bilbo, then you are sadly mistaken.’

Bilbo scowled at him. ‘Oh, stop with the teasing, I’m trying to compli-‘ he stopped mid-sentence, his throat catching, and descended into a coughing fit.

Thorin gave him a few firm pats on the back and bemusedly waited for Bilbo’s coughing fit to subside.

When Bilbo regained enough breath to speak again, the first thing he did was to swear, just once, in the eagle’s language. He felt like he’d earned it. ‘Sorry,’ he said to Thorin in Westron, ‘I won’t translate that for you, it was rather rude.’

‘I wasn’t going to ask you to,’ said Thorin mildly. ‘I think your curse words may be too much for my fragile ears.’

Bilbo let out a snorting laugh.

‘Did you know that “cloudy-head” is an insult in Khuzdúl?’ Thorin said.

‘Well if that’s the kind of insults you’re used to, I’m definitely not going to translate eagle curse words.’

‘It does loose a little of its effect in Westron. But I think it suits you.’

Bilbo smiled. ‘Now that I’m going to take as a compliment,’ he said.

And Thorin’s resulting smile was enough to make Bilbo forget his surroundings and his cold, if only for a moment.

But on the tenth day, it became abundantly clear that it was not just a cold.

Someone was calling to him, but they must be shouting from a great distance – their voice was muffled, and Bilbo could barely make out what they were saying.
'B... Bilbo!'

The sound of his own name caused him to stir a little. His body felt as heavy as lead. He became aware he was breathing, but very slowly and with a great amount of effort. The cloying dark tried to drag him back down again into unconsciousness, but the voice said his name again, and Bilbo resisted the force that tugged at his mind.

'Bilbo! Fo... Mal...'

With a great effort, Bilbo fought back against the lure of sleep. The fingers of his right hand twitched. He took a deeper breath. Both of these actions seemed to take a monumental effort. Forcing another, deeper breath, Bilbo focused on opening his eyes.

The half-light of Mirkwood, dim as it was, was still too bright. Bilbo’s eyes stung, but he stubbornly kept his eyes open. There were two shapes crouched over him – he concentrated, and they swam into focus. It was Thorin and Óin – the names came to him slowly in the haze of his mind. Bilbo wondered why they both looked so worried.

'Bilbo!' Thorin all but shouted at him again. Alright, thought Bilbo. No need to raise your voice.

Another voice said, ‘he’s waking up!’

He blinked, once, twice, coming back to himself a little more, focusing on Thorin as a fixed point. He thought he saw something like relief pass over Thorin’s face, but then Kíli and Fíli were barging in, demanding to see him.

‘You’re awake!’ Kíli said, stating the obvious.

‘Thank Mahal,’ breathed Fíli.

‘Give him some space,’ Thorin snapped at them, and they reluctantly retreated a little.

Bilbo licked his lips and tried to speak. It was a little easier to breathe now he was awake. ‘What happened?’

‘He has no wound on him,’ Óin was saying, ‘I don’t understand, Thorin – if this is poison, I see no wound I can treat.’ Then, to Bilbo, ‘have you eaten anything in the forest, Bilbo? Anything at all?’

‘No,’ said Bilbo, shaking his head. He tried to sit up, thankful for the hand Thorin placed on his back to ease him upright. ‘Nothing at all. Ow, my head,’ he groaned, pressing one hand to his temple.

‘We couldn’t wake you,’ said Thorin quietly. ‘You were barely breathing.’

‘What’s this?’ Óin took a hold of the hand that was pressed to Bilbo’s temple and inspected the unravelled bandage at the tip of Bilbo’s finger. Bilbo had no choice but to let him unwrap it, to find the blackened fingertip hidden beneath.

‘Bilbo...’ said Fíli. Behind him, Bilbo could now see the rest of the Company hovering anxiously.

‘I didn’t think anything of it, at the time,’ said Bilbo, ‘I just brushed against this...substance.’

‘You should have told us,’ said Thorin sternly. His lips had thinned out completely, and there was an angry set to his jaw.

‘But I honestly felt fine before this morning – I just felt like I had a mild cold. Nothing to worry about.’
Óin tugged at his beard. ‘This must be magic,’ he said, ‘and if it is, I can only treat the symptoms, not the cause.’

‘I feel better, now,’ Bilbo said, and then added ‘really,’ when he caught their disbelieving looks.

‘Yes, you really look the picture of health,’ said Dwalin sarcastically.

‘You are going to sit with Óin,’ Thorin instructed, ‘and tell him all of your symptoms so he can start treating you. Dwalin, Balin, with me. I need to talk to you both.’

And before Bilbo could dispute this command, Thorin’s hand on his back withdrew, and the Dwarf was striding away, Balin and Dwalin in tow.

‘I’m sure this is all unnecessary,’ said Bilbo, steadfastly ignoring the fact that he was a little out of breath.

‘I don’t think standing’s a good idea right now, lad,’ said Óin, but Bilbo ignored him, easing himself off of the forest floor. He struggled to get his legs under him for a moment, and then Fíli and Kíli scrambled to help, taking an arm each. Bilbo was grateful for it, and kept a hand on each of their shoulders once he was upright, until the world stopped spinning. He was feeling a great deal better already, but there was still a rasp in his throat and his legs were threatening to buckle under him at any moment.

The rest of the Company were still watching him closely, as if expecting him to collapse again at any moment. ‘I feel much better,’ he told them all in as much of an upbeat tone as he could manage, ‘it’s just a cold.’ To prove that he could stand unaided, he removed his hands from Kíli and Fíli’s shoulders. The brothers hovered close, though, in case Bilbo needed them again. Bilbo tried to tamper down on his rising irritation. Really, did they all have to cause such a fuss?

Thorin, Balin and Dwalin were all in deep discussion a little further off. Bilbo strained to hear what they were saying over Óin’s questions about his health.

‘Have you coughed up blood?’

‘Hmm? Oh, no – no blood.’

‘Have coughed up anything else?’

‘No,’ said Bilbo, not really listening. His sharp hearing finally picked up on a single, inflammatory phrase, uttered by Thorin:

‘...send him back.’

_Oh no you don’t_, thought Bilbo, outraged. _You’re not sending me back, not while I’m still breathing!_ Ignoring Óin’s protests, Bilbo stormed towards Thorin and all but shouted,

‘Thorin Oakenshield, you will _not_ send me back!’

Thorin started to say something, but Bilbo was on a roll now.

‘I refuse,’ he continued fiercely, ‘and it’d be a waste of time, anyway! Don’t you dare even suggest it – I’m not turning back now, not because of a ridiculous cold.’

He was out of breath again by the time he finished his rant.

‘That’s exactly what I would have said,’ said Thorin mildly, ‘if you had let me get a word in
edgeways.’ There was no rebuke to his voice, only amusement.

Bilbo deflated. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Well. Good. Carry on then.’

‘As Mister Baggins was saying,’ Thorin said to the Company at large, ‘we cannot turn back. We’re too deep into the forest, now. Our only option is to press on. I’m sure Óin’s treatments will help with whatever ails Bilbo.’

Bilbo, as wrapped up in his own embarrassment as he was, still caught Kíli and Fíli’s reaction to the decision. Fíli’s alarm and worry was quickly schooled into a more neutral expression, but Kíli was not so restrained. His frustration and anger remained on his young face for all the world to see.

Despite Bilbo’s protests that they needed to leave, Óin insisted he spend the morning going through Bilbo’s symptoms. Bilbo grew increasingly frustrated as the morning wore on, and when Óin finally presented him with an ointment to rub on his chest and a foul-smelling cup of water to ingest, Bilbo barely remembered to say thank you.

The Company packed up after a quick lunch and returned to their march forward. Bilbo’s breathing had eased a little, and he kept pace with the Dwarves. And if he was a little more tired than usual when they stopped that evening, a little more grateful for the rest – well, Bilbo didn’t mention it.

But Óin’s treatments did nothing to ward off the nightmares. So violent and so terrible was Bilbo’s nightmare that night that someone finally took notice. Bilbo found himself shaken awake, wrenched from a blood-soaked dream, staring at Bifur’s concerned face.

Bilbo cringed away from him, embarrassed and angry. Bifur said something to him quietly and meaningfully in Khuzdûl. Bilbo shook his head, incapable of understanding. Bifur tried again, and this time Bilbo could hear a certain quality to his voice that needed no translation.

*You have nothing to be ashamed of.*

Bilbo swallowed, and gave a hesitant nod. Bifur squeezed his forearm once, and then moved away, back to his watch duty.

Not all of Bilbo’s nightmares ended so amenably. Poor Fíli, who slept beside Bilbo the following night, woke him with a concern furrowing his brow and causing his mouth to turn down.

‘Bilbo-‘

Bilbo turned over, drew the covers up to his chin, and ignored him.

There had, at least, been no more repeats of the terrible morning on which they had been unable to wake him. He was groggy when he rose, and it took him some time to get going, but no one had yet had to shake him awake. Óin’s medicine seemed to be helping a little.

The Company’s collective reaction to their burglar getting ill would have been heart-warming, had it not been a constant reminder of Bilbo’s newly weakened state. The Dwarves huddled around him, wary of every cough and sneeze, and more than a few of them offered him their share of their food and water rations. Bilbo refused every offer, and grew more and more short-tempered with each passing day. He felt guilty, too – his friends were only trying to help. But he felt strung out, worn thin, exhausted before he had even taken his first step in the morning and barely able to catch his breath at night. He was so wrapped up in his frustration at his illness that he did not notice how Thorin’s gaze rarely left him, his dark eyes full of concern.
On the thirteenth day, they reached the river.

They were running worryingly low on water, but they heeded Beorn’s warning and did not refill their skins. Bilbo’s index finger was evidence enough that nothing in the forest was as it seemed – as ordinary as the river appeared, they didn’t dare risk it.

The Company was at a loss for a moment as to how to cross until Bilbo’s sharp eyes picked out a boat on the opposite bank. A length of rope and a hook were shortly produced, tied together and Kíli, with Bilbo’s help, he managed to throw the rope and hook it onto the lip of the boat. With a great heave, the Dwarves hauled the boat free from its moorings and pulled it towards their side of the bank. Another rope and hook was quickly thrown into a tree on the opposite side to create a relay system. Thorin, Dwalin, Óin and Glóin were to go first, followed by Bofur, Bifur, Ori and Dori, then Bilbo and Bombur, as Bombur needed to be with the lightest load, and lastly Dori, Fíli and Kíli.

Most of the Company had made it across the river with little incident, and were now waiting on the last of the Dwarves to come across. Dori got in first, then Fíli. This is when everything went horribly wrong.

It happened in an instant. There came the sound of hooves, and a deer burst out from the undergrowth, running full tilt towards the river. It hit Kíli before the young Dwarf could turn to see what was happening, throwing him into the water, the deer stumbling from the impact, and then, against all reason, leapt into the river.

‘Kíli!’ screamed Fíli, starting towards the river, in spite of the fact that Kíli was already disappearing downstream, pushed under the surface, his hood the only part of him that was visible. Bilbo and the rest of the Company rushed forwards, but Thorin got there first, wading into the water until he was hip-deep in it, lunging forward just in time to catch the hem of Kíli’s coat.

Dwalin moved Bilbo aside, pushing into the river to help Thorin, who now had a limp Kíli held tight against his chest. Between the two of them they heaved Kíli from the water to lay him out on the muddy riverbank.

Heart in his throat, Bilbo watched helplessly as Thorin pushed back Kíli’s hair from his face, desperately searching for any sign of life. Kíli remained unresponsive, face slack, eyes closed.

‘Kíli, Kíli,’ Thorin was murmuring under his breath.

‘He’s still breathing,’ Dwalin shouted to the rest of them, and their relief was almost palpable.

Then Fíli was shoving his way through – having traversed the river while Kíli was being rescued – shouldering Dwalin aside to get to his brother.

‘Come on, brother, wake up!’ Fíli shouted, hand over Kíli’s heart. But Kíli did not wake, nor even stir, no matter how many times Fíli called for him.
Translations:

_Sanbuzra:_ most perfect (true/pure) deep
_Sankherum:_ most perfect (true/pure) name.

I am not very good with any language that isn’t English – if anyone thinks that the Khuzdûl doesn’t look right, please let me know! Next chapter will most likely be out on Wednesday.

Thorin teasing Bilbo about cuddling up to Luaithre was inspired by a conversation I had with tentativesunriseonthehorizon. All credit goes to her for that bit :D

How was everyones' day today, dear readers?
To Endure

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the lateness of this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was little they could do. Kíli remained as still as death, and, after a thorough inspection by Óin, the healer declared that Kíli was now in clearly in a magically-induced sleep, though how long he would remain this way Óin could not say. Fíli had at first remained adamant that Kíli would wake in just a few moments; he argued and pleaded in equal measure until, at long last, he fell silent and spoke no more. Bilbo wasn’t sure what was worse – Fíli’s stream of denial or his sudden muteness.

‘We need to move on,’ said Thorin to his quiet Company. ‘We’ll need a stretcher to carry Kíli.’

Fíli rose from his brother’s side. Bilbo couldn’t name the expression on the young Dwarf’s face – it was somewhere between fear and anger, with grief mixed in there, too.

‘We’re carrying on?’ he said incredulously, ‘with two of our Company injured and vulnerable?’

‘We have no choice.’

Fíli started forwards, locking gazes with Thorin and holding out his hands beseechingly. ‘No, we do! Send me back to Beorn’s with Bilbo and Kíli. I can carry my brother – he barely weighs a thing. We can find a cure for both of them and then we’ll...we’ll march at double speed to rejoin you.’

But Thorin shook his head. ‘Even if you were to reach Beorn’s again, there is no guarantee that he would offer us aid a second time. You cannot carry Kíli all that way by yourself, Fíli. And even if you were to reach Beorn’s and he were to give you aid, you would still have to traverse Mirkwood again, unless you are suggesting you would abandon this quest?’

A flash of hurt passed over Fíli’s face. ‘No, of course not! I would never abandon this journey, but I don’t know how we’re supposed to continue like this! There has to be another way!’

‘There is no other way,’ Thorin said. He seemed in complete contrast to Fíli at that moment – Thorin, unmoved and unwavering, and Fíli, agitated and passionate. There was an air of finality to Thorin’s tone as he said, ‘for all we know we may be nearly out of this accursed forest. We will keep going.’

No one voiced their disapproval of Thorin’s decision, and there were not even any murmurs of discontent. Bilbo knew Thorin was right, no matter how much his heart ached for Kíli and Fíli, and there was little logic to be found in Fíli’s argument. But he suspected that there was an underlying question that Fíli dare not ask of Thorin – Fíli was far too loyal to utter it aloud. And yet, it hovered in the air between them, unspoken:

*Is this journey worth more to you than your nephew's life?*

Bilbo wasn’t sure if he knew the answer to that.
A stretcher was put together out of branches and cloaks – Bilbo offered the use of his spear, but Dwalin pointed out that it was of more use in Bilbo’s hands. This side of the river had huge spider webs strung from nearly every tree, and it was wise to be armed and ready at all times.

Kíli did not weigh much, and so when he was raised up on the stretcher, it was with little effort. Still, they agreed to take it in turns, with Fíli, Dwalin, Bofur and Balin taking the first turn. They barely spoke as they walked, and no one tried to stop Fíli when he refused to be relieved from carrying his brother. Bilbo’s breathing had worsened again, but he didn’t want to bother Óin and ask for more ointment. Each of the Company seemed lost in their own thoughts, as though this latest incident with Kíli had reaffirmed the possibility that they could lose each other at any moment in this accursed forest. Bilbo kept his laboured breathing to himself, and Kíli did not leave his thoughts at all for the rest of that day. He was worried not only for Kíli, but for Fíli, too. The young Dwarf seemed strangely diminished without his bright and cheerful younger brother, and Fíli barely touched his share of dinner that night. They did not even have the fortune of extra provisions to share out now that Kíli could not eat – his pack had been washed downstream, and even with one less mouth to feed, Bilbo knew that they were running worryingly low on food.

Fíli did not sleep that night. When the rest of the Company settled down to sleep, Bilbo could clearly see the solid line of Fíli’s back, upright and unmoving next to his brother. With a small sigh Bilbo mused that he wouldn’t be getting much sleep that night anyway, and he may as well keep Fíli company.

Fíli did not turn to look at Bilbo as he settled next to him. Of all of them, Fíli and Kíli had coped the best when faced with Mirkwood’s hardships, but now Bilbo could see the toll it had taken on Fíli, as though the last two weeks had finally caught up on him all at once.

‘I’ve never seen him like this before,’ said Fíli, almost to himself. ‘It’s strange.’

Bilbo kept quiet. He had a feeling that Fíli was barely aware of his presence, and if he needed to talk, then Bilbo could listen.

Bilbo could see a soft smile curling one half of Fíli’s lips, and was suddenly reminded of Thorin, the familial resemblance between the two stronger than ever. ‘Even in sleep he was a nuisance,’ Fíli went on, ‘when we were little and had to share a bed, he’d kick and snore and talk in his sleep and try and steal all of the covers. He’d have whole conversations to himself.’ The smile faded. ‘I’ve never seen him so still.’

‘He’ll wake up,’ Bilbo said, putting an arm around Fíli’s broad shoulders. ‘You’ll see.’

Fíli said nothing, and Bilbo wished that he could believe his own words. But he just wasn’t sure about anything, anymore.

If Bilbo’s illness had brought the Company together, then Kíli was clearly a worry too far. Over the next two days Thorin observed his Company’s behaviour uneasily. They were fracturing. His Dwarves would never abandon this quest or go back on the loyalty they had sworn to him, but they were breaking all the same. They were now falling back on that most essential of things – familial ties. Dori and Nori huddled around Ori more than ever, which frustrated Ori to no end. Fíli barely said a word and Thorin suspected that he was not getting any sleep at all. Glóin kept making snide
remarks about Bombur’s weight, which set Bofur and Bifur off in his defence. Bombur had not complained once about the lack of food during the entire time they had been in Mirkwood, but Glóin seemed to take offence to the fact that Bombur seemed to be suffering no weight loss. Thorin knew, though, that Bombur had to be suffering just as much as the rest of them, if not more. They were now running dangerously low on food, and had cut their rations down even more to compensate, which hardly helped with the Company’s infighting. That Thorin was used to starvation was of little use if the rest of the Company could not continue.

And worst of all was Bilbo. The circles under the Hobbit’s eyes had darkened, his once round cheeks now hollowed out, and more than once Thorin had spotted him stumbling as he walked. The deeper they went, and the more they pushed forward, the more Bilbo seemed to fade.

None of this stopped Bilbo from volunteering to do ridiculous things, such as climbing a tree.

‘We need to see where we are,’ Bilbo said crossly when Thorin shot down the idea.

‘You’re not well enough,’ Thorin snapped.

‘I think I’ll be the judge of that, thank you.’

‘Bilbo you can barely walk, let alone climb a tree! What if you fall? What if you misjudge the next branch?’

‘I’m not walking though, am I? I’m climbing a tree. I’ve been doing it for years; I can do it in my sleep by now.’ At Thorin’s furious, pointed glare, Bilbo slashed his hand through the air sharply. ‘You know what I mean. And besides, I’m the only one who can do this.’

The Company held its breath. After a few tense moments of glaring at one another, Thorin relented and looked away.

‘Fine,’ he said, ‘but you’ll come down the moment you feel dizzy.’

Bilbo rolled his eyes, ‘yes, yes. Of course.’

A tree was chosen for the task, and Thorin insisted on giving Bilbo a leg-up to help him to the first branch. Had Bilbo been healthy, he would have scoffed at the gesture, ignored the proffered hand and scaled the tree on his own. But as ill as he was he said nothing, and was actually grateful for the help.

It did not take long for Bilbo to climb to the top. Despite being weakened, he still knew how to climb a tree without getting hit in the face by a stray branch or slipping on mossy bark. When he breached the canopy the sun on his face and the breeze winding its way through his hair was a revelation. The view, however, was anything but. There was no end to the forest. It stretched on, and on, and on in all directions. The bottom dropped out of Bilbo’s stomach, and he could not help the resulting thought that passed through his mind: they were going to die here.

He stared at the sky for a few moments to regain some semblance of calm. It was close to sunset, and the undersides of the clouds were lit with a glorious burnt-orange glow, brilliant against the pale blue of the sky. Such a welcome sight did a great deal to damper down Bilbo’s despair.

When he had taken his fill of looking skyward, Bilbo pushed back down into the thick branches of the tree. His descent was far rougher than his ascent – halfway down he misjudged the distance between one branch and the next, and fell two feet before he caught himself. Bilbo could clearly hear Dwarven cursing below, even as high up as he was.
The Dwarves did not take the news any better than Bilbo had. There were groans and resigned sighs, and Thorin looked as grim as Bilbo had ever seen him. Still, though, they were faced with little choice. They pressed on.

Thorin would never be sure what woke him that night. He passed from sleep to wakefulness in a moment, and instantly knew that something was wrong. He sat up – it was still night, as far as he could tell, and the Company was still asleep. He could see Dwalin’s back from where he sat, still on watch duty, and Fíli, who had fallen asleep upright next to Kíli’s still form.

The bedroll beside him was conspicuously absent.

There was no reason to worry, Thorin told himself. Even if Bilbo had wandered off, it was likely he had not gotten far. Besides, his spear was still here, and Bilbo would never leave something so important to him behind.

As quietly as he could, Thorin got up and made his way over to Dwalin.

‘Have you seen Bilbo?’ Thorin asked of him in a whisper, hand on his friend’s shoulder.

Dwalin shook his head, ‘no, I haven’t. Has he wandered off?’

‘Probably. Stay at your post – I’ll find him.’

Dwalin looked reluctant to remain where he was, but he did as Thorin instructed.

Thorin picked his way through the rows of sleeping Dwarves until he reached the end of the camp. From what he could make out, the path twisted sharply to the right up ahead. Perhaps Bilbo was merely around the corner, not too far away at all, and simply hidden by the geography of the forest. Thorin’s breath seemed very loud in the oppressive silence of Mirkwood. He stalked forward carefully, rounding the bend, slowly revealing the path ahead.

Thorin narrowed his eyes, wishing his night vision was sharper. Another step forward, and he could make out a form emerging from the darkness. He let out a sigh of relief. He recognised the line of Bilbo’s shoulders and the back of his messy head of hair – the Hobbit was facing away from him, away from the path and into the trees. Had he seen something, hidden in the undergrowth?

A prickle of instinct wound its way down his spine. There was something wrong, here – Bilbo was standing far too still, and Thorin knew the Hobbit’s ears to be far, far too sharp not to have heard Thorin’s approach.

Thorin took another couple of steps forward. Still Bilbo did not turn.

‘Bilbo?’ Thorin said his voice barely above a whisper, but still too loud to his ears.

No response. Bilbo was almost in arms reach, now. Thorin couldn’t see his face – was the Hobbit sleepwalking?

Slowly, and so as not to startle him, Thorin gently placed his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder.

Nothing could have prepared him for what happened next. Lightning-fast Bilbo spun around, batting the hand on his shoulder away, striking out at Thorin’s knee with his foot, throwing his weight into
Thorin’s upper body to send the Dwarf tumbling to the ground, the Hobbit following, twisting away the placating hand that tried to stop him, slamming it into the dirt above Thorin’s head.

There was a knife at Thorin’s throat. Thorin’s free hand was half-raised, palm open. Bilbo’s expression was unrecognisable, twisted into a snarl. There was not a single glimmer of remembrance for who Thorin was to be found there.

‘Bilbo,’ Thorin said, grimacing as the knife pricked at his skin when he tried to speak. ‘Bilbo. It’s alright – you don’t have to fight me. I’m...I’m your friend, remember?’

The hand holding his wrist to the ground clenched.

‘Bilbo.’

And at last, Bilbo blinked, the terrible fury that had darkened his face fading away, to be replaced with horror.

‘Thorin,’ gasped Bilbo. The knife vanished from Thorin’s throat and Bilbo scrambled to move off of him, to sit on the ground to star at the knife in his hands.

Thorin took a breath and slowly sat up. Bilbo was facing away from him once more, but the shaking of the Hobbit’s shoulders reassured Thorin that this was the Hobbit he knew, not the being that had attacked him moments before.

Bilbo’s breaths were coming out in rasps, becoming progressively shallower and shallower with every passing moment. He had the fingers of one hand twined deep into his curls, tugging so fiercely on the roots it must be causing him pain. Very, very slowly, Thorin reached out and put his hand on the nape of Bilbo’s neck. The Hobbit started at the first touch of a rough, callused palm to the soft skin of his neck, but Thorin held it there, not saying a word, waiting patiently for Bilbo’s breathing to even out. After a long minute, Bilbo began to sound less frantic, though his body was still wracked with shivers.

‘I’m sorry,’ Bilbo said to his knees.

‘It’s alright,’ said Thorin quietly. ‘What happened?’

‘No. No, it’s not alright. I...I almost...’ he trailed off, curling into himself and shaking his head, tightening his fingers in his hair.

‘Bilbo,’ Thorin tried again, using the Hobbit’s name as a question.

Bilbo’s body shuddered once, and he raised his head to stare out at the path. Thorin could just about see the tight set of his jaw. ‘I was dreaming, I think,’ he said. ‘Having a nightmare, but I wasn’t really asleep. It was like I couldn’t wake up. I thought...I thought you were my enemy. I thought you were going to kill me.’

Bilbo turned to face him, Thorin’s hand falling from its place. His face was pale and drawn, pinched tight with worry and stress, and now there was guilt filling his blue eyes and twisting the line of his lips.

‘I’m sorry, Thorin,’ Bilbo said as if the words were weighing him down. ‘I’m not sure what’s happening to me.’

Thorin shook his head, frustrated and tired beyond belief. ‘I wish I knew.’
‘It won’t happen again,’ Bilbo vowed. ‘You’ll have to take my sword, my spear and my dagger. Would you mind carrying them? Please?’

‘I don’t think that’s a good idea,’ Thorin said, taken aback by the request. Bilbo could not go unarmed.

But the line of Bilbo’s mouth had firmed out, and Thorin recognised that look. Bilbo would not be dissuaded from this.

‘Please, Thorin. You have to. I will not risk harming you - *any* of you again.’

‘Alright,’ Thorin sighed. ‘But as long as you stay close to the Company at all times, agreed?’

Bilbo gave a fraction of a nod. ‘Agreed.’ He quirked a small smile, more of a grimace than anything. ‘You’d better start with this,’ he said, and passed Thorin his knife.

Thorin took it and rose to his feet, tucking it into his belt. The encounter had left him strangely awake, though his body was crying out for rest. Perhaps he could take the next watch – he could at least make some use of this newly found energy. ‘Come, back to camp with us,’ he said, holding out a hand to help Bilbo up. Bilbo took it and heaved himself to his feet.

Dwalin signed in Iglishmêk to Thorin when they rounded the bend of the road. Thorin signed back, *just a case of sleepwalking, no harm done*. Dwalin looked more than a little doubtful.

‘It’s my watch, now,’ Thorin said to Bilbo. ‘You should try and get as much rest as you can before dawn.’

Bilbo smiled weakly, ‘I think I’m afraid to go back to sleep, after all that. Would you mind if I sat with you for a while?’

‘Not at all,’ shrugged Thorin. Inwardly he was certain Bilbo needed sleep, but the lingering fear on Bilbo’s face said he should not argue the point. They relieved Dwalin, who went back to his bedroll with not a few suspicious glances in their direction. Bilbo fetched his blanket, draped it around his shoulders and came to sit next to Thorin.

A few moments passed with the two of them simply staring out at the dark, thinking over all that had happened, each of them not wanting to voice their fears.

‘Thorin,’ said Bilbo after a few minutes. He sounded more hesitant than Thorin had ever known him to be. ‘Would you...would you tell me of happier things?’

Thorin cast him a glance.

‘I need something to take my mind off...well, to distract me,’ explained Bilbo.

‘And what would you have me speak of?’

Bilbo drew the blanket a little tighter around him. ‘If it’s not too painful, could you tell me more of Erebor?’

‘It is not too painful, Bilbo, no. I can still speak of such things – I will not let the dragon taint my memories,’ said Thorin. He was quiet for a minute, mulling over what Bilbo would enjoy hearing about the most, Bilbo waiting patiently for him to begin speaking.

‘I have never told you of the Hall of Tales, have I?’ said Thorin. ‘It is a wondrous thing – a huge a
cavernous room that any may visit, should they wish. It’s so big that you can’t see the roof – it just disappears into darkness. Every inch of wall is covered in stories. Every single tale in our history is there for all to see, from the making of the Dwarves to the great deeds of our Kings and Queens and of our people, and it is all wrought out in the most beautiful art you will ever see. Our artists use gold for their lines, silver for their highlights, rich dyes and sparkling gemstones. And towards the front of the hall are blank spaces, ready to be filled. We were always so sure we would carry on as we always were, so sure we would have the time – the future – for achieving great things,’ Thorin said sadly. ‘I wish you could see it. I only hope that it did not fall victim to the dragon’s destruction.’

There was a poke to Thorin’s side. ‘You were doing so well before that last bit,’ Bilbo said gently to him. ‘No frowning, please. The smile was much more pleasant.’

Thorin’s scowl receded at once, voice and face softening again not only in remembrance, but at the Hobbit tucked up beside him.

His mind fell upon one particular memory, and he found himself smiling with little effort at all. ‘And the Starlit Arches. I had almost forgotten about the Arches. We have one set of winding tunnels that leads from the King’s hall to the market that is covered in a particular kind of gemstone. It reflects the smallest amount of light – we never had to light any torches in there. You’d walk along and question if you were underground at all – look up and you would see not dirt and rock, but a starry night.’ He huffed a laugh. ‘They were also a damn good place to play hide and seek.’

Thorin became aware of a weight against his shoulder. He turned to see Bilbo slumped against him, fast asleep. The Hobbit’s face was still too pale, but he at least looked a little more at peace. Without conscious thought, Thorin took his fill of looking at Bilbo, taking in the soft curve of his jaw, the line of his nose, the messy head of brown curls, flecked here and there with gold. In his chest a feeling was making itself known; it felt as though a bud was opening, like the first flower of spring gently unfolding, filling him with warmth from finger tips to toes. But even as it bloomed he realised that this feeling had long since taken root in his heart.

Thorin’s breath caught in his throat. Of course. What a fool he’d been.

He had lied to himself once before about Bilbo, had kept himself wilfully blind, but he would not make the same mistake twice.

As carefully as he could manage, Thorin eased Bilbo off of his shoulder and down onto the forest floor. Bilbo did not stir, and Thorin was not sure if he should be glad of this – Bilbo sleeping too deeply had not ended well before. He fetched another blanket to bundle up and put under Bilbo’s head. Hoping a few hours rest might restore him, Thorin made sure the Hobbit was properly covered up, and then returned to his watch. He would need to speak to Nori tomorrow.

The Company were slow to rise they next day, and so it was easy for Thorin to corner Nori while the rest were stumbling through their morning routines.

‘Nori,’ said Thorin with false cheer, slapping his hand down on Nori’s back, ‘a word if you please.’

‘Of course,’ said Nori, looking startled.

Thorin got straight to the point. ‘I need your lockpicking kit,’ he said.

Nori laughed, ‘what lockpicking kit?’
Thorin gave him a thoroughly unimpressed look. Nori gulped.

‘No, really,’ insisted Nori, ‘why would-’

‘Nori, would you like me to tell Dori about the incident with the oysters and the Elvish bard?’

Nori closed his mouth with a click.

‘That’s what I thought,’ said Thorin when Nori promptly reached into his coat to pull out a leather case.

Nori shook his head and started to move away, but Thorin caught him again for one last word.

‘Not a word of this to anyone, you understand?’ said Thorin with a rather frightening grin.

Nori, nodded and moved away as quickly as he could, not even grumbling about the loss of his kit. Thorin could be awfully scary when he wanted to be.

Nori’s lock picking kit was finely made, and exactly what Thorin needed. The long, thin pieces of metal would never be as good as those in a proper engraving kit, but they would do for now. Thorin could always re-engrave the courting bead later, when he had access to proper tools. All he had to do was wait until nightfall, take the first watch, and settle down to create a courting bead fit for his intended without any prying eyes.

But he never got the chance to put Nori’s kit to work, for later that same day Kíli sat bolt upright on the stretcher with a shout, awake once more and blinking in the gloom.

His stretcher bearers were so shocked that three of them let go, which caused even more confusion, Kíli tumbling to the floor in a heap on top of them. The fourth stretcher bearer, Fíli, was too busy scrambling over the others – uncaring if he stepped on anyone – to get to his brother.

‘Fíli,’ said Kíli weakly when his brother enveloped him in a crushing hug, ‘can’t breathe.’

Thorin was not far behind, and soon there were was laughter intermixed with the grumbling of Bofur, Dori and Nori, who were still trying to pick themselves up off of the floor. Bilbo crowded around Kíli along with the rest, grinning fit to burst, barely able to believe they had been so lucky.

Kíli was released by Fíli only to have his Uncle put one hand on each side of his face, Thorin turning Kíli to him to search for any signs of lingering illness. When Kíli fussed at the attention and at being treated like a child, Thorin let out a long breath, and smiled.

And then Kíli said, ‘where are we?’

Óin hoped that the memory loss would be temporary, and fade with time just as Kíli’s unconsciousness had. After a fairly frustrating round of explanations as to where they are, what they were doing, and their lack of food to a very confused Kíli, it was discovered that Kíli had only a vague recollection as to who Bilbo was.
‘Mister Boggins?’ said Kíli when Bilbo finally got his turn to welcome Kíli back to the waking world.

Bilbo groaned. ‘You don’t remember me, either?’ he said, aggrieved that he had lost Kíli’s friendship.

Kíli narrowed his eyes at him, thinking. Then he recoiled in horror and said, ‘you threw a knife at me!’

Fíli started to laugh, and found he couldn’t stop. Kíli’s confusion over this only added to the mirth. Bilbo supposed you had to laugh, if only not to cry.

‘You threw a knife at him?’ Thorin asked of Bilbo, eyebrows raised.

‘Well. I-yes, I suppose I did,’ said a rather sheepish Bilbo. ‘But in my defense, he was harassing my teapots!’

‘Well that’s a healthy sign,’ said Óin. ‘Five minutes ago he could barely remember approaching Bilbo’s house! He’ll remember everything by the end of today, Thorin - you’ll see.’

‘Can anyone else hear that?’ said Bofur suddenly, and the Company quietened at the alarm in his voice.

‘Never mind hear - can anyone else smell that?’ Bombur said, his face alight with hope and hunger.

Bilbo could smell it too, now. There came the sound of laughter from between the trees, and the smell of feasting wafting through the air. Bilbo’s mouth started to water.

‘Smells like roast boar,’ Ori said wistfully.

Without warning, both Ori and Bombur bolted into the forest and off of the path. This caused a chain reaction in the rest of the Company – Dori and Nori rushed in after Ori, Bofur and Bifur after Bombur, Dwalin and Balin both tried to stop them, until the rest of them were left with little choice but to follow.

‘Stop!’ Thorin roared to them as he left the path, but they did not heed his call, and so Thorin started after them with every intention of hauling them forcibly back onto the path. Bilbo, not wanting to be left on the path by himself, followed on closely behind, plunging into the darkness, fighting his way through the undergrowth, trying to keep Thorin’s back in sight. It was so dark that he couldn’t see the rest of the Company, only hear them making their way noisily towards a light source in the distance. The sounds of laughter and the smell of food were both stronger, now, and Bilbo could only hope that they were all heading in the same direction. Gandalf’s words floated ominously through his mind: do not leave the path.

He stumbled into the clearing half a second behind Thorin. He saw a flash of what lay in the open space – a table heaving with food, torches lit and blazing – and then the light intensified, so fierce Bilbo had to throw up an arm to shield his eyes. Then, just as quickly, he was plunged into darkness.

He stood, blinking sunspots from his eyes, night-vision robbed from him by the sudden flare of light. He waved a hand in front of his face and found he couldn’t see it. The silence and darkness, in stark contrast to the noise and light of moments before, was so oppressive Bilbo felt as though it were pressing down on his shoulders.

‘Thorin?’ he called out tentatively, his voice sounding strained. ‘Kíli? Fíli? Dwalin?’ No reply. Panic started to well up in his chest and throat. He couldn’t be alone-
A hand reached out of the dark to take a hold of his wrist.

‘Bilbo,’ breathed a rough voice, so familiar to his ears that he didn’t even lash out, which would have been his usual, instinctive reaction.

‘Thorin!’ Bilbo gasped in relief, his panic abating. Although he couldn’t see Thorin, he could sense the Dwarf’s solid, comforting presence. Thorin released him, leaving a ring of warmed skin behind on Bilbo’s wrist.

‘Where are the others?’

‘No sign of them,’ Thorin said, and Bilbo could sense him shaking his head, ‘but they can’t be too far off. You can barely hear a thing in this forest – I couldn’t hear you until I was a foot away from you.’

Bilbo smiled, even though he wasn’t sure if Thorin could see it. ‘Well, I’m glad you did. I...I wouldn’t want to be alone here. But, what are we to do now?’

‘We try and find the path again, and hope the others do the same,’ said Thorin. Bilbo had the impression of Thorin turning to look at him. ‘Bilbo...can you see me?’

‘Er. Sort of,’ Bilbo admitted. ‘I think I know where you are, but my eye sight isn’t too good right now, thanks to whatever that light was back there.’

‘Elves, most likely,’ Thorin said tersely, ‘you’d best take back your sword and spear.’

‘I don’t want to hurt you again,’ said Bilbo immediately.

‘Take them, Bilbo,’ Thorin insisted, on the verge of outright pleading. ‘I know you will not hurt me, and I will not have you wandering this forest unarmed.’

Bilbo didn’t argue. That, more than anything, worried Thorin.

‘If you can’t see, it’s best if you hold onto my coat in the meantime, until your sight returns to you.’

It was a good idea. Bilbo reached out into the dark and brushed his fingers against heavy wool, drawing back a little when he made contact, and then taking a firm grip of Thorin’s coat. It was a slightly awkward arrangement, but they made it work, and for the next two hours they walked together, passing countless trees that all looked the same, with no sign of the path, or of the others. It was hard going for Bilbo, and he had to use his spear as a crutch, so weak were his legs. The gnawing hunger ached in his belly, a constant reminder of their desperate situation. Bilbo’s night vision had come back, but he didn’t tell Thorin this. Being in contact with Thorin, even if it was just the rough material of his coat, was comforting.

But even this small contact was not enough to stem Bilbo’s rising tide of hopelessness.

‘This is useless,’ he said eventually, and Thorin paused in his steady gait. Bilbo could not stop his deepest darkest fears from pouring out, thoughts that he had tried to ignore for the last few days. But here and now with Thorin, he felt as though he couldn’t hold back a moment longer.

‘What if we never find the others? Are we going to starve here, in the dark?’

Thorin turned to look at him over his shoulder. Bilbo could see his haunted expression in the grey light of the forest. It would be night, soon, and they would have to stop and try and sleep on empty stomachs.
'We will find a way,’ said Thorin firmly.

‘But what if we don’t?’ Bilbo shook his head, feeling more lost that he ever had. ‘You sound so sure.’

‘I am sure because I have to be, because there is no other option,’ Thorin admitted. He watched as something like pure, undiluted fear passed across Bilbo’s face.

‘I’m not,’ said Bilbo in a very quiet voice.

Thorin turned to him completely and put a hand on each of Bilbo’s shoulders. ‘We will weather this. It is said that the Dwarves were made to endure.’

‘You might be. I’m just a Hobbit,’ said Bilbo with a whisper of a smile.

Thorin chuckled under his breath. ‘Yes, a Hobbit,’ he agreed, ‘and the strongest, most stubborn creature I have ever met. You can’t give up, not now. I swear to you we will find a way out. We will see this through to the end, and you’ll stand under your sky once more, and perhaps even this tunnel-loving Dwarf will be glad to see clouds and stars again.’

Bilbo’s smile had transformed into a genuine one. The sight of it greatly gladdened Thorin’s heart, though he was still plagued with fear. He had meant every word he had said to Bilbo, but he also knew his own heart.

_We were made to endure_, was the old saying, and how true it was for the Dwarves of Erebor. Thorin had already known such tragedy. He knew how important their journey was to his people. But Thorin wondered how much _more_ his heart could endure for the sake of Erebor. Could he continue, without his nephews, without Dwalin and Balin and his Company?

Without Bilbo?

Thorin vowed he would never have to find out.

There were lights among the trees again. By unspoken agreement, Thorin and Bilbo steered clear of them when they restarted walking. But it seemed as though their day of misfortune was not yet finished, for by avoiding one set of lights, they stumbled across another.

Another feast all laid out, ready to be eaten, another flare of light, and suddenly Bilbo and Thorin were separated. It was, perhaps, one of the worst moments of Bilbo’s life. Thorin’s coat disappeared from under his finger tips, and he was left grasping empty air.

‘Thorin?’ he shouted. ‘Thorin?’

No reply.

There was no panic, this time, only the numbness that comes with utter despair. His back hit the trunk of a tree, and he slid down it to sit on the forest floor. Dread seemed to suffuse every single part of him, weighing down his limbs. For a while he couldn’t think, so overwhelming was his despair. But then, like warm sunlight falling on his shadowed mind, he remembered Thorin's words.

*I swear to you we will find a way out. We will see this through to the end.*
Bilbo breathed through his nose and let his head ball back to thunk against the tree. He stared up at the canopy, trying to imagine the sky far above. Lord Elrond had not been the first to tell him that there was power in a name - the eagles had been the ones to let him into that little secret.

There is a reason they are not spoken of to outsiders, Deas had said to him once. For better or worse we have given you our truest selves. But I know you will only use this power for good. Invoke us in your darkest hour, Bilbo, and we will give you strength.

Bilbo let his eyes fall shut.


He began to breathe a little easier.

‘The-Breeze-That-Stirs-The-River.’

The aches in his body receded.

And, finally, Gwaihir’s First Name: ‘The-Light-That-Falls-On-The-Mountain-Peak.’

The darkness loosened its hold on his heart. His illness had retreated momentarily, pushed to one side. He could do this. Somewhere, in the sky above, flew eagles who loved him. He would survive this, if only to see them again. Here, in this forest, there were those that needed him. He would not give up on them while there was still breath left in his body.

He heaved himself to his feet, using his spear as a lever, picked a direction and started walking. He had every intention of walking until he collapsed or until he found the others, whichever came first. For how long he walked with only the sound of his footsteps for company he could not say, but at last he saw something that stood out against the uniformity of the forest. A darker patch of forest - noticeable in its complete lack of any light - was different enough that Bilbo changed direction to head towards it. The spider webs were far more numerous, here. Bilbo’s senses prickled, sight and hearing sharpened, for his gut was telling him that this was where he needed to be. He crept forward, spear at the ready in his hand, stepping carefully over trailing silver string, making almost no sound at all. He was part of the silence of the forest, now.

There was little light in the clearing that was revealed to him through the gaps in the trees, and Bilbo could see why – thick webbing was strung over the whole clearing, like the top of a marquee. Bilbo picked out shapes and movement – spiders, he realised, and lots of them. His eyes were drawn to the furthest side of the clearing where were row upon row of tightly wrapped up bundles hung, some near the ground, others high up on a branch.

It was the Company, Bilbo realised with a lurch. Bilbo could see the top of Fíli’s golden head, the ear flaps of Bofur’s hat, and the distinctive black and white beard of Bifur.

And between Bilbo and his friends, the biggest, most fearsome spiders he had ever seen, all of them in constant movement, scuttling from branch to branch, clicking at each other all the while.

Bilbo retreated a little and hid his form behind a tree. He noticed with surprise that there was the slightest hint of blue around the hilt of his sword. Strange – he had thought the sword only glowed when orcs and goblins were close, but perhaps it could help him now. His blood was singing with the possibility of battle, but he took a few moments to compose himself. He needed a plan.
There was quite some confusion among the spiders when the first stone hit, knocking a spider clean off its perch. Another two stones followed in quick succession, two more spiders keeling over, unconscious. One particular spider, nearer to the edge of the trees, was struck across its back. It turned, as did many of its fellows, peering into the forest, wondering if this was yet more Dwarves come to offer themselves for the spiders' feast. Curiosity and greed won out over its caution. It scuttled forward, into the gloom.

There was a small pause, and then there came the sound of a sword striking spider-flesh, high pitched squealing, and a moment later the spider rolled back into the clearing. It had been slashed from end to end, gave one last feeble twitch of its legs, and died.

Bilbo stepped out of the trees, sword in one hand, spear in the other, face grim. The spiders took one look at the blood-splattered, glowing-blue sword and were whipped up into such a fury that they charged, as one, after Bilbo.

Bilbo turned and ran for his life. The spiders followed at breakneck speed - they were fast, but Bilbo was faster, and he was experienced at fighting in forests. They tried to catch him in their webs, swinging high above him, but Bilbo dodged every attempt, and slashed through the rest. He ran as far as he dared from the clearing, and, when he thought he had put enough distance between him and the spiders, swung around and headed back to their nest, sheathing his sword as he did so, shrouding his form in darkness once more. So silent and swift was he that the spiders carried on their pursuit through the undergrowth. He didn't have long - the spiders would surely soon realise what he'd done.

Two spiders had remained behind, ready to start their feast without the others. But Bilbo did not let their pincers anywhere near the Dwarves - he dispatched both quickly, the first by thrusting the point of his spear through its body, and the second fell victim to his sword – one slash of the glowing blue blade took out three of its legs, the next cut its body in two.

Bilbo put side his spear for a moment to climb the tree, hands and feet easily finding holds in the bark. His sword made quick work of the spider’s string, cutting the rope-like anchors that held the wrapped-up Dwarves to the tree branch. They tumbled to the ground, Bilbo following on after, rolling to regain his feet after the fall. He slashed open the cocoon-like bindings that kept the Dwarves entrapped, and Fíli, Kíli and Balin were all quickly revealed. Bilbo urged them to their feet, but they were sluggish with spider-poison, and their movements slow.

But still they stumbled to help free the others, and soon the Company were all standing unsteadily in the clearing, trying to regain control of their limbs and shaking away the fog in their heads. And not a moment too soon - Bilbo could hear the tell-tale sound of the scuttling of many, many legs on the approach.

‘Get ready!’ Bilbo cried to them, ‘get ready to fight, and when I say so, mount an attack in that direction!’ he said, pointing left.

He could only hope they had understood him. There was no time to repeat his instructions, for a wave of furious spiders were upon them. If the spiders were angry before, then they were apoplectic with rage now, with their feast free and ready to fight.

Bilbo defended the Dwarves from the brunt of the attack as best he could. He stood between them and the spiders with a battle fury hot enough to match his enemies’. Some of the healthier Dwarves, like Balin and Dwalin and Bifur, were trying to help, but they would soon be overwhelmed unless Bilbo acted, and acted quickly.
It was time for part two of the plan.

‘Go now!’ He shouted to Balin, ‘push that way, I’ll draw them off!’

And with that he laid into the spiders with spear and sword, directing their wrath solely towards him, leading them in the opposite direction from where the Dwarves were headed. He dashed back and forth, slipping between the trees, striking at the spiders and retreating back into the shadows, ensuring that most of them followed him and him alone.

This next part was a gamble, but Bilbo had no choice but to take it. When he judged that he had lead the spiders further enough away from the Company, he suddenly stopped, sheathed his sword and threw himself into a pile of leaves in the crook of the roots of a tree.

Bilbo lay as still as he could, and listened to the scuttling of the spiders as they flickered past him, oblivious as to his hiding place. He had lit fires in four different places in preparation for this part of the plan. He only hoped that they would keep burning for long enough to confuse the spiders, and that the fires looked enough like the light of his sword to distract them from the Dwarves.

He breathed in the musty scent of the forest floor. The sounds of the spiders in hot pursuit faded, then disappeared altogether, silence descending once more. He pushed the leaves off of him and tried to sit up, but was blindsided by a sudden rush of dizziness. The battle had sapped the last of his strength. There was nothing left. His illness, held at bay momentarily, now came back threefold, and Bilbo found he couldn’t breathe at all.

Even as he gasped and strained for breath, Bilbo could make out the sounds of Dwarves pushing their way noisily through the undergrowth. The Company was passing him by, so close to his hiding place Bilbo could merely call out and one of them would hear. But he had no breath with which to shout. Black spots danced across his vision. His heart beat was beating so fast he thought it might burst in his chest. He tried to reach out with the last scraps of his strength, fingers straining towards Fíli and Kíli, but it was no use.

His last thought before unconsciousness took him was that Thorin had not been among those he had freed from the spider’s nest.

Chapter End Notes

Psst. Psst! *whispers* thanks for all the kudos, comments and bookmarks and stuff.
You're all awesome. *runs away*

I am predicting Monday for the next chapter.
Bilbo’s return to consciousness was a slow one. He hovered between sleep and the waking world for several long, sluggish moments, without any real awareness for what had happened or where he was. But while his mind was foggy, his body was not, and when he sensed a presence hovering near him, he reacted out of pure instinct.

He flung one hand out, gripping his attacker’s wrist fiercely, and with the other he reached for his dagger, only to find it missing from its usual place under his pillow. He half-registered the tall young Man whose wrist he held, but his body was more concerned with the fact that Bilbo had not been able to move the man’s wrist, not even by an inch, the limb held in place by an insurmountable strength.

Still operating on instinct, Bilbo did the next best thing, and flung himself away from the threat, out of the bed, to press his back up against the wall. His mind was finally catching up with his swift movements, eyes flicking around the room, taking in the rock walls - finely carved - the generous bed, and the Man – no, not a Man, an Elf - staring bemusedly at him.

‘Peace, Master Hobbit,’ said the Elf, ‘I mean you no harm.’

‘Where am I?’ Bilbo demanded, still searching for anything in the room that might be used as a weapon. There was nothing to be had, unless he could wrench a torch from its bracket.

‘You are safe.’

‘That’s not an answer,’ said Bilbo. There was only one door – shut, and on the other side of the room. He wasn’t sure if he could reach it before the Elf.

The Elf tilted his head a little to one side, as though Bilbo were the most fascinating thing he’d ever seen. The movement reminded Bilbo of a curious bird. The Elf, Bilbo noted, was tall, like all of his kind, but whereas the Rivendell Elves had been dark haired, this one was haloed in golden hair, with brilliant blue eyes. He looked young, if Elves could ever be called young.

‘But still, I assure you, you are safe,’ the Elf said. ‘There is no need for alarm.’

‘I wonder if you’d say that if you were the one who had just woken up in a strange place, with a strange Elf hovering over you, an Elf that won’t tell you where you are?’

The Elf smiled, untroubled by Bilbo’s terse tone. ‘If it would put you at ease, I’ll tell you my name. I am Legolas Greenleaf of the Elves of the Greenwood, though it is lately called Mirkwood.’ He raised one eyebrow. ‘Well met.’

Bilbo did not relax, but he could not help but reply politely, ‘Bilbo Baggins, at your service. Pleased to meet you, I suppose. You say I’m in Mirkwood, but this doesn’t look like any part of Mirkwood I’ve seen. So I ask again, where am I?’

The Elf shrugged, an infinitesimal movement of his shoulders. ‘It was a curious thing. I was wandering the woods this morning when I all but stumbled across you. I almost stepped on you, in fact. You were half-dead, so I brought you here, to King Thranduil’s palace, in the hopes that you would recover. Fortunately, I was right.’
‘Thranduil?’ Oh no, this was ill news. Bilbo knew that name from Balin’s tales. But Bilbo did not dwell on this - there were more important questions to be asked. ‘And what of my friends? The Dwarves?’

Bilbo had the satisfaction of seeing surprise flicker across Legolas’ face, the only real hint of emotion the serene Elf had shown. ‘The Dwarves? So you were a part of their Company, then,’ he said, almost to himself. ‘If they are your friends, then you might not like what I’m about to say…they have been taken to the dungeons.’

Bilbo cursed, loudly and colourfully, in the eagles’ language.

‘I am not sure if that is anatomically possible,’ said Legolas mildly, eyebrows raised.

‘You understood that?’ spluttered Bilbo.

‘I did, but you’d be hard-pressed to find an Elf who couldn’t. What is more curious is how a Hobbit, of all the Free Folk, came to speak the language of the Eagles of Manwë.’ Legolas’ eyes gleamed with curiosity. ‘I’m sure there is quite the tale behind your clothes and your…linguistic abilities.’

‘Nevermind that,’ said Bilbo, his Hobbit side horrified that he had been caught swearing. He licked his lips, nervous about the answer to his next question: ‘if my friends are prisoners of your King, then what does that make me?’

‘You were brought in separately to the Dwarves,’ said Legolas, ‘and I was unsure if you were a part of their group. But now that you’ve confirmed it—’

Bilbo tensed, ready to sprint for the door at the slightest provocation, but Legolas held up a calming hand.

‘You are not a prisoner, Master Hobbit! I will not be escorting you to the dungeons, and neither will any of my kin. You have been lucky – the capture of the Dwarves has caused quite the commotion. Everyone was so distracted and excited that I doubt anyone saw me take you to this room.’

Suspicion immediately flared in Bilbo’s chest. He narrowed his eyes at Legolas. ‘You’re…helping me. Why? Not that I mind, but why would you not just throw me in the dungeons with the others?’

Something that could only be called a smirk curled Legolas’ mouth. ‘Come now,’ he said, tone light, ‘what’s with all the suspicion? I’m merely excited about having found a Hobbit in the woods. You’re the first exciting thing to happen in this forest for months.’

Bilbo stared at him. ‘You live in a forest infested with huge, flesh-eating spiders,’ he pointed out.

Legolas waved his hand elegantly. ‘Spiders can become terribly repetitive after you’ve been fighting them for the past year,’ he said.

Bilbo gave him the most disbelieving, unimpressed look he could muster. Legolas’ expression didn’t change an inch.

‘I have my reasons, Mister Baggins. You’ll just have to trust me.’ At Bilbo’s snort, he pointed out, ‘I’m afraid you don’t have much choice. Outside that door is a palace full of Elves, and they are all as sharp-sighted as I am. As stealthy as Hobbits are, I am not sure if you would remain undetected for long. I’ll take my leave of you now – I’m needed elsewhere. I would suggest you stay here. Whatever illness plagued you before is mostly cured, but I think you could still do with the rest. I will return later. Goodbye, Mister Baggins.’
He turned to leave, but Bilbo stopped him. ‘Can you at least tell me...my friends – are they well? Have they been fed?’

‘They have been fed and watered and are all in good health, said Legolas gently, ‘and I know this because they have enough strength in them to be bad-tempered.’

Bilbo let out a breath. Legolas took his leave, the door clicking shut behind him. Bilbo counted to ten, and then moved to check if it was locked. It wasn’t. He wasn’t sure what to make of that.

It was only when he went to sit down on the bed that he realised he hadn’t asked the right question – he knew the Dwarves were well, but he had not asked how many had been captured. His worry, which had abated with Legolas’ assurances, rushed back all at once.

Despite his fears for his friends, Bilbo did not dare venture out of the room just yet, for he was not keen on getting captured within half an hour of waking up. Instead, he took the chance to take stock of the room and of himself. In his panic at waking up in a strange place, he hadn’t noticed how easy it was to breathe - there was still the faintest whisper of a cough in his throat, but it was nowhere near the suffocation he had experienced before. Bilbo’s mind reeled away from that particular memory. The desperate sensation of being unable to draw any breath was not one he particularly wanted to linger on. He certainly felt a lot better, though, in mind as well as in body; there was a lingering ache in his joints, as there usually was after a long illness, but on the whole Bilbo felt almost refreshed. He would almost say he was healthy again, were it not for the gnawing ache of hunger and dryness of his throat. He hoped that Legolas would stay true to his word and return, and if he did so he would bring as much food and water with his as an Elf could carry.

His room did not offer up much information, save that he was underground, which was some cause for surprise – Bilbo had thought that the Elves would have steered clear of anything even remotely Dwarf-like in their dwellings. His room was basic - four stone walls with four supporting pillars and two torches, a wooden chair, a bed and a bedside table with nothing in it. The pillars had been deeply carved with a twisting, vine-like pattern that was pleasing to the eyes, but Bilbo had no time to admire the workmanship. He sat on the bed and tried to decide what to do, but he simply did not know enough about his situation to make any real plans. His eyes fell once more on the wooden door and then darted away again. He had no idea if he could trust Legolas. The Elf had vaguely insinuated that he would help Bilbo, but in the same breath confirmed Bilbo’s friends were under lock and key.

The thought of his friends, of Kili and Fili and Dwalin locked up somewhere, possibly injured, probably still recovering from their near miss from death by starvation, sat uneasily atop Bilbo’s heart. It was one thing to hear that they were safe, but it was another to see it confirmed for himself. He thought of Kili, pale and unmoving on the stretcher, and of how there hadn’t been enough time for Bilbo to truly assure himself that the young Dwarf was fighting fit again.

And then there was Thorin. At least with the other Dwarves Bilbo had seen them freed from the spiders, but what of Thorin? What if he was still trapped out in Mirkwood somewhere, dosed up on spider’s poison and ready to be eaten?

With that in mind, Bilbo couldn’t stay still a moment longer. He got up off of the bed and, as quiet as he could, opened the door a fraction. He heard no movement on the corridor outside, so he opened it a little more, enough for him to slip through and have a proper look around the door frame.
A long stone corridor stretched out in either direction. It was narrow, but more than tall enough for an Elf to pass through, and more torches lit the way. Bilbo hesitated on the threshold. He had no idea how big the palace was, and there was nothing on him that could be used to mark the way so that he wouldn’t lose his way. It was quiet in the corridor – he couldn’t hear any hint of life. Legolas must have taken him to a part of the palace that was rarely used. This piece of foresight on behalf of the Elf was highly suspicious, and Bilbo had to wonder what on earth Legolas was planning.

With a resigned sigh, Bilbo gave up and retreated back into the room. He’d have to wait for Legolas’ return, and if the Elf didn’t answer his questions, then Bilbo would be left with no choice but to chance the corridor.

Bilbo was unable to gauge the time in his windowless room, but he would put good money on it being almost nightfall when Legolas returned. Thankfully, the Elf had brought food with him, and lots of it, a veritable feast compared to what Bilbo had been eating in the forest - as well as a water skin.

‘I think you should slow down,’ said Legolas amusedly as Bilbo tucked in with a gusto, ‘you may make yourself sick.’

Bilbo glared at him around a hunk of bread slathered with honey, but he did slow down a fraction. He barely tasted the food, or the clean, refreshing water, more focused on satisfying the ache in his stomach than on his senses.

Legolas perched on the wooden chair and waited patiently for Bilbo to finish his meal. When at last Bilbo found that he could eat no more, he did, in fact, feel a little sick, but he certainly wasn’t going to tell Legolas that.

‘So,’ said Bilbo, brushing crumbs from the front of his tunic, ‘I think it’s time we had a proper chat. But first of all – how many Dwarves are there in the dungeons? I want to know if all of my friends are accounted for.’

‘There are twelve that I have seen in the dungeons,’ said Legolas, and Bilbo’s heart constricted in fear.

‘Who?’ Bilbo demanded before Legolas could continue.

‘I could not tell you all of their names,’ Legolas said, smiling infuriatingly as though this were a light-hearted affair, ‘for there were so many.’

‘And is...is Thorin Oakenshield among them?’

‘No, he is not. But!’ Legolas added quickly at Bilbo’s alarmed expression, ‘I have seen Thorin Oakenshield separately to the other twelve, in my King’s throne room. I think he was brought in earlier than the others.’

Bilbo leant forward so much that almost fell off of the bed, so happy was he to hear this. ‘You have? And is he well, too?’

‘He is as well as the others.’

‘What was he doing in the King’s throne room?’
‘King Thranduil was trying to question him. He was entirely unsuccessful on that front,’ said Legolas wryly. ‘Thorin Oakenshield was very unhelpful in explaining exactly why he was in Mirkwood.’

Bilbo slumped, overwhelmed by his relief for a moment. That sounded exactly like Thorin.

‘And I don’t suppose you will be much more forthcoming over your journey’s purpose?’ Legolas asked, eyes sparkling.

‘No,’ Bilbo said, unable to hold back his smile, ‘you’ll get nothing from me, either.’

‘A shame, but it was worth a try,’ Legolas said with no real bite to his tone.

All thirteen Dwarves healthy and accounted for. It seemed that fate had finally decided they had had more than their fair share of troubles recently, and was trying to make up for it. But of course, there was still the small matter of their imprisonment, but that didn’t seem like much of a problem to a very elated Bilbo.

‘But perhaps you can satisfy my curiosity,’ said Bilbo, smile fading. ‘Why are you helping me?’

A quiet calm came over Legolas, all of his youthful teasing vanishing. He looked cautious and grave in equal measure. ‘I’m afraid I haven’t been entirely honest with you, Master Hobbit.’ Legolas levelled his bright blue gaze at Bilbo. ‘When I introduced myself I left off my title – I thought it might be too much all at once for you.’

‘Well that’s not patronising,’ said Bilbo.

Legolas ignored him. ‘Thranduil is not simply my King, but my father, too. I am Prince Legolas.’

Bilbo let out a groan of dismay. ‘Oh no, no, no. Please tell me you’re joking.’

‘I’m afraid I’m not.’

‘Oh, wonderful,’ huffed Bilbo. ‘I am breaking bread with the son of my Company’s greatest enemy.’ He wondered what Thorin would make of that, and immediately winced. Bilbo had not been told the story in its entirety, but he had managed to piece together a rough idea of what had happened, enough to know that the Dwarves were somewhat justified in their mistrust of Elves.

‘The Dwarves’ enmity with my father is another matter,’ said Legolas. ‘It doesn’t concern me, here.’

‘Doesn’t concern you?’ said Bilbo incredulously. ‘Does it not bother you that your father abandoned the Dwarves on the day of their greatest need? I’m not sure if I would do that to my worst enemy, let alone those who I was apparently allies with.’

‘I will forgive you for that slight against my father,’ said Legolas, voice as cold as the first ice of winter, ‘if only because you have been travelling with Dwarves and likely have not heard both sides of the story.’

‘Is there another side of the story?’ said Bilbo, indignation seeping away in the face of Legolas’ chilly tone.

‘There is,’ said Legolas, voice hard. ‘I do not...I do not condone my father’s choice that day, but you must understand, this was not the first dragon my father had seen, nor was it the first time he had experienced the destruction a dragon can wreck on the Free Folk of this world.’
Legolas’ demeanour had become tinged with sadness, hinted at in every single smooth gesture. ‘It was not an easy decision to make – you might say it was a King’s decision. I am a Prince, and I hope I never have to be King, if that is the kind of choice I would be faced with. What would you have done, Mister Baggins? Would you have lead your people into battle, knowing you were leading them to certain death? That is what happens with you fight a dragon. Unless you are very, very lucky, you are willingly walking to your death.’

Bilbo immediately thought of The Lonely Mountain, and of Smaug in the mountain’s belly, curled up and waiting for him. He shuddered, and forcibly shifted his mind away from the mental image.

‘It is a terrible thing, to be a King, Bilbo,’ Legolas continued, ‘and I assure you my father took no pleasure in turning away from the Dwarves that day.’

Bilbo heaved a sigh. He could understand what Legolas was getting at, even if he would probably never agree with it, no matter how many excuses Legolas made. ‘Still, though,’ he said, his stubbornness unable to let the matter go so easily, ‘he could have helped.’

Legolas inclined his head a fraction. ‘Yes, he could have in the aftermath, if the Dwarves were inclined to accept help from a source that they hated so much by that point.’

‘I thank you for telling me the other side to the story,’ said Bilbo, ‘but it still doesn’t explain why you’re helping me.’

‘The Dwarves being captured presents a problem,’ Legolas said, and some of his previous lightness returned to him, ‘and although it has greatly amused my kin, it will actually cause more trouble than the whole thing is worth.’

‘I’m not sure if I follow,’ Bilbo frowned.

‘Elves and Dwarves are both stubborn Folk,’ said Legolas, smiling when Bilbo let out a snort of laughter, ‘as I’m sure you know. So, we’re at an impasse. On the one hand my father wants to know your purpose, and why you were trespassing in Mirkwood. Please, let me finish,’ Legolas held up a hand as Bilbo opened his mouth to dispute the so-called ‘trespassing’, ‘but on the other, the Dwarves will never say. Are we to hold the Dwarves forever more in the dungeons, then? But letting you all go, and especially letting you go not knowing what it is you’re up to, would be a bit of a blow to our pride.’

Legolas spread his hands, ‘so, you see, we’re a little stuck, although I doubt that anyone else has noticed, save my father.’

‘I think I understand, now,’ said Bilbo. ‘You’re going to use me, aren’t you? The perfect scapegoat.’

Legolas’ smile widened. ‘you’re very quick, Mister Baggins. Yes, that’s exactly what I’m proposing. I will help you help the Dwarves escape. You get what you want, and I get my father out of a tricky situation. Having you all escape will still be an annoyance, but I think we can bear it.’

Bilbo ran a hand through his hair, thinking it over. Legolas’ proposal seemed logical, and there was no reason that Bilbo could think of for the Prince to have hidden Bilbo away like this, other than the one Legolas had stated. He didn’t think he had much choice. He would have to trust that Legolas was telling the truth.

‘I’ll agree to help you if you help me, but I have one request,’ said Bilbo, holding his finger up. ‘This is non-negotiable.’

‘Very well. State your terms.’
‘I want to see my friends. Yes, I’m sure what you’ve said about their well-being is true, but I still want to see them. We...we went through a great deal together, out there in Mirkwood. ‘

‘I understand,’ said Legolas softly, ‘but I’m not sure how to get you through the halls without being detected. And there is another problem – I think you will have to choose just one of your friends to see.’

‘Why?’

‘Twelve of them are all roughly in one place, but one is not. My father has put your leader, Thorin, in the deepest parts of the dungeon, far away from all the rest. I would not like to risk you in the halls a second time, Mister Baggins. It would be pushing our luck too far.’

‘Bilbo, please,’ he said with a wave of his hand, ‘if we’re going through with this madcap scheme, then I would like us to be on first name terms.’ He was quiet for a moment, even though he already knew his answer. He hadn’t even had to think about it. ‘I’d like to see Thorin, if we can manage it. Besides, it’d be good to have at least one of the Company ready if we do manage to escape.’

Legolas nodded and made to stand. ‘I will think about how to get you down there,’ he said. ‘I don’t think you’ll be discovered in this room, so I think what’s best for now is for us both to get some rest. There’s a bathroom not far from your door if you need more water or wish to wash. I’ll return tomorrow, when I can. I’ll knock five times on your door to let you know it’s me.’

‘Alright then. Goodnight, Legolas.’

‘Goodnight, Bilbo.’

Being confined to one room with only yourself for company and little to distract you from your thoughts is bad enough, but for a Hobbit like Bilbo it was so frustrating that he was almost at his wit’s end by mid-afternoon on the second day. He needed to be out and doing something, needed to be making plans, anything to stop him from dwelling on the fact that he was alone again. His room was by no means as frightening as Mirkwood, but the experience of being utterly alone, the moment when Thorin had all but vanished before his eyes, was far too recent for comfort. Even having had a hearty breakfast and a bath hadn’t helped, and Bilbo was overly grateful when Legolas finally knocked on the door.

‘What took you so long?’ Bilbo grouched at him half-heartedly. His irritation was quickly swept away when Legolas deposited more food on the bed, a sack consisting of apples, bread and another jar of honey. Even as he bit into an apple, Bilbo noted that Legolas had kept one hand behind his back.

‘I have other duties to attend to,’ said Legolas, indifferent to Bilbo’s bad temper, ‘I had to ensure that I would not arouse suspicion. Besides, it’s almost time for dinner. I think now will be the best time for us to try and visit Thorin.’

Bilbo eyed him. ‘And how are we going to do that?’ he said, tone mild once more now he had food and company. ‘I haven’t been able to come up with anything beyond sneaking through the halls.’

At Legolas’ self-satisfied smile he sat forward eagerly. ‘You have a plan?’ asked Bilbo.

Legolas revealed what he had been holding behind his back. In his hand were what appeared to be
the stiff bristles from a broom.

‘We will turn you into a Dwarf,’ said Legolas. ‘If anyone sees me with you, they’ll just think you are being escorted back to your cell. There are so many Dwarves in the dungeons that no one will know any different!’

Bilbo looked from the bristles to Legolas, to the bristles again. He thought it over. ‘That’s...that’s actually a very good plan,’ he said with some surprise.

‘We will need to make you a beard with these. You don’t look very Dwarvish.’

Bilbo sat back, excitement bubbling up inside him.

This was going to work.

This wasn’t going to work.

‘No, it’s no use,’ sighed Legolas, ‘your Hobbitness shows through no matter how many bristles we stick on. Perhaps horsehair would work?’

‘I think we’d better give up on it,’ said Bilbo with a shake of his head, picking off the bristles they had attached to his smooth cheeks, ‘and rely on my stealth, instead.’

‘I have heard that Hobbits can be quiet when they want to be,’ started Legolas dubiously, ‘but I am not sure if even you can walk down a hallway unnoticed.’

‘Have you ever seen a Hobbit sneaking around?’ Damn, but some of these bristles were a pain to get off.

‘Well, no-‘

‘Exactly,’ said Bilbo. ‘And you never will.’

It was agreed that Legolas would take him down some of the quieter corridors and through parts of the palace that were rarely used; it was a longer journey, but there was far less risk of getting caught. Legolas would lead the way, with Bilbo following on behind as discreetly as he could manage, and Legolas would stop every now and again to allow Bilbo time to catch up.

Their journey was made longer by the fact that Legolas kept trying to catch Bilbo out.

‘This truly is fascinating,’ Legolas said to the empty corridor, the fourth time he suddenly stopped mid-stride and spun around to look behind him. It was like they were playing the most ridiculous game of Grandmother’s footsteps. ‘I can’t even hear your footsteps. And where are you hiding?’

Bilbo’s silence became so pointed that Legolas held up his hands. ‘Do not fret. I will stop now,’ he said with a soft, amused smile, ‘but let it be known that I am very impressed, Master Hobbit.’

When they finally reached the dungeons, Legolas let one of his hands reach out and brush against a
pillar as he passed. This was the agreed signal that Bilbo should remain where he was, for now. It was too much to hope for that Thorin’s cell would not have its own guard, but Legolas had assured Bilbo that this would not be much of a problem.

‘No one is fond of the guard shift that falls during dinner time,’ he had said earlier, back in the room. ‘It will not take much to persuade the guard to give up his shift. I will say that I wish to speak to the prisoner personally, and that he may as well join our kin in the great hall.’

Whatever Legolas had said the guard, it clearly had the intended effect. Bilbo watched from his hiding place as another tall Elf, this one dark-haired, walked past him, in the direction Bilbo had just come from.

‘It is safe for you to come out, now,’ said Legolas after the guard had disappeared. Legolas’ eyes were fixed on a completely different spot from the one Bilbo was currently hiding in, and Bilbo took a great amount of pleasure in stepping out from his hiding spot and seeing the impressed look that flashed over Legolas’ face.

‘Remarkable,’ Legolas muttered to himself, and then, to Bilbo, ‘this way. Through this door there are some steps, and then a corridor full of cells. You will find your friend in the last cell.’

Bilbo nodded, and slipped past Legolas, through the door and made his way down a series of stone steps and into a low-hanging corridor. The stone work was far rougher here, and it was not very well lit. Bilbo had to step over more than a few puddles of water on his way down.

He found he was nervous, which was ridiculous. What was there to be nervous about? Thorin was his friend. If anything, he should be excited. But that did not seem to stop the butterflies from fluttering in his stomach.

Bilbo tugged at the edge of his tunic (newly washed), straightened his shoulders, and made his way down the corridor. As Legolas had promised, there were rows upon rows of empty cells before the very last one. His steps had become quieter and quieter as he approached the end, though Bilbo had made no conscious effort to be stealthy, but it meant that, when Bilbo finally peered into Thorin’s cell, Thorin did not immediately notice him.

Thorin was sat - his hands thankfully unchained - on the cell’s bed, elbows on his thighs, head unbowed, staring at the opposite wall. He looked tired; this was the first thing that struck Bilbo. Tired, and as still as a statue. He did not fidget or shift position, gaze unwavering, expression curiously blank. Without his huge coat, he looked strangely vulnerable.

‘Thorin,’ Bilbo whispered, though he had no idea why he had pitched his voice so low. It was not as though anyone were to overhear him down here.

At the sound of his name, Thorin startled, just enough for Bilbo to notice, his hands jolting a little in his lap. His head turned, slowly, brow furrowed with confusion, and his dark blue eyes fell on Bilbo.

The reaction to Bilbo was immediate. Thorin’s face came alive with emotion, eyes widening in disbelief, then crinkling in what Bilbo could only describe as joy, the Dwarf’s mouth falling open in a half-stunned, half-relieved smile.

‘Bilbo?’ said Thorin, rising from the bed and coming to stand as near to the bars as he could, resting his hands on the iron that separated them. ‘Bilbo, you’re-you’re alive?’

‘You didn’t know?’ said Bilbo, not sure if he was more surprised by this or by the stutter that had interrupted Thorin’s usually smooth and confident voice.
‘No, I didn’t,’ Thorin was still smiling, less of a grin now and more of a quiet, happy thing that lingered at the edges of his mouth. ‘The damn Elves haven’t told me a thing, beyond that they caught the rest of the Dwarven members of my Company. But not a word has been said about you.’

Bilbo hadn’t thought of that. He’d been so eager for confirmation that his friends were alright that he hadn’t considered how the Dwarves might be feeling. Of course they wouldn’t have heard about him, and they couldn’t have asked for fear of giving him away to the Elves. The thought warmed and worried him at once – he didn’t like the idea that they had been worrying about him, and especially not Thorin.

‘Well,’ said Bilbo awkwardly, ‘here I am.’

‘Yes, here you are,’ agreed Thorin. ‘And I am glad of that, but how in Mahal’s name have you managed to avoid capture?’

‘It’s a long story,’ Bilbo said vaguely, knowing that Thorin would take the news of Bilbo working with Legolas well at all, ‘but I haven’t been captured so far.’

‘And are you feeling any better?’

‘I am feeling better, no more suffocation for me,’ said Bilbo, attempting humour but missing by a wide margin. He winced. ‘Yes, I am. There’s something about this palace that has helped me recover, I think.’

‘This is welcome news. We need our burglar fighting fit. And what of the others? Are they well, too?’

Bilbo had to wonder at the cruelty of the Mirkwood Elves. These were certainly not the kind and welcoming – if a little distant – Rivendell Elves. Bilbo couldn’t imagine Lord Elrond keeping anyone locked up with no assurances that their family was safe.

‘They’re fine,’ said Bilbo, ‘they’re being held elsewhere, from what I can tell. All twelve of them.’

The line of Thorin’s shoulders loosened a fraction. ‘Good,’ he said, ‘As much as I hate these Elves,’ Thorin said, every word dripping with derision, ‘I’m glad to hear...’ he trailed off.

‘That they’re not out there somewhere, starving?’ Bilbo finished. He gave a small smile. ‘I know - I felt the same way. At least we’re all healthy, even if we’re not in the most ideal position right now.’

Thorin nodded, and his voice turned teasing. ‘So, then, Mister Baggins, what is the Great Burglar’s plan?’

Bilbo tried not to cringe, instead standing a little straighter. ‘The Great Burglar’s plan is...is a work in progress. You’ll hear about it when you need to.’

‘I’m sure you’ll come up with something,’ said Thorin, and he wasn’t teasing any more. Bilbo found himself shivering a little under Thorin’s dark gaze, the Dwarf’s eyes had slipped half-way shut, looking at Bilbo with such confidence and gentle belief that Bilbo found he had to get away. It was a soft look, but Bilbo felt as though it were a weight on him, on his shoulders.

‘Well,’ Bilbo said with confidence he didn’t feel, ‘you’ll just have to see, won’t you? Maybe it’ll be a surprise.’ He glanced down the corridor, if only so he didn’t have to look at Thorin. ‘I’d better go,’ he said, even though Legolas had not given the signal to say someone was approaching. ‘The next time we see each other I’ll have a pair of keys in my hands, just you wait and see.’
'I'll hold you to that,' Thorin said, smiling at Bilbo’s bravado.

‘Goodbye, Thorin.’

‘Goodbye Bilbo,’ said Thorin, and then, more seriously, ‘stay safe.’

‘I will.’ And goodness, he really was dithering now. He was sure he was blushing as he turned away, up the corridor, trying very hard all the way not to look back and see Thorin one last time.

The walk back was uneventful, which Bilbo was grateful for. He had a great deal to think about, and a more than a few questions to ask of Legolas. But, as Bilbo quickly found out, Legolas was hesitant to answer anything related to the palace’s layout.

‘This is ridiculous,’ Bilbo told him once they were safely back in his room, ‘how are we supposed to come up with an escape plan when you won’t even tell me the basics?’

‘I cannot simply divulge all the secrets of my home,’ said Legolas, ‘it is bad enough that I am allowing you to wander our halls unchecked.’

Bilbo threw up his hands in frustration. ‘Who do you think I’ll tell? Do you really think I’ll use this information against you?’

‘You may. You are closely connected to the Dwarves. I cannot take that chance.’

‘I swear I won’t tell them anything.’

‘I cannot take the risk,’ said Legolas, voice remaining steady even as Bilbo’s became laced with frustration.

‘If there’s one thing you need to know about me, Legolas, it’s that I hate war. I would never, ever use anything you tell me as an advantage in battle.’ He huffed angrily, ‘and I think you are doing the Dwarves a great disservice. Why on earth would Thorin wage war on you? He doesn’t even have a kingdom yet!’

‘But there is the key word: yet. I do not think you understand, Bilbo. The uneasiness between our two Peoples runs deeper than you can ever imagine.’

‘Fine,’ Bilbo snapped, as the end of his patience, ‘then tell me how I’m supposed to come up with something.’

‘We will work around it,’ said Legolas.

Bilbo scrubbed a hand over his eyes. The past day had done a great deal to restore him, but he still had many hours of sleep to catch up on.

‘Alright. Let’s try this: is there any way we can sneak out of the gates?’

‘No,’ came Legolas’ response immediately. ‘They are guarded at all times, even during feasts. And the guards there will not be persuaded to leave their posts for anything.’

‘And there’s no other way out of the palace?’
‘None.’

Bilbo flopped back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. This was impossible, it really was. No doors, no hidden entrances, no...

Bilbo sat up again slowly. ‘I heard water,’ he said. Legolas simply blinked at him, so he continued, ‘I heard water, in the corridor. Is there a river running through the palace?’

‘Not a river as such,’ said Legolas, ‘but there is a stream that leads out into the river.’

‘And that river – does that lead to anything?’

‘It eventually runs all the way down to Long Lake. We use the waterways for transporting food and wine to other parts.’

A smile was beginning to creep across Bilbo’s face. ‘What do you use to transport the food?’

An answering smile was brightening Legolas’ handsome features. ‘Barrels.’

‘Big barrels?’

‘Big enough to fit a Dwarf inside. Or a Hobbit.’

‘Perfect. The Dwarves are not going to like this, but I think we have a plan.’

They couldn’t act on it immediately, of course. Legolas said that they needed a big enough distraction that no one would notice thirteen Dwarves and one Hobbit trotting through the halls. But, as it turned out, Mirkwood Elves were fond of feasting, and when they feasted they did not go about it half-heartedly, and there was another scheduled two days from now.

‘As for the keys to the cells, that should not propose a great problem,’ Legolas told him. ‘The butler and the chief jailer are...fond of sampling the wine before each feast. It doesn’t do any harm, which is why no one has ever tried to stop them. But on the night of this particular feast, I can make sure that there are stronger wines on offer. They won’t be able to resist tasting some. They’ll be asleep within an hour of the first drop touching their lips. Once I know they’re snoring away, I can escort you to the dungeons again.’

‘But what about our weapons?’ asked Bilbo, surprised at himself even as he asked. He hadn’t even thought of his spear, dagger or sword.

‘That’s up to you. I took your weapons to the armoury when I first brought you in. I can try and recover them for you, while you’re getting the Dwarves out.’

‘Please do,’ said Bilbo, ‘at the very least get my spear and sword out. If we’re venturing into Mirkwood again, I’d like at least one of the Company armed.’

Legolas nodded. ‘I’ll leave them at the dock. It would not do for your Dwarf friends to know that an Elf is helping them, after all.’

With the plan set, all they had to do was wait. This seemed like a daunting task for Bilbo, and so he persuaded Legolas to bring him books as well as food on his next visit.
'You and that Dwarf,' said Legolas as he made to leave. ‘Are you...close?'

Bilbo, who was now making his way through his second apple of the day, gave Legolas a confused look. ‘Well, yes, if you mean Thorin,’ he said, thrown off by the question, ‘I suppose so. We’ve been through a lot together. All of the Company have.’

‘Yes, I’m sure the Company has,’ Legolas seemed to be speaking with the utmost delicacy, ‘but was there any reason why you chose to see Thorin and not any of the others?’

The question flummoxed Bilbo. ‘He’s our leader. He...he had to know about the plan,’ he attempted to explain, but the words didn’t ring completely true, even to his own ears. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘I was simply curious,’ Legolas said with a shrug. ‘Think nothing of it.’

And with that he left Bilbo alone to his thoughts.

Bilbo meant to focus on the plan, he really did. He was supposed to be conjuring up every single way that it could go wrong, and what they could do should that happen. But, alone and with little else to do, Legolas’ parting question kept repeating over and over in his head. He found that his mind kept drifting back to the way his heart had practically done cartwheels in his chest when Thorin had said, ‘you’re alive,’ in a voice that sounded relieved down to his bones. How Bilbo’s skin had tingled with an echo of warmth where Thorin’s hand had gripped his wrist. How glad Bilbo had been, to know that Thorin cared enough about him to have sat in his cell and worry about Bilbo’s fate.

Oh, no, thought Bilbo. Oh, no. He pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. This couldn’t be happening. He couldn’t have feelings for Thorin. The eagles had teased him for it, right after their run-in with Azog, but he had brushed it off as mere banter. But was he really so obvious? His family noticing was one thing, but an Elf he barely knew? His hands weren't enough. He took a pillow out from under his head and put it over him, breathing in the clean, sweet smell of freshly laundered sheets.

There was no getting away from it. Even now he could feel himself blushing. And really, should he be surprised? When Thorin so often graced him with gentle touches and soft half-smiles? He just had to hope that Thorin wouldn’t notice – he would have to be very careful, because he'd only just won Thorin’s friendship, and it was a friendship that Bilbo took a great amount of joy in. He liked being Thorin’s friend. He liked that Thorin trusted him, and felt comfortable enough to smile in his presence.

Bilbo wasn’t about to let a silly little crush ruin that.

When the time finally came to put the plan into motion, Bilbo found himself more worried about seeing Thorin again than anything else. But he was distracted from his contemplations on how much of a fool he was going to make of himself by Legolas’ outstretched hand.

‘I hope we meet again someday, under better circumstances,’ said Legolas.

Bilbo shook the proffered hand with a smile. ‘So do I.’

‘And, perhaps next time you will tell me your story.’
Bilbo chuckled, ‘yes,’ he agreed. ‘I think you will have earned it.’

Bilbo hoped that they could be friends, if they ever met again. Legolas seemed more far-sighted than most of his kin, and it was a quality that Bilbo could admire. With nothing more to say to each other, they left the room and took the same route down to the dungeons, but this time Legolas took him to where the Company was being held. As promised, two Elves were sat at the entrance to the dungeon, slumped over on the table in front of them, fast asleep.

‘Here,’ Legolas handed him the keys from the chief jailor’s belt. ‘Good luck, Mister Baggins.’

‘Thank you, Legolas. I mean no offence, but I hope I don’t see you again for a while.’

Legolas smiled, and without another word, turned away.

The Company was overjoyed to see him, and Bilbo had to shush them quite a few times as he fumbled with the keys in the first lock. It took a lot longer than Bilbo would have liked to set them all free, and he has interrupted frequently by pats on the back and by more than a few hugs.

‘Knew you could do it, Mister Boggins,’ said Kíli, grinning and bouncing out of his cell.

Bilbo eyed him, considering, before saying, ‘you remember me, don’t you?’

Kíli grinned wider, if that was possible.

‘If you remember me, then there’s no excuse not to use my real name,’ said Bilbo sternly, hands on hips, but he laughed when Kíli swept him up into a hug.

‘Where’s Thorin?’ asked Dwalin.

‘Down there,’ said Bilbo, pointing to the far end of the hall. ‘You can go and get him, if you like. Here, take the keys. He’s down the steps and right at the end.’

Dwalin went to do just that. Coward, Bilbo berated himself in the privacy of his mind.

‘So, what’s the plan?’ said Fíli.

‘And how did you even get in here?’

‘Yes, that’s what I want to know – you’re certainly living up to your title, Mister Baggins!’

‘Well, it’s a long story, and I think-’

‘You will tell us though, won’t you? Later?’ pleaded Ori.

‘A burglar never reveals his secrets, Ori,’ Bilbo said with mock-haughtiness.

‘But what is the plan?’

‘If you let him speak,’ said a voice, ‘then I’m sure he’ll tell us.’

Bilbo glanced at Thorin gratefully, ignoring the way his heart had sped up a little.

‘I knew you’d come up with something,’ said Thorin.

‘Well. Yes. I have a plan, but you’re not going to like it.’

‘I’m sure whatever it is will be better than sitting around in this place,’ said Balin. ‘Come now Bilbo,
tell us what it is.’

Bilbo told them.

They didn’t like it.

Not even the reappearance of their weapons at the dock did much to discourage the Company’s grumbling, and they only ceased their complaining when Thorin asked if they’d like to be put back in their cells. With that prospect in mind, they began to willingly load themselves into barrels, which were then fastened with lids and pushed out into the water. Slowly, the Company dwindled, barrels bobbing away in the current, until Bilbo and Thorin were the only ones left.

‘You next,’ said Thorin to Bilbo.

‘But how will you load yourself up?’

‘I’ll manage somehow, I’m sure. Here, this looks like a Hobbit sized one,’ he added, rolling up a barrel that was smaller than the rest.

‘Are you sure-’

‘Would you like me to help you in, or push you in?’ Thorin asked, and Bilbo could tell that he was only half-joking. Rolling his eyes and smiling a little, Bilbo gave in and got into the barrel. It was a good fit, not too spacious, with some reassuring air holes.

‘I’ll take your spear,’ Thorin said as he handed Bilbo his sword and dagger. ‘See you at the river’s end.’

Bilbo nodded, unable to speak. He was suddenly nervous, and was made more so when Thorin put the lid on his barrel. The sudden feeling of weightlessness, of being pushed out into the river and being unable to find his footing in the water, was very unnerving. The long journey in the dark that followed, with no way of knowing if the others were following or if they had drowned, was awful for Bilbo. He was bashed about, rolled over, and at one point overcome with panic when his barrel overturned too much and let in water. By the time his barrel hit something solid that was not another barrel, Bilbo was bruised, shivering and on the verge of throwing up.

The barrel came to a stop, its bottom scraping along what Bilbo could only guess was a stony shore. He pushed at the top, desperate for daylight and fresh air, but his arms were weak and his attempts did little aside from making him feel claustrophobic. But before panic could once again sink its teeth into him, the top was wrenched off. Daylight streamed in and Bilbo blinked, dazed. A hand appeared before his nose, and Bilbo gratefully took it, and was heaved out of the barrel and onto the shore. It was Dwalin who had helped him out, the Dwarf looking more than a little bedraggled. Around them, the others were either lying on the shore, groaning and white faced, or helping the remaining Dwarves out of their barrels. Bilbo caught sight of Thorin hauling Fíli out of his barrel, the poor young Dwarf green in the face and muttering about apples.

‘I’m glad you got us out,’ said Dwalin, ‘don’t get me wrong, you’ll have my eternal gratitude for that. But...never again, eh?’

Bilbo would’ve agreed, but he was too busy staring the lake. It was the biggest body of water he had ever set eyes on, stretching out like a huge mirror, so vast Bilbo would have to turn on the spot to see
the entirety of it. And there, on the other side, stood The Lonely Mountain. It was a shock to see it up
close so suddenly – the last time Bilbo had caught a glimpse of it, the peak had been no bigger than
his thumb, but now it was a fixture that couldn’t be ignored, so huge and imposing that it demanded
his attention, and Bilbo found that he couldn’t look away.

‘We made it,’ said Thorin, coming to stand next to Bilbo. Around him, the others were getting to
their feet, ignoring their aches and pains for the moment in favour of looking up at The Lonely
Mountain.

‘Thanks to you,’ Thorin said, putting a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. Bilbo ducked his head for half a
moment.

‘Any one of us could have done the same,’ he said.

'Perhaps,' said Thorin, ‘but not in the same style, I’m sure.'

They stood there, on the shores of the Long Lake, watching as the mountain’s peak was touched by
the first light of dawn, and despite being cold and wet and exhausted, there was a shared sense of
calm and hope about the Company that bound them all together.

And then Fíli ruined it by throwing up all over Kíli’s shoes.

Chapter End Notes

The bit with Bilbo swearing and Legolas understanding was thought up by
tentativesunriseonthehorizon - it just had to be written into the chapter once she'd said it
:D All credit to her!

I have a very busy week up ahead, and I'm going away over the weekend, so I'm not
sure how much time I'll have to write. I think the next chapter won't be out till next
Monday, sorry guys!

Thank you to everyone who’s reading this, and thanks and a big hug for those who have
commented (with some pretty great comments) and kudo'd and bookmarked. I would
never have gotten this far without you cheering me on.
Despite Bilbo’s fears, their welcome in Laketown was a warm one. Even the Dwarves looked stunned at their reception – all it had taken was Thorin declaring their purpose in front of the guards and the Master of Laketown for them to be ushered into the warm town hall from one moment to the next, seated at a great feasting table with what felt like the entire town celebrating their return. The Master of Laketown seemed eager to please them, and promised them the use of a large townhouse for the duration of their stay, and as much food as these ‘noble, weary travellers’ could stomach. The tired Company accepted his invitation wholeheartedly, and Bilbo sat quietly, ate his fill, and finally allowed himself to relax for the first time in weeks.

His calm, so hard-won and long fought for, did not last long, for Bilbo caught sight of a young man at the far end of the high table. The man was relaxed and at ease, chatting to what looked like two other guards, but leaning against his chair was a longbow and a full quiver of arrows. The sight of the weapon, so casually put to one side, sent a shock of terror down Bilbo’s spine, as though he’d been doused with a bucket of ice water. Now that he was looking for them, he could clearly see that the rest of the guards were similarly armed, their bows and swords in easy reach even as they sang songs in honour of the Dwarves.

Bilbo tried to catch the Master’s attention, but the man was too busy listening to Balin’s explanation of how they had come to be at Laketown. After a few failed attempts at catching the Master’s eye, he rose from his chair and decided instead to talk to the bowman at the far end of the table.

‘Excuse me, sir,’ said Bilbo, as loudly and as clearly as he could. It was extremely noisy in the town hall, and Bilbo knew his small stature didn’t help with trying to catch someone’s attention.

But thankfully the young man heard him and turned fully in his seat to look at Bilbo, the two guards watching in interest.

‘Master Hobbit,’ said the man, ‘I don’t believe we’ve met.’

‘Bilbo Baggins, at your service,’ said Bilbo hurriedly.

‘Bard, at yours.’

‘Pleasure to meet you, I’m sure, but I need to talk to the leader...or the captain, or whoever it is that commands your guards.’

‘Then you are in luck, for I am the guard captain,’ said Bard. It was strange but, now that Bilbo was standing in front of him, Bard looked oddly familiar. He was dark haired and dark-eyed, with pleasing, regular features, but there was a roughness, and energy to his movements and tone that reminded Bilbo of someone else.

‘Good, well...there’s something that I wanted to talk to you about, and it might sound strange,’
Bilbo’s eyes flickered towards the two other guards. It wasn’t his intention for Bard to dismiss them, but the man did just that, asking them if they could give them a few minutes privacy.

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo after they had left. ‘This is going to be a little unbelievable for you, but I have some friends who may visit Laketown. At some point. And they’re not, perhaps, what you’d expect.’

Bard’s expression was one of polite, puzzled interest.

Bilbo took a deep breath and said, ‘my friends. They’re...well, they’re giant eagles.’

Bard blinked, and Bilbo was suddenly thankful that he had not had to go through this process with the Dwarves. Deas and the others turning up out of the blue had certainly saved him from such explanations; at least then he’d had physical evidence of what he was claiming.

‘Have you ever heard of the Eagles of Manwë?’

‘I have, in passing,’ said Bard, ‘and only then when I was a boy.’

‘Well, I have the honour of counting them as my friends. They were supposed to have followed me to Laketown, but I’m worried that your men...if they’ve not seen giant eagles before...’

‘They might try and attack them?’ Bard finished. He ran his hand over his stubbled chin, leaning back in his seat, and at once Bilbo knew exactly who Bard reminded him of. It had been many years, but the memory of Jeth - the young village boy who had died in the first attack of the war - still haunted him to this day. Bilbo pushed the memory away. It was not a comparison he wanted to draw, no matter how unsettlingly similar Bard was to Jeth on the day that Bilbo had found him dead.

‘I cannot promise much, Mister Baggins,’ said Bard, ‘I am tasked with protecting this town and I must abide by that above all else. I can do as much as I can and let my men know that any large birds should not be shot down, but...I can’t guarantee anything. If they happen to see a huge, unknown creature in the sky, well – they may mistake it for something else. Especially with so much talk about the dragon, these days.’

‘I understand you have your duties, but, please, would you make it as clear to them as possible?’

‘I will.’

‘I suppose that’s all I can hope for,’ said Bilbo, grudgingly. ‘Thank you, though, for understanding.’

‘If that is the kind of expression elicited from a good meal and the offer of somewhere warm to sleep, then I could always escort you back into Mirkwood, if that would make you happier.’

Bilbo glanced over his shoulder at Thorin. ‘I wouldn’t go back into that forest for all the food in Middle Earth,’ he said, ‘and that’s quite a thing for a Hobbit to say.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ agreed Thorin, coming to sit beside Bilbo. ‘You’ve looked troubled ever since we were welcomed into Laketown. What’s worrying you?’

Bilbo wound his hands together in his lap. The townhouse promised to them by the Master was large enough to fit all of them with room to spare, and it was graced with a huge, spacious hall for dinning.
At one end of the hall was a long window - this is where Bilbo and Thorin were now sitting, for the view was quite breathtaking, as it offered the most unobstructed view of the mountain in all of Laketown. "I'm sure it's nothing," Bilbo said, looking out at the steadily darkening sky. "I'm likely worrying over nothing. Because I haven't had enough stress in the last few weeks," he added, his voice dry.

Thorin held his silence, patiently waiting for Bilbo to speak his piece, and with a sigh, Bilbo did so.

"I'm worried about the eagles," he admitted, "and I know that's ridiculous, because they're huge, tough predators, but. They should be here by now, Thorin. The northern route around Mirkwood isn't that long, especially when you can glide on thermals all day."

"So you're worried they've run into trouble," Thorin said, more statement than question.

Bilbo nodded. "And it's not just that. I doubt the Men of Laketown have ever seen a giant eagle before. Their guards are well-armed, and bored. What if they try and shoot the eagles down?" Bilbo let out a noisy breath. "I talked to the Captain of the guards, but he couldn't assure me of anything."

"But can they really be hit when they fly so high? Can any arrow reach them?"

"I've seen it happen before," said Bilbo darkly, "they're not impervious, and all it takes is one well-aimed arrow to bring them down."

Their conversation was not helping with his nerves. The more he thought about the situation, the more reason he could see to worry. That he was talking to Thorin only helped a little – the Dwarf's presence was simultaneously soothing and nerve-wracking in equal measure.

"They're my brothers and sisters, Thorin," said Bilbo, not really aware of what was coming out of his mouth anymore. "They're the closest thing to family I have. I could tell sit here and tell you about them for hours. Landroval and Gwaihir are brothers, did you notice? I wouldn't be surprised if you didn't. They're not as close as they once were. I think it's because Gwaihir's so certain and confident, or he pretends to be, and Landroval can feel overshadowed by that, at times. He's just so quiet. But in some ways he's the sweetest of all of them. He'd let me ramble on for hours about plants and gardening...rather like I'm rambling on to you now. I'm so sorry."

"Don't apologise," said Thorin, "they are your family, and hearing about them is always interesting."

Bilbo scoffed, giving Thorin a side-long, disbelieving look.

"I assure you Bilbo, it is. There are not many in this world that can sit and hear about giant eagles acting like any other normal family," Thorin pointed out.

When Bilbo remained quiet, Thorin said, "if you were boring me, I would let you know."

That lightened Bilbo at long last. "I'm sure you would," he said with a fleeting smile, flicking his eyes back to Thorin once more.

"Tell me one thing about the eagles that no one else would know."

"Why?"

"Because I think you need to talk – or ramble, if you will – about something right now. And because I am interested."

Bilbo clenched his hands together, and after a beat or two of quiet, Thorin took a breath and said...
said, ‘if you’re uncomfortable telling me-’

‘No, no that’s not it at all,’ Bilbo assured him at once, ‘I’m simply trying to think of the right way to phrase it. What I’m about to tell you is...is a little difficult to grasp, you see, unless you’ve lived amongst the eagles for a long time. They have this concept of Names. Gwaihir, Landroval, Tuit...these are names used for the outside world. They’re like armour, if you will, protecting their true selves from strangers. And for family, for those closest to them in all the wide world, they have their First Names. These are precious to them, because First Names reveal their very being, their essence.’

Bilbo’s countenance softened. ‘They gave me a First Name, you know,’ he said, thinking back to that night in the Eyrie, so long ago now, when he had stood before the King with a battle song thrumming through his veins and had felt his First Name settle around his shoulders like the softest, most welcoming cloak. ‘They accepted me as their family, and they gifted me with a Name.’

Bilbo suddenly became aware of how Thorin’s eyebrows had steadily risen during his explanation, and of how the Dwarf’s face was lit with what Bilbo could only describe as disbelieving wonder.

‘Thorin?’ Bilbo asked, unsure as to how he had drawn such an expression from his friend. He wished he knew so he could file away the information for future use.

Thorin shook his head, visibly reining in his expression, ‘it’s...it’s nothing.’ Bilbo raised his eyebrows at him. ‘It’s just that...it would appear Dwarves and eagles are more alike than I first thought.’

‘How so?’

‘Because Dwarves have the same custom, more or less. We are all born with the names you know us as now, but on our coming-of-age-day, when we cease to be children and enter into Dwarven society, our mother’s gift to us is our sanbuzra sankerum.’

‘Your...your sanbuz...’

‘Our Deep Name,’ said Thorin, coming to Bilbo’s rescue before Bilbo could stumble through the Khuzdûl, ‘that’s the closest I can get to its real meaning in Westeron. Khuzdûl is sacred to us, Bilbo. We believe it was the last gift Mahal gave to the Seven Fathers, whispered into their ears as they woke. To speak it aloud is to lend your words a great deal of weight, and so our Deep Name is said aloud to us only once, on our coming-of-age day. It is never written down or recorded. From that day on it is our treasure to keep and guard.’

‘It’s never said aloud again?’ said Bilbo with rapt attention.

‘Not until we find our One. It’s our final gift to our intended – it’s how we propose. We entrust our One with our Deep Name, and if they accept, then they reply with their own.’

It was a system both practical and touching, and so wholly Dwarven to Bilbo, but he could see a flaw in the exchange even as he admired it. ‘But what if they don’t accept? That seems...like quite the gamble.’

‘It isn’t, not usually. Dwarf courtships can last for many years. When you finally give away your Deep Name, you should be very certain of your intended’s affections.’

‘I see. That’s....it’s a lovely idea. Really lovely.’

They had drifted awfully close together during their conversation, Bilbo now noticed. There was
barely any space between them, and Thorin had hardly looked away from him while he had spoken of Ones and Names, his head tilted towards Bilbo, his hair falling pleasingly around his face. Bilbo resisted the urge to reach out and brush back the dark curtain of Thorin’s hair. He clenched his hands together again in his lap, but not out of nerves, this time. The atmosphere had become far too intimate, full of a sense of anticipation that Bilbo couldn’t quite understand.

‘Do eagles court?’ asked Thorin, and thankfully his question drew a chuckle from Bilbo, easing the tension a little. He leant back in his chair, giving himself a small measure of breathing space.

‘Not unless you count falling in freefall,’ he said, ‘that’s how they assure themselves of the other’s affections, you see. They fly high in the sky, lock talons and fall to the earth together.’

At Thorin’s look Bilbo smiled, ‘I know, it’s a little extreme, isn’t it? But it’s an act of trust. The idea is that you trust the other enough to hold on as long as you can. When they are terrifyingly near to the ground, they both snap their wings open. And that’s it,’ Bilbo shrugged. ‘I suppose that’s another way Dwarves and eagles are similar. Giving your Deep Name is an act of trust too, isn’t it?’

‘Yes... I suppose it is,’ Thorin mused.

For reasons unknown, this comparison had sent Thorin’s gaze hazy, slipping away from Bilbo to stare into the middle distance. He looked like he was about to begin brooding, but Bilbo wasn’t having that, and he knew the perfect way to snap Thorin out of it: with another terrible attempt at Khuzdûl.

‘So,’ said Bilbo, ‘it’s the san-sanbuz...ra...’

It worked. Thorin turned to him with a half-smile, amused at Bilbo’s attempts. ‘I think, if you wish to speak Khuzdûl, we may have to start with something a little easier.’

Bilbo blinked. ‘You’d teach me Khuzdûl?’

Thorin looked surprised at his own admission. ‘Yes,’ he said, certainty colouring his voice once he’d thought about it, ‘if you were amenable to it.’

‘Of course I would be! But isn’t it a secret language? Am I allowed?’

‘It is a secret, yes, and never taught to outsiders. But I think you, of all people, have earned the right to learn our language. There has never been a truer friend of the Dwarves.’

Bilbo had to look away at that. He attempted to stop his toes from curling but failed miserably. ‘Well, thank you. I’m sure anyone else would have done the same, but. Thank you.’

Out of the corner of his eye, Bilbo could see Thorin smiling at him, which didn’t help with the way his heart was doing somersaults in his chest.

‘So,’ said Bilbo, because speaking granted him some measure of distraction from his fluttering heart, ‘if we are to start with basics, then what about...the Khuzdûl for chair?’

Thorin proceeded to teach him a few simple words, progressing from chair to window to table. Bilbo’s pronunciation steadily drew smiles and then chuckles from Thorin, Bilbo mock-indignant that Thorin was laughing at him for his terrible attempts at Khuzdûl. It quickly became clear that Khuzdûl was so dependent on pronunciation that if even one part was uttered slightly wrong, it could mean something completely different. Bilbo was, perhaps, mispronouncing things on purpose, just to be rewarded with Thorin’s laughter.
‘Well I’d like to see you try the eagles’ language!’ Bilbo said after one particular attempt had drawn a startled laugh from Thorin.

‘Go on, then,’ said Thorin.

‘Go on...what?’

‘Teach me the eagle’s language,’ Thorin said with a challenging gleam in his eye.

Bilbo attempted a smirk, but he was smiling too much to pull it off. ‘Alright then,’ he said, ‘I could do with a good laugh.’

The market of Laketown was not a place for an idle stroll, as busy as it was, but nevertheless Bilbo found himself there quite by chance. Being cooped up in the cosy townhouse had done little to temper Bilbo’s lingering worries, and so he had decided to make a day of exploring Laketown while he still could. The Company had, against all the odds, managed to arrive in Laketown two weeks before Durin’s Day, and had thus allocated themselves a few days worth of rest before they set off again for the Lonely Mountain. Bilbo hoped it would be enough time for them all to regain their strength before the last leg of the journey.

Bilbo wandered through the market, dodging men, women and children. It was good to see such a bustling, lively place after the emptiness of Mirkwood, and he let himself get lost in the crowd, with no intention of buying anything.

His eye was caught by one particular stall that stood out in amongst the rest of its colourful fellows. There was no food or wine on display, but instead the stand was full of elegant, skilful woodcarvings. The owner, a middle-aged man with a beard worthy of a Dwarf, was hard at work on another piece.

Bilbo passed by the stall. An idea was starting to form in his mind, sparked by the sight of the fine woodcarvings. Dwarven courting beads, as far as he could infer from his conversation with Bofur, were all made out of metal, but Bilbo had no skill in engraving. Besides, Bofur had said that the bead was a highly personal thing, and Bilbo didn’t think that giving gold or silver would truly reflect his personality.

He shook his head furiously, annoyed that he had let the ridiculous thought expand so far as to consider giving Thorin a courting bead. It was a ridiculous notion. No matter how Bilbo felt, he was certain that Thorin would not return his feelings. What did Bilbo have to offer him, after all?

But then, a small thought wormed its way into his mind: it wouldn’t hurt to try, would it? And Bilbo could always pass it off as a misunderstanding if Thorin didn’t accept and claim ignorance of Dwarven ways. Yes, that might just work, thought Bilbo, turning around abruptly and heading back to the stall. At the very least he could use it as a demonstration of how much he valued Thorin’s friendship.

The stall was approaching, and with every step Bilbo’s rush of determination faded a little more. He ended up passing by the stall altogether, head lowered. No, such a plan would not work. Bofur would know it was not a misunderstanding, and if he happened to blurt something out - well, Bilbo and Thorin’s friendship would quickly shift from comfortable to awkward. Bilbo simply couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t risk losing the way that Thorin looked at him sometimes, as though Bilbo Were
the most fascinating, infuriating thing Thorin had ever known.

But then, what if those looks meant something more, and Bilbo never took the chance to find out? Bilbo slowed to a stop and looked up, beyond Laketown, his eyes quickly finding the Lonely Mountain. There was a dragon in there, waiting for him to steal his way into the hoard. It was a thought that Bilbo had tried his hardest to forget until now, but it was far harder to be wilfully oblivious when there was a constant reminder of his task on the horizon. Would he go to Smaug hating himself for not taking the chance while he still could? Bilbo was reminded of one of the eagles’ sayings, ‘if you want to find out if you can fly, first you must fall.’ A little straightforward, perhaps, but it got the point across. And Bilbo knew, then and there, that he had to take the jump. He would not be able to walk to his death without knowing he had taken the chance while he still could.

He all but marched back to the woodcarver’s stall. The owner put aside his tools and peered down at Bilbo.

‘Can I help you, Mater Hobbit?’

Bilbo immediately felt a little foolish - he had no coin on him at all. The issue of money hadn’t crossed his mind; it had hardly been of great importance in their journey so far, and any that Bilbo had brought with him had been long since lost to the goblin hoards.

‘I’m looking for some wood to carve,’ said Bilbo, ‘but I’ve, ah – I’ve just realised that…’

He trailed off. He had but one item of any worth on him, and that was his feather necklace. He had decided to forgo his tunic that day, not wanting to draw any attention to himself while he wandered Laketown, instead choosing to don an odd blue coat he had found in amongst the clothes the Master had provided for them. He drew out his necklace from under the coat, taking it off and presenting it to the woodcarver.

‘I have no coin for you, I’m afraid. I only have this,’ Bilbo said to him, ‘it’s a feather from one of the Eagles of Manwë. Would you take it in exchange for some wood to carve? I don’t need much.’

The man took it from Bilbo’s outstretched hand, looking it over. ‘The Eagles of Manwë, you say? Well, I’m not sure if I believe you, Master Hobbit. But you’re a part of that Dwarven Company, aren’t you?’

‘I am.’

The man nodded to himself. ‘I’ll take it as payment for now, Master Hobbit. What kind of wood are you looking for?’

Bilbo was taken aback by how easy that had been. He hadn’t even needed to haggle. He wasn’t going to argue the point, though, so instead he said, ‘what’s the easiest wood to carve?’

Ten minutes later, Bilbo had four small blocks of wood tucked under his arm in a bundle. The woodcarver had even been kind enough to drill a hole through the centre of each one; Bilbo would have to repay the man’s generosity when he a few more coins to his name.

He was concentrating so much on not dropping the wood and formulating plans in his head for the design that he all but ran into Kíli and Fíli. Without so much as a by-your-leave the two young Dwarves grabbed Bilbo by the back of his coat and dragged him off of the street and into a small,
hidden side-alley.

‘What are you-‘ started Bilbo, but he was shushed by Kíli. Bilbo was just about to open his mouth to rebuke him when he saw a large group of young women pass by the mouth of the alley, just bare inches from where they lay hidden. Bilbo raised his eyebrows at Fíli. Fíli shrugged helplessly.

After the women had gone on their way, Kíli and Fíli relaxed visibly.

‘What was that all about?’ said Bilbo in his normal speaking voice, but Fíli flapped a hand at him.

‘Keep it down!’ Fíli said hurriedly, ‘they might hear you!’

‘Who? That terrifying hoard of young maidens that just passed us?’

‘Yes!’ said Kíli with a rather crazed look in his eye. ‘Oh, you may laugh, Bilbo, but you haven’t been chased around by them all day!’

‘Admirers of yours, then?’

‘Yes,’ said Fíli, ‘there’s tons of them about. We’ve only just been able to get away. Kíli hasn’t been this popular in his entire life.’

That earned him a swift kick from Kíli, which Fíli neatly avoided, ‘have too,’ said Kíli, ‘and anyway, they only want us for our gold.’

‘I’m sure that’s not entirely true,’ Bilbo said. From what he knew of the race of Men, Kíli and Fíli would almost certainly be considered handsome by the inhabitants of Laketown.

‘Maybe not,’ said Fíli, ‘they were probably attracted to this,’ he gestured to his beard and moustache.

Kíli snorted loudly, ‘yeah, right, that soup catcher?’

‘At least I have something to catch soup with-‘

‘Boys, boys,’ said Bilbo loudly, interrupting what sounded like a very old argument, ‘if you want to stay hidden I suggest you take your own advice and argue over who is the more handsome in quieter voices.’

‘What’s that?’ said Kíli abruptly, looking at the wood tucked beneath Bilbo’s arm.

‘Oh? Ah, it’s nothing,’ Bilbo said with a wave of his free hand, trying his best to tuck the wood behind him in the narrow alleyway.

‘Doesn’t look like nothing,’ Fíli pointed out, ‘it looks like a lot of wood. Someone’s been shopping.’

‘What’s it for?’ Kíli brightened, ‘oh! Are you carving something?’

Drat. Kíli was far too sharp for his own good. ‘Er, no – why would you say that?’

‘Because it’s apple wood, or it looks like it. Nice, easy wood to carve, that.’

‘Why else would you be carrying around small blocks of wood, if not to carve?’ frowned Fíli. ‘Small blocks of wood with...holes in them...’

He trailed off. He and Kíli shared a look. Please don’t say it, willed Bilbo.
‘Are you making a hair bead?’ asked Fíli.

Damn.

‘No, I am not,’ said Bilbo in as firm a voice as he could manage, but by the looks on Kíli and Fíli’s faces, he wasn’t fooling anyone. ‘Yes, I am,’ he sighed in defeat.

‘Who for?’

‘If you must know Kíli, it’s—it’s for. Well.’

‘It’s for Thorin, isn’t it?’ said Fíli quietly.

Bilbo could feel himself(57,410),(319,439)(54,410),(319,430)(55,410),(319,429)(56,410),(319,423)(55,410),(319,420)(56,410),(319,424)(57,410),(319,434)(55,410),(319,421)(56,410),(319,432)(55,410),(319,422) going bright red, and was thankful for the darkened alleyway. ‘What if it is?’ he said in a small voice, glancing between the brothers. ‘What would you say if it was?’

Fíli and Kíli fell quiet, their faces becoming grave and their voices solemn.

‘You’d like to court Uncle?’ confirmed Kíli.

Bilbo stood up to his full height. ‘Yes, I would.’

‘I expected this to happen,’ said Fíli with a sad shake of his head. Bilbo’s heart felt like it was withering in his chest. ‘Well, then, Bilbo. I’m afraid I can only say one thing,’ Fíli went on, putting a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and looking the Hobbit directly in the eye.

‘What in the name of Mahal took you so long?’ said Fíli.

Beside him, Kíli could hold back not a second longer, his sad expression exchanged for an easy grin in an instant.

‘You two,’ said Bilbo with a shake of his head, letting out a relieved breath, trying to feel irritated but failing completely, ‘I am going to get you back for that, just you wait and see.’

Fíli grinned, and in that moment they could be twins, so identical were Kíli and Fíli’s expressions.

‘So, you don’t have a problem with it?’

‘Problem? Nah, of course not.’

‘No, no problem at all, Bilbo,’ assured Fíli.

‘We’re actually rather glad.’

‘You are?’

‘Of course we are. Thorin hasn’t had anyone to take care of him his entire life.’

‘He’s always taken care of us, but as his nephews, he’s never let us return the favour.’

‘And you make him happy. That’s good enough for us.’

‘I make him happy?’ Bilbo repeated, stunned by how easily Fíli had said this.

‘You do,’ agreed Kíli, ‘and besides, it might help Uncle to get laid once in—’

Fíli thankfully cut off the rest of that horrifying sentence by slapping his hand over Kíli’s mouth.
‘Thank you, brother,’ he said wryly, then jerked his hand away with a disgusted look on his face. ‘What are you, twenty?’ he said, wiping the hand Kíli had licked on Kíli’s jacket.

The tips of Bilbo’s ears were almost certainly red – he could feel how hot they were.

‘Well, thank you both of you, for accepting all of this with just the minimal amount of teasing.’

‘We can tease you more, if you like-‘

‘No, thank you Kíli, that won’t be necessary,’ Bilbo said quickly. ‘Say, are either of you skilled in woodcarving? I could use a hand with this bead.’

‘I’m afraid not,’ said Fíli, ‘I’m more of an architect, and he’s a weapons smith, like mum and Thorin.’

‘But I’m sure Bofur will be able to help. He was a toymaker as well as a miner, you know.’

‘Hmm, perhaps,’ said Bilbo, unsure. He wasn’t keen on yet another person knowing about his intentions towards Thorin.

‘Anyway, want to see me trounce the Captain of the Laketown guards at archery?’ asked Kíli.

‘Who, Bard?’ said Bilbo, thrown by the abrupt change of topic.

‘That’s the one. He was boasting about his skills last night so I just had to challenge him to an archery contest! The pride of the Dwarves is at stake, you know.’

‘Of course it is,’ Bilbo said dryly. It actually sounded appealing, and Bilbo needed something to take his mind off of Thorin. ‘That sounds entertaining enough for me. Lead the way, Master Dwarf!’

Back in the heart of the market and unbeknownst to Bilbo, another transaction was taking place.

‘I won’t give it you for free,’ the local blacksmith was saying to Thorin, ‘not like the rest of these morons. That’s a fine engraving set there in your hand, and I’ll not be parted with it for anything less than gold coins.’

Thorin could admit to himself that this wasn’t going as planned. He hadn’t even suggested that the blacksmith give him the engraving set for free, but the man seemed to have an axe to grind over the hospitality Laketown had provided for the Dwarves. Thorin tuned out his rambling. He had little on him that could be exchanged for the kit, and he was not about to be parted from his weapons – such a thing would be highly impractical, when he was to soon do battle with a dragon. No, there was only one item on him that would satisfy the blacksmith. Thorin reached up into his hair and undid a large gold hair bead from its resting place. His mother had made it for him, gifting it to him on his twenty-seventh birthday. The two braids that framed Thorin’s face marked him out as the heir to the throne – his father had worn the same braids - but his mother had wanted him to have something far more personal adorning his hair.

‘You are more than a Prince,’ she had told him, ‘you are more than a title.’

He thinks she would have understood what he was about to do.

The blacksmith was still ranting. ‘You might be the King Under the Mountain, but I see no crown on
Very deliberately, Thorin placed the gold bead on the counter. The blacksmith ceased babbling at once.

‘Will that do?’ Thorin asked of him mildly.

As it turned out, that would do very nicely.

‘Bofur, I need your help.’

‘Bilbo? What can I do for you?’ said the Dwarf in question, looking up from his spot beside the fire.

Bilbo opened his hand to show Bofur his attempts at woodcarving.

‘Ah,’ said Bofur, ‘I see.’

‘Can you teach me how to carve?’ said Bilbo, glancing over his shoulder at the rest of the Company, but the Dwarves were far too interested in the food on the table to pay Bilbo and Bofur much notice.

‘I can try,’ Bofur picked up one of the pieces of wood. ‘Are these...hair beads?’

‘It depends,’ said Bilbo, ‘can you keep a secret?’

Bofur laid aside his pipe. ‘I can, if this is what I think it is,’ he said slowly.

‘Thank you,’ breathed Bilbo, joining him by the fire.

‘Although I have to express my disappointment, Bilbo.’

‘Your disappointment?’

‘I really thought we had something,’ said Bofur, ‘would you really throw that away so easily?’

‘Oh, shush.’

‘But the handkerchief, in Mirkwood! I thought you were giving me a signal.’

‘Shush.’

‘What has he got that I haven’t?’ said Bofur, putting on a mournful air, ‘apart from a kingdom and a heck of a lot of gold?’

Bilbo gaped at him. ‘How did you know it was Thorin?’

Bofur clucked and gave Bilbo a look.

‘Does everyone know about this?’ Bilbo hissed. Bofur patted him consolingly on the back.

‘Don’t worry about that now,’ said Bofur, and for some strange reason he glanced over at Nori as he said this. ‘What did you have in mind for your bead?’

With Bofur’s help, Bilbo sketched out a rough idea of what he wanted to carve. He quickly found
that Bofur was a surprisingly patient teacher, which Bilbo greatly appreciated – he needed all the help he could get, but Bilbo could have done without all the innuendo about the hardness of wood.

Slowly but surely under Bofur’s careful guidance, Bilbo’s design came to life. First to be revealed was the oak leaf; Bilbo was unsure if Thorin knew just how appropriate his name was, for oak leaves symbolised strength, hardiness and courage. Then, on the opposite side of the bead, Bilbo carved as close a resemblance as he could get to the Lonely Mountain. Between the oak leaf and the mountain, Bilbo carved long, swirling lines, depicting a strong wind, and long, wispy clouds above it. This was the more abstract of his ideas, and one he’d likely have to explain to Thorin, if he ever had the chance to.

‘It’s be nice to coat it with something, give it a nice gloss,’ said Bofur once it was finished, ‘but we don’t have much to hand, now. But it’ll do, don’t you think Bilbo?’

Bilbo looked up from the wooden bead in the palm of his hands. ‘It’ll do, Bofur. Thank you – I’d never have been able to carve something as fine as this without your help. Really, thank you.’

‘Ah, don’t worry about it,’ said Bofur with a dimpled grin, ‘if you’re going to betray me with another, I’ll not have you going about it half-heartedly.’

When Thorin strode into the hall, the sight of Bilbo and Bofur huddled up together in one corner caused him to double take. The two were as thick as thieves, their backs to him and heads bent together. A hot rush of jealously shot through him, and he forcibly turned away, barely acknowledging the greetings of his Company, instead heading towards the back of the townhouse, where there was a small bit of decking that would afford him some measure of privacy for his task.

He sat on the steps and breathed in the cool night air, unable to banish the image of Bilbo and Bofur from his mind. He took out the engraving kit from his coat and unhooked the blank engraving bead from its usual place around his neck, rolling the gold piece between his fingers. Thorin had never thought he would have cause to use the bead, but as this journey had demonstrated, he was more than capable of being wrong. He carried the bead for good luck and because, for most of his race, to be without one was a strange thing indeed and an invitation for disaster. But now, thanks to Bilbo, he had a reason to use it. Thorin had no doubts about engraving the bead – he was certain of his feelings for Bilbo. He could see no other option but to present it to Bilbo and hope that the Hobbit had not already found another.

He had been mulling over his design since that first night in Mirkwood, and Thranduil’s dungeon had provided him with ample enough time to visualise it in his head. He now only needed to roughly outline the design on the bead before he started work.

Slowly but surely, the design began to emerge out of the gold. A feather, half-curled, went on one side, and on the other, a flower. Thorin knew little about flowers beyond their use for decoration, but he did know of one that had once bloomed on the mountainside before the dragon’s destruction. Thorin carefully engraved a tiny Glory-of-the-Snow, a small flower that was known for its adversity, as it had once bloomed even in late winter. Thorin thought it suited Bilbo very well. Between these two Thorin created a twisting geometric pattern, two lines that appeared at first glance to be separate, but on closer inspection were one complimentary whole.

‘I could have told you you’d need an engraving kit all the way back in Rivendell,’ said a voice from over Thorin’s shoulder, ‘would have saved you a lot of trouble.’
Thorin made no move to hide his work – he knew exactly who this nosy newcomer was. Dwalin would have found out eventually anyway.

He turned to peer at his friend’s face. After a moment Thorin’s expression cleared with understanding. ‘Balin had to tell you, didn’t he?’

‘No,’ said Dwalin, affronted, ‘I worked it out myself.’

Thorin raised his eyebrows.

‘Alright, I might’ve had a _bit_ of help,’ conceded Dwalin. ‘But I bet you don’t know this: Hobbits like flowers.’

‘Yes, I know,’ said Thorin as though talking to a small child, ‘what of it?’

‘They exchange flowers when they want to start courting. Did you know _that_?’

‘No,’ admitted Thorin, pausing in his work, ‘I didn’t. But how did you know of Hobbit courting customs?’

‘I have my ways,’ said Dwalin mysteriously, ignoring Thorin’s disbelieving snort at this.

Thorin looked down at the engraving bead. He had no flowers to hand and he briefly tried to remember if there had been any growing on the shores of Long Lake. There were likely some being sold in the market, but what kind would Bilbo be expecting? He didn’t want to cause offence - he’d done that enough on this journey to last him for the next two decades.

‘Never thought you’d use that for a Hobbit,’ said Dwalin, gesturing towards the bead in Thorin’s hands.

‘I never imagined I’d used it at all.’ The newly engraved pattern glimmered in the light from the open doorway, ‘let alone on a journey to reclaim Erebor.’

Dwalin barked a laugh at that.

‘Speaking of the journey,’ started Thorin, ‘do you think this...’ Thorin stopped, shook his head a little and rephrased, ‘have I the right to start something like this when we are almost at our goal?’

His friend was astonished Thorin had asked such a thing, though he was hiding it well. Thorin was not the kind of Dwarf to ask for assurances. Dwalin could not recall the last time Thorin had sounded hesitant about his actions, but he suspected that had been shortly after the fall of Erebor.

‘I think it’s selfish,’ said Dwalin, looking Thorin in the eye as he spoke his piece. Thorin flinched at this, the reaction so small that only someone who knew Thorin as well as Dwalin did would catch it. ‘But,’ continued Dwalin, ‘I think you’ve earned the right to be selfish.’

‘That’s not a good enough reason,’ said Thorin quietly.

‘I think it is. I think the rest of the Company would agree, along with half of Ered Luin, and that’s not just because they’re terrified of Lady Dís.’

But still Thorin’s expression remained solemn. Dwalin let out a breath, hardly believing what he was about to say. The things you do for your best friend, he thought. He stared out at the inky expanse of water and said, ‘he makes you sharper.’

‘What?’
'He makes you more focused. I could see it, even as far back as Rivendell, though I didn’t think you’d end up courting him, back then. You were always looking East, before you met him, and believe me I don’t think that’s a bad thing, but. The Hobbit makes you see that there’s other, just as important things right in front of you.’

‘Dwalin-’

‘No, let me finish. He makes you a better leader, Thorin, and you were a damn good one before. And if our people can’t see that when they return to the mountain then they’re blind, the lot of them. I know it’s an odd choice, courting this strange, half-wild Hobbit, and many will think the same. But he’s everything we’d admire in a Dwarf, and besides that, if you don’t take this one chance of happiness when it’s thrust under your nose, then so help me I’ll have no choice but to kick your arse into the end of next week, King of mine or not.’

There was a long, drawn out pause while Dwalin caught his breath.

‘Are you finished?’ asked Thorin.

‘I am.’

‘Good. Thank you, old friend,’ Thorin said, and he truly meant it.

‘You’re welcome,’ grunted Dwalin.

‘Now can we pretend this never happened?’

‘Damn straight.’

It was their last night in Laketown, and Bilbo was still carrying the bead around, much to his shame. The last few days had greatly restored the Company, which Bilbo was glad of – it was good to see them all healthy again, especially Kíli and Fíli – but it also meant that Thorin hardly had a moment alone. As the day of their departure drew near, he was drawn more and more into discussions over the best routes into the mountain and travel plans with the Master, and so Bilbo found himself spending more time with Kíli and Fíli than planning to confess to Thorin. He could admit to himself, though, that this was largely his fault. He was putting it off.

And now all of Laketown was celebrating their imminent return to the mountain, the streets thronged with revellers, the doors to the town hall thrown wide open, and the Company was more than willing to join in. Bilbo dodged a dancing couple, smiling at the sight of Kíli and Fíli, who were both standing on one of the long tables, singing a bawdy drinking song and trying to drag Ori up onto the table with them. Fíli and Kíli had stuck close to each other all week – Bilbo had not been the only one who had felt the effects of Mirkwood, and Kíli’s period of unconsciousness and subsequent separation from Fíli had clearly taken its toll on the brothers. Bilbo hoped that the rest granted to them by Laketown had done its bit to ease their worries.

Bilbo passed by a side door and caught sight of the precisely the Dwarf he had been looking for. Apparently Bilbo was not the only one who wanted a little peace and quiet away from the party, and Bilbo wondered if he should give Thorin his space. He berated himself - he was avoiding Thorin yet again, making more excuses that sounded flimsy even inside his own head. He took a deep, calming breath, reached into the pocket of his tunic to draw out the bead, and made his way over to Thorin.
‘It’s quite the sight, isn’t it?’ said Bilbo, inwardly cursing that he had opened with such a ridiculous statement. Of course the Lonely Mountain was quite the sight.

Thorin seemed not to mind Bilbo’s lame attempts at conversation. ‘It is,’ he agreed, ‘but it’ll look even better soon enough.’

‘I can’t wait to see all the things you’ve told me about. I can’t imagine how eager you are to see your home again,’ said Bilbo, studiously ignoring for the moment the dragon that lay between them and Thorin’s home.

‘I am eager to see Erebor again,’ said Thorin, ‘but I must admit I’m also dreading it, just a bit.’

‘Why?’ asked Bilbo. This was the first time Thorin had spoken of Erebor with anything other than reverence and longing in his voice.

‘It’s been a long time since I laid eyes on Erebor. I was young, when the dragon came. Erebor has always been this fixture in my mind, for so many years. Now I stand in the shadow of the mountain once more, I wonder how much of it I’m remembering correctly. I wonder how much it’s changed.’ Then, in an undertone, ‘how much I’ve changed.’

‘I’m sure it’s just as you remembered it, and more besides,’ said Bilbo. ‘But I can relate to your hesitance. I know our situations were vastly different, but I felt like that when I returned home from the war. The Shire was welcoming and jarring all at once. It hadn’t changed a bit, but I had. It took a long time for me to adjust.’ Bilbo dared to look up at Thorin and smile, ‘and if all goes to plan, you’ll have many, many years to make Erebor feel like home again.’

‘This is true,’ Thorin said, returning the smile, ‘but I worry for Kíli and Fíli. I’ve told them stories of Erebor even before they could understand what I was saying, since they were small enough to hold in my arms. And I had this foolish notion of reclaiming the mountain when they were still young, raising them as Princes, as is their right. I’d take them to the Whispering Pools and tell them stories of Dwarven deeds. I never told you about the Whispering Pools, did I? They were my mother’s favourite place in the whole of Erebor. We have underground rivers and streams, and some Dwarven engineer hundreds of years ago thought it was a good idea to have them all converge into one room. It was so peaceful there. She’d take us to the Pools after our lessons and tell us tales of Durin and the Seven Fathers.’ Thorin glanced at Bilbo and shook his head. ‘As I said, a foolish notion.’

‘I don’t think it is,’ said Bilbo, nudging Thorin with his elbow. ‘And who knows, you could still do just that. You might have a hard time getting Kíli and Fíli to sit still long enough to listen to fairytales, though,’ and this finally drew a ghost of a smile from Thorin, which was enough for Bilbo to dare to say, ‘and if they won’t, then...I’d not be adverse to visiting the Pools with you to hear some more of your people’s tales.’

‘You would?’ said Thorin softly.

‘I would. Who knows, one day you might even be telling me Dwarven tales in Khuzdûl.’

Thorin chuckled at that. ‘I think that might be a long time coming,’ he said. ‘But thank you, Bilbo. For letting me...ramble.’

Bilbo shrugged, ‘not a problem,’ he said easily, even as he tightened his hand around the bead in his palm. Perhaps this was it – perhaps this was the ideal moment to ask-

There was a huge crash from behind them. It sounded as though one of the long tables had collapsed in the town hall. Thorin shot Bilbo a despairing look. ‘Now, if you’ll excuse me,’ he said, ‘I’m going
to go and find out exactly what Kíli and Fíli have just broken.’

Bilbo laughed shakily and let him go. He watched Thorin leave, disappearing in amongst the revellers, and opened his tightly clenched fist. The bead had left an imprint on his hand, physical evidence of his failure.

‘You’re a damned fool, Bilbo Baggins,’ he said aloud to himself, and there was no one around to contradict him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you as ever for all your lovely comments and kudos. Next chapter soon *dances away*
The Company that made its way across the waters of Long Lake was a strangely sober one. Fog lay thickly over the still waters, and the sun was but a hazy smudge in the sky; the cold damp weather hardly did much to lift their spirits. They should not be feeling like this, Bilbo thought. They had come so far and were so close to their goal that he felt as though he could reach out and grasp it in one hand. But the mountain loomed over them, revealed in fleeting moments when the fog cleared, its peak sharp and unforgiving, and any good cheer that had returned to them with their stay in Laketown steadily began to seep away. Bilbo felt it most of all. For the entire journey across Long Lake, he hunkered down in his seat, shivering, but not from the clammy cold. The reality of his contracted task was beginning to dawn on him.

They arrived at the foot of the mountain late that same evening, to be greeted by the men who had been sent ahead to bring around their mounts and supplies in preparation for their arrival. The men did not linger long; as soon as the reins of the ponies were transferred into the Company's hands, they were off, climbing back into their boats to return home, not wanting to spend a minute more in that dark and uneasy place.

The next morning, when the fog fully cleared, Bilbo could understand why. He had never been able to properly wrap his head around the scale of the Dragon's destruction, as able a storyteller as Balin was, but he could now see it with his own eyes, and he found grief stirring in his breast. Bilbo had lived in the mountains for many years, and had loved those lofty peaks, but this was nothing like the Misty Mountains. Even in the sparse rocks of the Eagle's Eyrie, there had been life; tiny birds nesting in the cliffs, insects hidden under stones, and plants growing stubbornly among the cracks. But here there was not a single hint of any other creature. It was land truly devastated. Bilbo turned his ear to the wind, shuddering as he heard not the sweet sounds of a mountain breeze winding its way through a lively valley, but a dark howling gale – it was as though the mountain itself were screaming.

They were quiet as they made their way up into the foothills on their ponies, and not just from the hard climb. Even the most cheerful members of the Company were quiet, and they largely kept their reverent, respectful silence and they rode. As he attempted to steer his mount, Bilbo found himself watching Thorin. This was not new - his eye was often drawn to the other Dwarf, these days. But he could not help but wonder what it was like to return home and still see evidence of that terrible day written into the very landscape itself. Thorin's expression was carefully blank and gave no hint as to how it was affecting him, save for a soft sadness that Bilbo saw in the way his gaze often flickered between the mountain's peak and the foothills around him. Perhaps he was searching for any echo of what Erebor had once been. He must not have found anything, for he kept looking throughout the day.

Once, Thorin caught Bilbo staring, and Bilbo, furious at himself for allowing himself to be caught, was much more careful from then on in his observation of Thorin, only chancing glances when Thorin’s attention was firmly elsewhere. His wooden bead sat unhappily in his top pocket, a constant reminder of his cowardice every time it bumped against his chest.

It took a few days of travel for them to reach the spot where the door was supposedly hidden, and the
Company came to realise a slight flaw in their plan. Hidden doors are, of course by their very nature hidden, and so they spent a highly frustrating, fruitless day searching for any hint of a door.

'What are we even suppose to be looking for?' asked Bilbo of Dwalin in a whisper.

'I don't know, lad,' said Dwalin with a heaving sigh, 'your guess is as good as mine. With any luck we'll find a great big sign with the words 'secret door this way' written across it.'

Bilbo snorted at that, and returned to his search.

They were high up on the flank of the mountain, traversing over steep cliffs and broken paths, making camp on the largest ledge they could find. There were two full days left until Durin's day, and their window of opportunity for finding the door was disappearing far too quickly for comfort. The difficult nature of their search was taking its toll on their temper, and Bilbo felt overcome with a sense of hopelessness, and frustration. He was not the only one. That night when they made camp Thorin looked to be in a foul mood, staring at the looming mountainside as though it had personally offended him. Bilbo wished he could move to sit beside him and smooth out the wrinkles of his brow with his hands, to press a kiss to the corner of his mouth in the hope that Thorin might be shaken from his reverie and turn to him with a smile. Bilbo's stomach flipped over at the thought, and his skin ached with the need to touch, to comfort.

He was staring again, and he realised only when Thorin snapped his gaze to him. Flushed with a hot wave of embarrassment, Bilbo looked away at once, panic causing him to leap to his feet and move away from the Company as quickly as he can, his only thought to find a spot where he could sit and attempt to calm down and suppress his blush. Thorin must surely have noticed his strange behaviour, and Bilbo quailed at the thought that he might have given away his true feelings.

It was a very miserable and cold Hobbit that Fíli called out to half an hour later. At first, Bilbo was so lost in his own thoughts that he didn't hear a word, but when Fíli cried out again, louder and with more urgency, Bilbo was shaken from his brooding.

'Bilbo!' Fíli was shouting, 'Bilbo, look!' He was pointing to the rapidly darkening sky. There, just cresting the flank of the mountain, Bilbo could see four achingly familiar shapes, rapidly approaching.

Bilbo laughed aloud, so great was his sudden, stunned joy. The relief was bone-deep, and it surely would have brought a weaker Hobbit to his knees - as it was, Bilbo settled for grinning like a mad man and waving furiously at his approaching kin.

'Give them some space!' Thorin was saying behind him, 'quickly, move up so they can land. Nori, Dori - move the ponies further down the valley. We don't want them spooked.'

Bilbo paid no attention to any of this. The flock was so close now that his sharp eyes could easily pick out the dappled plumage of Luaithre, the white patches on Tuit's chest, and the lighter gold colouring of both Landroval and Gwaihir. They came to land one by one on the cliff the Company was camped on, and Bilbo did not hesitate to barrel into them as soon as their claws touched rock, embracing them each in turn, smiling fit to burst.

'Thank goodness, thank goodness,' Bilbo murmured as he pressed his cheek to warm gold feathers, 'I was so worried.'

They all seemed a little winded, but greeted him with equal enthusiasm, chirping out trills and clicks happily. But then Bilbo threw his arms around Tuit and stepped back to find his right hand smeared
with bright red blood, and the smile slipped from his face.

'Tuit?' he said alarmed, 'Tuit! Are you injured? What happened?' he immediately started forward to inspect the injury that had previously been hidden by Tuit's feathers.

'Oh, it's just a little scratch,' said Tuit over his head, 'nothing to worry about!'

'Little scratch? Little?' spluttered Bilbo, pushing feathers out of the way to find a long gash, just above Tuit's wing joint. The wound was clearly at least a couple of days old, but it was bleeding sluggishly, likely reopened by the flight.

'Óin!' Bilbo shouted, turning back to see the Company hovering uncertainly a few feet away, 'Óin, could you please take a look at Tuit? He's wounded.'

The Dwarf started forward, his pack of supplies - always in easy reach - in his hands in the space of a few seconds.

'It's nothing, Bilbo,' protested Landroval, 'we've survived worse in the war - it's just today's flight. He'll be fine.'

Bilbo was about to turn to him and point out the ridiculousness of this statement, but then he caught sight of the blood trickling from the pinions Landroval's right wing, and found himself too furious to speak for a moment.

'Truly!' put in Luaithre, having seen where Bilbo's gaze had fallen, 'it isn't much! We just ran into a little trouble on the way over, and-'

'What trouble,' Bilbo ground out, and then gaped at Luaithre, 'you too?' he snapped when he saw that some of her beautiful feathers had been ripped out from just under her wing, exposing a jagged, scabbed-over wound.

'Gwaihir,' Bilbo said with quiet fury, 'please tell me that you, at least, are not hiding an injury from me.'

Gwaihir raised his head. 'I am not,' he said sniffily, 'and honestly, Bilbo, there's no need to cause a fuss-'

'Liar,' he growled at him, and unbeknownst to Bilbo the Company flinched at his tone, 'I can see that you're bleeding from your neck!'

'Five gold coins on Bilbo,' whispered a voice from behind Bilbo's back.

'Shut up, Kíli,' hissed another.

Angry beyond belief, Bilbo switched into the eagles' language, if only to spare the Dwarves from his tirade, occasionally swapping back into Westron to ask - with terrifying politeness - if someone could fetch him some hot water and a spare cloth, and would Óin mind treating all of his idiotic family?

The eagles weathered Bilbo's anger with as much dignity as they could manage, bowing their heads only a little in the face of the Hobbit's wrath. They knew that Bilbo's actions were only born out of worry for them, and they did not try and turn away his ministrations again, but let him tend to their wounds, wincing at Bilbo's tuts and the threats he muttered under his breath, that they should mind not get injured again, or else.
Eagles were hardy creatures - hardier, even, than Dwarves. They could heal easily enough from most wounds by themselves, though it could be a long and painful process - it had taken Gwaihir two months to recover from his arrow-wound. But Bilbo would always insist on helping the process along, even though the eagles always tried to argue - always unsuccessfully - that it was not needed.

Night had truly fallen by the time the eagles’ wounds had been properly attended to; Bilbo would have liked to continue just to reassure himself that they were alright, but there was little light to see by as the Company did not want to risk a campfire. Bilbo’s anger had drained away, helped along by the fact that several members of the Company had helped tend to the eagles, and that the wounds were not as serious as Bilbo had first thought. Bilbo had turned around at one point to refill his pot of water to see Thorin with the sleeves of his borrowed coat rolled up to the elbow, revealing his muscled forearms, tending to Landroval with such gentleness and care that Bilbo had to look away. Gwaihir caught his eye, and his gaze promised Bilbo that they would speak of this later.

‘Thank you for your help,’ Bilbo said politely to the Company when they had finished. The eagles whistled their agreement. ‘They say thank you, too,’ Bilbo translated.

The Dwarves all called out that it was not a problem, and that thanks were not needed, and Bilbo felt warmed even without the usual campfire.

‘We thank you for coming all this way,’ replied Thorin, ‘we may have need of your sharp eyes in our search for the door.’

‘Gwaihir says they would be happy to help, as soon as it’s light,’ said Bilbo.

Thorin nodded, and Bilbo noted that his expression was a little lighter, a little more hopeful, and Bilbo felt the weight atop his heart lessen in response. Perhaps their impossible task was not quite so impossible after all, with the eagles by their side.

‘Well, then?’ said Bilbo to the eagles at long last, as the Company began to ready for bed, ‘what happened? Why are you so late?’

‘We may have run into some orcs,’ said Tuit.

‘Not very many,’ added Landroval quickly, ‘but enough to give us some trouble and slow us down.’

‘Orc numbers are swelling,’ said Gwaihir, ‘we do not know the reason why, but I have not seen this many since the war.’

‘Orcs with arrows. They only managed to scratch us because someone decided to take a closer look,’ said Luaithre with a glare in Tuit’s direction.

Tuit lowered his head and wings. ‘Sorry,’ he muttered, and Bilbo suspected that this was not the first time that he had said this on the flight over.

‘You’re here, now,’ sighed Bilbo, ‘that’s what matters. And you’ll heal soon enough,’ he reached out to press his hand briefly against Tuit’s side, and when he slept that night, his bedroll was set down very close to where the eagles were roosting.

With the eagles’ arrival came the renewal for hope for the Company. Thorin’s suggestion of the night before was proved right almost immediately – they had barely been searching for an hour when
Gwaihir called out to the Company below. With excitement causing his heart to pound, Bilbo followed Gwaihir’s instructions across the mountainside, steadily drawing in the rest of the Company, Thorin following close behind. With Gwaihir’s help, they soon found a set of steps carved out of the rock, so sheltered by the landscape that it was hardly any surprise they had not found it without an eagle’s sharp eyes. The staircase was broken in some parts, and disappeared altogether in others, but so clear was the carved-out path that they had little trouble finding what it lead to. They were almost running by the time that the steps levelled out all of a sudden to reveal a small plateau, with a few more steps leading to a rock face sheltered by a large overhang. The rock face was far too flat for it to have occurred naturally. A few birds flitted around the overhang, and Bilbo absent-mindedly noticed that they were all thrushes, and that they seemed to be thriving.

‘It’s here,’ Thorin said, slightly out of breath from the climb, ‘it has to be.’

‘But where, though?’ said Fíli, who was the next to arrive, ‘I see no sign of a door – not even an outline.’

‘Perhaps it’s revealed on Durin’s day?’ suggested Bilbo as Thorin stalked forwards to examine the blank rock face.

‘The skill of the architects and stonemasons who created these doors is legendary,’ Thorin said, ‘they would have built a door that could only be seen in the very moment it could be opened.’

He turned to Bilbo with a half-smile, ‘it seems I owe your kin more thanks, Bilbo.’

Bilbo returned the smile, content for the moment to enjoy this small victory and not think of the consequences and what it meant for tomorrow.

‘We’ve found the door!’ Thorin called out to the rest of the Company who were making their way up, and was met by a resounding cheer, echoed by the eagles in the sky above.

The doorway was far too narrow and small to fit the entire Company on, but still they moved their camp further up the mountain, as close as they could manage, leaving their ponies further down in the valley. They all seemed imbued with a new sense of energy, and their camp was full of activity for the rest of the day, idle hands finding something to do, even if it was simply sharpening weapons. Some, though, were happy enough to simply sit and talk.

‘Now that’s a worrying development,’ Dwalin said, gesturing to where Kíli, Fíli, Tuit and Landroval were all attempting to get past their language barrier with what looked like increasingly dramatic and unnecessary hand gestures (Kíli and Fíli) and the flap of wings (Landroval and Tuit).

‘Disaster is sure to follow,’ said Bilbo with good humour. Kíli and Fíli were likely taking the opportunity to relax and neglect their duties, as Thorin had chosen to remain by the door since its discovery.

Bilbo’s smile slipped from his face at the thought of Thorin. Durin’s Day was tomorrow. He had one day left in which to gather his bravery and say something to Thorin. But instead of venturing up the steps to join the Dwarf in his contemplation of the doorway, Bilbo found himself moving away from the Company, to find Gwaihir and Luaithre, who were set a away from the camp.

If he had hoped to find comfort from his troubles, then he was soon disappointed.
‘What are you going to do about you and that Dwarf?’ said Gwaihir the second Bilbo was out of earshot of the rest of the Company.

Bilbo gaped at him, at a loss for words.

‘Yes,’ agreed Luaithre, ‘it’s not like you to dally this long, Bilbo. I had thought to find you two courting by the time we found you again.’

‘Was I really that obvious? Even all those weeks ago, when we had that day of rest at the Carrock?’ said Bilbo quietly, shoulders slumping.

‘It was obvious to us,’ Luaithre said, tone gentle.

‘Fíli and Kíli are wondering if you’ll ever do anything about it,’ added Tuit as he and Landroval came to land beside them.

‘No one should have left you four alone together,’ said Bilbo, ‘you’re a dangerous combination.’ He puffed out his cheeks and admitted, ‘I’m going to ask him to court me, before I go through the door.’

‘You don’t exactly sound happy about it,’ clucked Landroval, ‘you’re asking someone to court you, Bilbo! It’s supposed to be a joyous occasion...isn’t it?’

‘Not if he rejects me.’

Luaithre huffed at this and shuffled her wings, ‘I doubt that’ll happen, Bilbo. And if he does he’s a fool and I refuse to help him any more with his quest.’

Bilbo chuckled. ‘It’s my quest, too, now,’ he pointed out.

‘But if he does accept,’ said Gwaihir, ‘have you thought of the consequences? Bilbo - if all goes well and you agree to marry him, you’ll be his consort. You’ll rule Erebor together. Are you prepared for the duty such a position would bring?’

If he was honest with himself, Bilbo had not thought that far ahead. The problem of the dragon had caused a block on his mind and he had felt – for many days, now – that he could look no further ahead than Durin’s Day. If all that Gwaihir said came true, would he be prepared to take on the title of Consort? To make a new home, here in the Lonely Mountain?

‘It’s a decision our mother had to make,’ said Gwaihir, very quietly, and Bilbo had never heard him speak so softly before, ‘though she did not have as many subjects to rule over as you would, of course. She told me once, shortly before she-she died, of how her and our father came to be together. She said that there had been one simple question she had asked of herself before accepting his proposal to court.’

Gwaihir looked Bilbo full in the eye and said, ‘is he worth it?’

The eagles had fallen silent, letting Gwaihir speak his piece with a quiet bordering on reverence. They often forgot Gwaihir was a prince, so closely knit was their group. Now, though, both he and Landroval looked every inch the princelings they were born to be, drawn up to their full height, their bright gold colouring radiant in the light of the sun.

Gwaihir’s question hit home, like an arrow finding its mark, sweeping away all of Bilbo’s doubts and fears and worries with its simplicity. Bilbo said nothing for several long moments, staring into the distance, before he turned back to Gwaihir.
'I think there’s only one answer to that,’ he said with the softest of smiles, ‘I think I’ve always known it. Yes, Gwaihir. He is worth it.’

Even if Thorin had any inclination that he was being talked about, then he had no room to contemplate it. Contrary to Bilbo’s belief that he was inspecting the door, Thorin was instead taking a few moments to collect his thoughts - and his courage. With the door now finally found, the deadline for giving Bilbo the bead was now as clear as it could be. Dwalin’s titbit of information on how Hobbits courted had given Thorin cause to hold back on approaching Bilbo in Laketown; he had not wanted to neglect Bilbo’s culture if he could help it – if he was going to do this, then he was determined to do it right. He had searched in vain for a flower to buy in Laketown, and he had held a vain hope that the land about the mountain had recovered enough to produce plants. He had been wrong in that respect. It would be many more years before the valleys bloomed bright once more.

He had even contemplated making a flower out of a spare bit of metal wire, but had dismissed the thought immediately. He had neither the tools nor the time to make something that would be good enough to give to Bilbo. No, he would have to do this without a flower, he decided. Thorin took a deep breath and made to go down the steps, but then a bird chirped sharply to his left, drawing his attention.

There, half-hidden among the stone, was a plant, growing stubbornly even in the difficult conditions of the mountainside. It had produced several powder-blue flowers, each one fully opened despite the season. For the first time in several days, Thorin smiled.

‘I’m glad to hear you say that,’ Luaithre was saying to Bilbo in the same moment Thorin was plucking a flower. ‘Even though I don’t think him worthy of you.’

Bilbo pened his mouth to dispute this, but Landroval got there first.

‘Would you think anyone worthy of Bilbo?’ said Landroval curiously.

‘No,’ said Luaithre, and Bilbo snorted.

‘What about us? What if we were to court?’ Landroval went on.

‘I wouldn’t think anyone worthy of any of you. And besides, they’d have to come through me first.’

‘Luaithre,’ said Gwaihir with tested patience, ‘that’s ridiculous-’

‘Make sure that Dwarf of yours asks permission to court you from me, Bilbo,’ Luaithre said, ignoring Gwaihir completely. Bilbo suspected that she was only half-joking.

‘And the rest of us!’ protested Landroval, ‘you have to do that, don’t you? Ask the family’s permission?’

Bilbo was trying not to laugh at their bickering, ‘yes, in some cultures you do. But I don’t think Dwarves go in for that.’
‘Well, they should!’ said Luathre, mock-indignantly, ‘wouldn’t be right otherwise.’

‘Can we please just go and hunt?’ put in Tuit, ‘not that I’m not also concerned about Bilbo’s honour being besmirched,’ - here he ignored Bilbo’s spluttered ‘besmirched!’ – ‘but I am hungry.’

‘Yes, please,’ muttered Gwaihir, ‘and perhaps while we’re hunting Luathre can try and explain how she’s suddenly become our guardian.’

‘I certainly didn’t agree to that,’ said Landroval.

‘You didn’t have to agree, it’s just obvious,’ Luathre said to them, and then, to Bilbo, ‘we’ll see you tonight.’

They took off one by one, and Bilbo watched them go. He could still hear them bickering even as they flew. They could always cheer him up, mused Bilbo with a smile, and he was glad of their presence at this crucial stage of the journey.

‘Bilbo?’ said a voice from behind him, and Bilbo turned to find Thorin standing a few feet away.

‘Oh, hello Thorin,’ said Bilbo. He found he couldn’t read Thorin’s expression, so blank and controlled was the look on the Dwarf’s face. ‘What can I do for you?’

‘I’d like to speak to you, if you’re amenable to it.’

‘But of course,’ said Bilbo easily, ‘but...aren’t we speaking now?’

The teasing did not draw any reaction from Thorin, and Bilbo began to worry.

‘Not here,’ Thorin said, ‘we’re too close to the others. Somewhere a little more private – the doorway, perhaps. There are things I...wish to discuss with you.’

Well, that sounded ominous. Mutely, Bilbo nodded, and without another word Thorin turned to lead them towards the doorway, bypassing the camp as they did so. As they climbed the steps and as the sounds of the Company’s good cheer faded, Bilbo could feel the calm and the certainty that the eagles had imbued in him slipping away, and his mind raced with the possibilities of what Thorin wanted to speak to him about. One in particular refused to leave him alone – had Thorin noticed his staring, knew Bilbo had feelings for him, and was about to let him down gently?

They walk between the camp and the doorway was interminably long, but it also seemed to be far too short to Bilbo. Thorin came to a stop as far away from Bilbo as the ledge would allow him to, and Bilbo felt every inch of space between them.

Thorin’s previously stoic expression slipped for a moment, and he seemed to be gathering himself to speak. After a moment or two of simply looking at each other, Thorin began.

‘Bilbo, I am grateful for our friendship, especially after our...rocky beginning,’ he said. ‘Which was my fault, and I take full responsibility for that. But I am thankful for your companionship, and your ability to get us all out of some very tricky situations,’ this was said with a rueful half-smile. ‘Which we seem to get into a great deal. You’ve proved your courage and your cunning a hundred times over on this journey, and any Dwarf would be honoured to call you a friend.’

Bilbo’s forgot how to breathe. It was as he’d feared. His heart felt like it was withering in his chest.

Thorin took another deep breath, unaware of the effect his words were having on Bilbo. He hesitated, and then ploughed on.
‘But, lately, I. You might have noticed that I have...feelings, for you, beyond friendship. And I was wondering if you would do me the honour of accepting my courting. Of you.’

Thorin put out his hand, uncurling his fingers to reveal a handsome golden hair bead.

‘I was hoping you would accept this. It’s how Dwarves begin courting and...’ Thorin trailed off, because Bilbo’s reaction was not quite what he’d been expecting. The Hobbit was laughing – it had begun with chuckles and strengthened to gales of laughter that were slightly edged with giddiness, or perhaps hysteria. But it was not a happy sound, to Thorin’s ears.

‘I see,’ said Thorin in small voice as Bilbo made an attempt to reign in his laughter. He began to close his hand, to withdraw to save the last scraps of his dignity, but his movements were halted by Bilbo’s hand reaching out to take a hold of wrist. Before Thorin could ask what Bilbo was doing, the Hobbit drew his free hand level with Thorin’s own and opened his fingers to reveal what looked like-

‘Is that...is that a-‘ Thorin had never been so lost for words in his entire life

‘A wooden courting bead?’ completed Bilbo, beaming at him. ‘Yes, it is. I’m so sorry for laughing, but - I was just so relieved. I thought you knew I was about to ask to court you and you were trying to put me down gently.’

Thorin was still speechless, so Bilbo decided to speak for the both of them, although it was difficult saying anything at all, so wide and big was his grin. ‘I’ve been carrying this around since Laketown,’ he admitted, and his smile faded touch, ‘is...is it alright? I know wood is an unusual material for these things, but-‘

He stopped abruptly as Thorin reached down to pick it up and look at the pattern. ‘It’s perfect,’ he said, and there was a full-blown grin spreading across Thorin’s face, and Bilbo wondered if his poor heart could take seeing such an expression. Thorin would be the death of him, one day.

‘Does this mean you accept my courting?’ said Bilbo, half-teasing, half-tentative.

‘It does, if you accept mine,’ Thorin said, and in reply to this Bilbo plucked up the golden courting bead from Thorin’s palm, turning it this way and that in the light, admiring the skill and the way the metal was warmed by his fingers, heart brimming over with joy.

The gentle touch of fingertips to the curve of his cheek, brushing back some of his curly hair, brought his attention back to Thorin.

‘Would you let me braid it into your hair?’

Bilbo hadn’t thought that far ahead; he had been concentrating so much on the bead itself that he’d all but forgotten what it was meant for. It was a very public way of declaring your intentions, but Bilbo found the idea rather appealed to him.

‘Of course. It’d be an honour to wear it,’ Bilbo said, and he knew he’d struck gold with his words when a happy, satisfied look made its way into Thorin’s eyes. ‘Could you teach me how to braid yours? If you want to wear mine, that is.’

‘It’d be an honour,’ Thorin said, echoing Bilbo’s words.

‘We’d better sit down. On the dragon’s doorstep,’ Bilbo said with a laugh, seating himself on the largest of the stone steps leading up to the door. Thorin came to sit closely beside him, and Bilbo’s bright happiness was layered with shaky nerves when Thorin turned his undivided attention to Bilbo.
Thorin’s eyes roved over Bilbo’s face, and Bilbo struggled not to look away. He was about to open his mouth to tell Thorin to get on with it, if only to spare Bilbo’s heart a moment more of that intensity, but then Thorin reached out and wove his fingers through the wavy hair that fell in front of Bilbo’s ear.

‘There are many types of braid,’ Thorin said as his skilful fingers began to separate Bilbo’s hair out into manageable strands, ‘as anyone can see from a single glance at our Company. But braids are not simply for decoration - braids can signify a Dwarf’s rank, marital status and trade.’

Bilbo closed his eyes and let Thorin’s voice wash over him, revelling in his proximity and in that smooth, deep voice. Thorin’s hands were quick and light and did not pull, not even once. Bilbo could feel the braid beginning to take shape and wished he had a mirror to hand.

‘Fíli, for example, wears the braids of the Crown Prince of the Line of Durin. Kíli will have to wear the same braids, one day, though he’ll likely whine about it.’

Bilbo let out a shaky laugh. Thorin’s fingers kept brushing over Bilbo’s cheek while he braided his hair, and the feather-light touches were causing him to shiver.

‘But courting braids are a little different. This one is made up of two braids, woven together,’ said Thorin, and he reached down to take the gold courting bead from Bilbo’s hand to secure the braid. Bilbo could feel it resting comfortably just behind his ear.

‘Gold suits you,’ Thorin told him, running a hand over the braid.

‘Your turn,’ Bilbo said trying to ignore the heat in his cheeks, ‘I’m afraid it’ll just be a simple braid for now. I’m not capable of any fancy braids, but I will try and learn.’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘Well, I do,’ Bilbo told him with mock-sternness. He reached out to gently separate three strands of Thorin’s hair, just behind the braid that framed the right side of his face. ‘You were probably wondering what I’d carved onto my bead,’ he said, braiding as neatly as he could, ‘the oak leaf and the Lonely Mountain need no explanation. But I tried to carve out a likeness to wind on it, too. Eagles have a wind-lore, a hundred different names for every type of breeze you could think of, and a few that you couldn’t, and one type in particular seemed to suit you. They call it the Homeward Wind. It’s the steady breeze that can always be counted on to carry you home, no matter where you wander.’

Bilbo took a breath, focusing on the braid rather than Thorin’s soft gaze. ‘And there’s rain clouds on there, as well.’

‘Are you comparing me to rain?’ said Thorin with a smile, ‘am I really that dour?’

Bilbo just shook his head, chuckling, ‘no, not at all. For the eagles – and for me – rainclouds mean life. When it rains, the clouds give up something to help the land grow. And-and they never ask for thanks, for such a wonderful gift.’

Bilbo, with Thorin’s help, tied the wooden bead into the end of the finished braid. It was a little wonky here and there, but it was the best Bilbo could do with shaking hands. Thorin seemed not to mind, anyway.

‘There. Now we match.’

‘I’ll cherish it,’ said Thorin, with his usual seriousness, ‘but I’m forgetting something. I have
something else for you, Bilbo.'

Bilbo watched as he reached into his borrowed coat to draw out a small blue flower.

'I know it’s not much,' said Thorin, ‘but I was told Hobbits exchange flowers.’

Bilbo was astounded all over again. ‘Who on earth told you-‘ he stopped, abruptly and narrowed his eyes at Thorin, ‘did you get Ori to ask me about Hobbit courting habits?’

‘I’ll never reveal my source,’ said Thorin with a flash of a grin, presenting the flower to him. Bilbo took the fragile stem between his thumb and forefinger.

‘It’s perfect. Thank you,’ he said, deeply touched, and tucked it into his top pocket for safe keeping. ‘I owe you flowers, now.’

‘You don’t owe me anything,’ said Thorin, reaching forwards to take Bilbo’s hands between his own.

‘No, you’re getting flowers,’ Bilbo said firmly, heart racing. They seemed to be drifting closer and closer together. ‘I’d be...I’d be a disgrace to Hobbit kind, if I didn’t.’

‘If you insist,’ Thorin all but murmured, smiling crookedly in a way that made Bilbo’s heart contract. He was so close that Bilbo could feel his breath ghosting over his lips, Bilbo’s eyes slipped shut, Thorin’s nose bumped against his. He sensed Thorin hovering a hairsbreadth away, one last second of hesitation that seemed to stretch on for hours, and at the first press of lips against his own, Bilbo’s heart stuttered in his chest. Thorin’s lips were surprisingly soft, a pleasant pressure that narrowed Bilbo’s focus to the gentle movement of Thorin’s mouth and Thorin’s thumb as it stroked over the soft underside of Bilbo’s wrist. But Thorin ventured no further – Bilbo could already feel him pulling away, happy, it would seem, for their first kiss to remain sweet and chaste.

Oh no you don’t, thought Bilbo. He was not some delicate flower to be treated with care, as nice as that first kiss had been. Before Thorin could retreat completely and before his courage fled altogether, Bilbo reached up to cup Thorin’s jaw in one hand and drag the Dwarf back in for another kiss. Thorin made a soft, surprised sound at the back of his throat, quickly deepening into a pleased growl when Bilbo took advantage of his position to slant his mouth across Thorin’s and put his hands on Thorin’s broad shoulders, on his chest. The simple kiss of moments ago was nothing compared to this – Bilbo’s daring matched by Thorin’s passion, and all thoughts left Bilbo’s head, drunk on Thorin’s scent and taste and warmth and the way that Thorin made a small, punched out sound when Bilbo nipped playfully at his bottom lip.

Their exchange of breaths and kisses was brought an end as suddenly as it had begun by a small thrush chirping loudly and suddenly from its position near Bilbo’s feet. They jolted away from each other at the startlingly shrill noise, and Bilbo sorely wanted to throw a rock at the damn bird, friend of the eagles or not. But abrupt ending aside, neither Thorin nor Bilbo seemed able to draw away from each other completely; the bare inches between them allowed Bilbo to come back to himself just enough to realise that Thorin had wound one hand through the unbraided side of his hair, the other kneading at Bilbo’s side, rubbing little circles into the covered skin. They smiled at each other a little dazedly, laughing at their own ridiculousness. Bilbo knew his cheeks had to be aflame – his whole body seemed alight – but he relished the flush on Thorin’s cheekbones and the way that his eyes had darkened and slipped half-way shut. Thorin was looking at him heatedly through his dark lashes, and he tilted Bilbo’s head forward a little so that their foreheads touched. Bilbo brushed his fingers over the wooden bead that sat in Thorin’s hair, unable to stop smiling, trying to catch his breath. Thorin was of little help on that front - when he slowly slipped his hand down to cup Bilbo’s
cheek and press a thumb to the edge of Bilbo’s mouth, Bilbo found his breath shortening again at the simple, affectionate gesture, even after their passionate exchange.

As they sat, drinking in their fill of the each other’s presence on a dragon’s doorstep and in the fading light of the penultimate day of the year, Bilbo wondered if he had ever known a moment more ridiculous, or more perfect.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you liked it, lovely readers. I’d love to know what you think! It took them long enough, didn't it? Thank you to everyone who stuck with this until they finally got together - your patience amazes me.

Next chapter should hopefully be out Wednesday evening/Thursday morning.
It has to be said that Bilbo and Thorin did not return to camp for quite some time after this exchange of beads and kisses, and that when they did finally come to sit with the rest of their Company, those keen of eye took note of lightly rumpled clothing and the way that Bilbo hadn’t quite managed to flatten down the mussed up hair on one side of his head.

And, of course, there were the courting beads.

The Company was sat around in a rough circle, as they would any other night had they been allowed a campfire, waiting for dinner to be shared out, and Thorin and Bilbo took their place among them. A hushed silence fell over the camp as they sat down, Bilbo’s cheeks flushed as he shot looks at them nervously from the corner of his eye. Thorin seemed not to care one bit.

The silence stretched on interminably, and Bilbo began to fidget at so many eyes staring at him. But then Bofur let out a cackle and said, ‘hey, pay up Góin!’ and like a dam bursting, Bilbo found himself overwhelmed by well-wishers, every Dwarf keen to offer their congratulations, while, in the background, money was being exchanged at a furious pace. Some had clearly gotten the better end of the deal, others had not, but Nori had apparently come out of it best of all if his grin was anything to go by, which was hardly surprising.

Bilbo let himself get swept up in it all, simultaneously mortified and amused that the Company had been aware enough to be betting on them, and at the same time shaking hands until his wrist hurt and receiving hearty backslaps. He was smiling again, heart lifted by the knowledge that his friends were so pleased with his courting. Someone – likely Fíli – produced a flanked of ale, which was shared out amongst them all, so that they might toast the news.

‘To Thorin and Bilbo,’ said Fíli, raising his mug, ‘thank you, for finally sparing us from all those meaningful, longing looks!’

They cheered and raised their glasses, Bilbo laughing and covering his face with one hand. He glanced at Thorin beside him to find the Dwarf warring with his expression – Bilbo could see happiness and amusement in the creases on his mouth, but he was also trying to glare at Fíli in reprimand. He wasn’t quite managing the latter, though. Bilbo reached out with his spare hand to clasp Thorin’s in his lap, watching in delight as Thorin’s expression cleared at once when he turned to Bilbo.

‘So, Thorin, did you ask Bilbo’s family for permission?’ asked Balin, drawing their attention. His question elicited a wave of chuckles from the Company.

Thorin favoured him with a cool look, ‘no,’ he said, ‘I have not.’

‘And it wasn’t needed!’ Bilbo added hurriedly.

‘Rather you than me,’ laughed Balin, and thankfully, the conversation turned to how much certain members had lost or won from the bet. Oin, in particular, bemoaned the fact that they had gotten together on the eve of Durin’s Day. Meanwhile, Dwalin was grinning away, having gotten the lion’s share, cheerfully defending himself against Ori’s protests that Dwalin had had insider information, and that it really wasn’t fair that he’d been allowed to bet in the first place.
Bilbo laughed along with them, and he was sure even Thorin was amused and pleased by the Company’s reaction, though he leant at one point to say – in a whisper, ‘did I truly need your family’s permission?’

If Thorin noticed that Bilbo’s resulting chuckle was a little nervous, he made no comment on it. ‘No,’ said Bilbo, ‘no, you won’t have to worry about that at all.’

‘What is that?’

As it turned out, Bilbo may have been stretching the truth ever so slightly. Now, with four well-fed eagles before him, and Luaithre glaring at Thorin, Bilbo began to worry that Luaithre had been serious about asking for permission.

‘Um,’ said Bilbo.

‘Ah,’ said Thorin beside him. The Dwarf likely could not understand what was being said, but he could infer Luaithre’s meaning easily enough from her gestures alone.

‘That better not be a courting bead,’ said Luaithre, ‘Bilbo! I told you only earlier today that he’d need permission from us to court!’

Thorin said, in an undertone to Bilbo, ‘I thought you said this wouldn’t be a problem?’

‘She’s joking,’ said Tuit quickly.

‘I am not,’ said Luaithre.

‘She is.’

‘Well. Maybe a little,’ said Luaithre after a pause to think about it, and Bilbo laughed in relief to hear the warmth in her voice.

‘We’re very happy for you,’ Landroval said.

‘And relieved,’ said Gwaihir in an undertone - then, directly to Thorin, ‘if you should mistreat him, Dwarf, then you will know the wrath of the eagles. That is my promise as Prince, and I swear it by the wind that carries me.’

Thorin looked in askance to Bilbo, as Gwaihir’s words had clearly been directed at him rather than Bilbo.

‘Er,’ said Bilbo, ‘they’re very happy for us. And they were only joking about needing permission.’

Gwaihir glared at Bilbo, then Thorin, ‘that’s not what I-‘ he started, but thankfully Tuit smacked him with his wing, and he subsisted into sullen silence.

‘Then I thank you for your well-wishing,’ said Thorin, and Bilbo could hear the humour in his tone, ‘and I promise to look after Bilbo, and give him all that he deserves.’

‘What,’ said Bilbo, even as a hot flush crept up the back of his neck, ‘look after me? I think you’ll find I’m the one that’s been looking after you so far!’
Thorin looked at him side-long. ‘Well, now it’s my turn, then.’

‘And I don’t get a say in it?’

‘No,’ said Thorin with a smirk.

‘I think I’m starting to like you, Thorin,’ said Luaithre, and Bilbo groaned and put his head in his hands.

‘I’m sorry, Bilbo,’ said Landroval, not sounding sorry at all. Thorin pried Bilbo’s hands away from his face. ‘I’m afraid you made your choice. You’re stuck with us, now.’

And Bilbo could admit in the privacy of his mind – where he allowed himself to be sentimental, on occasion – that he wouldn’t have it any other way.

If there was one thing that Thorin hated, it was waiting. He had led an active life, and by his nature he always preferred to be doing something, no matter how small the task. But Durin’s Day dawned bright and brilliant, and there was little else he could do save wait for sunset. The rest of his Dwarves seemed similarly fidgety, anxious for what the day would bring, and worried glances were often sent in the direction of the Company’s burglar. They were not alone, on that front. Bilbo’s acceptance of his courting had provided ample distraction from the Hobbit’s task, but now, though, as the hours slipped by, Thorin found himself cursing their journey, and the stubbornness that had driven them all here. He had even hoped that they would never find the door, so that Bilbo would not have to venture down into a dragon’s lair. This thought had been immediately accompanied by guilt, for he should not – he would not - put his concern for Bilbo above the success of this journey. But still, though, the thought persisted. Perhaps the door would not be revealed. Perhaps Durin’s Day would prove to be a fallacy, and Bilbo would never have to risk his life on a fool’s errand.

But he knew this was a foolish hope to hold, and so he did not waste time on wishes, but instead spent most of the day shadowing Bilbo. He stayed close to the Hobbit through breakfast and lunch, and returned to his side almost immediately after Bilbo landed along with his eagle kin, their odd family group having decided to take a brief flight around the valley.

It was hardly surprising, then, when Bilbo finally asked him about the strangeness of his behaviour.

‘As much as I like your company, Thorin,’ began Bilbo carefully, and Thorin knew he was in trouble, ‘and I think the bead in my hair is proof enough of that – I am wondering why I seemed to have gained a Dwarven shadow today.’

‘Do I need a reason to be around my intended?’ said Thorin a touch waspishly.

‘Well, no,’ Bilbo said with raised eyebrows, ‘but I’m almost certain that the reason you’ve stuck so close to me is not because of my charming company.’

Thorin looked away. ‘Are you not scared, Bilbo?’ he said.

‘Of course I am,’ said Bilbo as though this were obvious, ‘if we’re right, and Smaug is still alive, then I’m about to get closer than I’d ever want to a dragon.’

‘You don’t have to,’ Thorin burst out suddenly, ‘the contract – you could get out of it, if you want. And no one in the Company would think any less of you for not doing through that door.’
The line of Bilbo’s lips twisted. ‘Do you really think I’d do that?’

Thorin gave a sharp shake of his head. His sharp blue eyes were lit with an anger Bilbo knew was not directed at him.

‘I wish you would.’

‘If I was, would I be the same Hobbit that you decided to court?’

Thorin’s silence to this was answer enough.

‘It’s what you brought me along for, isn’t it?’ said Bilbo gently. ‘It’s what I’m contracted to do,’ Thorin gave him a dark, frustrated look, but Bilbo remained unbowed in the face of it, continuing regardless, ‘but it’s not about that, anymore. That’s not my reason for doing it. Before, I would have gone down that tunnel because I’m your friend, Thorin. But now I’m going because I’m your...your intended.’

Thorin stared at him for half a breath, and then let out a furious, hissed curse in Khuzdûl. Without warning, Bilbo found himself swept up into a rough, heated kiss that left him reeling, lips tingling, a warm curl of heat low in his belly when Thorin eventually pulled back.

‘That’s not fair,’ said Thorin, curling a hand around the junction between neck and shoulder, thumb on Bilbo’s jaw. ‘You’re not allowed to...’ he let out a long breath when Bilbo touched foreheads with him, his eyes fluttering shut.

‘Promise me you’ll be careful,’ Thorin said roughly.

‘When am I not?’ Bilbo countered, but Thorin flicked his eyes open and Bilbo sobered, ‘I promise. I’ll be back before you know it. And then we’ll figure out a way to get Erebor back.’

A spark of humour returned to Thorin’s eyes. ‘And it’ll be as easy as that, will it?’

‘Of course,’ said Bilbo, drawing back to look at Thorin properly and quirking a smile, ‘because all the other parts of our journey have been so straightforward. I think we’re owed this.’ His expression softened, ‘I can’t wait to see all the places you’ve told me about.’

‘And I can’t wait to show them to you. But you’ll be the first among us to see the legendary treasure hall of Erebor, with all its riches and endless gold.’

Bilbo snorted, ‘I rather think I will be paying more attention to the great big stinking dragon than admiring the gold,’ he said.

‘Perhaps,’ said Thorin with a hint of a smile, though a shadow passed over his face at the mention of the dragon, ‘I will be very surprised if the first thing that comes out of your mouth when you return is not “gold”.’

‘If I had anything to bet with, I’d take you up on that wager. But...I think it’s time. The sunlight’s fading already.’

Thorin sighed. ‘Yes, it seems the hour is almost upon us. Come, to the door with us.’

It was a strange assortment of eagles, Dwarves and Hobbits who gathered around the door as the sun
began to drop below the tree line, turning the sky a fierce shade of red. No one spoke, and there were no sounds save for the chirping of thrushes as they continued about their business, oblivious to the drama that was about to unfold.

Bilbo practically held his breath as the light faded. He glanced at Thorin beside him, to find that the Dwarf was staring expectedly into the horizon. No need to worry yet, Bilbo told himself, though he ran his hands over the braid in his hair. Thorin had been kind enough to re-braid it for him this morning, and the weight of the bead was a comfort in the last moments of the day.

‘Look!’ said Kíli suddenly, at the same time Tuit screeched the same in his own language.

And there, in the rapidly darkening sky, was the ghostly shape of the moon. As one they turned to the doorway, to find that the outline of a door had appeared in brilliant silver, flowing over the smooth rock, blazing to life even as the sunlight faded.

‘Quick, Thorin!’ shouted Balin, ‘the key! Look – there’s a keyhole!’

Sure enough, a hole had appeared in the door. The key was ready in Thorin’s hands, and he rushed forward to fit it into the lock. It was perhaps the one and only occasion that Bilbo had seen Thorin’s hands fumble as they did in that moment, but he soon had the key in the lock, turning it as soon as it slid home. There was a resounding crack, and flakes of rock tumbled from the overhang.

Thorin put his shoulder to the door and began to push. Dwalin and Dori were at his side in an instant to help, and together they heaved and shoved, oblivious to the scrape of rock over rock and the dust that was thrown up by their united force. The door began to move inwards achingly slowly.

The last light of Durin’s Day vanished, and the door stood open. Dori, Dwalin and Thorin stood back, panting, trying to catch their breath.

‘Mahal’s blessings,’ muttered Bofur, ‘we actually did it.’

‘We did,’ agreed Bilbo, and every eye fell to him, ‘and now I think it’s time I see what all the fuss about with this treasure hoard.’

He said it lightly enough, but they were all staring at him so glumly that Bilbo had to look away.

‘Any last bits of advice?’ he said to the eagles, so he did not have to look at his friends looking at him as though he were about to drop dead.

‘I don’t know much about dragons save what my father has told me of the War of the Wrath,’ said Gwaihir. ‘But I do know this much: don’t give him your name, and be sure not to steal a single coin from his hoard, not even by accident. Dragons know every ounce of gold that they guard, and Smaug will notice.’

‘It seems I am not to be a burglar after all,’ said Bilbo with a weak smile.

‘Be safe, Bilbo,’ said Luaithre, her sentiment echoed by Tuit and Landroval. She touched her beak to his forehead for a moment.

‘I’ll try.’

He could delay no longer. He knew he would falter, if he lingered here too long, in the company of his friends and family. He made sure that his sword was properly belted at his side, and that his knife was safely tucked away. His spear was too long and would be more of a hindrance than a help. It would have to stay behind.
Bilbo stepped forward, towards the pitch-black mouth of the tunnel. The Dwarves moved out of his way, but Thorin did not.

Bilbo locked gazes with him for one long moment. Thorin clenched his jaw so tightly Bilbo could see the muscles tense in his cheeks, but he, too, stepped aside. Bilbo touched his hand to Thorin’s forearm briefly, and then descended into the mountain.

Bilbo had to force himself not to look back, but when the scant light provided by the moon’s glow dimmed to almost nothing, he allowed himself one single glance over his shoulder. The tunnel entrance was put a pinprick of light, like his very own moon in a sky devoid of stars. Bilbo took a few more steps forward, and found himself swallowed up by darkness. It was like Mirkwood all over again, and it took every scrap of courage Bilbo had to keep going, to ignore the panic rising in his chest at being left alone in the dark again.

He did not have to travel long in the dark, though. A red glow began to appear in the tunnel, growing brighter with every stride, and abruptly and without warning, Bilbo found himself at the end of the passage.

The treasure hoard of Erebor was before him, and Bilbo forgot how to think, how to breathe. He remained in the shadow of the tunnel, transfixed at the ocean of gold before him, stretching on and on, as far as the eye could see, in a great cavern of a room. It was a truly staggering sight, but even this was quickly forgotten in favour of the terror-inducing vision that was Smaug.

The great dragon was lying on his side, his bed of gold a bright contrast to the blood-red of his scales, the one eye that Bilbo could see firmly shut, his side rising and falling with the steady rhythms of sleep. He was emitting such heat that Bilbo began to sweat, despite the considerable distance between them. Smaug was huge, and that was even taking into account the fact that most of his bulk was still half-hidden among the gold.

Bilbo sat at the lip of the tunnel, desperately hoping that his approach had not disturbed Smaug’s slumber. His heart was hammering away in his chest, terror freezing his blood and shortening his breath. But such pure fear could not be sustained for long, and after several minutes of simply sitting and watching for any sign of awakening from Smaug, he began to calm down, and rational thought began to return to Bilbo’s mind.

He had been lucky, it would seem, but he was not about to test that luck by remaining where he was much longer. He turned his mind to strategy, to planning, eyes quickly flickering over Smaug, taking in the dragon’s wings and the sharp ridges that lined the dragon’s back. Bilbo knew dragon-hide to be legendary in its hardness – the fairytales read to him by his father told him as much – but surely there had to be some point of weakness. There was in any enemy, if your eyes and wits were sharp enough, Bilbo had found. But try as he might, he could see not gap in Smaug’s scales, and Bilbo could only guess at the softness of his belly, as that part of Smaug was mostly hidden to him.

Still, though, a plan was starting to form in Bilbo’s mind. It was a mad one, full of risk and danger, but, as Bilbo saw it, they had few options available to them.
Thorin was waiting for him a few steps into the tunnel. Bilbo found himself almost carried out the rest of the way, Thorin’s hands on his shoulders, eyes roving every inch of Bilbo that he could see.

‘You’re alright?’ he said, a question wrapped up in incredulity.

‘I’m fine, I’m fine,’ Bilbo said, to both him and the rest of the assembled Dwarves and eagles.

‘And the dragon? Is he alive?’ asked Dwalin urgently.

‘He’s alive,’ said Bilbo, and the Company groaned.

‘Did he see you?’ this from Thorin, who was still staring at Bilbo intently.

‘No – he was asleep, and I think he still is,’ the Company began to murmur to one another at this news, every face alight with worry bordering on panic. ‘But – listen!’ said Bilbo, struggling to be heard over the din, ‘I think....I think I have a plan.’

‘Quiet! Let him speak,’ commanded Thorin.

‘Thank you. The way I see it is this – we need Smaug out of the mountain, and I think there’s only one way of doing that.’ Bilbo squared his shoulders, knowing that this next part was likely going to cause a fuss. ‘I have to go back and steal something from the hoard.’

As expected, there was a great outcry at this, mostly from the eagles. Bilbo put up his hands at the wave of noise, trying to continue, but it was Thorin’s voice that cut through the rest.

‘You cannot go back in there,’ he ground out.

‘I can, and I will. My job’s half finished. No, just let me explain – Smaug can’t come up the tunnel. It’s far too narrow for him. If I can grab even just a coin then if he wants it back he’ll have no choice but to come out of the mountain.’

‘Which leaves us with a bloody great big dragon bearing down on us,’ said Dwalin, ‘I’m not sure if I like this plan.’

‘But don’t you see? We can then get in the tunnel and close the door. He’ll be out, we’ll be in.’

‘We’ll be trapped you mean,’ said Thorin, and he sounded as if he were nearing the end of his patience. ‘What’s to stop Smaug coming back into the mountain?’

‘How far is it to the front gate from the hoard?’

‘It’s not a great distance, if you know the way,’ said Balin.

‘Then we go to the front gate and strike Smaug down while he remains outside of the mountain.’

‘How, Bilbo? What can do that the entire army of Erebor couldn’t?’ Thorin said, his voice full anger underlined with grief, Bilbo’s chest aching at the sound of it.

‘We’ll find a way,’ he said Thorin fiercely.

‘If you are to draw him out of the mountain,’ said Gwaihir, ‘then there is great danger to the town of Men not far from here.’

‘I know,’ said Bilbo tersely, ‘it’s a terrible risk, but I see no other way around it.’
‘Bilbo, if you draw the dragon out, and if he turns his gaze towards the town, we will be left with no choice but to try and stop him,’ Luaithre said.

‘You—you’re not serious?’ gasped Bilbo, and it was his turn to be terrified.

‘We are,’ said Landroval firmly, ‘we cannot remain hidden in the face of the kind of destruction Smaug would bring. You know this. You know us.’

‘I would not want you to face down a dragon even if you had every eagle from the Eyrie at your back. You haven’t seen him, he’s huge! What can you do, against such an enemy?’ Bilbo said, and in his panic he did not even register that he was echoing Thorin’s words of only moments before.

‘We can distract him. We would not hope to be able to kill him, but we could direct his wrath elsewhere.’

‘Yes, towards you!’ Bilbo scrubbed a hand over his eyes, trying to compose himself. Arguing with the eagle was not helping his justification for going back into the mountain. ‘We need more information,’ he said to Thorin. ‘I have to go back down there.’

‘And what good will that do? You’ve seen Smaug once, Bilbo, how is seeing him again going to help?’

‘I don’t. I don’t know. But we can’t do much inside the mountain, Thorin. Smaug would only have to swipe his tail once to kill us all, and if he should decide to breathe fire...no, we need him out of the mountain. We need him to have some kind of weakness. Perhaps I missed something the first time around. But I have to try.’

‘Dragon-hide has no weakness, Bilbo,’ said Balin. ‘You were not there. You did not see the way a thousand spears, a thousand arrows, simply clattered off of Smaug’s scales.’

‘There has to be a way. If we can find a weakness, then we might just have a chance.’ He looked at Thorin desperately. ‘Thorin, please. You have to trust me. I can do this.’

Thorin looked into the faces of his Dwarves, at the eagles who were watching with rapt attention, and then back to Bilbo. ‘Alright. Alright,’ he said as though each word were being forcibly drawn from him. ‘But I’m coming into the tunnel with you, this time, even if it’s just half way. This is non-negotiable, Bilbo.’

‘But no further,’ agreed Bilbo quickly, ‘we can’t risk waking him.’

Thorin turned away to issue commands to the Dwarves, instructing them to pack up everything they had, to make sure their weapons were to hand and they were ready to move into the tunnel at any moment. Bilbo noted that he took particular care to clap a hand on Kíli’s shoulder to ask if he still had a full quiver of arrows.

Bilbo looked to the eagles at their perches. ‘Promise me,’ he said to them, ‘promise me you’ll hide, if there’s even the slightest hint of Smaug coming out of the mountain.’

‘We promise, Bilbo,’ said Tuit, ‘but as for what comes after – well. We won’t promise anything we know we can’t stick to.’

‘Don’t try and extract anything more from us,’ said Luaithre gently but firmly as Bilbo opened his mouth to say more, ‘don’t make us choose between our honour and our love for you.’

Bilbo looked away, his hands through his hair, catching his fingers on the braid he had forgotten was
there.

‘I’m so sorry to have brought you here,’ said Bilbo in a whisper, and had he been speaking to any other then his words would not have been heard over the clamour of the Company readying themselves to move.

Gwaihir glared at him. ‘We came here of our own free will,’ he reminded Bilbo.

‘And we would not have it any other way,’ said Landroval. ‘But enough of this. If you are to go back into the mountain, we will have to leave, and I would not like our parting to be so sad.’

‘Yes!’ agreed Tuit, ‘you know how quick we can be, Bilbo. We’ll be so quick the dragon will not even see us. We’ll be alright.’

Bilbo managed a watery smile. Thorin came to stand beside him. It was time.

‘Goodbye. Be safe...please,’ said Bilbo, and he was enveloped for a moment in a group hug.

‘We will if you will,’ said Tuit, stepping back to take off into the night’s sky. The others soon followed, stretching their wings one by one, and Bilbo had to turn away.

Thorin’s hand found his. Bilbo graced him with a brittle smile. ‘Here we go again,’ he said with a lightness he didn’t feel.

As promised, Thorin stopped when Bilbo judged them to be half way through the tunnel. They embraced in the dark, Bilbo breathing in the scent that was wholly Thorin, taking comfort and courage from the warm circle of his arms. Bilbo stepped back and pressed a kiss to Thorin’s lips, tugging at the courting bead in Thorin’s hair for luck. Not a single word passed between them. Bilbo simply turned away, feeling Thorin’s gaze on him, walking towards the heat and the red glow of a dragon.

There was the gold again. There was Smaug. But instead of focusing on the dragon, this time, Bilbo found himself wondering how he might take a closer look. A floor of gold coins and treasure was hardly useful for stealing silently through the room, and as soon as Bilbo stepped out of the tunnel, he would be terribly exposed if Smaug happened to wake up.

His eye naturally fell to a support column not too far from where he lay hidden. It might provide him with ample enough cover to remain unseen, as gold had piled up against it, throwing the side nearest Bilbo into complete shadow. Very carefully, Bilbo stepped out of the relative safety of the tunnel. His attention was split between the dragon and the path beneath him, every instinct and sense alert to danger, and he barely allowed himself to breathe, so great was his caution. He made not a whisper of a sound as he crept closer and closer to the column, not even allowing the coins beneath his feet to tinkle or shift.

He was half a foot away from the column when it happened. Without warning, and with no discernible change in his breathing, Smaug suddenly raised his head and boomed,

‘Little thief! You come again into my lair, do you?’

Bilbo all but flung himself behind the column, trembling in fear.
'I had thought you too foolish to try again,' said Smaug, ‘but it seems greed can overcome fear easily enough. Tell me, who thinks himself clever enough to escape me twice?'

Bilbo held his silence. Surely, surely if he were to speak now he would give away his position? But Smaug’s voice had echoed slightly...

‘I am the lucky number,’ he said, and Bilbo’s guess had been right – his words bounced off of the walls, and unless Smaug had very sharp hearing, the dragon would be unable to place him. ‘I am...I am he who walks unseen.’

‘What dull titles,’ said the dragon, ‘but I asked for your name, little thief.’

‘I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me,’ babbled Bilbo, barely aware of what he was saying, ‘I am he who flies on borrowed wings and drinks the blood of his family.’

‘How lovely,’ sneered Smaug.

‘I am the guest of bears and the bane of spiders. I am he who brings light and he who drowns his friends in barrels and draws them alive from the water again.’ Bilbo took a deep breath. ‘And I did not come to steal from you, O Smaug the Terrible. I came to see if the legends about you were true, and if you were as great and as tremendous as I have been told.’

‘If you think flattery will win you treasure, then you are sorely mistaken, thief.’

‘Truly! I have not come for your gold. And I see now that the stories could not begin to compare to your magnificence.’

‘Hmph!’ said Smaug, and Bilbo could hear him take several long drags of air. ‘Your scent is as fickle as your words, thief, but I think not all of your titles are untrue. I smell eagle on you, and yet an eagle you are not.’

Bilbo swallowed, a loud click to his ears.

‘No doubt you were chosen for your strange scent, but tell me – are you to profit from this dangerous task of stealing into a dragon’s lair? Or are your friends to take an equal share in anything you might steal, despite the fact that you alone were brave enough come here?’

‘We are not here for gold,’ Bilbo said again. He came to notice a small gold vase just to his right. It looked fairly light – perfect for quickly scooping up in a mad dash for the exit.

‘So there are more of you,’ said Smaug triumphantly, and Bilbo cursed his own stupidity.

‘There are, O Smaug the Mighty, but we come for revenge, not for the treasure,’ said Bilbo, though he quickly added, ‘no matter how lovely that treasure may be.’

Smaug snorted, and Bilbo felt a wave of heat wash through the hall. Sweat began to run down between his shoulder blades and down the side of his face. Bilbo blinked it out of his eyes.

‘Revenge!’ laughed Smaug, ‘your lies grow ever more humorous, trespasser. Tell me, who is left alive to take revenge against me? Where are Girion’s heirs? Dead, all of them! Where are the Dwarves? They cower in the dark, scattered by the destruction I brought down upon the mountain. And if they were to have the audacity to take revenge, how would they kill me? My skin is impenetrable, Thief in the Shadows! There is no weapon in this world that can harm me!’

‘I have been told by my friends that a dragon’s underside is softer than all the rest,’ said Bilbo,
considering the distance between him and the tunnel, ‘that while your hide is unparalleled in its hardness, but your belly is quite unprotected.’

‘Your information is out of date,’ snarled Smaug, ‘look here – my underside is even stronger than the rest!’

Smaug shifted, and what Bilbo did then was perhaps the bravest thing he had done so far – he chanced a look around the column at Smaug.

His courage was rewarded. There was what he had been hoping for. Most of Smaug’s chest was encrusted with jewels, but in the hollow of his left breast, was a patch completely unprotected by scales or gems. It was time to leave. Bilbo tensed, coiled tight like a spring, every muscle in his body ready to burst into movement. There was a roaring in his ears.

‘There! What do you think of that,’ Smaug said.

‘Truly magnificent, your Magnificence!’ said Bilbo, ‘as befitting one of your grandeur! Why, I am dazzled by your waistcoat of diamonds!’

‘I am sure you are,’ said Smaug lowly, still casting about for Bilbo’s hiding place. Bilbo’s sharp ears tried to pick out his movements. Smaug shifted again, and Bilbo guessed – he hoped – that the dragon had turned aside for a moment.

Bilbo took his chance. He burst forward, scooping up the vase as he sprinted towards the tunnel’s mouth. A great snarl reached his ears as Smaug reared back and opened his jaws. Heat and light began to pour through the cavern. Bilbo did not even breathe, forcing his legs faster and faster, lungs burning. The tunnel was bare inches away.

Smaug let out a spear of flame that hurtled towards Bilbo. Vase still in hand, Bilbo tore into the tunnel, shoulder impacting into the wall, throwing him off for just a moment before he was back into his stride again. Fire and overwhelming heat followed him into the corridor, roaring behind him, and Bilbo sped up even more, his legs screaming at the pace. Flame and sparks licked at the back of his tunic, at his heels, then retreated, the dragon-fire folding back on itself. Still, Bilbo kept running, blind in his terror, and he would have run all the way out the tunnel had it not been for Thorin.

‘Bilbo!’ Thorin said, catching the Hobbit as Bilbo all but barrelled into him, ‘Bilbo, are you alright? What’s this?’

‘I’m a burglar after all!’ said Bilbo with a hiccupping laugh, ‘but we have to...we have to go, Smaug-‘

He was cut off as a terrific roar nearly shook them off their feet.

‘I think I’ve made him angry,’ said Bilbo a little hysterically.

‘Come on, then,’ said Thorin, as steady as a rock, and exactly what Bilbo needed in that moment, ‘we must warn the others.’

They ran through the rest of the tunnel, Smaug’s furious snarls urging them forward. As promised, the Company were huddled around the doorway, and they sprung to their feet as Bilbo and Thorin emerged.

‘Into the tunnel!’ Thorin snapped in a voice that brokered no argument. It was the voice of their King, and the Dwarves hastened to obey.
‘Did you find a weak spot, lad?’ asked Balin even as he hurried into the tunnel.

‘Yes, the left side of his chest – there’s a bare patch. I’ll explain once we’re all inside, come on!’

But even once they were all safely within the tunnel, some among the Company were reluctant to close the door.

‘We’ll be stuck inside,’ said Dori who was closest to the door, ‘isn’t it better to-‘

There came a roar like thunder - a roar that had not come from inside the mountain.

‘Close it,’ said Bilbo frantically, ‘quickly, close it!’

The door slammed shut, and not a moment too soon. The Company waited in the dark, huddled up in the tunnel, as the sounds of a dragon’s fury reached them. In all his years Bilbo had never heard anything so terrifying, Smaug raining blow upon blow down on the mountainside, each one causing the tunnel to shake.

‘We need to get to the front gate,’ Bilbo said, grasping Thorin’s shoulder, ‘while there’s still time. Who knows how long it’ll be before he directs his rage elsewhere?’

Bilbo felt – rather than saw – Thorin nod. Thankfully, someone in the Company – likely Dori – had had the foresight to make torches, and one was lit in short order.

‘You’ll be needing this, Bilbo,’ said Ori, his young, brave face revealed by the flickering light of the torch.

‘My spear! Thank you, Ori,’ Bilbo said, gratefully taking it in his other hand.

‘Lead on, burglar,’ said Thorin, and Bilbo did just that.

Without Smaug in the treasure hall to provide light, it was pitch black when they emerged from the tunnel. Bilbo let Thorin take the torch from his hands – Thorin seemed to have an unerring sense of direction underground, and as soon as the rest of the Company were out of the tunnel, he wasted no time in heading towards the back of the hall. As they hurried across the mountains of gold, Bilbo could hear gasps of wonder from behind him, and there were quite a few stragglers by the time the light from the torch fell on a set of steps, leading up into Erebor itself.

‘Quickly!’ snapped Thorin to the ones who lingered, ‘we’ll have time to count our riches later. This way!’

They were taking too long, thought Bilbo. How long had it taken to simply cross the treasure hall? Every second that ticked by seemed like an hour, and Bilbo was so wrapped up in his own worry that he did not see any of the wondrous hallways that they passed through, lined with rich colours, the dark rock inlaid with gold and silver here and there, glittering like stars in the night. Bilbo’s mind was racing with what might have already taken place outside the mountain, and his eyes were firmly on the back of Thorin’s shoulders, leading them – almost at a run, now – to the front gate.

The corridor they were on lead out into a great hall, bigger, even, than the treasure hall, but Bilbo only caught a glimpse of it, for Thorin turned into another corridor, nearly sprinting up the flight of stair at the end of it, up and up and up until they were stood on the battlements of Erebor. The battlements were so long Bilbo couldn’t see the end of them, and the outside world was blocked out by a series of huge doors, lined up one after another, all the way along the wall.

‘They were closed when the dragon came,’ said Thorin, gesturing to the doors, ‘we’ll need to open
only one of them open. Dwalin, Bifur, turn the winch – Dori, I have need of your strength again.’

It was a system that had not been used in many, many years, but this was Dwarven craft, and such things do not rust easily, nor do they stiffen with age. With Dwalin and Bifur pulling at the mechanism that kept the door shut, and Thorin and Dori pushing against the door itself, inches of sky quickly began to appear, until all of Long Lake and beyond was revealed to them on the other side.

It should have been a night lit only by the moon. Instead, the cool dark was being lit up by burst of crimson dragon-fire. Smaug had clearly grown tired of hunting the Company on the mountainside, and had turned his attention to Laketown. The Company watched in mute horror as the dragon winged his way across the town, raining yet more fire down onto the already burning houses, the dragon’s body a glittering red, clearly visible even in the dark.

Bilbo stepped out onto the outside battlements, the wind tearing at his clothes, some sixth sense causing him to look up just as four shapes winged away overhead, heading directly for the dragon.

‘No!’ Bilbo heard himself say distantly, ‘No!’

But it was of no use – the eagles couldn’t hear him, and even if they could they would not be inclined to change their course. They sped towards Smaug and the burning Laketown in battle formation, swift and silent, until their forms were swallowed by the night, and Bilbo could only guess at what was happening to his kin.

Smaug was rearing back, great wings beating the air, fire igniting in his throat – but he was cut off before he could unleash his destructive fire on the town. He seemed distracted, his flight faltering, claws and tail and snapping jaws directed at something else, something in the air.

‘What’s happening?’ said Kíli at Bilbo’s side.

The great body of the dragon began to turn, away from the town, still furiously snarling and twisting, trying again and again to breathe fire, only to be cut off each time, and the Company could hear his terrible roars from across the lake.

‘The eagles – they’re...they’re bringing him this way!’ said Bilbo, his voice rising to a shout as he realised what his kin were doing. ‘They’re giving us a chance – they’re bringing the dragon back to the mountain!’

Several of the Dwarves cursed - and Dwalin said, ‘why by Durin’s blood would they do that’ - but Bilbo ignored them all. He turned to Kíli and grasped the young Dwarf by the shoulders.

‘Do you think you can do it, Kíli?’ he asked, panic edging into his voice, ‘do you think you can put an arrow into his chest?’

Kíli was grim-faced as he unslung the bow from his back. ‘If the eagles give me a clear shot, I can try,’ he said. ‘Where exactly is the weak spot?’

Bilbo quickly described it to him the best he could, Kíli listening intently.

‘The rest of you, move back,’ Thorin was saying to the others, ‘take cover and ready yourselves.’

Another roar informed them that Smaug was drawing ever near, and if Bilbo had thought him huge in the treasure hall, it was nothing compared to his size in the open air. Thorin clasped his hand against Kíli’s shoulder, giving his nephew a nod before moving back, Kíli sliding an arrow out of his quiver to notch it to the string of his bow. Bilbo could make out the eagles once more, their bright forms revealed in flashes when they wove and duck and slashed at Smaug’s eyes and at his wing
joints. Bilbo’s heart was in his mouth as he watched them – each pass they made brought them closer and closer to Smaug’s sharp claws, his huge teeth. Each pass could mean death for any of them in an instant.

The Company had retreated back, behind the closed-off parts of the battlements, until only Thorin, Kíli, Fíli and Bilbo remained. Smaug was so close now that Bilbo could see the glitter of gems on his belly as the dragon flew past the front gate, circling back, chasing the eagle that danced in front of his nose. Bilbo distantly registered that he seemed slower, his movements halting and weak.

‘Kíli-’ started Bilbo, terrified that they had but moments before one of the eagles were hit, or Smaug grew tired of the aerial battle turned his attention to the battlements.

But Kíli seemed not to hear him. He calmly drew back his arm, stretching the bow to its full-draw, his hand steady, his expression calm and focused, gaze on the force of nature twisting through the sky above them. Smaug flew closer and closer. They could feel the heat rolling off him in waves. Still Kíli waited. Bilbo’s heart was in his throat, his body shaking in terror.

Smaug flung out one claw to swipe at the air. Kíli let out a breath that was almost like a sigh, and let his arrow fly. Bilbo and Thorin watched its flight, gasping as the arrow disappeared into Smaug’s chest, feather and all. Smaug screamed and reared back, fighting to stay aloft, but he had clearly been wounded – dark blood was pouring from his chest and into the lake below. Bilbo could barely believe it – it was the best shot he’d ever seen, Kíli had killed the dragon-

That triumphant thought was cut short, for several things then happened in quick succession – Smaug began to lose altitude, and even as he fell he opened his mouth, ready to direct one last burst of dragonfire in their direction. But before even a spark had been emitted from his mouth, Luaithre dived through the air, striking out at his eye with pinpoint precision. Smaug snarled and – in one last spiteful act, swiped at her with razor sharp claws.

Bilbo watched in horror as Smaug fell from the sky in a shower of blood and half-spluttered flames.

And Luaithre fell with him.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter out very, very soon.
Chapter Notes

Sorry this is late! As you can see, this got a bit long, so it took more time than I thought it would to finish.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For as long as he lived, Thorin would never forget the way Bilbo screamed like a wounded animal as Luaithre tumbled from the sky, a heart-wrenching sound that struck Thorin to the very core of his being.

Some tug of instinct pushed Thorin into action just as Bilbo started forward, towards the edge of the battlements. But Thorin caught him before he took more than two steps, wrapping his arms around Bilbo, holding him in place, preventing him from what Thorin could only guess was a desperate attempt to get to Luaithre; against all logic Bilbo might have leapt from the battlements had Thorin not seized him. It was an act of madness, but Thorin had seen many a Dwarf driven to such inexplicable actions by grief.

Bilbo quietened, yielding to Thorin’s hold, his gaze instead fixed ahead; Thorin couldn’t make out Luaithre in the darkness, but two of her kin were circling in the air roughly in the direction she had fallen. It tore at Thorin’s heart, to see Bilbo like this, to see someone he had come to care so deeply for in such pain. Thorin was all too familiar with that pain himself.

But still, Thorin loosened his hold on Bilbo when Tuit swept by the battlements, heralding his arrival with a screech that sounded to Thorin’s ears to be more like a battle-cry than a greeting. Bilbo responded instantly, and Thorin watched in rapt fear as he sprinted forward to fling himself from the battlements, smoothly landing on Tuit’s back, the eagle’s flight uninterrupted by his new passenger’s arrival.

Thorin watched them wing away into the night. He had not felt so helpless in many a long year. The fingers of his right hand clenched, longing for the hilt of a sword.

After several long minutes of simply staring into the night, Thorin turned away, picking up Bilbo’s spear as he did so. His nephews looked shell-shocked – Kíli’s previous calm had vanished, replaced by wide-eyed fear for Bilbo’s kin. Too young, the both of them, Thorin thought to himself.

Out-loud he said, ‘come. There’s not much we can do here. Let’s try and get some rest.’

Above Long Lake, Tuit and Bilbo were quickly making their way back to where Landroval and Gwaihir were hovering above the water. The body of the dragon, laden as it was with jewels and gold, was rapidly sinking, but as Tuit approached, Bilbo’s eyes began to pick out a smaller shape not far from the carcass of Sm aug, floating on the surface.

‘There - Luaithre! Luaithre!’ Bilbo called out, every part of him straining to see even a flicker of life.
Luaithre lay on her back, wings folded awkwardly across her body, head thrown to one side. Her hollow bones were allowing her to float - for the moment. Tuit drew level to hover as close as he could to her body, and Bilbo saw with a slow turn of his stomach that the darker water that surrounded Luaithre’s twisted body was blood. Despite his battle experience, despite having delivered a thousand blows worse than the one that Luaithre had received, Bilbo had to turn away when his eyes fell to her wounds. An ever-expanding circle of blood was flowing from the four huge, gaping gashes slashed across her front, staining her feathers. Smaug had dealt her a deadly blow.

Gwaihir and Landroval were calling for her, voices angry and plaintive all at once, and Bilbo found himself switching naturally to their language without conscious thought.

‘Tuit, is she dead? There’s just so much blood, oh-‘ sobbed Bilbo into Tuit’s feathers, sick with grief.

‘Enough of that!’ said Tuit, his words holding but a tremor of what he was truly feeling, ‘we don’t know that yet – we need to get her ashore, I’ve no clue how long she’ll keep afloat,’ he turned to Landroval and Gwahir, ‘quickly! Grasp her wings, as gently as you can. We’ll head for land.’

Landroval hastened to obey, but in the very instant he touched Luaithre’s wings did she stir, trying to raise her head from the water, and Bilbo nearly choked on a gasp.

‘She’s alive!’

‘Of course she is!’ said Tuit, though he dipped a foot lower in the air in relief, ‘it’d take more than a dragon to kill Luaithre!’

‘She’s alive for now,’ Gwaihir reminded them, ‘take a hold of her wings, little brother, before she sinks any lower.’

It was a struggle – Luaithre was heavy, her feathers waterlogged, and Landroval could barely manage to lift her above the water, but he did not complain or falter in his task for a moment. Gwaihir and Tuit flew above him as a guard, watching anxiously as Luaithre was slowly – ever so slowly – pulled to shore. The remains of Laketown acted as beacon for the odd group, the town still alight and blazing fiercely, but Bilbo had no space in his heart to mourn those who must surely have been lost in Smaug’s attacks. The sun was beginning to rise, and to Bilbo’s dismay the first rays of light revealed that they were still a great distance from land.

‘This is taking too long,’ he said fearfully.

‘Do you know of any other way?’ Gwaihir snapped at him.

‘Look, there! Men!’ said Tuit, pointing his head towards the blazing outline of the ruins of Laketown, where a small flotilla of boats were emerging as though from the flames themselves, heading in their direction.

‘Do they mean to strike while one of us is injured?’ screeched Gwaihir.

‘No!’ said Bilbo, who could make out the man standing on the prow of one of the boats, ‘It’s Bard! He’s come to help!’

It was chaos on the banks of Long Lake. The former residents of Laketown were huddled around in
great masses in the shadow of Mirkwood, and everywhere there was wailings of grief and stirrings of panic, many of their number injured or dying, many more searching for family members and friends.

With the help of Bard and his men, Luaithre – still unconscious - had been heaved upon the stony beach. As soon as her body had been secured, the men had moved away, their strength desperately needed elsewhere.

‘Wait!’ Bilbo said, catching Bard’s arm, before he, too, could disappear, ‘Bard, she needs a healer, she’s close to death.’

‘We are grateful for what your friends did – we all saw how they turned the dragon’s attention away from the town’ said Bard, expression grim, ‘but there are many here who are near death, Bilbo. I’m not sure if we can spare anyone.’

At Bilbo’s furious look he added, ‘but I’ll ask regardless,’ shaking his arm out of Bilbo’s grip and quickly striding away.

Bilbo had neither the time nor the patience to watch him go. Instead he rushed to Luaithre’s side, desperate to know if she was still alive after the ordeal of being dragged ashore.

‘She lives, Bilbo,’ said Landroval, who was half-slumped over beside her, near-collapse from exhaustion. ‘Look, see how her chest moves.’

It was true – Luaithre’s ribcage was rising and falling by bare inches, and when he put a hand to her beak Bilbo could feel a trembling exhale of air every few seconds. Her wounds were still bleeding, but sluggishly, and Bilbo took heart from this – the blood had been all but pouring from her out in the Lake.

Bilbo put a hand on the side of her face. ‘I don’t know what to do,’ he said to the others.

‘There’s not much we can do, without a healer,’ said Gwaihir, ‘save huddle around her and keep her warm, and hope she survives the night.’

‘I think we can do better than that,’ said a voice.

Bilbo turned to this newcomer and started in surprise. ‘Leogolas?’ he said incredulously, ‘what are you doing here?’

Legolas stood in stark contrast to all those around him, his rich tunic unsullied by ash or blood, not a hair out of place. He smiled kindly at Bilbo, his blue eyes dark with sympathy.

‘When a town of Men sits so close to my father’s Kingdom as Laketown does, it does not take long to come to their aid,’ said Legolas, and Bilbo’s eyes flickered behind him, to see that the population of Laketown was dotted here and there by the tell-tale signs of Elf-kind – their height and calm bearing marking them out against the grieving, ash-stained former residents of Laketown.

‘My father sent the swiftest among us ahead to help, but there will be many more to follow,’ continued Legolas. ‘I am no great healer, but I can help sow up her wounds, at the very least.’

Landroval, Tuit and Gwaihir all looked to Bilbo. He nodded at them in answer to their unasked question.

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo to Legolas, his every word drenched in gratitude, ‘thank you, yes, that would be very kind of you.’
‘Think nothing of it,’ said Legolas, ‘I had hoped we would meet again and I could meet those you had called kin. I only wish it had been in better circumstances.’

Bilbo moved aside, though the other eagles hovered close as Legolas knelt beside Luaithre, careful not to step on her wings. He produced bandages and a needle and thread from his pack and with Bilbo’s help, they set about the bloody and gruesome process of stitching together Luaithre’s wounds, washing them as best they could with water from the Lake. It was a long and arduous task, and Bilbo’s hands and back ached by the time the last stitch was knotted and Legolas stood back to declare their task complete.

‘She will heal,’ said Legolas, washing his hands in the shallow waters of the Lake, ‘I sense she has a strong and stubborn will.’ He touched a hand to Bilbo’s shoulder lightly for a moment. ‘I will return later to check on her.’

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo distractedly, barely aware of Legolas’ departure. He stood on the shore for a handful of minutes, staring in the direction of the Lonely Mountain. He could feel the toll of the night’s events seeping into his muscles, his joints, his heart, weighing him down. With a sigh tore his gaze away from Erebor, moving to sit beside Luaithre. Landroval was fast asleep, but Tuit and Gwaihir edged closer to Bilbo when he took his place at Luaithre’s side. Perhaps she sensed their presence, or perhaps the stitches had allowed her to regain some of her strength – Bilbo did not know the reason, he only knew the way his heart leapt when she stirred, groggy but clearly alive and fighting to remain so.

She murmured his First Name, her voice so faint it was almost inaudible. But Bilbo heard it all the same, his heart twisting in his chest, vision blurry with tears.

‘Stupid bird,’ he muttered, stroking some of her dislodged feathers back into place. ‘Stupid, foolish bird. Don’t you dare die on me. Don’t you dare.’

They slept close to each other that night, crowded around Luaithre. Bilbo curled up at her flank, encircled by eagles on all sides. The others were so close that it was almost uncomfortable - Landroval’s beak was pressed against Bilbo’s shoulder, Tuit’s pinion feathers sticking into his side - but none of them minded. One by one they sunk into the sleep that is granted to the truly exhausted.

Bilbo woke later that day, when the sun was beginning to make its way down towards the horizon. He rose from his odd nest of feathers with a headache pounding at his temples and aches all over his body. Luaithre was still fast asleep, and it seemed as though the rise and fall of her chest was a little easier, a little deeper. Or perhaps Bilbo was simply trying to convince himself that she was on the mend.

He carefully made his way out of the circle of eagles, trying not to wake Landroval or Tuit as he did so. There was still a great commotion taking place further inland, where the majority of the townspeople were still settled. Bilbo saw that, not even a full day after the destruction of the dragon, the men and women had turned their minds towards raising shelters and organising food as best they could – he could see guards moving with purpose through the crowds of people, aided here and there by Elves. Luaithre had been set down just above the waterline of the Lake, and so their little group was already a fair distance away from the refugee camp; however, Bilbo clearly see that they were being given a wide berth – many were shooting them wary glances, many more still avoiding their resting place as much as they could, even if it meant a longer and much more circuitous route to the Lake for water. Bilbo registered all of this with little surprise. In spite of what the eagles had done for
Laketown - the people here had likely never seen birds of such a great size.

Bilbo let his eyes drift inevitably towards the ruins of the town. Laketown was still, in some parts, still ablaze, small fires licking at the sky, pale grey smoke drifting from the rest of the brunt out shells of homes. Something impacted in Bilbo’s chest, as though someone had stuck a knife between his ribs twisted. He’d done this. He’d unleashed the fury of a dragon on an unsuspecting town. The death, the destruction – Luaithre’s injury – all rested firmly on his shoulders. The guilt was so overwhelming that Bilbo almost vomited, though there was nothing in his stomach to expel.

‘I have been told that the death toll would have been far greater had the eagles not drawn off the dragon,’ said Legolas as he approached, ‘and that the numbers lost were not so great, in the end.’

Bilbo said nothing to this for several long moments. He had to physically shake himself from the downward spiral his thoughts had taken to say, ‘is there anything I can do?’

Legolas shook his head. ‘It would be best if you remained with your friends,’ he said, and gave a little twist of his lips, ‘the people here are grateful to the eagles for helping to save them, but you are another matter. The Master of Laketown has been stirring up ill-feeling towards you and your Company. There are many here that you would find....unfriendly.’

Bilbo sighed. ‘I don’t think I blame them,’ he said in a small voice, ‘this is my fault, after all.’

‘You should not blame yourself for the evil dealt out by a dragon, Bilbo,’ said Legolas, ‘they are unpredictable, twisted beasts, created by evil to deal out terrible destruction. That is their only purpose. To say you had any control over this is a fallacy.’

Bilbo did not correct him. He did not think he could stand Legolas’ judgement, or his anger. Bilbo had had control over the situation – he had chosen to unleash Smaug. He’d thought of little else but Erebor, to have the kingdom freed once more from Smaug’s reign. For Thorin.

Legolas seemed to take no offence to Bilbo’s lack of response to his reassurances. Instead he said, conversationally, ‘they are hailing Bard as their King.’

‘They’re what?’ said Bilbo.

‘It seems the captain of the guards has hidden depths,’ said Legolas offhandedly, ‘he is the heir to King Girion, who once justly ruled over Dale in the time of King Thrór.’

Bilbo shook his head, flabbergasted. ‘I did wonder how he had persuaded so many men to help Luaithre last night.’

‘You can imagine that this pleases the Master greatly,’ said Legolas, with a great deal of sarcasm, ‘but Bard remains loyal to him, for now.’ Legolas paused, turning to look at Bilbo fully, and to Bilbo’s astonishment he began to speak in the language of the eagles.

‘There are rumours that the men mean to march on the mountain,’ said Legolas, and for a moment Bilbo was so surprised to hear someone who was not an eagle speak their language that Legolas’ words did not fully register, ‘and I think Bard means to lead them. This is as much as I can infer from my kin and my travels through the camp. He means to seek reparations, for what was done to Laketown.’

‘Reparations...’ echoed Bilbo in the same language, ‘so he means to ask for a share in Erebor’s treasure?’

Legolas nodded, and a cold chill went down Bilbo’s spine. ‘I do not think he realises that Thorin
Oakenshield and his Company are still alive.’

‘But they are,’ said Bilbo, sucking in a sharp breath, mind racing with the consequences, ‘and no matter how much I think the people of Laketown deserve their share of gold, I do not think Thorin will take them marching on the mountain well at all. It’s their home, Legolas, and they’ve only just reclaimed it.’

‘There is great anger, here,’ Legolas said, ‘and great grief. I fear the consequences of hasty decisions as a result of that.’

Bilbo pressed a hand to his mouth, thinking. ‘Legolas, do you have time to look over Luaithre’s wounds again? I think she’s breathing a touch better this morning.’

‘Of course, Bilbo.’

‘And where is Bard?’ asked Bilbo, ‘I have to speak with him.’

Finding Bard was a difficult feat, even with Legolas’ directions. Bilbo was largely ignored as he passed through the crowds – his height was an advantage, as most mistook him for a child, and the few that did give him a second glance did no more than scowl if they recognised him.

After almost half an hour of searching, Bilbo spotted a cluster of men near the centre of the camp. Impatient to speak with Bard, Bilbo wasted no time in pushing through the ranks, until he was at last standing before the man himself.

Someone caught a hold of his shoulder just as he called out, ‘Bard!’

‘Stop right there,’ said the man who gripped his shoulder, ‘you can’t just barge in here and think you can talk to bard the Dragon-Killer!’

‘Dragon-Killer?’ Bilbo said, thrown momentarily by this new title.

‘Let him go,’ said Bard with a calming gesture, and the man reluctantly released his hold on Bilbo.

‘I need to speak with you alone, Bard. It’s urgent. It can’t wait.’

Bard considered him for a moment before gesturing to his men. ‘We were finished here anyway. You have your duties, gentlemen, but try and get some rest, too.’

‘Sir, I don’t think-‘

‘I hardly think Mister Baggins here will do me any harm, and besides, I am more than capable of taking care of myself,’ said Bard wryly, ‘but I thank you for your concern.’

The men moved away, though Bilbo noted that two of them hovered a short distance away.

‘Dragon-Killer?’ said Bilbo when they were alone.

Bard shrugged. ‘I shot an arrow into the dragon’s breast last night. He took some time to die, but the townspeople are quite taken with the idea of having a dragon slayer in their midst.’

Bilbo had wondered why Smaug’s movements had seemed so slow last night as he had drawn near
the mountain. He spared a moment to imagine Kíli’s outrage at having to share the glory with his rival.

‘I have heard that you mean to move on the mountain,’ said Bilbo, getting straight to the point.

Bard leant back on his chair, expression inscrutable. ‘You have sharp ears, Mister Baggins,’ he said.

‘Thorin and the others are still alive. If you think the gold of Erebor lies undefended, you are solely mistaken.’

Bard was quiet for a moment. ‘That would not change my decision to go to the Lonely Mountain with any who choose to follow,’ he said at length.

‘You cannot go under the banner of war, Bard. Come as friends.’

‘You would have us beg for what we are owed?’ asked Bard, ice creeping into his tone.

‘No,’ said Bilbo firmly, ‘I don’t mean that at all. I am owed one fourteenth of the wealth of Erebor for my part in the venture. You can have it.’

Bard’s eyebrows rose at this, and he seemed to be struggling to maintain his bland expression. Bilbo took note of how tired he looked, how strained, and wondered when was the last time Bard had any rest.

‘You offer me the wealth worthy of a king,’ said Bard, ‘why should I believe that you would give that away so willingly?’

‘I don’t care for gold,’ said Bilbo, ‘I am happy enough to have Erebor free again – that’s reward enough for me. But I won’t waste my breath trying to convince you of that. You have my word that you will receive my portion of the treasure. I understand your plight, Bard. I would do right by the people of Laketown.’

Bard seemed to be turning this over in his mind, uncertainty in every line of his body. He frowned and ran a hand through his hair.

‘We will come to the mountain,’ he said, ‘to collect our gold. I will hold you to your promise, Mister Baggins. You can be sure of that.’

Bilbo let out a breath he didn’t know he had been holding. ‘Thank you. But please, please, don’t come armed.’

‘I will need men to move the treasure,’ pointed out Bard, ‘if it as great as the tales suggest, then I will need every spare hand Laketown can provide to take it out of the mountain.’

‘Yes,’ said Bilbo, growing impatient and desperate to be back at Lauithre’s side. He had been away from her for too long, ‘but just-just don’t go looking for a fight. Please. There’s no need for that.’

Bard gave a small nod. ‘I will consider your advice, Mister Baggins.’

‘I hope you do consider it, Bard. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to tend to my friend.’

He took his leave of the man. He would just have to hope that Bard would take his advice, and his offer.
‘You will have to return to the mountain,’ said Tuit later that night, ‘and warn Thorin of what Bard intends to do.’

‘I can’t leave Luaithre,’ said Bilbo immediately, ‘not until she wakes up.’

‘That may not be for many days,’ said Legolas, who had chosen to remain with them for the time being, ‘and Men are not a patient race. They are recovering from their tragedy quickly, and I do not think it will be more than a handful of days before they march on the mountain.’

‘We’ll look after her, Bilbo,’ Landroval said, pecking at Bilbo’s sleeve, ‘and we’ll move to the mountain as soon as she can fly.’

Bilbo said nothing, choosing instead to look miserably at where Luaithre lay, still unconscious.

‘Do you doubt our ability to protect her?’ said Gwaihir waspishly.

‘No! It’s not that,’ said Bilbo quickly, ‘I just, I don’t-’

‘I will watch over her, too, Bilbo,’ said Legolas gently.

‘You would?’

‘Of course. Luaithre and the others have helped to bring down a dragon. I think I can lend my aid, in this instance,’ he said with good humour.

Bilbo felt torn. He wanted to return to the mountain - to return to Thorin - but he found the thought of leaving Luaithre as she was repugnant. In the end, though, practicality and the danger of the situation at hand won out over his desire to see Luaithre awake and well with his own eyes.

‘Alright,’ he said in a whisper, stroking Luaithre’s head one last time before standing, ‘Alright, I’ll go back to the mountain. Tuit, would you mind taking back to the front gates?’

Bilbo’s arrival was hailed by Bofur, who had been sat on the battlement as lookout. Tuit landed and let Bilbo smoothly dismount, and Tuit promised to let Bilbo know if there were any changes to Luaithre’s condition before he flew away.

‘Your eagle-friend - she alright?’ said Bofur worriedly.

‘She’s alive,’ said Bilbo, and he smiled when Bofur let out a breath of relief.

‘Mighty brave thing the lass did, last night,’ he said, ‘if, uh, you can call an eagle a lass.’

‘I’m sure she wouldn’t mind,’ said Bilbo, weary but glad to be back among in the Company once more. ‘Where’s Thorin? I need to see him.’

‘Through here – we’ve a camp set up in one of the guard towers, waiting for you to get back.’

They had barely gone more than a handful of steps before the very Dwarf Bilbo needed to see appeared at the end of the battlements.
‘Bilbo!’ said Thorin, striding forwards to hug him, Bofur side-stepping out of the way just in time. Bilbo allowed himself to slump into the much-needed embrace for just a handful of seconds.

‘I’ll, ah, go and tell the others the good news,’ said Bofur, taking his leave.

‘How is Luaithre?’ said Thorin, his gaze taking in Bilbo’s ash-stained clothes and red-rimmed eyes.

‘She’s...she’s alright, I think,’ Bilbo said, ‘we think she’ll survive. She’s still unconscious, though.’

‘That’s good news,’ said Thorin, his hands still on Bilbo’s upper arms. Bilbo felt that if he were to remove them, his knees might give out. He was only just realising how hungry he was, how exhausted, emotionally and physically.

‘We had thought, when we saw her fall-’

‘No,’ said Bilbo, cutting off that awful train of thought before it could be completed, ‘Smaug hurt her badly, but eagles are tough, and we managed to get her to shore. But that’s not what I came here to talk to you about. Thorin - the townspeople are seeking reparations for what happened to Laketown. I’ve agreed to give them my share of gold.’

Thorin looked aghast at his. ‘Bilbo, you cannot be serious,’ he said lowly, ‘would you really give away your share so easily?’

‘I would,’ said Bilbo, his gaze slipping off to stare at the wall. ‘What happened to Laketown, to Luaithre – that was all my fault,’ he said miserably. ‘I would happily give it all away if it meant they - at the very least - rebuild the town.’

‘It was not your fault,’ said Thorin, cupping Bilbo’s cheek in one hand, encouraging Bilbo to look him in the eye once more. ‘We did not know Smaug would turn his gaze towards Laketown.’

‘But we suspected-‘

‘-but we didn’t know. We hoped it would not come to that.’

Bilbo pressed his hand against the one on his face, removing it to clasp between both of his. Their relationship was still so new that Bilbo revelled in every touch and glance granted to him, and already, after just a few minutes in Thorin’s presence, Bilbo could feel his rattled, frayed nerves being soothed.

‘There’s more,’ he went on, ‘they’re calling Bard King.’

‘The captain of the guards?’ said Thorin, taking a moment to recall the young man in question, ‘why?’

‘He is Girion’s heir.’

‘You’re sure?’ at Bilbo’s nod, Thorin shook his head. ‘If it’s true, then it is a miracle. I thought all of Girion’s heirs were long since dead.’

‘They’re also calling him Dragon-Killer,’ added Bilbo.

Thorin arched an eyebrow, ‘really now?’ he drawled, ‘well, I’m sure Kili Dragon-Killer will have something to say for that.’

‘I’m sure he will,’ chuckled Bilbo.
'He’s quite taken with his new title,’ Thorin said, tone wry and affectionate. ‘Come, sit down by the fire and have some food. You look like you’re about to keel over. We’ll discuss this petition of Bard’s after you’ve had some rest.’

The entire story was on the tip of Bilbo’s tongue, but he found himself unable to say it. He could get it all over with, here and now, and tell Thorin of Bard’s men moving on the mountain, but the idea of sitting by the fire and resting just for one night among his friends was simply too appealing. Bilbo was stuck in Erebor – unless Tuit or one of the other eagles arrived to bring him news, he would have to remain here for the foreseeable future. The situation with Bard could wait - for now, at least.

And so what he said instead was, ‘that does sound appealing,’ and made to move towards the stairs, but Thorin caught him with an arm around his waist, halting him in his tracks.

‘But first, I’d like to kiss my intended, if that’s alright,’ Thorin said, voice pitched low.

In spite of their situation, Bilbo found himself smiling. ‘Yes, I think that’s acceptable,’ he said after appearing to give it some thought, and before Thorin could make a move he stood up on his tiptoes, burying his fingers in that mane of dark hair, kissing Thorin slowly and languidly, heart fluttering in his chest, Thorin’s hands slipping down his spine to rest low on his back.

‘If that’s the kind of kiss I get every time I return,’ said a rather breathless Bilbo when they parted, ‘remind me to go away more often.’

With Bilbo’s return Thorin decided to split the Company in two; half would remain in the guard tower, to work on closing the front gates and fortifying them, and the other half would return to the hoard. Bilbo did not understand why the second camp was needed until Thorin explained the next day - they were to search for the Arkenstone.

‘Words cannot describe its beauty,’ Thorin told Bilbo as they picked their way through the hoard, ‘many have tried, but none for them have been fully able to convey the wonder of the stone. In my grandfather’s time it was used as a symbol of his right to rule. It would give me great joy to see it restored to its proper place above my grandfather’s throne.’

There were other things that Bilbo thought they could be doing – more of them could be working on the front gates, for one thing – but Thorin’s eyes lit up whenever he spoke of the Arkenstone, and any suggestions Bilbo might have had died a death before he could utter them. If it meant so much to Thorin, who was he to say otherwise?

Bilbo had intended to talk to Thorin about Bard on that first day back, but he instead found himself simply wandering around the vault, listening to Thorin speak. As they wandered over the veritable mountain ranges of gold, Bilbo took note of how Thorin no longer spoke of craft mastered over decades, or how the Dwarves laboured long and hard in the darkest places of the world to find beautiful things; instead he only spoke in words that described an item’s worth, of how much gold had been used, how many gems. Whenever he paused in their search to pick up a priceless piece of treasure, he would talk of carats of gold and the clarity of diamonds. It was strange to Bilbo, but he supposed that after so many years away from Erebor, Thorin had every right to relish his wealth.

The rest of the Company were no different. They had a rota set up – apparently to relieve those labouring at the front gate, but Bilbo suspected it was so each member could spend some time in the treasure hall. They spent their time sifting through the treasure in organised groups, but Bilbo noticed
that they often stopped in their search to pick up a handful of coins, simply to watch as the money tumbled from their hands.

By the time they reached the mid-point of that first day, Bilbo knew he could no longer justify putting off speaking to Thorin. When Thorin paused in his explanation of how Dwarves two centuries ago had discovered new technique for cutting gemstones, enhancing their clarity and tripling their price over night, Bilbo pulled him into a side room just outside the treasure hall.

‘I have to tell you something,’ said Bilbo, ‘I might have left out...a few details about Bard last night.’

‘What of him?’

Bilbo took a deep, fortifying breath, ‘he means to come to the mountain. It’s not just Laketown that seeks reparations, it’s Bard, too. And I was serious about giving him my share of the gold. I promised him that. I think it’s the least I can do.’

‘Would he have marched on the mountain anyway, regardless of whether or not you offered him your gold?’ said Thorin, and there was an underlying tension to his otherwise steady voice that worried Bilbo.

‘Well, I think-’ stuttered Bilbo, but his hesitance had given him away and Thorin let out a breath between his teeth.

‘He thinks he can intimidate us with a show of numbers. Well, he may be surprised when my cousin Daín from the Iron Mountains turns up with hundreds of his finest Dwarves.’

‘Dain?’

‘Yes. As soon as we reclaimed Erebor I sent out our ravens to all of our kin, telling them to return to the mountain. But to my cousin Daín I asked for as many Dwarves as he could spare, so that we could secure our treasure.’

‘That’s not needed,’ said Bilbo quickly, ‘I’m sure we can sort this out civilly enough. Bard and his men will come, they will collect my fourteenth share, and they will leave.’

‘You cannot just give away your gold so easily!’

‘I think I can do what I like with it,’ said Bilbo, temper spiking at Thorin’s tone.

‘And what about every other petitioner with a claim on our gold? You would set a precedent - and besides, we can’t be seen to be simply giving away gold because some Men threatened us!’

‘Bard is not threatening us, and I’m not talking about you setting a precedent, I’m simply talking about me giving away my gold.’

‘But Bilbo, we’re courting – if you give away this gold, in the eyes of the men it would be the same as me giving it away! Don’t you see? They come to us with threats of violence and in great numbers – you may have offered this willingly, but they mean to force my hand in this.’

‘So now we’re courting, I can’t make a single decision on my own?’ said Bilbo coldly, ‘must I check with you before I do anything?’

‘No, that’s not it all, said Thorin slowly, patronisingly, ‘but you must see that you are a part of this Company, you are linked to me – any action you take is a reflection on us.’
‘But it needn’t be!’ said Bilbo, throwing his hands up in the air in frustration, ‘I made it very clear to Bard that the gold was coming from me and me alone. I have no need of it, Thorin. That was not my reason for coming on this adventure.’

Thorin shook his head sharply, ‘you would throw away the wealth of my people so easily,’ he said, almost to himself.

‘As I understood it,’ said Bilbo, ‘the gold was mine to do what I like with it. If that meant spending it all on clothes then you would have no say over it.’

He quietened, his anger abating slightly. ‘It’s my fault, Thorin. You cannot change my mind. What happened to Laketown—‘

‘Was Smaug’s fault, not yours.’

‘And he would never have left the mountain had I not stolen that damn vase!’ Bilbo burst out.

‘At the very least – at the very least, if you cannot be persuaded otherwise, let us negotiate with Bard. You need not give him your entire share.’

‘I agreed to one fourteenth,’ said Bilbo tersely with a glare in Thorin’s direction, his temper rising again, ‘I gave my word. I will not go back on that.’

‘Is...everything alright?’ said Dwalin, hovering at the doorway and glancing between the two of them.

Thorin let out a frustrated noise. ‘You try to talk some sense into him,’ he snapped to Dwalin as he strode past his friend, effectively ending his and Bilbo’s conversation.

‘Insufferable,’ growled Bilbo under his breath, stalking in the other direction before Dwalin could ask what was going on.

Bilbo went to help with the front gate, and his anger at Thorin must have showed on his face, as the others all studiously avoided asking him what was wrong. He had hoped that Tuit or one of the other eagles would arrive bearing news, but there was no sign of them, and as a result Bilbo had the added worry over Luaithre on top of his argument with Thorin going round and round in his head. He just hoped that no news was good news, and no one tried to stop him when he slept in the watch tower again that night.

The next few days hardly lightened the load on Bilbo’s shoulders. Bilbo would work on the front gates for half a day, then return to the hoard to help look for the Arkenstone for the remainder. He and Thorin had many a stilted, awkward conversation, neither of them willing to concede and admit they were wrong. Bilbo had hoped that their first argument would have been after many months of happy courting, when they were comfortable and secure in each other’s presence and could easily weather such things. As it was, Bilbo felt miserable and hurt whenever he and Thorin met, with no clue as to how to put it right or argue his case more effectively.

Worst still was Thorin’s growing preoccupation with the Arkenstone. He spent more and more time in the vault, until Bilbo suspected that he wasn’t leaving it at all, perhaps even sleeping in there, rather in the camp that was set up just outside. This obsession was a strange and foreign thing to Bilbo – while the mounds of gold had been marvellous to behold when he had first laid eyes on it,
now it all seemed to blend into one yellow mass, utterly meaningless. As Thorin turned more and more towards the gold and their search for the stone, the more he withdrew from Bilbo, until he hardly talked to him at all.

On the seventh day, a raven arrived, fluttering in through a gap in the battlements and heading straight for Thorin in the treasure hall. The bird – who Bilbo was astonished to find spoke Westron – began to relay information quickly and precisely to Thorin. It did not bare good news.

The Mirkwood Elves had allied with the men of Laketown. They are armed, and in great numbers, and are gathering on the far shores of Long Lake.

The effect on Thorin and the other Dwarves was instantaneous. To say they were furious was an understatement.

‘It’s as I suspected, Bilbo,’ Thorin said to him, eyes ablaze with his anger, ‘they had no intention of a peaceful resolution. They intend to take what they think is theirs by force. Well, I think our swords and axes may have something to say about that!’

He raised his sword into the air and the others roared their agreement. A shiver of dread went down Bilbo’s spine.

‘I’m sure there’s some kind of explanation,’ said Bilbo, but even to his own ears his voice and argument sounded flimsy, ‘there has to be.’

‘No, there is not,’ snarled Thorin, ‘they have betrayed us before and they will do it again, and the Men of Laketown have only ever been interested in our gold. But they will find a cold welcome to the mountain. We will hold here until my cousin Daín arrives, and then we will see if their pleas change!’

Bilbo had heard enough – he quietly slipped away. No one noticed him leave.

Bilbo made for the front gates with every intention of sitting alone on the battlements for the rest of the night, but to his joy he was pleasantly surprised to find both Tuit and Landroval already resting on the battlement walls.

‘What on earth is going on, Bilbo?’ said Tuit in lieu of a greeting, ‘we’ve been sitting here for an hour now!’

‘Never mind that, how’s Luaithre?’

‘She’s well,’ said Landroval, ‘we’ve managed to move her to the mountain.’

‘You have!’ exclaimed Bilbo. At last, some good news. ‘She’s awake, then?’

‘Not anymore,’ said Tuit, chuckling, ‘she’s asleep again now. We’ve taken roost where that secret door was. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you before – we’ve been busy looking after her-

‘-and feeding her!’

‘-and feeding her,’ agreed Tuit with a bob of his head and a laugh, ‘which is no small task. But she’s well, Bilbo. She’ll be fighting fit in no time.’
‘Oh thank goodness,’ said Bilbo, slumping against the walls of the battlement.

‘Bilbo, you look exhausted!’ said Landroval, staring concernedly at him, ‘never mind Luaithre, are you alright?’

‘Ha!’ said Bilbo, scrubbing his cheek with one hand. ‘Not really, no. There’s...there’s something wrong with Thorin.’

Landroval and Tuit exchanged a look.

‘He’s...he’s not himself,’ said Bilbo slowly. He was finding this difficult to say even to his own kin. ‘If I were being unkind, I would say that he has gone mad.’

Landroval lowered his head towards Bilbo in sympathy, and Tuit came to lightly rest his head on top of Bilbo’s. Bilbo made no move to push him off – he knew it to be a fruitless task.

‘We have heard of the gold-lust of the Dwarves,’ said Landroval, ‘but I had hoped Thorin would be unaffected.’

‘Gold-lust? Yes. Yes, I suppose that’s what it is,’ sighed Bilbo. ‘I tried to understand to begin with. He was very poor for a very long time, you see. I think there were times when he almost starved, and he had to watch his people die from illness and exposure in the wilds. But this...this I can’t justify. He won’t listen to reason.’

‘Perhaps it’s best if you come with us,’ suggested Tuit, ‘if you are so fearful of him.’

‘No, no I’m not afraid of him,’ said Bilbo with a shake of his head, dislodging Tuit momentarily, ‘it’s just...I don’t recognise him.’ And goodness, that hurt to say aloud.

‘If he harms but one hair on your head, I will rip his still-beating heart from his chest,’ promised Landroval, and Tuit squawked his agreement.

Bilbo was far too used to their way of speaking by now to blanch at the casual promise of violence, but it did send a spark of fear shooting through his veins. Landroval was not one to hand out idle threats.

‘I’m sure it won’t come to that,’ he assured them quickly, ‘I may not recognise Thorin as he is right now, but he wouldn’t do that.’ As Bilbo said this, he touched the bead that still sat in his hair. The braid was messy today – Bilbo had had to braid it himself the last few days, and his fingers weren’t yet up to the task.

‘I have to. I have to try, one last time, to make him see reason,’ Bilbo went on quietly. ‘Just give me one more day.’

‘And if he doesn’t see reason?’ asked Tuit.

‘I’ll have to deal with that when I come to it. Give Luaithre a knock on the beak from me, would you?’

‘We will. Good luck, Bilbo,’ said Landroval. ‘We’re not far away if you need us.’

Rather than double their work on the gates in light of the two armies marching towards them, the
Company instead doubled their efforts to find the Arkenstone. They were almost frantic in their search, ushering Bilbo into the hall and leading him to a section that had not been combed yet. Bilbo tried to protest, but no one seemed to hear him, and Thorin was over the other side of the vault, giving out orders.

Well, Bilbo supposed he needed time to work himself up to speaking to Thorin anyway. He sifted half-heartedly through the gold, not really looking at all, filtering out the shouts of the rest of the Company as they constantly updated each other as to their progress. His stomach churned with the thought of yet another argument with Thorin, but worse still this was an argument that could potentially-

But Bilbo could not let himself finish that thought. He was so lost in his own whirlpool of deliberations that he all but tripped over what appeared to be a large, overturned table, encrusted with precious gems. Cursing and rubbing his stubbed toes, Bilbo was about to turn away when his eye was caught by something glittering underneath the tabletop. With a great heave Bilbo pushed aside the heavy table, to reveal a brilliant stone about the size of Bilbo’s palm.

It was the Arkenstone. There was no doubt about it. Bilbo had seen his fair share of diamonds and stones in the hall, and none of them, none of them compared to this. It was truly astonishing, giving out a light all of its own from its glittering depths.

A small thought wormed its way into Bilbo’s mind, rapidly taking on the outlines of a plan. This could be the solution to all of their problems. Bilbo could conceal the Arkenstone, hide it away in his pocket or his bedroll. Then, when Bard and his men arrived, he could give him the stone so that the man could bargain with Thorin for a share in the gold.

It would mean betraying Thorin, but it was the right thing to do. It would stop a war before it had even begun, with no bloodshed, and no loss save a budding relationship in its first stages. It would destroy Bilbo, but it would be the right thing to do.

But instead of hiding the Arkenstone in his pocket, Bilbo found himself saying, in a dull and exhausted shout, ‘it’s here, I’ve found it. It’s here.’

The discovery of the Arkenstone was the final straw for Bilbo. That night he found himself sitting on the edge of the circle gathered around the campfire, staring at Thorin, disgusted at himself. He had been unable to deny Thorin the joy of seeing the Arkenstone, and Thorin had been grateful. He had picked Bilbo up and spun him around, but had then immediately turned his attention to the stone in his hand.

Said stone was now being passed around the Company, though Thorin did not look happy about this. He seemed nervous about even Kíli and Fíli holding it, and only settled when it was back in his hands once more. All they talked of that night was the beauty of the gem and the story of how it had first been discovered, Balin relating how astonished they all were the day it had been placed above King Thrór’s throne.

When the day’s work finally took its toll even on the excited Dwarves, and conversation had quietened to a murmur, Bilbo rose and made his way over to Thorin’s side.

‘Thorin, I need a word with you. Alone,’ said Bilbo.
‘Can it wait?’ Thorin said distractedly.

‘No. It can’t,’ Bilbo said in a tone that brokered no argument, and Thorin must have seen something on Bilbo’s face, because at last he nodded and rose from his spot beside the fire.

Bilbo led them away into a large hall not far from the treasure vault. It was something Bilbo had discovered during their first days in Erebor, when he had dared to wander away from the Company. Now, though, he had no time to admire the skill that had gone into creating the magnificent, high-ceilinged hall. He turned to Thorin immediately, and even he was surprised by his anger.

‘You have your akensone now. Are you satisfied? Are you prepared to see reason?’

Thorin blinked, taken aback by this sudden, unexpected assault of words. ‘Am I prepared to see reason? I’m not sure I follow, Bilbo.’

‘I’m sure you don’t,’ Bilbo snorted in derision. ‘You were so concerned about the Arkenstone that you’ve even let the work on the front gates lapse.’

‘Is that what this is about?’ said Thoin with a hollow laugh, ‘is this why you’re so angry? We can start work on the gates again tomorrow, if it concerns-’

‘No, that’s not what this is about,’ snapped Bilbo. He was trying to reign in his temper, but he was finding it difficult in the face of Thorin’s utter lack of understanding. All the frustrations and worry and hurt of the last few days had set him alight with anger, and he could hold back no longer.

‘You’re so concerned with the gold that everything else is simply ignored, or forgotten about! What of all those places you told me about on our journey? The Starlit Arches, the Hall of Tales – you said once that you were looking forward to showing them to me. What happened?’

Thorin was glaring at him. ‘The guided tour can come later. I needed to secure my peoples’ heritage,’ he said tersely.

‘Yes, but the gold is only a part of that heritage!’

‘You do not understand,’ said Thorin in a hiss, ‘I would ensure that never again would my people have to beg for work and food. Never again would they have to watch their children starve! That is why the gold is so important.’

‘As I understood it, we were reclaiming Erebor because it was your home. Come Thorin!’ said Bilbo, and he barely recognised his own voice anymore, so full of venom was his tone, ‘why don’t you tell me about the Sun and Moon Gates? Tell me how many ounces of precious metals were used to make them, how many gems, and say nothing of the love and care that your great-grandfather put into creating them. Tell me how, if all the riches of all the kingdoms of Middle Earth were to be put together, they still would not equal the worth of Erebor’s treasure. Because that’s all that matters to you, doesn’t it?’ he sneered, ‘it’s not about reclaiming your home any more. It’s about defending cold, dead rocks.’

‘You do not understand!’ roared Thorin, stalking forward, towards Bilbo, his face twisted with rage, ‘you are not one of us, you don’t understand!’

‘I’m beginning to think I’m not!’ Bilbo shouted back, anger pumping through his veins, ‘because I don’t understand how you think gold is of any importance in a situation like this! We have two armies ready to march on us, and another on the way.’

‘We can outlast them both.’
‘We’re still at risk! There’s still the possibility of war on our front doorstep! How can you not see that? When did the gold become a priority, above everything, above our lives?’

‘Every member of this Company knows what’s at stake, save you,’ Thorin spat, ‘they would die to defend-‘

‘Of course they would! But that’s the trouble, right there – what are you defending, Thorin? Your home? Or the gold?’

Bilbo took a deep, heaving breath. He felt like he was in the middle of a battle, his hands clenching at his sides, adrenaline thrumming through his veins. Before him, Thorin was pacing back and forth like a wolf in its den. ‘More importantly,’ he said, ‘I need to know what’s worth more to you. Where do the lives of every member of this Company fall on your scale of worth? What’s more important, the gold, or them? Is it more important than Kili and Fili – your own nephews?’

Bilbo paused, and said, softly, ‘than me?’

And Thorin, his face dark with rage, stopped pacing to snarl, ‘yes.’

In the ensuing silence, Bilbo stuttered out a gasp. He felt like all the air had been sucked from his lungs.

‘Then...then I have no more need of this,’ said Bilbo distantly, and he reached up to unwind the gold courting bead from his hair. It tumbled from his fingers, bouncing on the smooth floor, but Bilbo was already turning away. He felt like every inch of him had been carved out by that single yes, leaving nothing behind but a hollow shell and a fragile heart that was shattering, like glass that had cracked and was now tumbling apart, breaking a little more with every step that he took.

One step, two steps, and his mind was blank, numbness filling the hollow spaces.

Six steps, seven steps – where would he go, now Erebor was lost to him?

Ten steps, and a voice as soft as a spring breeze halted him in his tracks.

‘Bilbo. Bilbo, please – don’t go.’

Bilbo did not turn. He could not look at this Dwarf again, at this creature that he no longer recognised, no matter how much he pleaded. Bilbo didn’t think he had any strength left to even try. He stood, rooted the spot, unable to move forwards, heaving in great lungfuls of air. He concentrated on that, on the simple inhale and exhale, blocking out everything else.

A hand clasped his shoulder, turning him around. Bilbo pushed him away, batting the hand that had touched him to one side, pushing the Dwarf’s chest to put some distance between them. It took the last reserves of Bilbo’s courage to look him in the eye.

Thorin’s hands were held up in surrender, and for the first time in many days, his expression was clear, albeit twisted with crushing sorrow and guilt.

Bilbo glared at him, wary, and Thorin said, voice broken, ‘I’m so sorry, Bilbo. I’m so sorry. It seems I am not fortunate enough to remain untouched by the madness of my Line,’ he shook his head, at a loss with himself, self-hatred flickering across his face.

Bilbo watched dispassionately as Thorin sank to his knees, head bowed.

‘It seems I will never learn my lesson, when it comes to hurting you,’ said Thorin. ‘In every instance
you spoke the truth, but it was as though I were seeing the world through a veil of...a veil of...but no matter.’ He drew in an unsteady breath. ‘You owe me nothing, Bilbo. If you wish to leave Erebor and never return, I would understand. I wouldn’t even be surprised. You have every right to.’

‘But know that I am sorry,’ he reiterated, every word thick with emotion held in check, ‘for all the words that have passed my lips since I came to this place, but especially those...those that I have uttered in this hall. If I spent the rest of my time in this world apologising for what has passed in this hall, it would still not be enough.’

Thorin raised his head to find Bilbo staring at him, eyes fierce, but with hot tears streaming down his cheeks.

‘Bilbo?’ said Thorin tentatively.

‘Get up,’ Bilbo commanded, and Thorin hastened to obey.

Bilbo swiped at the wetness of his cheeks with the sleeve of his coat, and Thorin ached to wipe them away himself, with his own hands, but he knew he did not have the right. As it was, he stood stock still as Bilbo closed the space between them, staring up at Thorin’s face, searching every inch of his expression for the madness of moments before.

‘I promise you, you’ve shaken me from my madness.’

‘Shut up,’ said Bilbo absently, levelling his gaze at Thorin, and Thorin stood quietly and endured the scrutiny.

After several excruciating, tense moments, Bilbo’s expression crumpled, and he took Thorin’s face between both of his hands.

‘Never, ever do that to me again,’ said Bilbo, ‘and swear to me, swear to me that your madness is gone, and that you’ll listen to reason.’

‘I swear it,’ said Thorin immediately, imbuing his voice with as much gravitas as he could.

Bilbo sighed softly and withdrew his hands, Thorin feeling the loss of contact keenly. ‘You have a lot of grovelling to do,’ Bilbo informed him.

Thorin managed a smile, ‘I do. And I intend to start right away.’

Bilbo looked away. ‘Well, that can wait. First, you have to shake the others out of their gold-lust. You are not the only one affected.’

‘But how? None of them have a Hobbit to snap them out of it,’ said Thorin, and his heart ached when Bilbo did not smile. It would take some time for them to get back to what they had, but Thorin was determined to try.

‘You are their leader,’ Bilbo said to him, and he sounded exhausted, ‘you’re their king. Where you go, they will follow. You’ll find a way. We have work to do,’ he said, and turned to lead them from the hall.

And what else could Thorin do but follow?
We're almost at the end, now. I'm predicting that there'll be about three more chapters to this, but that might change.

Unfortunately, I'm going away for a week and will have no internet access, and I won't be back until the 1st June. But I hope I can resume posting as soon as I can once I'm back! But yes, sorry, it looks like there won't be a new update for a couple of weeks at least.

I'd like to thank you all for your responses to this story so far. It's been amazing, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
It was a long walk back to camp. Not a word was spoken between them, but Bilbo turned to look expectantly at Thorin when they came to stand before the Company. Thorin’s eyes skittered over the gently unravelling braid in Bilbo’s hair. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and looked away.

The Company had been laughing and listening intently to what would surely have been a bawdy tale from Dwalin, but at Thorin and Bilbo’s approach they instinctively stilled, catching on to the sombre air that Thorin had brought with him into the happy camp.

‘My friends,’ started Thorin, but then paused, tongue faltering. He suddenly realised that he had no idea what to say. He looked at each of their expectant faces in turn, lit by the golden glow of the fire, his gaze coming to rest on Kíli and Fíli. The Arkenstone was a heavy weight in his pocket.

Thorin took a breath and tried again. ‘My friends. I fear we have been blind these last few days. Myself most of all. I have been blind and I have allowed myself to be bewitched by the beauty of gold. I have done all of you a great disservice – some more than others’ - Thorin very purposefully avoided looking at Bilbo, here - ‘but I would make it right this night. The riches of Erebor are not contained within this room, and I intend for each and every one of you to see that.’

Half of the Company looked rebellious at this declaration, as if they would sorely like to dispute this. They would have surely spoken out if they had not held such respect for Thorin. As it was, they held their silence and let him speak his piece, with only the crackle of the campfire as background noise.

‘As your King, I command you to leave here. As your friend, I ask you to remember that Erebor was our home. It was our home above all else, even above our gold. That is what is most important. That is what we have been fighting for. Go - wander Erebor. Find familiar sights and rediscover all that time and the lust for gold have caused you to forget. For those of you who have never laid eyes on Erebor before, I promise you, you will find something worthy in these halls, something that will drive all thoughts of treasure from your mind...as hard as that is to believe.’

Utter silence greeted his words. For several long, expectant moments, no one uttered a sound. Thorin felt himself standing straighter in response, trying not to clench his fists. It took all of his restraint not to sag in relief when Balin, Dwalin, Kíli and Fíli all stood up in quick succession, each within half a second of the other.

‘C’mon, lads,’ said Fíli with an easy grin, ‘it’s time we did a bit of exploring. I’m sure all this gold will still be here when we get back.’ He finished with a small nod towards Thorin, and Thorin wished he could express his gratitude. As it was he merely nodded back.

Kíli shoved good-naturedly into Fíli, and, bright-eyed with the possibility of exploring Erebor, they tumbled out of the treasure room together, followed closely by Balin and Dwalin, the last of whom muttered, ‘better see if the old place is still standing, I suppose,’ as he left.

Fíli and Kíli’s boyish eagerness had a knock-on effect; Ori was soon on his feet, demanding his brothers show him the library, voice full of the confidence he had gained on his travels. With only a little grumbling, Nori and Dori hurried after him, Dori already fussing about broken pathways and unstable masonry.
Next to rise was Bofur, who tipped his hat in Thorin’s direction before coaxing Bombur from his perch with the promise of finding the kitchens, Bifur shaking his head and trailing along behind. Óin was a little harder to persuade – apparently he was quite comfortable where he was, thank you very much, but Glóin all but hauled him to his feet and pushed him out of the room, Óin pushing him back all the way, their roughhousing an echo of Kíli and Fíli’s own just moments before.

Finally, Thorin and Bilbo were left alone. Thorin let out the breath he had been holding, the line of his shoulders relaxing from their rigid hold. He still couldn’t bring himself to look at Bilbo.

‘Well, then,’ said Bilbo, with forced lightness, ‘are you going to treat me to the guided tour?’

Thorin glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Bilbo was smiling, but the expression seemed brittle in Thorin’s eyes.

‘If you like,’ said Thorin slowly, testing the waters. ‘What do you wish to see first?’

Bilbo shrugged, and the smile slipped from his face. He suddenly looked very tired.

‘Let’s just see where our feet take us, shall we?’ he said.

Bilbo had not been inclined to explore Erebor until now. Though at first he had held a burning desire to see the magnificent kingdom that Thorin had described, he had quickly realised that he would become hopelessly lost without a guide. One night, when he had been at his lowest ebb, when Thorin had seemed so distant he was all but unreachable and the guilt over Luaithre and Laketown had been too overwhelming for idleness, Bilbo had almost ventured out regardless. But he had barely gone down more than a handful of corridors before he’d stumbled across three skeletons, huddled in an alcove, their final resting place dusty and peaceful, in its own way. He’d turned back, after that.

But with Thorin at his side, walking into Erebor proper did not feel so much like he was trespassing. Any skeletons they came across were carefully circumnavigated, and they did not pause to examine them. There were simply too many to grieve each one. Instead, all of Bilbo’s attention was directed upwards, towards the ceilings and arches and columns that were gradually reaching further and further up with each step they took, like a great bud slowly blooming, until Bilbo found himself in the middle of a monstrously huge hall. The light from Thorin’s torch did not reach far in the cavernous space, but it did reveal the great support pillars, all intricately carved with green and gold lines, the beautiful patterns weaving up and up and up until they were swallowed by the darkness.

‘This used to be the marketplace,’ said Thorin, his words hushed, holding up the torch as far as it would go so Bilbo could see as much as possible, ‘before Smaug, in the days of my grandfather, you would have been barely able to move for all the Dwarves crowding this place.’

Bilbo was staring, agape, at every inch of the room revealed by the light of the torch. Seeing his reaction, Thorin added wryly, ‘but if it’s the guided tour you want, I think I can do better than just an empty room.’

‘Just an empty room?’ echoed Bilbo in a near-whisper, falling into step with Thorin once more as he lead them from the marketplace, ‘if your marketplace is so grand, then I can’t imagine what the throne room must be like.’

Thorin smiled a little. ‘It’s not the throne room that I wanted you to see. Here, this way,’ he said, gesturing to the right, where a set of inter-linked arches lead off to an enclosed tunnel.
If Bilbo had been speechless before, it was nothing compared to his reaction upon stepping into the Starlit Arches. Had Bilbo not been so transfixed by the wondrous sight of a night’s sky deep underground, he would have seen the way that Thorin was looking at him, gaze soft and warm as he watched Bilbo drinking in the sight of a myriad of stars strung above their heads. The glow from Thorin’s torch was enough to set off a blazing trail of tiny lights, glinting blue and white, a river of stars trailing away down the tunnel.

‘I seem to have found something to render you speechless at last,’ said Thorin, tentatively teasing, ‘I’ll have to bear it in mind for the future.’

Bilbo shot him a mock-indignant look, immediately turning back to the view above him.

‘You’ll bump into something, if you’re not careful.’

Bilbo half-considered winding his fingers into Thorin’s coat, as he had once done in Mirkwood, but something caused him to hold back. Instead he shrugged and said, ‘I’ll be fine. Where to next?’

‘There’s one more thing that I’d like you to see,’ said Thorin, and he lead them through the Arches, which took far longer than it should have because Bilbo kept pausing to admire each new constellation that was revealed by the torch. Eventually they reached a turning, and within a few minutes Bilbo felt the brush of fresh air against his cheeks, a tell-tale sight that they had come to another wide open space.

But Thorin paused on the threshold, blocking Bilbo’s view of whatever lay ahead.

‘Thorin?’

Thorin turned to look at him over his shoulder. ‘It’s...not quite as I remember it,’ he said falteringly, tension lining his mouth and forehead, ‘it seems not all of Erebor has remained untouched.’

‘I’m sure it’s not that bad-’ started Bilbo automatically, but then Thorin stepped aside.

Most of the rooms and tunnels they had come across so far had shown little evidence of Smaug’s invasion. Chunks of dislodged masonry had been a common sight, but for the most part Erebor had seemed intact, the skill of the Dwarves ensuring that not even the slow march of time or the arrival of dragon could do much more than cause surface damage.

But this room was another matter. The bottom of Bilbo’s stomach dropped out when he realised that this must have once been the Whispering Pools, that hallowed space that for Thorin had held many a treasured memory – Bilbo could still see the rough outline of the original layout, even among the rubble. Bilbo wondered, briefly, what had caused such destruction, but had Thorin not said that the Pools were hundreds of years old? Perhaps time and the arrival of a dragon had cracked some vital support beam holding up the roof of the room – Bilbo didn’t know. All he knew was that a place Thorin had loved and enshrined in his memory was now in ruins.

‘It can be rebuilt,’ said Bilbo quietly, heart twisting in his chest.

‘Can it?’ muttered Thorin. ‘I’m not sure it can. Perhaps the damage is too much.’

‘Of course it can,’ Bilbo said with a sigh. He wasn’t so sure they were talking about the room anymore. ‘It’ll just take a little time.’

Thorin said nothing to this. He continued to stare into the room, not moving past the threshold.

‘Come on,’ Bilbo said at length, when he could no longer stand a moment more of Thorin’s
mournful silence, ‘back to the camp with us.’

At last, Thorin tore his gaze away, and together they walked back through the Starlit Arches and into the marketplace, each of them deep in thought. They were drifting along a cavernous, beautiful passageway in silence when Thorin’s hand brushed up against Bilbo’s own. It had likely been an accident, a result of walking so close together in spite of the generous space in the passageway, but Bilbo saw, out of the corner of his eye, Thorin very carefully more his hand away so that it wouldn’t happen again.

With no hesitation whatsoever, he reached out and tangled his fingers with Thorin’s. Thorin turned to look at him, and Bilbo caught the way he cast a wondering glance at their joined hands. Bilbo kept his gaze firmly ahead, though he smiled with the corners of his mouth.

They were almost back to camp when Bilbo tugged on Thorin’s hand, diverting them without an explanation into a very familiar hall. Thorin had hoped to avoid this hall for as long as he could – he was sure it was simple a feasting space for the treasure room’s guards, but for him it would always be the room in which he had almost lost Bilbo.

The aforementioned Hobbit had other plans, it would seem. But before Thorin could feel more than a prickle of apprehension, Bilbo had bent to pick up something that gleamed in the dark of the room. The courting bead.

Thorin’s breath caught. Bilbo turned it over in his hands, smiling faintly. He turned to Thorin and said, ‘would you braid this back into my hair for me? I seem to have grown rather accustomed to it.’

‘Are you sure?’ said Thorin heavily.

‘I am.’

Slowly, and hardly able to believe he was not dreaming, Thorin put aside the torch and took the bead from Bilbo’s proffered hand. He stepped in close to Bilbo, as close as he dared, and began to braid the Hobbit’s curls with as much precision and care as he could muster.

Bilbo’s eyes fluttered shut, and Thorin heard him take a breath. ‘If you had not revoked...what you said earlier, then I might not have asked for this,’ he said quietly, ‘but now...well. I’m not giving up on you, Thorin.’

The braid was complete. Thorin smiled at Bilbo, allowing what he was feeling to shine through when the Hobbit’s eyes slid open. ‘Stubborn Hobbit,’ he murmured fondly, brushing his hand through Bilbo’s hair, scarcely able to believe his luck.

The Company slowly trickled back into camp in the same groups that they had set out in. It was far too late by then to do more than exchange a few words about the sights they had seen, voices full of pride when they spoke of how Erebor was just as magnificent as they remembered, if not more. Sleep weighed heavily on Bilbo’s eyelids, but before he went to bed Ori extracted a promise from him that Bilbo would come with him next time he went to the library; apparently it was a sight more
grand and astonishing than all of the wonders of Erebor.

Thorin’s speech had worked. Not a word was said about gold that night, and not a single member of the Company cast a glance in the direction of the treasure. Bilbo went to bed with a deep sense of relief. Thank goodness, he thought. Thorin had snapped out of his gold-lust and Luaithre was making a full recovery. Perhaps things were starting to look up.

He should have known better than to tempt fate.

Bilbo was woken the next day by Bifur shaking him awake, speaking to him in urgent tones in Khuzdûl.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Bilbo groggily, trying to shake off the last threads of sleep clinging to his mind, ‘I don’t know what you’re saying-’

‘He’s saying there’s one of those eagles of yours at the front gate,’ put in Balin helpfully. The old Dwarf had been one of the first to rise to tend to the fire.

Bifur turned and said something to Balin, and Balin frowned. ‘It appears we’re all needed at the front gate,’ he said, ‘you go ahead, laddie, I’ll wake the others. Bifur thinks it might be the eagle who was injured – Luaithre, was it? – well, she’s waiting for you and she seems a mite impatient.’

Bilbo needed no further encouragement. He all but leapt out of bed, barely pausing to throw on his tunic in his rush to the front gate. He had travelled between the gates and the treasure hall enough times now to know his way on his own, and he reached the battlements in record time, all but stumbling through the open door and into the fresh air.

‘Hello, Bilbo,’ said a very familiar voice.

All of the fledglings were perched on the battlements, but Bilbo’s gaze was fixed on Luaithre, and he took stock of her in an instant. She was not in her usual pristine state – more than a few feathers were still dislodged, or torn out together, and Bilbo could still see a mess of stitches crisscrossing her front. Her head was held a little low, and Bilbo thought she looked exhausted, though she was trying to hide it.

But still Bilbo all but gasped in relief, his heart doing an odd summersault in his chest because Luaithre was here – Luaithre was alive and awake and Bilbo had never been so thankful in all his life.

He started forward, intent on throwing his arms around her, but Luaithre skittered back.

‘No you don’t!’ she said, ‘get away from me, right now - my chest is all but held together with string, thank you very much, and I’ll not have your well-meaning gestures making me bleed again!’

Bilbo blinked, taken aback.

‘She’s been like this ever since she woke up,’ said Landroval mournfully.

‘She’s been even worse than Gwaihir when he was injured,’ added Tuit.

Gwaihir did not dispute this. ‘You should have seen her when were a little late in getting her food.’

‘Well you shouldn’t have been so slow!’ huffed Luaithre.

‘Good to see you, too,’ said Bilbo with a laugh, not offended at all. If Luaithre had enough strength
to argue, then it was a good sign.

Luaithre visibly gentled. ‘You too, Bilbo. I hope you haven’t been worrying yourself silly. I know how you like to do that.’

‘Not much at all, really,’ grinned Bilbo, ‘I knew you were too stubborn to die from a measly dragon claw.’

‘Death was too afraid to claim her,’ muttered Gwaihir.

‘Well, this is very true,’ said Luaithre loftily, ‘but what have you been up to in the meantime, Bilbo? I’ve heard things from the others. There was mention of gold-lust-‘

‘It’s all fine, now,’ said Bilbo quickly. When they cocked their heads at him disbelievingly, he went on. ‘It really is. You’ll see for yourself, soon enough – I think the rest of the Company is on their way here. Bifur said you wanted to speak to them?’

‘Yes,’ confirmed Gwaihir, ‘your Dwarf will want to hear-‘

But he paused as nearly half of the Company emerged from the door, Thorin in the lead. The Dwarf looked from Bilbo to Luaithre, and nodded his head in acknowledgement to the eagles.

‘I am glad to see you well,’ Thorin said to Luaithre, ‘what you and your kin did...songs will be sung for your brave deeds that night. The Dwarves will never forget.’

Luaithre looked like she was valiantly trying not to preen. ‘It was nothing,’ she said.

‘Did you hear that?’ said Landroval with boyish enthusiasm, nudging his brother with his wing, ‘we’ve gone down in song already!’

‘And so young, too,’ said Tuit.

‘It’s all downhill from here,’ said Gwaihir, half-joking, half-serious.

‘What about me?’ Kíli piped up, ‘won’t I be remembered, too? Surely the tale of Kíli, slayer of Smaug, is worthy of a song of its own?’

‘I’m sure it is, lad,’ assured Dwalin, ‘and they’ll be sure to start with a good description of your over-inflated head.’

‘At least three verses dedicated to that,’ agreed Fíli.

Thorin barely heard any of this, nor did he hear any spluttered protests from Kíli or how his nephew asked him for assurances. His line of sight had drifted away from their odd gathering, out towards the horizon, to the far shores of the Lake, where, even at this distance, he could see the morning sunlight glinting off of spears and shields and swords.

‘They’ll be here by nightfall,’ said Gwaihir quietly, having seen where Thorin’s gaze had fallen. His words alerted Bilbo, who turned to look, the rest of the Dwarves following suit.

‘No,’ breathed Bilbo, ‘no - I had hoped...I had hoped they wouldn’t come. I had hoped it was a mistake-‘

‘There was no mistake,’ said Thorin grimly, ‘two armies march upon us. It seems Bard has not taken your advice after all, Bilbo.’
‘But I can understand Bard’s men coming armed – they’ve just lost their town, but the Elves...’ he trailed off, thinking of Legolas. Bilbo could not help but feel a little betrayed. Legolas had seemed so against conflict, and he had known all the details of what had happened that night. Why, then had he allowed his father to march on Erebor in a move that could only be constituted as a declaration of war?

‘They would not come in such numbers if they did not think they could extract more than one fourteenth of the treasure from us under the threat of violence,’ said Thorin, but he no longer sounded furious. Instead, he simply sounded resigned. ‘It would appear that we are not the only ones affected by gold-lust.’

‘There’s more, I’m afraid,’ said Landroval, ‘Bilbo – we bring grave news.’

Bilbo tore his gaze away from the approaching armies. Once Landroval was satisfied he had Bilbo’s full attention, he said,

‘There has been great chatter amongst the lesser birds, and their warnings have reached our ears. They have sighted another army.’

Bilbo took a moment to think. ‘Daín’s army?’ he asked hopefully, ‘was it an army of Dwarves?’

But Landroval shook his head. Dread began to tiptoe up the length of Bilbo’s spine.

‘No. They spoke of an army of orcs. A huge, terrible army, with numbers so great it appears to be a storm cloud on the horizon.’

‘We must have seen some of them on the way here,’ said Luaithre, ‘something’s drawing them together-’

‘-and leading them straight towards the mountain,’ completed Landroval. ‘Bilbo. The birds spoke of a pale orc astride a white warg, riding at the head of the army.’

By now Thorin’s attention had been drawn to their conversation – he could not understand it, but he caught the urgency of the eagle’s tones, and Bilbo’s resulting, terrified expression.

‘Bilbo?’

Bilbo turned to him, and Thorin did not like the grim set of his mouth. ‘Azog is coming for us,’ he said, ‘Thorin – Azog is heading our way, and a huge army of orcs marches in his wake.’

Bilbo could not place the expression that passed over Throin’s face at this news, the Dwarf turning away so that Bilbo could not see his face. No one spoke. The wind ruffled at Bilbo’s hair and played with his braid. He wondered, miserably, if this clash was inevitable; he wondered if their paths had always led here, had always intended to converge inexorably at this point. And Thorin – was Thorin destined to have his life overrun by darkness, over and over again?

‘How many?’ asked Thorin.

Landroval spoke and Bilbo simply shook his head. That was answer enough.

‘Daín will be here soon,’ Kíli was saying, ‘won’t he? Can’t we just...hole up inside the mountain?’

‘We can’t hope to hold out for any great length of time,’ sighed Fíli.

Balin nodded in agreement, ‘the front gates are not what they used to be, and the wall we’ve built
‘And Dain’s Dwarves do not number many at all,’ said Dwalin, before he let out a string of curse words in Khuzdûl.

‘We will be overwhelmed,’ said Thorin, staring out at the horizon, and no one disagreed.

‘Unless we propose an alliance,’ Bilbo said suddenly, and every head turned in his direction.

‘An \textit{alliance}?’ spat Dwalin, ‘with our enemies?’

‘You’d have us ask for help from those who march on the mountain even as we speak?’ Fíli said incredulously, stance tense and gaze angrily fixed on Bilbo.

But Thorin and Bilbo only had eyes for each other.

Bilbo knew exactly what he was asking Thorin to do. He knew how much it would cost his pride - his people’s pride. But Bilbo refused to stand by while Thorin lost all that he held dear \textit{again}.

‘Thorin. \textit{Please}.’

Thorin shook his head a little, expression lost. ‘You would ask me to align with those who abandoned us in our darkest hour.’

‘I could go to them,’ said Bilbo urgently, trying not to let the desperation he was feeling seep into his voice, ‘I could be an intermediary on your behalf. We could give Thranduil the chance to redeem himself.’

‘What’s to say they’d agree to help?’ said Kíli.

‘Exactly,’ put in his brother, ‘I’d hardly be surprised if they just turned tail and ran at the first hint of orcs.’

But Thorin did not appear to be listening to either of them.

‘Please,’ said Bilbo again. ‘I will not have our journey end here. We have to try. You have to trust me – you know I have Erebor’s best interests at heart.’

Bilbo forced himself not to look away. It pained him to do this, but he could see no other option. At last, Thorin closed his blue eyes for half a moment, and then nodded his assent.

His agreement was immediately met by loud protests from the others, but Thorin held up a hand and they ceased immediately.

‘We do not have to agree to anything with them yet,’ Thorin said, ‘at the very least, Bilbo trying to form an alliance will buy us time. The Elves and the Men of Laketown may be more inclined to help when Dain’s men arrive, after all.’

‘But Uncle,’ started Kíli again, ‘I don’t see-’

‘Enough,’ Thorin commanded wearily, and Kíli quietened at once, though the unhappy set of his jaw spoke of his discontent.

‘You choose a wise course, Dwarf,’ said Gwaihir, and Bilbo translated.

‘I do not think the rest of my people would agree with you,’ Thorin said, ‘now if you’ll excuse me,
we have to inform the others. There’s preparations to be made for tonight.’

Without a word more to Bilbo – or to any of them – he left the battlements. Bilbo watched him go, and wondered what his idea had cost their relationship.

They came in great numbers, and when the sun dropped below the horizon the night was set ablaze by torches as the Men and Elves set up their camps. Bilbo watched it all from the battlements, Landroval keeping him company. Seeing so many assembled at the foot of the mountain, Bilbo asked if there were enough Elves and Men here to withstand Azog’s army. Landroval replied that there was not. If the army of Elves and Men were a cluster of trees, Landroval said, then Azog’s was akin to a forest. Bilbo hunched into himself at that, hugging his knees.

While he sat and waited for Thorin’s cue to go and parley with Bard, Bilbo found himself again and again thinking about the coming battle. It was a spectre that loomed over him, and it dogged his thoughts no matter how much he tried to distract himself with other things. He was terrified – for his friends, for his family, and for Thorin. He wondered if he could keep them all safe. He wondered if he would have to watch as yet another of his eagle kin was struck down.

And there was a small, dark part of him - buried deep, deep down in heart - that longed for battle. Out there somewhere Azog and his white warg prowled, and that deep, dark part of Bilbo would like nothing more than to piece flesh and bone with his spear and bring both of them to their rightful ends, never to trouble the Line of Durin again.

Bilbo was shaken from his dark thoughts by the reappearance of Balin and Thorin, who had come to wait quietly with Bilbo. Balin, Bilbo noted, still looked displeased about Thorin’s decision, though he held his silence.

They did not have to wait long. Soon a company of spearmen broke away from the main camp and advanced to the front gate, bearing the green banner of Thranduil and the blue banner of Laketown. Thorin hailed them. ‘Who are you that come armed for war to the gates of Erebor?’

One of the company stood forward. ‘Hail, Thorin, King Under the Mountain!’ he cried, ‘we are glad to see that you still live. We come to parley with you, over the matter of the treasure. Would you agree to this?’

‘You speak of negotiation under the threat of violence,’ Thorin replied disdainfully, ‘why should I listen to those who come to bargain with swords at their sides?’

‘We do not come for war, Thorin Oakenshield. We only ask that the people of Laketown receive the riches that were promised to them by one of your Company.’

Bilbo stiffened. Thorin glanced at him briefly, before turning back to the man.

‘I should ignore all your requests for parley,’ he said, ‘but...’ he took a deep breath, ‘I will allow you to speak to Bilbo Baggins, who will stand on my behalf. Will you receive him into your camp to parley, and guarantee his safe return?’

‘We will,’ said the man, ‘I am pleased to hear you will listen to our pleas, King Under the Mountain. Please tell Bilbo Baggins he is welcome in our camp whenever he likes. We will escort him there.’
Thorin turned away from the spearmen to look at Bilbo.

‘Wish me luck,’ said Bilbo, and then winced.

‘I do not like the thought of your going alone into our enemies’ camp,’ Thorin said.

‘I won’t be alone,’ Bilbo said with a shake of his head, ‘I think travelling there on a giant eagle will be enough to ensure my safety, don’t you?’

Thorin merely nodded. Every line of his body spoke of underlying tension. When he made no move to say goodbye to Bilbo, Bilbo moved away to climb onto Landroval, his heart heavy. But before he could do much more than take a hold of some of Landroval’s feathers, Thorin was there, at his side, helping him up onto Landroval’s back.

‘Be safe,’ Thorin whispered to him, squeezing his hand and then stepping away. Bilbo smiled at him, heart lifted by the simple gesture. He nodded goodbye to Balin, and Landroval opened his wings and took off into the night.

Landroval landing on the outskirts of the camp caused no small amount of surprise from the Men and Elves nearby. They were more surprised still when a Hobbit slid from the eagle’s back and informed them that he was there to parley with Bard and the Elvenking. Behind him, the company of spearmen who had advanced on the mountain was hurrying to catch up. Landroval fixed the astonished Elves and Men with a steely look. The ones nearest to Landroval skittered back nervously, and they hastened to obey Bilbo’s request.

He soon found himself inside a large tent erected near the centre of the camp. There were two people sat inside, attended to by guards of both races.

‘Bilbo Baggins, here to parley on behalf of Thorin Oakenshield,’ said the Elf who had escorted Bilbo there. The Elf stepped aside, and Bard and the other seated figure turned to look at Bilbo.

Bilbo instantly knew who the identity of the Elf who was sat to the left of Bard. The familial resemblance between Legolas and his father was so uncanny that Bilbo almost did a double take upon seeing him. It was made even clearer by the fact that Legolas was stood beside the Elvenking, both father and son wearing identical expressions of calm poise, though Legolas did lift his shoulders up half an inch when Bilbo swept his gaze over to him questioningly.

‘I’m glad you could come,’ said Bard to Bilbo. ‘May I introduce you to King Thranduil of the Mirkwood Elves, who honours us with his presence.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ said Bilbo politely, bowing in what he hoped was a suitable manner. He really ought to learn the proper etiquette of bowing to Kings. ‘I am Bilbo Baggins of the Shire.’

The Elvenking inclined his head, ‘and of the eagles of Manwë, too, if I’m not mistaken,’ he said in cool, steady voice.

‘Ah yes,’ said Bilbo, ‘I am deeply honoured to count them as my kin.’

Thranduil laced his fingers together, and Bilbo thought he saw a sparkle of amusement in the King’s eyes, though his expression did not move an inch.
‘But pleasantries aside,’ began Bilbo tentatively, ‘I have to ask – why have you come armed to the gates of Erebor?’

‘Straight to it, I see,’ muttered Bard to himself, and then, to Bilbo, ‘it was merely a...precaution.’

‘A precaution? We are not your enemies, Bard – I told you that before.’

‘You must understand, Bilbo,’ sighed Bard, ‘my men have been through a great deal. We had no idea what we would face when we came to the mountain. Not a single man or woman from Laketown has set foot on this shore in decades. It is considered cursed land. Did you honestly expect us to come unarmed?’

‘Did you honestly expect we’d be pleased that you had?’ Bilbo shot back, ‘it is hardly a good way to start negotiations. You’re lucky that Thorin didn’t simply turn you away.’

‘I agree that it was not the most ideal way to meet with Thorin Oakenshield so soon after he reclaimed his mountain,’ said Thranduil, ‘but it was necessary. The spears and swords you see about you are not to use against you, Master Hobbit.’

‘This might be a little rude,’ said Bilbo to the Elvenking, ‘and I apologise if it comes across that way. But I must ask why the Elves felt the need to come, too.’

Thranduil regarded him with a level look, ‘we are merely here to assist the Men of Laketown in their time of need. Our presence here is merely incidental – we were already on our way to the mountain when we met with Bard’s forces. Until Bard told us otherwise, we thought the mountain stood undefended.’

Bilbo almost snapped, *do the lives of the Men of Laketown mean more to you than the Dwarves of Erebor?* but he just about restrained himself. As it was he knew there were more important matters to hand than quarrelling over how their parley had begun.

‘In any case,’ said Bilbo, bracing himself for what was about to be revealed, ‘it may be fortunate that you have come armed. I know you want to be compensated for Laketown, Bard, and I intend on keeping my word. You will have your gold. But for now there is something else that requires our attention. I have received word that an army of orcs is on its way here. If you want your share of the gold, Bard, you will have to fight for it.’

Bard sat forward. Every Man and Elf in the tent stilled, their attention firmly set on Bilbo.

Bard snorted a humourless laugh. ‘If you mean to scare us off with stories of orcs, Master Baggins—’

‘It’s no joke!’ said Bilbo angrily, ‘there is a huge hoard of orcs on their way, and unless we band together, they will swipe us aside in an instant and claim the treasure for their own!’

Bard looked away with a hissed breath, running a hand over his face.

‘Are you certain?’ asked Thranduil.

‘I am.’

‘How long until they arrive?’

‘We’re not sure.’

Thranduil leant back a little in his chair. ‘This is ill news,’ he said, ‘but I find myself surprised that
‘You’re right to be surprised,’ replied Bilbo, ‘but Thorin knows the value of Erebor to his people. He would defend it above all else. He knows that sometimes...sometimes a King has to make difficult choices.’

Thranduil’s eyes were not the same as his son’s, Bilbo realised as the Elvenking fixed him with a pale-blue, piercing stare. Bilbo felt all the weight of the centuries that Thranduil must have seen in that moment. It was difficult not to look away.

‘You must leave this with us,’ said Thranduil in a near-whisper, though his strong voice reached all of their ears, ‘we will have an answer for you by morning. I fear we cannot delay any longer if what you say is true.’

Bard, looking greatly troubled and older than his years, nodded in agreement. Bilbo took this as his cue to leave. He bowed, and exited the tent. He could only hope that his words had sunk in.

He barely got more than two steps outside the tent before he was hailed.

‘Bilbo Baggins,’ said a voice, ‘parleying with Kings. I never thought I’d see the day.’

‘Gandalf?’ spluttered Bilbo, staring with astonishment at the old wizard, who was sat by a cheerful fire, contentedly enjoying a pipe full of Old Toby. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Oh, I thought I might just tag along and see how you were doing, my dear Hobbit. And what success you’ve had! Smaug is dead and Thorin is parleying.’ He let out a long trail of smoke. ‘Remarkable.’

‘That can’t be all you’re doing here,’ said Bilbo incredulously, ‘didn’t you have important wizard business to attend to?’

‘I did, and it has been attended to,’ said Gandalf, ‘and now here I am to provide a little advice, where needed.’

‘Advice...to whom?’

‘Well, to everyone! I am a neutral party in this, after all.’

‘Yes. Well. I am glad you’re here. I hope you can advise Bard and Thranduil to agree to a truce. Azog is leading an army towards Erebor, Gandalf. I fear for what will happen if we don’t ally with the Elves and the Men.’

‘Oh yes, the orc army,’ said Gandalf, and then subsisted into silence.

Bilbo side-eyed him suspiciously. Gandalf was very pointedly looking elsewhere.

‘You knew, didn’t you?’ said Bilbo when the realisation dawned on him. ‘But...but why didn’t you tell Bard and Thranduil?’

‘I’ll thank you to keep your voice down, Master Hobbit,’ Gandalf said, grumbling half-heartedly.

Bilbo narrowed his eyes at Gandalf. The wizard was looking more than a little uncomfortable.

‘You knew...but you let them march here anyway. Why?’ asked Bilbo, nonplussed.

When Gandalf held his silence, Bilbo came to his own conclusions. He stared, aghast, at Gandalf.
‘You planned this, didn’t you?’ he accused, ‘you knew Azog was going to come. You knew we’d need an army to help us.’ Bilbo shook his head. ‘Is this a game to you? Are the lives of everyone here no more than chess pieces in your eyes?’

Gandalf shot him a sharp look. ‘Do not take that tone with me, Bilbo Baggins! Would you have rather I left Thorin and his Company undefended against an army of orcs?’

Bilbo’s indignation melted away. ‘No, of course not.’

Gandalf huffed and set his robes more firmly about his person, taking a long drag of his pipe. ‘I have duties, Bilbo. If what you said is true – if I see our current dilemma in terms of a chess board, then you must know that I am playing on behalf of all that is good in this world. Erebor must not fall,’ Gandalf declared in a voice like steel. ‘It must stay strong. It must endure what is to come and see its rightful King crowned. The King that it deserves.’

Gandalf paused and glanced slyly at Bilbo. ‘And I see now that the King Under the Mountain must have a Hobbit to stand by his side.’

Bilbo’s hand flew up to brush against his bead. He’d forgotten that Gandalf knew nothing of his courting.

Gandalf smiled, all his fire of moments before dissipating. ‘My dear Bilbo,’ he said, ‘all that I wish for is that we might live to see this old wizard crown both you and Thorin.’

‘We’ve only just begun courting!’ spluttered Bilbo, but Gandalf gave him a knowing look. ‘Oh, bother it. And who says you’ll be crowning us, anyway?’

Gandalf’s smile widened. ‘With luck, we will have plenty of time to argue about such things. But come now, it’s late. Back to your Dwarves – and your intended.’

Bilbo shook his head and bid Gandalf goodnight. He had not gone more than five paces when Gandalf hailed him again. The old wizard’s face looked grave. ‘Stay safe, Master Hobbit,’ he said, and Bilbo could do little else but nod, trying to ignore the prickle of forewarning that shivered over his scalp at Gandalf’s words.

Thorin was there to meet Bilbo as soon as he landed. Bilbo quickly set about reporting all that he had learnt from the encounter, including his conversation with Gandalf.

‘His craftiness knows no bounds,’ said Thorin when he heard what Gandalf had done, ‘but for once I am glad of the wizard’s schemes.’

‘As am I,’ said Bilbo, ‘but what now? Sit and wait for morning? I don’t think I’ll be able to sleep much, after all that’s happened.’

‘No,’ said Balin, ‘I think it’s time we armed ourselves. A trip to the armoury is in order, for all of us. We can’t be going into battle dressed in nothing but borrowed clothes.’

The armoury of Erebor was ten times bigger than anything Bilbo could have ever dreamed of. Bilbo was going to have to readjust his concept of huge if he was to live in Erebor for any length of time. The racks from which armour and weapons hung seemed all but endless to Bilbo when they first opened the great gates to the armoury. Most of the Company was already there – Bilbo could see
Dwalin to the left, trying to find Ori a breastplate that fit – but they were all set much further back into the room. The first few racks were all empty. After a few moments pondering this, Bilbo understood why – when Smaug had descended on the mountain, many Dwarves must have come here to take up arms, for all the good it did them in the end.

Balin joined his brother, and Bilbo would have followed if Thorin had not drawn him to one side.

‘I have already picked out your armour,’ he said to Bilbo, gently steering Bilbo in the direction of a side room, one of his hands placed low on Bilbo’s back.

‘Oh you have, have you?’ said Bilbo, raising his eyebrows. ‘Do I get any say in this? I didn’t realise we had already gotten to the stage where we pick out each other’s clothes.’

‘Yes,’ Thorin said with the ghost of a smile about the edges of his mouth, ‘I’ve made sure our armour is in matching colours.’

‘Good. I’ll not have us clash on the battlefield,’ Bilbo said, smiling outright.

The side room contained some rotting furniture – a common sight about Erebor – and a small chest. Thorin crossed the room and opened the chest, drawing out something that Bilbo, even with his limited knowledge of metals, recognised at once.

‘Is that-’

‘It is,’ confirmed Thorin, holding up the mithril coat. The chainmail glimmered at the slightest movement, fluid, like liquid moonlight. Bilbo could understand why the Dwarves were so fascinated by it.

‘It’s for you,’ Thorin said, holding it out for Bilbo to see.

‘Me?’

‘Yes. I’d like you to wear it for the coming battle. Do you like it?’

‘I think I’d be a fool not to. But...Thorin – what will everyone else wear? What will you wear?’

‘We’ll be fine. Dwarven armour is the hardest, toughest armour in all of Arda.’

‘But not as tough as mithril,’ Bilbo pointed out.

Thorin said nothing to this.

‘I can’t take this, Thorin.’

Thorin’s lips thinned. ‘Why ever not?’

‘I won’t go into battle better protected than all of my friends. Than you.’

Thorin’s fingers tightened around the mithril coat. ‘There is but one mithril coat in all of Erebor, Bilbo, and it’s in my hands. It won’t fit me, but it will fit you.’

‘But perhaps it’ll fit Ori, or Kíli-’

‘Ori will have two older brothers looking out of him – a not inconsiderable force,’ said Thorin dryly, ‘and Fíli and I will both be taking care of Kíli.’
Thorin stepped closer, until Bilbo had to tilt his head back a little to look at him. ‘But you,’ said Thorin lowly, ‘you flit about on the backs of eagles. Can you guarantee that you won’t fly away in the midst of battle?’

‘If I do it’d only be to help you,’ said Bilbo with a frown, ‘it’s not like I’ll be running off altogether.’

At Thorin’s look he closed his mouth with a click. He supposed Thorin did have a point.

‘Please, Bilbo,’ said Thorin, every word tight with tension, voice on the verge of cracking, ‘promise me you’ll wear it. I need to know you’ll be safe.’

He carefully placed one hand at the juncture between Bilbo’s neck and shoulder, swiping his thumb over Bilbo’s pulse, and really, that just wasn’t fair at all, because between that and Thorin’s fragile, hopeful look, edged with desperation, how was Bilbo supposed to refuse?

Bilbo dropped his head down to rest on Thorin’s chest. ‘Alright, you insufferable Dwarf. I’ll wear the damn thing.’

‘You promise?’

‘I promise.’

Thorin rested his head atop Bilbo’s. ‘Thank you,’ he breathed into Bilbo’s hair.

Bilbo was far too restless to sleep that night. There simply seemed too much to think about, too much to worry about, and so instead of curling up in his bedroll and getting some much-needed rest – which was the sensible option – he found himself instead sitting slightly away from their camp, staring into the distance, only occasionally coming back to the real world to notice the changing of the watch.

The mithril coat was weighing on his mind. He wished now that he had not promised to wear it. He wished he had argued harder, had refused the gift outright, soft looks from Thorin be damned. He hated the thought of going to war in impenetrable armour, his friends dressed in nothing more than soft steel in comparison. He all but tormented himself with the image of the entire Company struck down in the midst of battle, and only Bilbo remaining in the aftermath.

But what could he do about it? He had promised Thorin, and the coat was on the small side – Thorin had not lied when he had said the coat would not fit him.

When Fíli came to wake Kíli so that he could take over the watch duty on the front gate, the solution seemed to present itself. Bilbo sat there, watching Kíli as he was slowly roused into waking by his brother, his mind racing. Fíli took after his Uncle – or perhaps his mother, Bilbo didn’t know – with a broad chest and broader shoulders. He would not fit the coat. But Kíli - Kíli was slighter. He was, of course, as strong as any of his kind, but his lean, archers-build leant itself to a slighter frame. A frame that might just fit the mithril coat.

If Bilbo pulled this off, then Thorin would never know any different. He might even be glad that Bilbo’s actions had saved one of his heirs, because, now that he thought about it, Thorin’s previous assertion that Kíli would be fine because he had his brother and Uncle looking out for him rang false to Bilbo. It was more likely that the reverse would be true. Thorin, as their leader, would have a great deal of attention focused on him during the battle, and it would be more likely that Kíli and Fíli
would be protecting Thorin, not the other way around. And Kíli – Bilbo had grown fond of Kíli. It had greatly pained him to see the young Dwarf uncurious for such a long period in Mirkwood, and as for the effect it had had on Thorin and Fíli...well, if Bilbo gave Kíli the coat, then perhaps he could save Thorin and Fíli that agony all over again.

With these reassurances over breaking his promise to Thorin in mind, Bilbo waited until Kíli had gotten an appropriate distance away from the camp before quickly hurrying after him, the mithril coat bundled up under one arm.

‘Kíli! A word with you, if you please,’ said Bilbo when he had caught up.

‘Bilbo? You’re still up?’

‘I am. I need ask you something. Well,’ he amended, ‘I need you to do me a favour.’

‘What is it?’

‘I need you to wear this,’ Bilbo said, producing the coat. Kíli immediately frowned at the sight of it.

‘Didn’t Thorin give you this? I can’t accept it, Bilbo.’

‘It’s true, your uncle gifted it to me. But now I’m lending it to you for the battle.’

Kíli began to shake his head, expression unhappy, hands held up as if to push away the chainmail. ‘I can’t accept this, Bilbo-‘

‘I know you can’t. Which is why I’m asking you this as a favour. Please. Just...wear it, and don’t tell your uncle.’

‘But I can’t go into battle wearing finer armour than everyone else!’ protested Kíli.

‘I know, but,’ Bilbo huffed, frustrated and tired. He just wanted to have the matter solved so he could go to bed in peace. ‘When it comes to putting our armour on, slip it on underneath your breastplate. No one will know the difference.’

‘But I’ll know the difference. And what will you wear?’

‘Kíli, I will have three eagles watching out for me. I’ll be fine. But you...you need to wear this. Just humour this silly Hobbit, would you?’

Kíli must have seen something in Bilbo’s eyes, some of Bilbo’s desperation, or his fear, perhaps, because after a few seconds, he nodded with obvious reluctance.

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo, ‘when the time comes, we’ll swap chainmail.’

‘Alright then, if you insist,’ Kíli said, still looking decidedly uncomfortable about the whole affair. ‘As long as Uncle never finds out.’

‘He’ll never know,’ Bilbo assured. ‘Goodnight, Kíli.’

‘Goodnight, Bilbo.’

In considerably better spirits, Bilbo returned to the camp. He was just rounding the last corner when he almost slammed into Fíli, who had apparently been waiting for him.

‘Fíli!’ said Bilbo, starting guiltily.
'I heard what you did, for my brother,’ Fíli said, quickly confirming Bilbo’s fears.

‘Yes, well, I-’

Fíli clasped a hand to Bilbo’s shoulder and smiled in what looked like deep relief.

‘Thank you. I will always be in your debt.’

‘What?’ exclaimed Bilbo, surprised, ‘no, no that’s not needed at all!’

‘It is. That shirt will guarantee him some measure of protection. I could not bear to...to see him laid low again.’

Bilbo’s shoulders slumped. It would seem that he was not the only one afraid for Kíli’s safety. He mentally berated himself for ever thinking Fíli’s reaction would be anything other than gratitude for handing the coat over to Kíli.

‘Yes, neither could I.’

‘Now all I need to do is keep his head safe,’ said Fíli lightly, ‘which is even more difficult now, what with it having grown so big over the last few days.’

Bilbo couldn’t help but laugh at that.

Dawn came too soon to snatch anything more than a handful of hours of sleep, so late was it that Bilbo finally retired. He was a little drowsy from lack of sleep when he woke the next day, and keenly aware that he needed a wash. A bath was in order, he decided, and it might help wake him up.

He gathered his things and made the short journey to one of Erebor’s many bathing rooms. Underground rivers and streams were in abundance in the Lonely Mountain, and the Dwarves had taken full advantage of the natural sources of water by building luxurious rooms in which communal bathing could be enjoyed by anyone.

Not that Bilbo had any intention of sharing this particular bathing room with anyone. He was hoping that the early hour would ensure that he would be left in peace while he enjoyed the large, cool pool of water.

He was so sure that no one else would be using the room that he all but barged in unannounced, and immediately found that the pool was already in use. By Thorin. Thorin, who was just getting out as Bilbo burst in. Bilbo promptly caught an eyeful of a broad chest and glistening, rippling muscles before yelping and hastily spinning around.

‘I-I do apologise,’ said Bilbo to the wall. His cheeks were on fire. ‘I thought the pool was empty. Which it’s not. Obviously. Er.’

Thorin’s voice, warm with amusement, floated over his shoulder, ‘why in Durin’s name do you feel the need to avert your eyes, Bilbo? In case you haven’t noticed – we’re courting. You can look all you like.’

Bilbo gulped. His shoulders were all but hunched up around his ears. ‘We’ve only just started
courting! It’s not—it’s not proper—'

‘But you’ve seen me bathing before, on the journey here.’

‘That was different! Oh, for goodness sake, would you please just put some clothes on? Anyone would think you’re a nudist.’

‘If it displeases you so, I’ll clothe myself,’ Bilbo heard him chuckle. He would sorely like to tell Thorin how much, in fact, the Dwarf’s nakedness would please him, but the thought alone sent another wave of heat over his face, and so he kept quiet. There came the sound of water being displaced, and the tell-tale rustle of fabric.

‘I’m decent. You can look, now,’ said Thorin, still sounding deeply amused by Bilbo’s discomfort.

Feeling a little foolish, Bilbo turned around, only to find that Thorin had simply put his breeches on, and that there was still a very lovely chest and shoulders to goggle at.

He spun back around to face the wall once more. ‘That’s not properly clothed!’

Thorin was laughing outright, now. ‘Alright, alright,’ he conceded, words muffled for a moment as he put his shirt on. ‘Now it’s safe to look, my dear Hobbit.’

‘Is this better?’ he asked, arms akimbo when Bilbo faced him once more.

Not really Bilbo thought sullenly, because Thorin was still damp from the bath, his shirt and breeches clinging to his skin, his long dark hair was dripping, clinging in inky tendrils to his neck and collarbones. Eyes up, Baggins, Bilbo reminded himself.

‘I’m glad we bumped into each other,’ Thorin was saying, and Bilbo snapped his eyes hastily back to Thorin’s face. Thorin’s resulting smirk let Bilbo know that he knew exactly what had diverted Bilbo’s attention.

‘I wanted to talk to you.’

‘Aren’t we talking now?’

‘I meant more privately,’ said Thorin, and Bilbo watched as some of the good humour faded from his face, ‘somewhere where we won’t have someone stumble across us, as you just did.’

Bilbo shrugged. ‘Of course. Do I have time to have a bath, or is it urgent?’

‘No, have your bath. I’ll wait outside for you. Someone has to protect your modesty, after all,’ he said, and his smile this time held a hint of teeth.

‘I can protect my own modesty, thank you...oh, this is a ridiculous conversation – away with you! Go stand outside – and no peeking!’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ said Thorin, in a tone that implied that he certainly would, and in great detail, but he allowed himself to be ushered by the room by Bilbo nonetheless.

Alone at last, Bilbo took a few minutes to regain his composure. The pool was cool and deep and very welcoming, and he wasted no time in diving in. He quickly washed his body and hair with a bar of soap, and, if he took a little longer than usual to soak, well. Thorin would just have to wait.

‘I’m done,’ said Bilbo as he emerged from the room. Thorin, as promised, was waiting for him. The Dwarf straightened as soon as Bilbo opened the door, eyes sweeping over Bilbo, and Bilbo was
deeply gratified to see something dark and hungry flash through his eyes as he took in Bilbo’s wet curls and pink cheeks.

‘Where did you want to go?’

‘To the battlements – we can relieve whoever’s there on watch and be left in peace,’ replied Thorin, and Bilbo noted that, as they walked, Thorin seemed to become more and more withdrawn and – dare Bilbo say it – even nervous, shooting Bilbo quick, darting looks out of the corner of his eye when he thought Bilbo wasn’t looking.

Bombur was on watch duty at the gate, and he was only too happy to be relieved. While Thorin instructed Bombur to not send anyone else back to the battlements, Bilbo breathed in the chill morning air, trying not to feel too uneasy about the conversation that awaited him in a few moments.

‘Bilbo?’ said Thorin once they had been left alone. ‘I have something to ask of you. I...’ he trailed off, apparently at a loss for words.

‘What is it, Thorin? I have to say, you’re worrying me a little.’

‘No, no. It’s nothing for you to be worried about. At least, I hope not.’ He turned away to pace back and forth a couple of times over the flagstones of the battlements. Bilbo watched him anxiously, unsure what to say.

Thorin gathered himself and stopped pacing. ‘Perhaps I’d better start with something else, first. Bilbo: I’d like you to take this,’ he said, and from his pocket he withdrew the Arkenstone.

Bilbo frowned, looking from the Arkenstone to Thorin and back again, uncomprehending. ‘But Thorin, why? You can’t give that away!’

‘I can, and I will,’ said Thorin gravely, ‘these last few days have proved to me that I cannot keep this. It has too much power over me, even now. I entrust it to your care.’

‘I can’t take this. It’s too much.’

‘You can. Hide it away somewhere, if you like. Just keep away from me.’ He visibly swallowed. ‘And from Kíli and Fíli, too.’

Bilbo bit his lip. Thorin seemed so certain. ‘If you’re sure-’

‘I am.’

Slowly, and with as much gravitas as such a momentous exchange deserved, Bilbo took the stone. It was heavy, which did not surprise him, but it was also cool to the touch, which did. He had expected it to be warm, like the light that emanated from its core. He wondered at it. The heart of the mountain, in the palm of his hand.

Without a moment’s more deliberation, he put it away, slipping it into the pocket of his tunic.

The effect on Thorin was instantaneous, like a great weight being lifted off his shoulders. Still, though, his worry lingered in the set of his mouth and the furrow of his brow.

‘Good. Now that that’s out of the way, I have one more thing to give you.’

‘I have received more presents in these last few days than I have in a lifetime in the Shire,’ joked
Bilbo weakly. ‘I really must return the gesture, sometime.’

‘Not yet. Not with this last gift,’ said Thorin, wetting his lips. ‘Bilbo. I know you can reciprocate this last gift, but I need you to understand that you not feel an obligation to. I give this to you freely, and I expect nothing in return. Do you follow?’

‘I-I think I do,’ said Bilbo, frowning. His heart began to race.

‘Bilbo. I want to give you my sanbuzra sankerum. My Deep Name.’

Bilbo stopped breathing. ‘No,’ he heard himself say as though from a great distance, ‘Thorin, no. You can’t mean to…it’s too soon!’

But Thorin was already shaking his head, smiling softly. ‘No, it isn’t. I must admit I have been turning the idea over in my mind for quite some time.’

‘Thorin, you can’t, it’s too much. And if you’re only doing this because we’re on the eve of war, then—‘

‘No, no I’m not,’ Thorin said, urgently, stepping into Bilbo’s personal space as if to reinforce his words with actions. ‘I’m not doing this out of fear, Bilbo. I’ve wronged you, I know. And I may never hear you accept my proposal with your own First Name. But I don’t want you to think of it like that.’ He took a hold of both of Bilbo’s hands. ‘This is a gift. And a promise. Because though I don’t think I’ll ever deserve it, one day I hope to earn the right to hear your Name in return.’

Bilbo let out a shuddering breath. ‘You don’t need to earn it, you idiot,’ he managed to say past the lump in his throat.

Thorin laughed a little, so close now they were sharing breaths. ‘I’m a Dwarf, Bilbo. Trust me when I say you haven’t even begun to see how we earn our intended’s Name.’

Bilbo closed his eyes, bringing his head forward half an inch so that he could rest his forehead again Thorin’s. He concentrated on his breathing, trying to regain a sense of equilibrium.

‘You don’t have to accept it,’ said Thorin quietly. ‘It’s your choice.’

Choice. What a fickle word that was. But in this instance, Bilbo already knew his answer. It was an easy decision. Bilbo felt something tighten, and then loosen around his heart. He opened his eyes, leant back a touch to match Thorin’s hopeful blue gaze and said,

‘Yes.’

A smile bloomed across Thorin’s face, and within half a second it widened to become the biggest grin Bilbo had ever seen the Dwarf wear. Bilbo’s stomach flipped over at the sight, and he was grateful that Thorin brought his hands coming up to grasp his shoulders. The Dwarf was trying to dampen down the happy expression that was plain for all to see on his face. Don’t do that Bilbo wanted to tell him, have you any idea how handsome you look when you smile? Have you any idea what it does to me? but he found he had not the breath to utter a single word.

Without further ceremony, Thorin dipped his head towards Bilbo ear.

‘All that I am, I give to you,’ he said, in Westeron, his voice a low, pleased rumble, ‘I am—‘ and he spoke a sibilant word in Khuzdûl, before translating for Bilbo’s benefit: ‘The star that shines brightest in the deepest dark.’
The Name seemed to settle deep down in Bilbo’s being, into his very bones.

Thorin drew back to look at Bilbo once more. He hovered, mouth a hairsbreadth from Bilbo’s own, and Bilbo found it the easiest thing he’d ever done to whisper, ‘thank you,’ before closing the gap.

That was the last word either of them said for quite some time.

Chapter End Notes

We're almost there, now - just two more (or thereabouts) chapters to go. Hopefully the last two shouldn't take as long as this one did!

Thank you to everyone who’s stuck with this for so long. I hope you enjoyed this (slightly delayed!) chapter.
Daín’s army arrived later that same morning.

So this is what a Dwarven army looks like, thought Bilbo, mesmerised by the sight of hundreds of Dwarves marching towards the mountain in neat, even rows. Every single one of them was heavily armed, a spear in one hand, axes and swords slung on their back or hanging at their hips. Their dark grey armour covered every inch of skin, and their helmets hid their faces. To say they looked formidable was an understatement.

Apparently the Elves and Men thought so, too. Bilbo watched in amusement as Daín’s army settled alongside the gate, provocatively close to the camps of Thranduil and Bard. The Elves and Men who were sat nearest to them edged away ever so slightly, though for the most part they stubbornly held their ground.

‘Is it enough, Gwaihir?’ Bilbo asked. The eagle had arrived only an hour ago to check up on their progress, thankfully after Bilbo and Thorin had...untangled themselves from each other. Bilbo could feel himself heating up at the thought, and forcibly turned his attention to Gwaihir.

‘No, Bilbo. It is not,’ he said sadly.

‘Do the Elves look like someone’s weed in their ale, yet?’ said Dwalin as he emerged from the darkness of Erebor. An old crow was sat heavily on his forearm.

Bilbo chuckled. ‘I’m afraid I can’t see that far, Dwalin.’

‘Shame,’ grunted Dwalin. ‘They make the best faces when things don’t go their way. Like curdled milk.’

Gwaihir spoke, a series of long flutes and whistles.

‘Gwaihir says that he’s not sure about curdled milk, but he says they do look like a warg that’s just found out its prey has claws,’ translated Bilbo with a grin.

Dwalin barked out a laugh. ‘I’ll trust your sight, Master eagle,’ he said to Gwaihir. He turned away for a moment to release the crow, watching its progress as it winged towards the Dwarven army.

‘What will Daín do, do you think?’

Dwalin shrugged. ‘He’ll have to stay and fight, now. Even with an army of orcs bearing down on us.’ The Dwarf glanced, side-long, at Bilbo. ‘If he abandons us now he could be tried by his own people for treason.’

Bilbo turned to him, shocked. ‘They could do that? Even though he’s a King?’
‘There are some laws that even Kings must abide by,’ Dwalin said, ‘and one of them is this: you
don’t turn tail and run when your family is in immediate danger. And Daín is family to Thorin,
although distantly. He might not be *trialled* when he returns home, but it’d be a massive blow to his
standing. No one would respect him anymore.’

‘I see,’ said Bilbo, mulling this over. ‘But – this journey. He refused to help Thorin then, didn’t he?’

‘Aye, he did. But that was a different matter. Many saw this as a fool’s errand. They thought we
wouldn’t even reach Mirkwood.’ Dwalin grinned, and his smile was like a knife, ‘but look at us
now. All those Lords and Ladies will have to go down on bended knee when Thorin is crowned
King. *Then* we’ll see who dares call him a fool.’

Dwalin spoke so easily of coronations and what would come after, but all Bilbo could think about
was the coming battle. The last few hours had gifted him with such perfect joy that he thought he
would never feel, but reality had pressed down hard on his elation. At the first sign of Daín’s army
on the horizon, Thorin had left to warn the others and to make preparations. They were moving their
camp to the front gates so that they could be ready - at any moment - for the arrival of Azog’s hoard
of orcs.

‘Dwalin,’ said Bilbo, ‘promise me you’ll look out for him.’

There was no need to say his name – Dwalin understood.

‘You’ll need no promise from me on that front,’ said Dwalin, tone steady and as certain as mithril,
‘I’ll watch his back, as I have always done. Thorin will have his crown. He will live to see Erebor
restored.’

The unsaid, *at whatever cost*, hovered in the air between them.

‘Yes,’ said Bilbo quietly, looking away once more to stare at the sky, ‘he will live.’

No word came from the camps of King Thranduil and Bard that day, and as the hours slid by,
Bilbo’s hope for a truce began to fade. He had thought the appearance of Daín’s Dwarves would
have spurred on some manner of reaction from the Elves and Men, if only a request for more
negotiations. But they remained silent, apparently content to studiously ignore both Daín and the
King before whose doors they rested before.

With no progress made in terms of diplomacy, Bilbo found himself caught up in the process of
moving camps with the rest of the Company. However, this was not the tedious task it normally was,
for Thorin kept stealing kisses from Bilbo every time they were alone for even a handful of seconds,
and as a result Bilbo was inadvertently taught a lesson on stoicism, as he quickly had to learn how to
school his silly grin into something much more appropriate every time they were happened upon.

Still, though, Bilbo managed to fit in the time for a good argument.

‘No.’

‘Yes.’

‘No.’
‘Yes.’

‘No!’

‘Bilbo. I am going into battle whether you like it or not. You can stand there and complain about it until you go grey or I drop dead of hunger – whichever happens first - but it will not change the fact that I am going into battle with you.’

Bilbo turned away, deeply frustrated, hands clenching at his sides. The Company were not the only ones who had decided to move camps. The eagles had arrived mid-afternoon to perch on the battlements, and Luaithre, much to Bilbo’s unease, had been with them.

‘Luaithre, you’ve barely recovered from the last battle. Tell me, what use are you going to be in this one?’

‘I am fine,’ snapped Luaithre, and they both ignored Gwaihir’s, ‘no she’s not!’

‘Yes, you look the very picture of health,’ said Bilbo with as much sarcasm as he could muster. ‘You must know how stupid this is – you’d say exactly the same thing to me if I was the one injured! In fact, you’d confine me to the Eyrie!’

‘And you’d find some way of sneaking out and joining the fight,’ said Luaithre, ‘likely by persuading Tuit to carry you out.’

‘Probably,’ agreed Tuit.

Bilbo let out a heaving sigh. He was so tired of being angry, and Luaithre did have a point.

‘I can’t let you...’ he started, and then trailed off. His anger was quickly seeping from him.

‘It’s not about letting me,’ said Luaithre, gently. ‘This isn’t your decision.’

Bilbo whirled around to face her. ‘No! It’s not. But it’s my fault!’ he shouted.

Luaithre leant back on her talons. The other eagles exchanged glances behind her.

‘Oh, Bilbo,’ she said, ‘none of this is your fault.’

Bilbo tore his gaze away from her, shaking his head. Luaithre leant down to nudge him a little in the side with her beak.

‘It’s not your fault,’ she said again, ‘all that I have done, all that has passed these last few days – I would do it all again in a heartbeat.’

Bilbo put a hand to his eyes and did not respond, not even when Luaithre came to rest the tip of her beak on his shoulder. Tuit, Landroval and Gwaihir all stepped closer, forming a ring around Bilbo.

‘I will not be left behind,’ Luaithre said, ‘I will not wait in the shadow of the mountain for news of my family. While there is still strength in my body I will not leave your side, Bilbo. Would you allow me the honour of sharing this storm-stirring wind?’ she said, uttering an ancient phrase used by all eagles on the eve of a great battle.

Bilbo closed his eyes and relented. ‘Yes,’ he said and gave the traditional response, ‘for with you at my side the storm will surely turn tail and flee in fear of us.’

If only, thought Bilbo. If only.
When evening fell, Bilbo took his place at the campfire beside Thorin. Some measure of what he was feeling must have showed on his face, as Thorin immediately asked him what was wrong.

‘Nothing,’ Bilbo said with a shake of his head. At Thorin’s persistent look he added, ‘just Luaithre being unreasonable.’

‘Why do I feel like that’s a phrase I’m going to hear frequently,’ said Thorin wryly, passing Bilbo his dinner. The bowl was, as ever, full of that delightful substance called cram.

‘Because eagles are frequently stubborn,’ said Bilbo, taking a pointed spoonful of cram. He winced. Still as awful as ever.

‘A trait I’m sure Hobbit-eagles do not share at all,’ muttered Thorin under his breath.

‘What was that?’

‘Nothing,’ said Thorin.

That evening, with the campfire burning low, the Company huddled together in the shadow of the gates of Erebor. The Sun and Moon gates had been wrenched apart during Smaug’s invasion, and were now fixed in the open position. The gold and silver reliefs that decorated each of the huge gates glittered by the light of the campfire, and, high above them, Bilbo could just about make out the silhouettes of the eagles through the opening in the battlements.

Every single one of them kept their swords and axes and spears within arm’s reach that evening.

Conversation flowed easily between them late into the night. Bilbo and Thorin were sat so close to each other that Bilbo was all but leaning on Thorin - Thorin could feel the aftershocks of Bilbo’s laughter where their arms were pressed together. The Dwarves began to tell tales of the days of Erebor, and for a few short hours they were successful in banishing the threat of war that hung over all of them. They spoke, fondly and often with a smile lighting their faces, of the great feasts they remembered, the tables of the feasting halls overflowing with food, and how, on one occasion, a table had broken under the strain. Balin spoke of the way the golden bells of Náin I would ring to signal the end of the court day, while Dwalin tried to convey the sights, sounds and smells and most of all tastes of the great markets. Then, slowly at first but quickly warming to his subject, Thorin began to describe the red-orange glow that could be seen from even the highest balconies of Erebor, stoked by those who had laboured deep down at the core of the mountain day and night to create wondrous things, their forges keeping Erebor warm during even the coldest winter’s eve.

At one point, Bilbo leant over to Fíli, who was sitting next to him, and whispered, ‘is Erebor as marvellous as the tales said it was?’

‘No,’ said Fíli, smiling like a young fauntling seeing fireworks for the first time. ‘It’s better.’

They laughed and joked together as a Company, relaying the best parts of their journey, and enjoyed a mutual groan of embarrassment when they reminded themselves of the not-so glorious parts – mind you don’t include a certain incident involving trolls, Ori – and their hearts were warmed by each and every word.

Halfway through Nori’s complaints about being put in a cell in between Kíli and Fíli during the Mirkwood incident, Bilbo fell asleep, his head drifting gently down to rest on Thorin’s shoulder.
Thorin fought against the instinctual reaction of freezing, and instead discretely wrapped an arm around Bilbo’s waist to tug him closer, into a more comfortable position. Bilbo’s steady, even breath tickled at Thorin’s throat, but he made a conscious effort not to move, even when Dwalin began to make cooing noises at the two of them.

Later, when the others had finally exhausted themselves of stories and had all drifted off into sleep, Thorin carefully manoeuvred Bilbo down into his bedroll, musing that he seemed to be making a habit out of this. Once Bilbo was settled, Thorin took to his own bedroll. He lay on his side, looking at Bilbo by the light of the dying fire, and reached out to clasp one of Bilbo’s hands in his own.

Bilbo’s eyes fluttered open at the contact, bright blue gaze coming to focus on Thorin. Thorin began to retract his hand, taking Bilbo’s groggy, confused look for disapproval, but Bilbo reached out and grasped Thorin’s outstretched forearm with both hands, using it to lever himself closer to Thorin so they were sharing his bedroll.

Bilbo wasted no time in tucking his head under Thorin’s chin and wrapping an arm around Thorin’s chest, and Thorin heard him mutter, ‘silly Dwarf,’ under his breath when he had settled himself firmly against Thorin’s side. Thorin huffed out a laugh, wrapping his arms around Bilbo and rolling onto his back, so that Bilbo was half-sprawled across his front, head resting comfortably on his shoulder. Judging by Bilbo’s breathing, the Hobbit had already fallen back to sleep. Thorin ran a hand over the back of Bilbo’s head, fingers slipping through Hobbit-curls, smiling all the while, and closed his eyes to follow Bilbo into slumber.

Gwaihir met Bilbo with grim words the next morning.

‘Today, Bilbo,’ he said, golden eyes dark with foreboding, ‘they will come today.’

Bilbo turned to Thorin and relayed the message with a heavy heart. Thorin nodded, squeezed Bilbo’s wrist once, and then left to ready the Company. Bilbo allowed himself a few moments in the open air, breathing in deeply, before he followed him inside.

The Company did not hesitate in putting on their armour at the news. Quietly, they shrugged on chainmail, clipped themselves into breastplates and buckled on vambraces. Thorin was busy with his own armour – Bilbo took the opportunity to draw Kíli to one side, into the guard tower, so that the Dwarf could slip on the mithril chainmail. Bilbo begrudgingly put on Kíli’s chainmail – he wasn’t used to wearing such a great deal of protection, but it was too much of a risk to go into battle wearing nothing but his tunic. Kíli’s ordinary chainmail was hidden beneath Bilbo’s travel-worn shirt, which was still, miraculously, in one piece. The glimmer of mithril disappeared underneath the layers of Kíli’s clothes, until not a hint of it remained when Kíli put on his plate armour.

Kíli helped Bilbo into his armour, nimble fingers deftly clipping Bilbo in. Bilbo had chosen a simple breastplate with shoulder guards, as well as a set of vambraces. He didn’t dare put on any more; wearing armour was strange to him, and he was afraid that if he wore too much it would hinder his movements and wear him down too quickly. His sword was buckled to his side, his Dwarven knife in its own sheath in his belt, and he hefted his dependable spear in his free hand. Kíli declared him ready, and with a nod of thanks, and feeling unreasonably guilty, Bilbo exited the guardhouse.

He emerged just in time to see Thorin sling Orcrist onto his back, the Dwarf finishing his own preparations. Thorin had always looked like a king to Bilbo, from the moment they had first met, all those months ago in Bag End. He had looked liked a king even when wearing ragged second hand
clothes, but now...now he was transformed. It was the way he was wearing the armour, mused Bilbo, they way it sat about his shoulders like it had been made for him. His armour was plain, unadorned for one of his rank, and similar in colour to those worn by Daín’s soldiers – a deep, grey-blue that seemed to absorb light. With the armour and with Orcrist on his back, Thorin’s presence seemed magnified, as though he had a gravity all of his own. *This is your intended*, Bilbo reminded himself, *this is the Dwarf that decided you were worthy enough to court, to hear his Name.*

It was too much, too heavier a thought for him to bear at that moment. He turned his attention to Kíli and Fíli instead, curious as to how they had prepared. Kíli had claimed the finest arrows the armoury could provide, fletched in Durin blue. One quiver-full hung from his waist, another slung over his back along with his sword, and Bilbo knew that every single one of them would find their mark in the hearts of orcs. Fíli was just as heavily armed, if not more; he had not swapped his twin swords, but Bilbo was in no doubt that he was carrying as many knives as a Dwarf could, plus a few more. Both of them were wearing borrowed armour, similar to Thorin’s, and Bilbo knew Kíli and Thorin had likely run a critical eye over each one, and was certain that the finest armour in all of Erebor sat on their shoulders.

The Company was arranged in its familial groups, each of them taking a quiet moment to say what needed to be said before the battle. Bilbo stood slightly to one side and watched as Thorin turned to Kíli and Fíli, clasping their shoulders and drawing them close so that he could talk to them in low, hushed tones. Bilbo couldn’t hear what was being said, but he saw Thorin’s mouth shape the words, ‘I am so proud of both of you.’

The three of them embraced. Bilbo looked away, not wanting to intrude further on a private moment, but a voice called his name.

It was Fíli, his arm open and beckoning towards Bilbo. Thorin was smiling at him, corners of his eyes crinkling, gaze warm. With no hesitation whatsoever, Bilbo stepped forwards to be embraced, Thorin’s arm low on his back, Fíli’s across his shoulders, Kíli with his head ducked down, though Bilbo could still see his grin. Bilbo had to close his eyes for a moment against the rush of feelings as he was hugged tightly, then released, Thorin stepping back. He eyed each of them fondly before he turned away to address the rest of the Company.

‘My friends,’ he said to them, and every head turned in his direction, ‘we have achieved more than I ever thought possible, even in my wildest dreams. Whatever your reason for joining this quest, you stand beside me here and now as the bravest Dwarves – and Hobbit – that I have ever known. Today, I would grant each and every one of you the honour of *ghachel uzhhyad sanzigil.*’

There were gasps at this proclamation, dropped jaws and astonished expressions. Glóin had to turn to Óin to confirm that what he had heard was correct.

‘What’s that?’ Bilbo whispered to a mildly surprised Fíli.

‘It means they don’t have to bow to him,’ Fíli explained.

‘But I’ve never seen them bow to him on this journey,’ said Bilbo confusedly.

‘No, Bilbo – you don’t understand. When he’s crowned King *everyone* will bow to him, even Kíli and I, even Dwalin and Balin. To not bow, to not be required to acknowledge him as King...that is a grand thing indeed. It has only been granted once or twice, to my knowledge.’

The Company would have remained hushed and quiet, but Dwalin stepped forward. ‘I think the honour’s ours,’ he said, and swept into a low bow before Thorin. It was not the same bow he had made to Bilbo at Bag End – instead of maintaining eye contact, Dwalin lowered his line of sight to
the ground.

Thorin shook his head and looked as though he were about to protest, but Dwalin’s gesture spurred on a chorus of ‘ayes’ and, ‘all ours, King,’ from the others. One by one the Company bowed before Thorin, almost in unison. Kíli and Fíli even swept into a low bow each, and Bilbo found himself sweeping into a bow alongside them, as gracefully as he could manage. When he straightened he found that Thorin was giving him a look that spoke volumes. Bilbo merely shrugged, grinned at him in response and mouthed, ‘don’t get used to it’, at him.

‘Thank you,’ Thorin said to them as the others righted themselves. He was as dignified as ever, but Bilbo could tell that he had been deeply touched by the gesture.

‘And I think that’s enough sentiment for one day,’ said Dwalin, ‘now let’s kick some bony orcish arse.’

This was met with a roar of agreement from the Company at large. Bilbo laughed and shook his head, ‘he just had to ruin the moment, didn’t he?’

‘He always does,’ groaned Thorin, though Bilbo could see he was holding back a smile, ‘he’s allergic to sentiment.’

Bilbo opened his mouth to reply, but he was cut off by the eagle voice that suddenly echoed through the hall.

‘What was that?’

‘That was Gwaihir,’ said Bilbo, ‘he says there’s a herald from Bard’s camp on his way here.’

The eagles nodded to Thorin in acknowledgement when he emerged into the winter sun. Bilbo spared a moment to tug gently on Tuit’s wingtip as he passed him, to stand beside Thorin and watch as a group of Men made their way steadily towards the gate.

‘Is it just me, or does it look like there’s a storm approaching?’ Bilbo muttered as they waited for the arrival of the Men.

‘Metaphorically or literally?’ Thorin replied.

Bilbo quirked a smile. ‘Both,’ he said, ‘but in all seriousness, I don’t like the look of those storm clouds over there. What do you think, Tuit?’

Tuit began to reply to Bilbo’s question in hushed tones. Thorin tuned out the conversation, staring instead at the Men. He noted that there were no Elves among the approaching party – was this a conscious decision on Thranduil’s part, perhaps? He inwardly speculated as to what that meant.

‘Hail, King Under the Mountain!’ cried one of the Men when they were near enough to see Thorin up on the battlements.

‘Has your King come to a decision?’ Thorin called back.

The man exchanged a glance with one of his soldiers. ‘He has,’ he said.

‘And the Elvenking agrees, does he?’
‘He does.’

Thorin, growing more impatient by the moment, all but flung back, ‘well? What is it?’

The man drew a breath, opened his mouth, and said, ‘they have decided that-‘

He was silenced by the arrow that pierced his throat, whatever words he was about to speak dying with him. His men were thrown into confusion, shouting and cursing and looking for the culprit. One of them even claimed Dwarven treachery. But Thorin had no time for ridiculous accusations – at the first sign of blood he had immediately moved to block Bilbo from any further arrows, pushing the Hobbit back towards the safety of Erebor.

Bilbo shoved back at him, pointing urgently towards the horizon. Around them the eagles had half-opened their wings, some of them calling out in what sounded like a battlecry to Thorin’s ears.

‘Look Thorin!’ Bilbo said, ‘there! They have come!’

Thorin looked to the horizon. A handful of small shapes were just cresting the one of the foothills, far in the distance. What Bilbo had mistaken for storm clouds was in fact an army. In the scant seconds since the herald had died, hundreds upon hundreds of orcs had appeared, a veritable swarm of them, until there seemed to be not a spare inch of horizon free of them.

Below the front gates, the camps of Daín, Bard and Thranduil had been thrown into upheaval. Men, Elves and Dwarves scrambled for their weapons, and Bilbo could see the distinctive figure of Gandalf striding through the camps, rousing members of every race, calling them to arms, his staff glowing with unchecked power. Bilbo’s heart began to race in his chest, in anticipation and fear. He and Thorin exchanged a desperate glance before they stepped back into the darkness of the mountain.

The Company, waiting by the front gates, knew something was wrong. If Thorin’s face had not given it away, then the noise from outside would have surely told them what was happening.

‘To arms,’ Thorin commanded as he came to stand at their head.

‘And Thranduil and Bard? Will they fight with us?’ asked Dwalin, hefting his great battle axes in each hand.

‘They have no choice,’ Thorin said, raising his voice to a near-shout as the din from outside became almost deafening, a huge roar that seemed to rise up around them. ‘They either stand and fight with us, or they die. All of you, behind me! If you remember one thing in the coming fight then let it be this: we stick together. Keep your formation. Do not let the enemy break us up into smaller groups.’

The Company nodded their understanding. Bilbo gripped his spear in one hand, feeling the familiar weight, the worn whorls of the grain under his fingertips. They were stood before a large side door, set to one side. It was weighted – when Thorin gave the signal, Dori would heave it open, and it would close the mountain off behind them, ensuring that no orc ever stepped foot inside of Erebor.

Thorin drew Orcrist from its scabbard. Behind Bilbo there came the sound of weapons being drawn and readied. They were separated from the outside world by rock several feet thick, but to Bilbo it may as well been paper; when there came the riotous noise of the first clashes of the battle, muffled slightly by the gates, Bilbo flinched. He wondered how many had been killed in this first wave alone.

‘Now,’ said Thorin to Dori, and the door swung open. Bilbo blinked against the bright light that poured in through the door.
Thorin turned back to look at them all one last time.

‘For Erebor,’ he said, and they echoed his words, Bilbo roaring with them.

And together, they charged into battle one last time.

There are few words that can describe battle on such a large scale. The waves of orcs and wargs charged in a relentless tide, breaking upon the Men and Elves and Dwarves who stood firm against them. The wargs and their riders lead the rush, falling on their prey with snarling, hungry jaws, the rest of the army following in their wake. Many fell to orcish arrows and orcish steel as the army of Azog slammed into the waiting ranks of the Free Folk.

But they were met with much resistance. Thranduil’s Elves soon met the terrible, furious hoards with their shining weapons, sending out flurries of arrows that shone like stars in the night’s sky, until orcish blood mixed with the red blood of the Free Folk on the rocky ground of the Lonely Mountain. At the head of the Elves stood Thranduil, Legolas by his side, and their weapons were among the first to slice into orc-flesh.

The resilience of the Elves was matched by the brutal blows of Dain’s Dwarves on one side, and the quick swords of Bard’s Men on the other, but in spite of their bravery, the sheer numbers of orcs began to make them lose ground, inch by inch, forcing them back towards the front gates. Lighting rolled in the belly of the great black storm clouds high in the sky above, and as thunder rumbled through the valley, the voices of those below met the storm shout for shout, battle-cries and screams mingling until they were indiscernible from each other.

But then from the mountain came the sound eagle cries, their song long and loud and joyous, delighting in battle, and many orcs and wargs trembled to hear it. Tuit, Landroval, Gwaithir and Luaithre opened their wings to their fullest extent as Thorin and his Company charged from the mountain to meet the orcs in battle. The eagles took to the sky, the black-purple clouds offsetting their bright gold feathers. With Orcrist held high, the Company following and the eagles acting as their vanguards, Thorin dove into the ranks of orcs. Bilbo was at his side, his spear flashing out to rob one, then two, then three orcs of their lives, pushing forward alongside Thorin and the others, pushing deeper, knowing their charge would rally the other armies and bolster their standing.

The eagles hovered above, watching their progress. Gwaithir, at the head of the formation, let out a scream before snapping his wings closed and plummeting into a dive. Without hesitation, the others followed him.

It was desperate, and chaotic, and bloody, but the Company stayed together. They kept each other safe and watched each other’s backs, and as the hours of battle wore on, they seemed almost tireless.

Bilbo’s arms began to ache with the effort of repetition, and each orc he killed seemed to be replaced by a dozen more. His hands were slick with orc-blood, his breath shortening more and more with every passing minute. A blue-fletched arrow narrowly missed his cheek, hitting an orc that had been about to slash at his spine. Bilbo didn’t have the time to thank Kili – he was too busy eviscerating an orc that had drifted too close to Thorin. The two of them were fighting almost back-to-back, Orcrist lashing out in smooth, lightning-fast strikes that were devastating to the enemy. His cheeks were splattered with orc blood, and a part of Bilbo thrilled to see him like this, a relentless, terrifying warrior, striking down anything that dared stray into his path.
And yet, Thorin was not invulnerable. A stray arrow - a lucky shot, most likely - hit Thorin in one of the few weak spots in his armour, in between the shoulder joints.

‘Thorin!’ Bilbo cried.

Throin reached up and tugged the arrow free. ‘I’m fine,’ he grunted, ‘watch your back!’

He was truly tireless, and Bilbo hurried to keep up with him.

But still more orcs surged forwards, until they were akin to an ocean to Bilbo. Elves, Dwarves and Men alike fell, the fighting intensifying, the air rent with warg howls and the rallying cries of Thorin, Bard and Dáin. It seemed hopeless – and the reality of the situation was beginning to take its toll. No matter how hard they fought, they were losing. Victory was beyond them.

The fighting up on Ravenhill, where the Elves were making their stand, was just as fierce. The Elf-lords, Gandalf among them, were refusing to concede any more ground, as bleak as their prospects seemed to be, even as great numbers of their kin fell in each new wave of orcs. They banded together, careful not to be split apart. But with a cry their prince was torn from the ranks by a sudden surge, the orcs quick to descend on him relentlessly, tearing Legolas’ bow from his hands. The Elf reached for his long knives with the swift speed that was gifted to his kind, but he was not quick enough – a warg bore down on him, its long, fearsome teeth ready to tear out his throat.

But it was not Legolas’ day to die. The warg was torn away, gripped in the claws of a great eagle whose talons dug deep into the beast’s sides, squeezing the snapping warg until Legolas heard its ribcage give way and collapse. The warg was unceremoniously tossed aside.

The eagle stood before him, its beak painted red with blood, its claws flecked with gore. ‘Rise, little princeling,’ it screamed at the astonished Legolas, ‘you must push them back!’

Another warg leapt for the eagle, but the great bird merely turned and snapped it up in its beak, holding the warg in place so that it could rend at the warg’s flesh with its claws.

Legolas took a deep breath, snatched up his bow, and leapt to his feet, an arrow already sliding into place even as he regained his footing. His sharp sight glanced west – and his heart was lifted by what he saw there.

‘Deas,’ breathed Bilbo back in the thick of the fighting, having seen what Legolas had sighted. ‘Deas!’ And in spite of the bloodshed all around him, he laughed aloud in joy.

A flock of eagles was winging its way towards the battle. In the lead was Deas, his brother Solas at his side, and it seemed that every eagle in the Eyrie followed behind him. On the back of the strong storm-wind, they swiftly came upon the fighting, their voices and wing-beats carrying even over the sounds of the battle. In tight formation they dove, wave after wave, striking the left flank where the orcs were gaining the most ground, and their talons and claws caused much devastation. The fledglings were quick to join them, strengthening the left flank, protecting Bilbo and the others by focusing their energies in this one section.

Bilbo’s elation at the eagles’ arrival did not last long. He, Thorin, Kili and Fili had been cut off from the rest of the Company, and Bilbo’s prediction that the orcs would focus their energies on Thorin had rung true. Still, though, until then their little band had remained untouched, nothing more than a few scrapes to show for all the damage they had dealt out.

From one moment to the next, this relative safety vanished. Without warning and with little time to prepare, a white warg, flanked by a warg on either side, charged full-tilt through its own ranks,
trampling over Dwarf and Man and orc alike. Such was the ferocity of its charge that Thorin had barely a moment to shout, ‘look out!’ before it had descended upon them.

The two ordinary wargs attacked Throin and Bilbo, and were quickly despatched. But the white warg – the white warg headed directly for Thorin’s heir.

The white warg leapt-

‘Fíli!’ screamed Kíli, and slammed bodily into his brother.

-and its jaws clamped shut around Kíli’s torso.

‘No!’ roared Thorin, he and Bilbo both starting towards Kíli, but Fíli got there first, plunging both his swords hilt-deep into the creature’s neck and pulling down, ripping open its skin. The beast snarled, letting go of Kíli, turning its head to snap at Fíli, but the Dwarf was too quick. With a snarl of his own Fíli pulled out one of his swords from the warg, slashing it across the warg’s jaws, slicing open its mouth. He then unsheathed a long dagger from his belt and stabbed it into the beast’s ribcage, finding and stopping its beating heart.

Thorin had reached Kíli’s side, hand reaching out towards his nephew, expecting to find blood and torn flesh. Instead, to his astonishment, Kíli sat up, took an arrow in hand and stabbed the orc that had been trying to sneak up on Thorin.

‘Kíli, I don’t!’ began Thorin, uncomprehending, but then he caught sight of mithril glittering around Kíli’s neck, and fear caused his heart to skip a beat.

Bilbo had not turned to see if Kíli was alright. There was no need. Instead, he had held his ground, knowing that if the white warg had charged then there was only one thing that could possibly follow.

He was not disappointed. From the tide of orcs strode one unmistakable figure, and the pale orc had eyes only for the Line of Durin. But Bilbo, his worst fears being realised before his very eyes, dashed forwards, blocking Azog’s path. He held his spear in both hands in front of him and snarled, ‘You will not take them!’

Those pale, unearthly eyes turned towards the Hobbit standing defiantly in front of him. Recognition flickered over his features. His fanged mouth moved, shaping words in his orcish tongue, thin lips moving to bear his teeth at Bilbo in anticipation. Bilbo bared his teeth back, fury thrumming through his veins.

Thorin, Kíli and Fíli, now separated from Bilbo by many metres of battleground, started forward with every intention of joining Bilbo, but a huge group of orcs and wargs rushed in to fill the space, cutting them off from Bilbo altogether. They fought more fiercely than ever, desperation quickening their movements in their haste to get to Bilbo.

Azog raised his mace, and the battle began. Bilbo danced away as Azog swung the mace out, so brutal a swipe that Bilbo felt the displacement of air even as he moved out of the way, flicking out his spear, hitting Azog’s thigh, though he did not achieve anything more than a scratch as Azog whipped the mace around, slamming into the ground where Bilbo had stood only moments before.

Bilbo was clearly outmatched, and intensely aware that any one of the blows he was so narrowly sidestepping could kill him in an instant. Still, he held his ground. Still he dodged and darted, claiming strike after strike on Azog, for all the difference it seemed to make. His spear lashed out in rapid stabs, scoring a glancing blow over Azog’s stomach, retracting again so that Bilbo could duck out of the way of the mace that would have surely knocked his head clean off of his shoulders, had
Behind Bilbo, Thorin snapped an orc’s spine with barely a glance in the creature’s direction, his eyes fixed on the battle ahead, heart in his throat as he saw Bilbo stumble backwards. A swing of Orcrist claimed another life, but still more orcs, more wargs, poured in to replace the fallen, dogging his every footstep, stemming his forward momentum. On either side of him, Kíli and Fíli fought more wildly than they had at any other point in the battle.

‘Bilbo!’

But Bilbo did not hear Thorin’s cries.

This wasn’t working. Bilbo could feel himself starting to panic. He needed a direct hit to Azog, something that would actually slow the beast down, and he needed it now. Azog was keeping him out of range with those terrible swings of his mace, but if Bilbo could just – there! Azog swung the mace wide, leaving his body open for half a second, and whereas before Bilbo had been cautious, now, spurred on by terror, he pushed forwards instead of simply sidestepping, throwing all of his weight into the spear, finding his mark just below Azog’s ribcage, pushing the spearhead in and up.

This was when the battle turned. Any normal enemy would have reeled back - or at the very least flinched at such a grievous wound - and Bilbo was instinctively expecting such a reaction. But Azog was no ordinary orc - he barely seemed to feel it. And so, for half a second, Bilbo froze. He hesitated, and his hesitation cost him. Azog’s clawed hand lashed out, the sharp spikes biting deep into Bilbo’s right shoulder, past skin and muscle until it hit bone. Bilbo screamed in pain as Azog picked him up and tossed him aside as though he were no more than a rag doll.

He hit the ground, hard. For a handful of precious seconds he couldn’t think, could barely breathe. The entirety of his right arm was ablaze with excruciating pain, his vision blurry from his head slamming into the ground. Get up, he told himself though the haze clouding his vision and his thoughts. Get up, or you die. Thorin dies. Kíli and Fíli die. Get up!

He blinked, heaved himself up on one elbow. He’d landed a mortal blow on Azog – had it been enough?

It had not. His eyesight had cleared enough to watch, in utter despair, as Azog put his good hand to the spear still lodged in his chest, to snap the shaft with no effort at all - the wood splintering with a sound like bone snapping - and wrenched the spearhead free. The blade dislodged with a sickening sound, and was thrown aside. Azog, covered in blood and gore, grinned in a sick parody of joy at the Hobbit sprawled, defenceless, before him.

But Bilbo refused to let it end there. With a monumental effort, he stumbled upright, swaying in place. His right arm was all but useless to him, hanging limply by his side. Blood streamed from the puncture wounds, running in red ribbons over his skin, worming its way through his shirt, chainmail and armour, melding the layers together. He fumbled for the sword at his side, drew it free with a trembling hand. Across from him, Azog did the same, exchanging mace for sword, lunging out even as he drew it from its scabbard. Bilbo escaped the wild blow - barely. But the strength had gone from his legs and he could not possibly hope to sidestep the next lunge – instead, desperately, he tried to block it. His sword was knocked out of his hand -

- and Thorin tore through the ranks of orcs in time to see Azog plunge the cruel blade deep into Bilbo’s stomach.

For a moment, the world fell away from Thorin. Not a sound reached his ears as he watched as Azog’s sword was pulled free in a spray of blood. Bilbo collapsed to the blood stained ground. He
did not get back up.

For centuries after the battle, Dwarves would talk of the way that no cry of grief was uttered by Thorin at the sight his One crumpling to the ground. They would speak in quiet tones of the utter devastation written plain for all to see on the heir of Durin’s face – such a lost expression, they would say. A Dwarf that had lost his One is a Dwarf that has lost everything, they would shudder.

And that, it is said, is the most dangerous kind of Dwarf of all.

Azog stalked forward, victorious, to stand over the fallen Hobbit. He met Thorin’s line of sight across the battlefield, barking out a strain of laughter, knowing that what he was about to do would damage Thorin more deeply than any mortal wound ever could. The orc raised his sword, preparing for the downward stroke that would decapitate Bilbo, the edge of the blade flashing in the light of the fading sun as it arced downwards.

But Orcrist met the downward swing.

Thorin pushed back against the orc’s sword with such strength that Azog actually had to step back. Thorin’s eyes were dark, expression murderous and unrecognisable, devoid of all reason. He rushed at Azog, slashing at him again and again with such recklessness and savagery that Azog was forced to meet each of them with his own swings. Azog’s animalistic fury was matched now by Thorin’s own – the Dwarf had become a force of vengeance that wanted only for Azog’s spilt blood.

But nevertheless, it was still not enough. Azog’s sword caught an opening in Thorin’s defence when he parried too wildly, the edge of his sword tearing at Thoin’s side. Thorin roared, tried to catch Azog’s sword hand with the tip of Orcrist, but all logic and thought had gone from his movements. Azog slashed upwards, slicing the front of Thorin’s chest, and Thorin lost his footing, Orcrist leaving his hand.

Azog pressed home his advantage, stamping down hard on Thorin’s chest with dark joy. A cry of utter pain tore itself from Thorin’s throat. His hand fumbled on the ground, connecting with something metallic. The tip of Bilbo’s spear. Azog crouched over him, sword at the ready to stop Thorin’s heart, but an arrow sliced open his cheek. It was not a great distraction to the orc, but it was enough, diverting his attention for just long enough that Thorin was granted a bare second to leap up and, using the spear head like a dagger, stabbed Azog in his flank.

At last, the orc snarled in pain. Thorin snatched up Orcrist, knocked aside the sword-blow that came up to stop him, and sliced at the back of one of Azog’s knees, cutting the orc’s hamstring. Azog fell to one knee. Thorin brought Orcrist up and around. The first swing sliced through the orc’s throat. The second cut off his head.

Azog’s corpse and skull quietly toppled to the ground, a nightmare banished forever.

It was done. It was over. With Azog’s death the tide of the battle had truly turned; Elves and Dwarves and Men were pushing back against those orcs who were still fighting. Already a large part of Azog’s orcs were turning tail and fleeing. They had won.

But Thorin spared no thought for any of this. Orcrist tumbled from his fingers as he turned away from Azog’s corpse, at Bilbo’s side in an instant. Kíli and Fíli were not far behind, dropping to their knees besides Bilbo’s body, watching with grief etched on their young faces as their uncle gently lifted the Hobbit off of the ground and into his arms. Bilbo was still breathing, but barely, his chest moving in rabbit-quick movements.

‘Bilbo,’ Thorin said desperately, voice utterly broken, ‘Bilbo, you fool, you bundushathur , why
weren’t you wearing the coat?’ and then, in a bare whisper, ‘stay with me, please, stay with me.’

Bilbo’s eyes fluttered open, and Thorin sobbed in relief. The Hobbit could hear his eagle kin, high in the sky above. His brow furrowed in confusion, for he recognised their song. This is the way eagles cry, their voices high and piercing, screaming with anger, with grief. But who are they crying for? Bilbo wondered.

Awareness seeped back into his mind, and he became conscious of the hot blood pumping from his abdomen, of the creeping numbness in his fingers, and he had his answer.

Thorin was hovering over him, the Dwarf’s eyes over-bright with tears. He was grasping at Bilbo desperately, one hand on Bilbo’s face as though he could hold Bilbo there by will alone. His touch was ghostly to Bilbo. He could barely feel it at all. Thorin’s lips moved but no sound reached Bilbo’s ears.

I have to tell him, thought Bilbo. His breath was coming in wet, choked-off gasps. I have to say...before it’s too late. He has to know-

Against his will, his line of sight slipped away from Thorin, to stare beyond him. The sky above was brushed with deep blue, tinged with a wash of gold from the setting sun. It was wide, and endless, and utterly perfect.

Darkness swept up to claim him on silent wings.
The Aftermath

Chapter Notes

There was originally supposed to be just one final chapter. Unfortunately, that chapter then became far longer than planned, and had to be split in two. I'm sorry about this - I have to beg your patience for just a while longer. The next and final chapter should be along in the next two days, I promise.

It was near midnight when he made his way towards the King’s tent. Torches lit his way and Dwarves watched his passage warily; many a hand drifted towards weapons that had not been put far out of reach, though the battle had been won many hours ago. But for all the untrusting eyes on him, he was not stopped, not even when he reached his destination. The truce was holding, then.

There were no Dwarven guards at the entrance to the King’s tent, but the door was flanked by two Eagles of Manwë. They looked up at his approach, their golden eyes sparking with approval. The one on the right bowed his head in acknowledgement, and, after a moment’s hesitation, the one of the left copied the gesture.

He nodded back and without further delay swept into the tent.

Two things immediately struck him – first was the near-stifling heat, the fire stoked high, burning fiercely to ward off the winter’s chill. The second was that there was another eagle sat in the corner of the tent, its head tucked under its wing, fast asleep. No wonder the tent had been built so tall, he thought.

Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain, leapt up as soon as he entered, whirling around to face him, blocking his view of the bed.

‘Get out,’ spat the Dwarf. He was holding himself stiffly upright, and if his pale skin and sweating brow were any indication, he was doing so under a great deal of pain.

‘I believe there is one here who has need of my help,’ said the Elvenking, his sharp sight taking in the dark shadows under Thorin’s eyes and the wooden courting bead in his hair. Interesting, thought Thranduil.

‘Have you no shame?’ Thorin growled, ‘can you not leave me to grieve in peace?’

The flaps at the entrance of the tent moved again, and another Elf entered. Prince Legolas came to stand beside his father.

‘There will be no need to grieve,’ said Legolas, ‘if you allow my father to tend to Bilbo.’

‘And why should I believe,’ said Thorin lowly, through gritted teeth, ‘that your father would do such a thing for a Hobbit he does not know?’

‘It is true, I have met Bilbo Baggins only once,’ said Thranduil, ‘but a debt is owed, Thorin Oakenshield. One of the Eagles of Manwë saved my son’s life. He has asked that I repay this debt by healing Bilbo Baggins.’
Thorin’s dark eyes flickered between Thranduil and his son. He still looked to be on the verge of fury.

‘Please,’ said Legolas, ‘we mean you no harm. I would count Bilbo as a friend.’

Both his father and Thorin snapped their eyes to Legolas.

‘He made no mention of you,’ Thorin said, looking Legolas up and down and apparently finding him wanting, ‘to my knowledge you have not spoken to each other at all. I did not realise that the Elves handed out their friendship so easily - only that they would throw it aside in an instant.’

‘We had....similar goals in mind when we met in Mirkwood. My Ada was not aware of this until now,’ said Legolas with great care. He felt the weight of his father’s gaze on him; Thranduil raised his eyebrows a tiny fraction, and Legolas knew that the matter was not resolved. We will have words later, said the look.

‘Regardless,’ said Thranduil, turning back to Thorin, ‘I am here to help, if you would simply step aside.’

Thorin’s upper lip curled in a sneer. ‘What can you do that our healers cannot?’

Thranduil had lived for far too long to respond with the anger such a ridiculous comment deserved. Instead he said, mildly, ‘I have lived for thousands of years, Thorin Oakenshield. With long life comes great knowledge.’

Thorin opened his mouth to retort to this, but the eagle in the corner of the tent stirred and lifted up its head. Thranduil recognised it as the eagle Legolas had described to him, the one whose wounds his son had stitched up.

‘Their intentions are good, Thorin,’ said the eagle. ‘And besides, I will be here to keep an eye on them.’

Thorin could not possibly understand the eagle’s words. Thranduil expected more arguments, more protests from the Dwarf. But he watched, fascinated, as Thorin looked to the eagle, meeting her eyes across the room. After a few moments of silent communication, the fight went out of Thorin’s exhausted body.

‘If you hurt him,’ he said to Thranduil, ‘you will not leave this tent alive.’

He stepped aside, moving over to stand by the eagle, revealing the bed upon which Bilbo Baggins lay. The Hobbit was deathly white, as pale as the sheets he lay on, a blanket drawn up to his shoulders. His hair lay lankly in a halo about his head, though someone had taken great care to precisely and neatly braid a section of his hair, a bright gold bead tying it off. Thranduil could hear a whisper of a breath passing through the Hobbit’s slightly parted, pale lips. If he had not been able to sense the life fluttering weakly at the core of Bilbo, the Elvenking would have thought him dead.

Curiously, there was another bed set up not far from Bilbo’s, and it, too, was occupied. Thranduil could just about see a hint of wild brown hair, the bed’s occupant tucked so deeply down into the bed that no other part of him was visible. Thranduil spared no thought to this – whoever it was, they were clearly fast asleep, and he was not here to tend to them.

He crossed the room to the Hobbit’s bed, carefully removing the weighty blankets to reveal a heavily swaddled torso and shoulder. The bandages looked to be fresh, but already blood was seeping through.
‘I will need a great deal of hot water,’ Thranduil said over his shoulder to Legolas, consciously keeping to Westron for the moment for Thorin’s benefit, ‘tell Tauriel we will need more herbs and fresh thread. And a chair, I think, for the King Under the Mountain – before he collapses from the strain of standing.’

‘I will need no such thing,’ said Thorin, glaring at Legolas.

Legolas hastened from the tent.

Thranduil narrowed his focus to the Hobbit before him, omitting all else from his thoughts but his patient, his mind already calculating what herbs he would need and in what quantities, and attempting to predict the damage that lay beneath the bandages.

‘You must live, Master Hobbit,’ Thranduil said in Sindarin to Bilbo, ‘I fear the consequences should you lose this fight.’

Thranduil and Legolas worked tirelessly into the small hours of the morning. Thorin watched every second, unflinching, and did not look away, not even when Thranduil began to thread his needle in preparation for the first stitch. He stubbornly remained standing, ignoring the unused chair, though when the first strains of sunlight began to filter into the tent, he began to lean on Luaithre, the eagle easily taking his weight.

At noon, Thranduil stepped back from Bilbo with a sigh. His hands were bloodied, and he gratefully washed them in the basin of water Legolas had fetched.

‘I have done all I can for him,’ he said to Thorin.

‘Is that it?’ said Thorin in a rasp, ‘you’re leaving now? He has not even stirred.’

‘He likely will remain unconscious for the next few days,’ said Thranduil, and the glance he sent in Thorin’s direction held a hint of reprimand, ‘is has been only a few hours, and there are others who have need of my attention. I cannot work miracles. Not in such a short amount of time, at least,’ he said with a hint levity about the corners of his mouth.

The Elvenking took a moment to look at his patient. ‘He is strong,’ he said, almost to himself, ‘it is a marvel that he has lasted this long. Perhaps there is something else at work here...’ he trailed off, eyes distant.

‘What do you mean?’ said Thorin when the silence had stretched on for too long.

Thranduil shook his head. ‘It is nothing to fear,’ he said, ‘regardless – this is not the work of evil, whatever it is. I will return at sunset to check on his bandages.’

He expected no thanks from the Dwarf, nor any farewells. Without another word he left the tent, Legolas following behind with a respectful nod in Thorin’s direction. They were both grateful that there was no need to duck down as they passed through the door.

When he was sure he was truly alone once more, Thorin Oakenshield began to cross the room in small, painful steps. Every inch seemed to cost him, until he all but collapsed into the chair by the bed, letting out a long, steady breath. His broken ribs creaked and complained at the exhale. Luaithre trilled at him, probably a reprimand for standing upright for so long. She then took to her own rest,
tucking her head under her wing once more. Thorin wasn’t the only one who was recovering from his wounds, after all – Luaithre had ripped her stitches wide open during the battle, and had been nicked by an arrow just above her right wing joint. Thorin was certain that both of these things would make Bilbo hopping mad.

If he ever woke up.

Thorin took one of Bilbo’s hands in his own. The Hobbit’s skin seemed cold to the touch, his palm callused and rough from wielding his spear, the knuckles bloody and torn. Wake up, thought Thorin. Wake up, so that I can be angry at you for breaking your promise, because I would rather be angry than be grieving.

It had become his mantra of late. It made no difference whatsoever, Thorin knew, but it made him feel marginally better.

The tent’s other occupant began to stir. Thorin watched out of the corner of his eye as his nephew emerged from the nest of blankets, blinking blearily and scrubbing the sleep from his eyes. He froze when he caught sight of Thorin.

‘Uncle?’ said Kíli, and Thorin thought he sounded strangely guilty.

‘You fell asleep, Kíli. You needed to rest.’

‘Yes, I’m sorry,’ Kíli said, ‘I only meant to close my eyes for five minutes-‘

‘You should go and get some food. You need to keep your strength up,’ Thorin said, taking in Kíli’s still-exhausted appearance.

Thanks to the mithril chainmail, Kíli had escaped the battle relatively unscathed, suffering nothing more than a gash to his thigh. The wound was deep, but it was hardly life-threatening by any means. Thorin knew, though, that Kíli was at risk from infection, and he needed rest and food to ward it off.

Kíli nodded shakily. ‘I’ll, I’ll go and fetch some,’ he said, ‘would you like any?’

Thorin shook his head. Out of the corner of his eye he watched Kíli push himself to his feet, noting with approval that Kíli could put most of his weight on his injured leg. His nephew slowly and carefully limped to the tent door, though he paused on the threshold.

‘Uncle?’ Kíli waited for Thorin to turn to him, before continuing, ‘I need...I need to ask if...’ he trailed off, and Thorin noted distantly that Kíli looked like a Dwarf half his age, so wide-eyed was his expression.

‘What is it, Kíli?’ Thorin said tiredly.

Kíli took a breath and tried to begin again, but something flashed across his face and he smiled, tight lipped and stiff. ‘It’s nothing,’ he said, and all but fled from the tent.

Thorin frowned, but he was too drained to think much more of his nephew’s strange exit. Instead he turned back to Bilbo, rubbing a hand over his face and hoping his gamble on the Elvenking’s healing abilities would pay off, and soon.
As promised, Thranduil returned at sunset. He checked over Bilbo’s wounds with a quick, clinical efficiency while Legolas put a teapot full of herbs and water on the fire to heat. Thorin initially thought that this was for Bilbo, but he was proved wrong when Legolas presented him with a flagon full of an earthy-smelling, darkly-coloured drink.

‘What’s this?’

‘It’s for you,’ said Legolas, ‘it will ease your pain.’

Thorin eyed the offered cup suspiciously and did not take it. Legolas put it on a little side table that stood next to the second bed, and Thorin had the distinct impression that the Elf was trying very hard not to roll his eyes. Thorin couldn’t help but feel a touch of satisfaction at that, petty as it was.

Neither Thranduil nor Legolas attempted any further conversation, finishing their work and leaving the tent with an unspoken promise to return. Thorin looked at the flagon, then at Luaiithre. But the eagle was still fast asleep, and so Thorin took the flagon and ducked out of the tent. The eagles guarding the tent were still there, and Thorin thought he recognised both of them; he could say with a fair amount of certainty that the one of the left was Tuit, and the one on the right Gwaihir. They looked up at his approach.

‘Is this poison?’ he said to Gwaihir, holding the flagon out.

Gwaihir gave him what could only be called a disdainful look. Thorin ignored the caws emitted from Tuit at his question. He was sure that the eagle was laughing at him.

‘Is it harmful in any way?’ Thorin persisted.

Gwaihir snapped his beak and rearranged his wings. He very deliberately shook his head, and then squawked. Thorin did not understand this latter part, but he could translate the implication well enough: ‘drink the damn thing, you fool.’

With a nod of thanks, Thorin re-entered the tent and retook his spot beside Bilbo’s bed. He sniffed at the drink, and then – begrudgingly - took a small sip of the still-warm drink.

It tasted of autumn, of fresh apples and of spices and herbs that were foreign to his tongue. It was not unpleasant. He waited for a handful of minutes and, after feeling no ill effects, drank the rest. In the privacy of his mind he could admit that it wasn’t half bad, and that the ache in his wound and in his ribs had already numbed a fraction.

‘Thorin,’ said a friendly voice from the tent entrance. It was Balin, and he was holding two bowls of steaming stew. He offered one to Thorin, who took it half-heartedly.

‘How is he?’ said Balin with a gesture in Bilbo’s direction, his old, but still sharp eyes flicking over the Hobbit’s still form.

‘No change.’

‘I have heard that the Elvenking and his son have paid a visit,’ said Balin.

‘They have,’ Thorin confirmed. He blinked, hard – the tiredness that he had kept at bay through sheer stubbornness until that point seemed to be creeping up on him, weighing his eyelids down. ‘They owed the eagles a favour, apparently. He has been healing Bilbo.’

‘Let us hope that it works. But his presence in this tent has not been helping matters; Daín’s Dwarves are restless,’ said Balin, getting straight to the point, ‘and Daín himself is demanding to see you.’
‘And why does this concern me?’

‘Concern you?’ said Balin, taken aback. ‘Thorin, they need to lay eyes on you. You have not stepped foot outside this tent since the battle ended. They need to see that the King lives.’

‘I stepped outside not two moments ago.’

‘No,’ said Balin with endless patience, ‘I didn’t mean a quick hello. You need to tour the camps and meet with Daín. They need to see that you are still, are still...’ he paused, and then pushed onwards, ‘that you are still Thorin Oakenshield. The camps are rife with talk – and it’s not just among our camp.’

‘Then let them talk. I do not see why this should concern me.’

‘It should concern you. You have presented them with a mystery, Thorin. The last they saw of you, you were an heir of Durin, and a Dwarf through and through. Now, though-’

‘Now I am associating with Elves, have eagles as bodyguards, and am courting a Hobbit, a race that many Dwarves will not have seen outside of a book,’ Thorin completed in a monotone. ‘I have no time for politics, Balin.’

Balin gave him a stern look. ‘You are King, now. Politics and gossip are a part of your life. If the camps have no information and only questions with no answers, they will start to invent ones of their own.’

Thorin remained silent, staring at Bilbo.

‘Bilbo will still be here when you get back. I can sit with him, and-’

‘No. I will not leave his side,’ said Thorin, with more energy and feeling than at any previous point in their conversation.

Balin made an irritated noise in the back of his throat. ‘It will not take long. Meet with Daín and the other Lords. Be seen getting dinner, or visit the other members of the Company.’

‘No,’ said Thorin, and his tone left no room for argument, ‘let Fíli go in my stead if Daín needs to see me so urgently.’

‘Thorin-’

‘You may leave, Balin.’

Balin visibly struggled with expression for a few moments. Then he set his jaw and said in an even voice, ‘yes, Your Highness. I’ll return if we’ve made any progress.’

He made to leave, but he pressed one hand to Thorin’s shoulder as he passed and said in an undertone, ‘he’ll wake up, laddie. Just you wait and see.’

Thorin waited until Balin had left to close his eyes. He attempted to smooth out the maelstrom of emotion roiling in his chest. Perhaps a few minutes of rest would help, he thought, rising to move over to the other bed. Just five minutes, and then he would return to Bilbo’s side. Just five minutes...
The following morning, Luaithre was strong enough to hunt, and she made her way out of the tent to gratefully take to the sky alongside three of her kin. She returned late that same evening, but did not re-enter the tent, instead taking up guard outside of it. Landroval entered in her stead, quietly tucking himself away in her corner, keeping a watchful eye over Thorin and Bilbo both.

But Thorin was not left on his own while Luaithre hunted, for the Company came to visit Bilbo in ones and twos. Some of them stayed for a good couple of hours, talking to the unresponsive Bilbo, updating him with all that had happened since the end of the battle. Dori presented the Hobbit with a newly-knitted scarf to keep him warm. Ori, nursing a head-wound, chatted about how he was attempting to capture the beauty of the eagles in flight on paper. Bofur told amusing anecdotes, making the antagonism between the races seem juvenile and far more amusing than they were in reality. Óin clucked over Bilbo’s wounds, inspecting the salves used by the Elvenking, and gave a very reluctant nod of endorsement when he found nothing to disapprove of. Dwalin - his right hand heavily bandaged - told Bilbo of how, during the battle, Ori had stolen Dwalin’s war hammer. Dwalin, chuckling, said that the slight young Dwarf had then proceeded to mercilessly take out numerous orcs before he was knocked out by a well-aimed rock. He left after an hour, and his parting shot was to tell Bilbo that the Hobbit needed to wake up because he owed Dwalin a rematch, whatever that meant.

Late in the evening of the second day, Fíli arrived with his arm in a sling. In the final assault to get to Bilbo, an orc wielding a fallen Dwarf’s mace had landed a hit full on Fíli’s left side, snapping his collarbone. Every single member of the Company had looked exhausted, but Fíli looked tired on another level entirely. There was a sheaf of papers tucked under his good arm.

Fíli approached Bilbo’s beside, and stood in silence for a handful of minutes.

‘I have some reports for you,’ said Fíli eventually, offering Thorin the papers, ‘Balin’s been taking notes for all of the meetings I’ve attended.’

Thorin nodded, taking the papers and putting them to one side.

‘Dain is asking to see you,’ Fíli said, ‘and now Bard is, too. I think my presence has appeased them for now, but I think you still need to see them.’

Thorin grunted non-committaly. ‘We’ll see,’ he said.

‘Kíli hasn’t come back yet, has he?’

Thorin thought about this for a moment. He couldn’t recall Kíli in amongst the waves of well-wishers. ‘No, he has not. Why?’

Fíli set his jaw. He seemed to be bracing himself for something. ‘He’s been avoiding you,’ he said, ‘you and Bilbo both.’

This was news to Thorin. ‘Why?’ he said again.

‘He’ll not thank me for saying this,’ Fíli said with great reluctance, ‘but he refuses to see reason, and it’s eating away at him. He thinks you hate him.’

Thorin could admit that he hadn’t been paying a great deal of attention to Fíli until that point. Now, though - ‘Why on earth would he think that?’

‘You don’t, then?’

‘Fíli, that’s a truly stupid question. Don’t ask it again.’
'What do you expect him to think?' said Fíli, and there was an edge of frustration to his voice, 'he was wearing Bilbo’s mithril. He thinks he’s killed the love of your life.'

Thorin sat back in his chair, scrubbing a hand over his face.

'Send him in. If he won’t come, then drag him here.'

'I will,' said Fíli with great care, 'if you come with me now and see Daín.'

Thorin dropped the hand from his face, meeting his nephew’s look. ‘No.’

Fíli did not look away. Something flared up in his golden eyes. ‘Speaking of stupid things, why don’t you start acting like the King you are and see to your duties?’

Thorin gave him his best glare, astounded at his audacity.

‘You dare-’

‘I do dare,’ burst out Fíli, speaking quickly in his passion, ‘because you are neglecting the very thing that Bilbo was fighting for!’

‘Don’t say that,’ said Thorin, but his words sounded strained and weak even to his own ears, ‘you don’t understand.’

But Fíli hadn’t finished. ‘Do you think this is what he wanted? For you to mourn at his bedside, waiting for him to wake up? Could you imagine how angry he’d be?’

Thorin laughed bitterly. ‘He could not possibly be as angry at me as I am at him right now.’

Fíli shook his head sharply, silent once more. He and Thorin stared at each other across the tent in a battle of wills, and Thorin was suddenly reminded with an immediacy that was painful of his sister Dís; the resemblance between her and Fíli was startling.

After what seemed like an age, Thorin looked away.

‘Send in your brother,’ said Thorin again, ‘and then we’ll see to Daín.’

He sensed, rather than saw, the tension leave Fíli’s body. His nephew nodded, hesitated and opened his mouth to speak again, but thought better of it, leaving Thorin in peace.

Thorin was too tired to contemplate what Fíli had hesitated to say. He waited patiently for Fíli’s return, raking his eyes over Bilbo’s face, imagining his intended’s disappointment upon hearing that Thorin had refused to see Daín. He’d likely feel guilty, too, that Thorin had not left the tent because of him.

Thorin was snapped from his imaginings by Kíli all but stumbling into the tent, Fíli following in short order.

‘No need to push!’ Kíli snapped as his brother, and Fíli rolled his eyes. Kíli huffed, making no move to straighten out his rumpled jacket, and studiously looked everywhere but the bed or Thorin.

‘You’ve not come to see Bilbo,’ Thorin said.

‘No, well, I’ve been helping Balin-‘

Thorin rose from his chair. ‘You’ve been avoiding him, and me.’
Kíli shot a vicious glare in Fíli’s direction. ‘Not exactly.’

‘Yes, you have.’

Kíli briefly met Thorin’s eyes, and then swept his gaze to the floor. ‘Yes, I have,’ he said quietly.

Thorin took a few steps towards Kíli, but turned to look at Bilbo as he spoke. ‘If you had not been wearing the chainmail, then you would likely be dead, and Bilbo would be alive and well.’

‘Yes,’ said Kíli with utter misery, ‘I know. If-if I could swap places with him, then I would, in a heartbeat, I-‘

He cut himself off. Thorin turned to Kíli to find him standing with fists clenched, knuckles white, and his jaw set so tightly Thorin could see the muscles bunched up in his cheek.

‘I am glad you were wearing the chainmail, Kíli.’

Kíli whipped his head around to stare at Thorin. ‘What? But-this is my fault-’

‘No, it’s not,’ Thorin said calmly, ‘if you had not swapped with Bilbo, you would almost certainly be dead. But as it stands you are both still alive, and Bilbo will wake up. I am grateful for this. Though,’ he added, ‘I am still angry at Bilbo.’

Kíli’s expression twisted at this, and he seemed to be trying very hard not to cry.

‘And anyway, I doubt that you could have refused Bilbo,’ said Thorin, ‘he is very hard to say no to, sometimes.’

Kíli nodded and let out a gusty chuckle. Thorin came to rest his hands on Kíli’s shoulders. He waited patiently for Kíli to look at him.

‘I do not hate you, Kíli,’ he said, pushing as much certainty as he could into every word to convince Kíli of this.

Kíli let out a sob, and Thorin drew him in to an embrace, resting his hand on Kíli’s nape, as he had once done when Kíli and Fíli were but small children.

Over Kíli’s shoulder, Thorin saw Fíli smile gratefully, utterly relieved.

This marked a changing point in Thorin’s vigil for Bilbo. His days fell into an odd sort of routine – he would sleep and eat at Bilbo’s bedside with an eagle for company, but during the day he would attend the various meetings that required his presence. In the evenings he would return to read over the day’s notes, and would often find Thranduil tending to Bilbo, continuing to provide care as promised. Thorin could not say that they had had anything that could be considered a conversation yet, but much to his consternation their silences were steadily decreasing in frostiness by the day.

Kíli now made sure to come by every day, without fail, even if only for a handful of minutes. The Company frequently visited, too, undeterred by Bilbo’s lack of response. Much to Thorin’s surprise, they even came specifically to see him, to keep him up to date with the happenings in the camp or simply to sit and keep him company, even if they did not speak.

For the most part, Thorin was kept busy, and he could say with a great deal of confidence that his
wounds were healing well. And yet, all the work and all the company could not banish his grief, nor
his worry, nor his desperation for Bilbo to wake up, and with every passing day he could admit to
himself that his carefully-guarded hope for Bilbo’s recovery was slowly, irrevocably, slipping away.
It had been ten days since the Battle of Five Armies, and Bilbo had not stirred, not even once.

But the will of Bilbo Baggins should never be underestimated.

He came back in increments, in slithers of hard-won consciousness. He drifted back into the world,
borne aloft with every inward breath and beat of his heart.

I’m alive, thought Bilbo. It was quite the surprise.

It was the first coherent thought that he would have for the next few hours. His mind was a mess of
pain and it was difficult construct a thought more complicated than, everything hurts, so clouded was
his consciousness.

He blinked, eyes smarting at the first hint of light. The ceiling seemed to be made up of a heavy,
cloth-like material, held up on a wooden frame. A tent, then? He blinked again, clearing his vision a
little more, looking down to the foot of his bed. A fire was burning away merrily and a teapot sat
atop it, which would explain the strangely sweet and clinically herbal smell that was permeating the
tent.

There was a weight on his right side – he could feel the dip in the bed. Slowly, with great care, Bilbo
turned his head a little to see. He was rewarded by bright pain flickering over his temples, and the
sight of Thorin’s dark head of hair, the Dwarf fast asleep on his folded arms.

Bilbo’s lips curled up into a smile. Thorin’s cheek was resting on a pile of papers. His brain tried to
make the connection between the ink on the page and the possible consequences that this could have
for Thorin’s skin, but he couldn’t quite grasp it, and he slid back into blissful sleep from one breath to
the next.

The second time he woke his thoughts were far clearer. He guessed it to be nearer dawn, as there
was a hint of cold sunlight about the flaps of the tent. The pain had not lessened any, and exhaustion
suffused his whole body, but he clung to consciousness, fighting tooth and nail to stay awake for a
little longer, this time.

Thorin was still asleep, and Bilbo found himself far more amused than he should have been at the
thought of Thorin waking up with the imprint of words on his cheeks. He took in the sight of his
intended, heart full to bursting, so very glad that he was alive to see Thorin once more.

Bilbo longed to touch Thorin, but his limbs seemed heavy and unresponsive. Still, though, the idea
of running his fingers through Thorin’s hair would not leave him – he could almost feel the sensation
of it against his fingertips, so evocative was the thought. He concentrated on moving his left arm,
willing it to move, and after a moment he managed it, though his responses were slow and clumsy.
With the utmost care and grimacing at the pain the movement brought, Bilbo brushed his fingers over
the curtain of hair that lay haphazardly over Thorin’s face. He traced the line of Thorin’s high
cheekbones, pushing back a long dark strand that lay across the bridge of Thorin’s nose. Exhausted
by this simple task, Bilbo placed his hand back on the bed, but his reward for his endeavours was having the pleasure of watching Thorin wake, the Dwarf disturbed from sleep by Bilbo’s soft touches. His features flickered, shifting from the smooth stillness of sleep, his brow furrowing, mouth twitching, and finally his eyes slid open.

Bilbo watched as Thorin’s groggy gaze sharpened, throwing off the last vestiges of sleep, and slowly his line of sight began to drift up the bed to alight on Bilbo’s smiling face. Bilbo had the privilege of seeing Thorin’s absolute shock when the Dwarf realised that Bilbo was awake.

‘Bilbo?’ breathed Thorin.

Bilbo swallowed, wet his lips, and said, ‘hello,’

Thorin’s expression crumpled. He reached out and pressed a hand to Bilbo’s cheek, stroking his cheekbone with his thumb. He laughed, shakily.

‘Am I dreaming?’

‘No,’ said Bilbo, voice but a whisper from being unused for so long. His cheeks ached from smiling, but he found that he couldn’t stop. Thorin was all but gasping, trying to restrain the flood of emotions. The hand on Bilbo’s face moved away for a moment to run over Bilbo’s shoulders and torso as though the touch of rough bed sheets and bandages could ground him.

‘I am so angry with you,’ he said, though he sounded anything but.

Bilbo had the grace to look a little sheepish at that.

‘I’m sorry, Thorin.’

‘Good,’ said Thorin, voice choked, ‘and do you promise you will listen to me on all matters in the future?’

‘No,’ Bilbo said, trying not to laugh because every hitch in his breathing sent a whole wave of aches through his body. He grimaced, resisting the black press of unconsciousness that had suddenly threatened to take him under again.

Bilbo shakily moved his hand so that it bumped into Thorin’s free one. Thorin took the hint, wrapping it up in his own.

‘Thorin,’ Bilbo began, but he had to swallow before he could continue, ‘I’m so glad I’m here.’

Thorin ducked his head down briefly. ‘As am I,’ he said when he looked up again. He tilted his head to one side. ‘And how am I supposed to stay angry at you when you are awake and smiling at me like that?’

A grin split Bilbo’s face. There was so much he wanted to say, but the short conversation had worn him out, and he was content to simply smile and try not to laugh with joy when Thorin kissed him gently on the mouth, then his brow, then his cheeks. And if both of their eyes were a little too bright – well, then thankfully there was no one else around to see.

News of Bilbo’s waking spread so quickly Thorin half suspected Kíli and Fíli had been waiting at
the door, eavesdropping on Thorin and Bilbo’s conversation. He simply couldn’t understand how else Fíli and Kíli knew of Bilbo’s waking a mere hour after it had occurred. They were quickly disappointed, though, for upon barging into the tent they found Bilbo to be fast asleep once more, their Uncle holding his hand and smiling softly. But the Line of Durin is known for its stubbornness, and they fetched in another chair so they could all sit and wait for Bilbo to wake up again. While they waited with great impatience, Fíli attempted to speak to Thorin over the matter of Dale, but his Uncle was too distracted to say more than a few words on the subject, and their conversation turned instead to who they considered the most annoying out of all of Daín’s advisors.

When the eagles returned from their daily hunt around noon, Thorin went outside to tell them the good news. He was then almost deafened as Tuit all but shouted the message to those who were still circling high in the air above, and the rest of the fledglings began to squabble over who would get to go in the tent first to see Bilbo. Thorin had to raise his voice to be heard over the din, reassuring them that Bilbo was resting and that he when he woke once more they would be the first to know. This seemed to placate them somewhat, for the time being at least.

Bilbo stirred again near sunset, blinking slowly and smiling when he saw Kíli and Fíli. Kíli’s relieved laughter must have reached the sharp ears of the eagles waiting outside, for Luainthre pushed through the tent flaps, followed by Landroval. Tuit and Gwaihir had to content themselves with peering around the front entrance, and Thorin had to steady Bilbo when the Hobbit began to laugh a little too hard at the strange scene they all presented.

Matters were made worse, of course, when the rest of the Company arrived, pushing past the eagles to see for themselves that Bilbo was awake and well. In the chaos that followed, Bilbo gripped Thorin’s hand tight, grinning at the noise and the confusion and the bickering, and sharing small, soft smiles with Thorin.

Three days later, Thranduil declared that Bilbo no longer needed his help.

‘The rest is up to you. All it will take now is time and rest,’ Thranduil said, looking pointedly at Bilbo.

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo. He’d had quite the surprise when he had found out that Thranduil had been healing him, and he still found himself unsure around the Elvenking days later. He had no idea where they stood, or if Thranduil and Thorin had reconciled. Thorin had kept stubbornly quite about the whole matter, and Bilbo hadn’t wanted to push the subject.

‘There is no need to thank me. The debt is repaid, Bilbo Baggins. Healing you did not trouble me at all; I am fortunate that it was one of the Eagles of Manwë who saved my son - they could have extracted a far higher price than a few days worth of healing for their deed.’

Thranduil dried his hands at the basin for the last time. He gave Bilbo a small nod of acknowledgement and said, ‘I believe my son would like to see you. Your...friendship with him is unexpected, but not unwelcome.’

‘Er. Thank you?’

‘I am not often surprised, Mister Baggins. I do hope you decide to stay in Erebor and continue with your courting.’
Was it just Bilbo’s imagination, or was Thranduil smirking at him? Bilbo couldn’t tell – Thranduil’s face had not moved an inch, but nevertheless Bilbo had the distinct impression of amusement from the Elf.

Bilbo allowed himself a sigh of relief when Thranduil left. He wasn’t quite sure if he would ever understand ancient beings of immeasurable wisdom.

Bilbo was confined to his bed for the next few days. It was something that he would have normally railed against with a great deal of energy and grumpiness, but healing such deep wounds left him tired and in frequent need of sleep. Besides, for the rest of the time there was always someone to keep him company.

His raft of visitors included Gandalf, whose first response to seeing Bilbo awake was to sit beside him and smoke his pipe.

‘I am glad to see you awake and well on your way to recovery, my dear Bilbo,’ he said. ‘I never doubted you for a moment. Though, I’m sure being under the care of the Elvenking certainly helped matters.’

‘Yes, I’m very grateful for all that he’s done.’

‘I’m sure Thorin is, too.’

‘That...I’m not so certain about,’ said Bilbo.

Gandalf made a small noise of amusement in the back of his throat. ‘We shall see. Well, Bilbo, I came to visit you today to tell you that I am making my way back to Rivendell. You are most welcome to join me, if that is what you wish.’

Bilbo raised his eyebrows. ‘I think you already know the answer to that question already, Gandalf.’

‘And very pleased about it I am, too,’ said Gandalf. ‘I have to admit it was not my original intention when I asked you to come along all those months ago, but you do continue to delight in doing the exact opposite of what I expected. Being in love does you a world of good, Bilbo, when it is not giving you cause to be stabbed.’

He said this last part with such an air of flippancy that but the time Bilbo had realised what he had said, Gandalf had already put on his hat and left.

But not all of his visitors were so expected.

When he woke mid-afternoon one day it was to find the chair beside his bed occupied by someone he didn’t recognise. It was, unmistakably, a female Dwarf. Her long dark hair, shot through with grey, was piled high on the top of her head in an intricate series of twists, but two braids had been left down to frame her face. Her side whiskers had been elegantly curled and styled to compliment the high sweep of her cheekbones, and her straight nose was terribly familiar.

Lady Dís.

She had not noticed Bilbo’s return to the waking world – her attention was firmly on the object she was turning over in her long-fingered, elegant hands. With a start Bilbo recognised it as the
spearhead from his broken spear. Thorin’s sister seemed fascinated by it, turning it this way and that in the light, careful with the splintered shaft and the sharp edge of the blade.

With her attention diverted, Bilbo took a moment to observe her properly, his curiosity running rampant. She seemed a little younger than Thorin, and although the familial resemblance between her and her brother was strong, Lady Dís’ face was a little fuller, her lips not as thin, and her eyes dark brown and heavily lidded. She was wearing a heavy travelling cloak with a fur trim about her shoulders and, under that, a fine midnight-blue dress, delicately embroidered around the neck with silver thread. The hem was completely caked in mud.

‘Good afternoon, Mister Baggins,’ she said suddenly.

Bilbo flinched, then grimaced at the resulting pain, then scrambled to bow his head in acknowledgement, though it was a difficult task to accomplish when he was in bed. It was hardly a dignified move, but this was Thorin’s sister. He wanted to give a good first impression.

‘Oh don’t be silly,’ tsked Dís, laying the spearhead down in her lap. ‘There’s no need for that. Come, let me see the face of the fool who is relieving me of the burden of my brother.’

Bilbo raised his head to find that Dís was smiling at him. ‘Yes, you’ll do nicely,’ she said after looking him up and down.

‘I’m sorry?’

‘I’m only teasing, Mister Baggins. But where are my manners? I am certain you already know who I am, but it’s only polite. I am Lady Dís of the Line of Durin, and it is an honour to meet you. Thanks to you, I still have two sons, though unfortunately they are both still rather foolish, despite having traipsed over half of Middle Earth.’

‘I think...’ started Bilbo, feeling greatly out of his depth, ‘that the honour is all mine. Forgive me, I had no idea you’d arrived.’

‘I’ve dropped by very suddenly,’ said Dís, ‘Thorin wasn’t expecting me for another two days, but I was eager to see my sons. He’s not even aware I’m here, yet. But just imagine my surprise when I turn up at the camp only to find that my brother is courting.’

‘Um,’ said Bilbo, suddenly feeling very guilty, ‘yes, it’s uh, it’s happened very recently.’

‘It better have happened recently,’ said Dís, although her smile was at odds with her vaguely threatening words, ‘the stories I have heard about you since arriving, Bilbo! I was quite sure that Kíli and Fíli were making some of it up, but then I caught sight of the eagles standing outside this tent. She patted his hand. ‘When we have the time, we will have a nice, long chat.’

Bilbo gulped. There was something very intimidating about the way Dís was speaking to him. It was the way her tone and words did not seem to quite match the levity of her expression.

‘But first, before my brother inevitably interrupts us, I must thank you, Bilbo. Can I call you Bilbo?’

‘Of course, but - what are you thanking me for, my lady?’

The smile slipped from her face, replaced by something far more solemn. Bilbo knew old grief when he saw it.

‘For not dying,’ she said, ‘our family’s loved ones have a habit of doing that. And please, call me Dís.’
‘You’re welcome?’ said Bilbo hesitantly. ‘I’ll try to keep up the good work.’

Dís flashed him a small grin. ‘See that you do, Bilbo. Now, if you’ll excuse me,’ she said, putting aside the spearhead and gathering up her skirts, ‘there are some things that need my attention.’

‘Of course, not at all - it was a pleasure to meet you.’

‘Perhaps when I return again we can speak in more depth, and you could introduce me to your eagle kin. I’ve never met an eagle before.’

‘I think they’d like you,’ said Bilbo.

‘I hope so. You’ll have to show me the proper way to greet an eagle, Bilbo. I wouldn’t want to insult them accidentally – they have such sharp beaks, after all.’

She rose to leave, but the tent door was pulled aside to reveal Dwalin and Thorin both.

‘Dís!’ said Thorin in the exact moment Dwalin said, ‘Lady Dís!’

Bilbo watched amusedly as Thorin, in an uncharacteristic display of affection, immediately reached out an arm to his sister - perhaps with the intention of embracing her - a surprised smile lighting his face.

Dís responded to this welcoming gesture by punching him, hard, in the arm.

Thorin, much to Bilbo’s surprise, reeled back at the hit. ‘What in Mahal’s name was that for?’ Thorin said, indignant and frowning, rubbing the spot with his other hand.

‘That was for not telling me you were courting,’ Dís scowled.

Thorin had the grace to look abashed. He flicked a glance over to Bilbo. ‘I was going to tell you when I next saw you in person,’ he said a touch defensively.

Dís huffed, exasperated, and relented. ‘Oh come here,’ she said, and allowed her brother to sweep her up into a tight hug.

‘Good to see you too, sister.’

‘Good to see you alive, brother. You too, Dwalin. Are you well? No injuries sustained?’

‘No, Lady Dís,’ said Dwalin, carefully manoeuvring his heavily bandaged hand behind his back.

‘Not that it would slow you down,’ Dís said brightly, ‘would you mind showing me around the camps, Dwalin? If you’re free, that is.’

‘Of course,’ said Dwalin, holding out an elbow for Dís to take, ‘right this way, m’lady.’

‘How many times, Dwalin?’ Dís chided as they left, ‘just Dís is fine.’

When Dwalin and Dís had exited, arm in arm, Thorin turned to Bilbo with a slightly embarrassed tilt to his head. ‘So you’ve survived meeting Dís, then.’

‘I have. She seems...’

‘Annoying?’ scoffed Thorin with the long-suffering air of an older brother.
‘Nice,’ Bilbo completed, chuckling.

‘I’m glad you think so. You’re likely to see a great deal more of her in the coming days. She is extremely *nosey,*’ Thorin said, coming to sit on Bilbo’s bed.

‘I don’t mind that,’ said Bilbo, ‘I am certain she cannot best my cousins for nosiness. Or the eagles,’ he added after a thought.

‘Don’t tell her that. She will try to out-nose them,’ Thorin groaned.

‘Let’s hope Kíli and Fíli distract her for the time being,’ Bilbo laid his hand gently on top of Thorin’s, ‘but right now I would like to get some fresh air.’

Thorin turned his hand over to meet Bilbo’s. ‘Are you sure you’re quite well enough?’

‘I don’t care – I just want to be *out* of this damn tent,’ groused Bilbo, ‘and I will do it with or without your help.’

‘Alright, alright,’ Thorin said placating, a smile twitching at the corner of his mouth, ‘but if I have to carry you back to bed, then I’ll hear no complaints from you.’

‘Agreed.’

It took quite some time and a great deal of wincing from Bilbo, but they managed to ease Bilbo slowly to his feet. Bilbo stood, eyes scrunched up tightly, breathing in through his nose with his hand braced on Thorin’s shoulders, Thorin’s arm wound underneath his armpits, holding most of his weight.

‘You can always-’

‘No,’ said Bilbo firmly, taking one step forward. In small, hobbled steps, he made his way to the tent’s entrance. He could almost smell the fresh air, and the thought of being able to feel the wind on his face gave him the energy to make the last few steps.

The camps lay before him, tents and cooking fires as far as the eyes could see. Everywhere he looked there was movement - Elves and Dwarves and Men mingled together, busy and *loud* as they went about their duties. The smell of stew and meats cooking over fires began to make Bilbo’s mouth water.

Landroval and Gwaihir greeted him happily, Landroval lowering his head towards Bilbo so that the Hobbit could put his other hand on the top of his head. The sky overhead was overcast and grey, and the wind was sharp with the promise of snow. Bilbo breathed it all in deeply, gladly.

‘I’m still angry at you,’ said Thorin off-handedly.

‘I know,’ Bilbo said. ‘I’ll find some way to make it up to you.’

They had time for such things now, after all.

There was so much to think about, and so many problems waiting to be resolved. There was the matter of Dale, and the possibility of peace with Mirkwood, and reparations for Laketown. On the more immediate, every day side of things, there were issues with their food supplies, and they desperately needed resources for the harsh winter months ahead. Once they had resolved all of this, then, perhaps, they could begin to think about the rebuilding of Erebor.
But first-

‘Thorin.’

‘Hm?’

‘I think you’re going to need to carry me back to bed.’
The winter that followed, according to Balin, was the worst to descend on the Lonely Mountain in recent memory. Nature was ever-merciless, and did not care that those who huddled in the relative shelter of the mountain had few provisions and even fewer time to prepare for the harsh, dark months, the weather so cold and so bleak that the Dwarves had little other option but to hide away in the belly of the mountain while the blizzards howled and tore at the barren ground outside. But the Dwarves endured, and Bilbo endured alongside them. The Men of Laketown took shelter in the shadow of Mirkwood, waiting until the cold weather broke so that they could, perhaps, begin work on Dale, their Elven allies retreating back into the welcoming eaves of their forest. Any ideas that Bard might have had to rebuild Dale and petition Thorin for the right to carry out the work were put on hold, but a tentative truce was made between all races out of sheer necessity for their desperate situation.

As if in apology for the freezing winter, spring returned to the lands of the East in a sudden burst of golden sunshine, thawing ice and snow in the space of a week and gracing the worn-out citizens of the Lonely Mountain with a series of glorious, perfect spring days. The front gates - newly repaired - were thrown wide open, and even the dark-loving Dwarves took the opportunity to stand in the sun, if only to begin trading with the Men of Laketown.

But for two particular denizens of the Lonely Mountain, the ending of winter signified something else altogether, for, at long last, they could hold not one, but two celebrations.

The day had finally come for Thorin and Bilbo’s wedding, and for their coronation.

Thorin had decided – in that ever-practical way of his kind – that his coronation could be put on hold until such a time as it could be celebrated properly, with all the pomp and circumstance that Erebor deserved. The Dwarves agreed - they had had other, more important things to think about over the course of the winter, and few resources with which to celebrate anything, let alone the marriage and crowning of their king.

Erebor was recovering, albeit slowly, her Dwarves working tirelessly to restore her to her former glory. Food had been exported to the mountain at great expense while they waited for Laketown’s farms to recover enough to provide for them, but much to Thorin’s consternation, they still did not have enough for the three-day long celebrations that would normally follow a Royal marriage.

‘Three days,’ Bilbo had all but squeaked when Thorin had told him this.

‘Yes. And then we would be crowned on the fourth day, and two more days of feasting and celebration would follow.’

‘Well then,’ Bilbo had said, because Thorin’s had begun to look withdrawn and tired, as he often had during the darkest days of winter, ‘we shall just have to make a day of it then, won’t we?’
As he spoke he reached out to brush his fingers over Thorin’s brow, trying to ease the deep furrows that worry and the strain of rebuilding a Kingdom had put there.

‘Yes,’ said Thorin, attempting to smile for Bilbo, ‘one fine day.’

It strangely reminded Bilbo of the Shire – it just seemed so normal, and bizarre, too – a King, having to think economically for his wedding day. Their family and friends would be there, though, and that was all that mattered to Bilbo. The eagles had returned to the mountain after spending the winter at the Eyrie – there was nowhere for them to roost and shelter from the harsh winds in Erebor’s foothills, and they refused to enter the mountain; it was simply too strange and unnerving for them. They had winged back to Erebor one cloudy morning, and the foothills had echoed with their happy, heralding cries. Now they waited and were content to hunt in the lands around the mountain while all the necessary preparations were made for the big day.

Two weeks after their arrival, a date was set. It was a fine spring day, with a gentle breeze to temper the warmth of the golden sun. A cloudless day - a day meant for Thorin and Bilbo both.

Bilbo stood before the gilt mirror, tugging nervously at the edges of his waistcoat. He was not usually vain, but today he seemed to be making an exception. His heart was skittish and was beating too fast in his chest, and his mind was racing with self-conscious thoughts. Was his necktie straight? Was the hair on his feet neat enough? Would Thorin think him strange in such bright, soft clothes, so at odds with the tunic that he had worn for most of their journey?

The polished surface of the long mirror reflected a Hobbit in very fine clothes indeed. He had elected to wear a pale cream waistcoat, intricately decorated in its entirety with tiny golden flowers that budded and bloomed in turn. A stark white shirt sat underneath this, with an emerald green necktie tucked carefully into the waistcoat, and a lightweight dark red jacket and a pair of simple, stone-coloured trousers to complete the outfit. Not content with straightening out his clothes for the fourth time in as many minutes, Bilbo picked up the flowered wreath that sat on the side cabinet, if only to have something to hold.

‘I think you look very handsome indeed, Bilbo,’ said Dís.

Bilbo did not shout, but it was a narrow miss. He had barely heard Dís’ approach, and he frequently suspected that Dís did it on purpose, just to make him jump.

‘Oh, thank you, Dís,’ Bilbo said, replying to her reflection in the mirror, ‘it’s, it’s not too much, is it?’

‘Not at all,’ she assured, and Bilbo half heard her mumble something that sounded very much like, ‘just wait until you see your other outfit,’ but he was too nervous to pay much attention.

‘Besides, I think my brother would think you handsome even if you were wearing rags – or troll snot,’ she said with sharp-toothed grin, stepping closer to brush something from his shoulder, ‘but I think this is much better, don’t you?’

Bilbo tried not to fiddle with his courting braid. Dís rested her hand on his shoulder comfortingly. ‘It’s your last chance,’ she joked, ‘are you sure you want to be a part of this ridiculous family?’

Bilbo took a deep, deep breath and raised his eyes to meet Dís’. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Lead the way. Before my legs give out on me.’
In deference to the eagles, a large, open-sided gazebo had been set up just outside the front gates for the sole purpose of holding the wedding. Thankfully, Bilbo had been told that the Dwarves of Erebor did not need to be in attendance for this particular ceremony – Bilbo and Thorin could instead enjoy a much more private affair with those they valued most to bear witness to their union. But this did not mean that it would be a small gathering - the entire Company were likely waiting in the tent, alongside all of their spouses, their children, seven great eagles, and one Wizard.

It was probably to be the strangest wedding Erebor had ever hosted.

Bilbo had, after a great deal of wrangling and bickering, convinced Thorin of the merits of a small wedding, with the focus entirely on their joining. That meant no armour and few ostentatious decorations. Such things would come later, Bilbo had said. But Thorin had insisted on just one thing – that they would walk to the gazebo as the front gates of Erebor opened – all three of them, one after the other. The Sun and Moon gates had been restored during the long winter, and Thorin intended to use them to full effect.

Bilbo could just make out the outline of his soon-to-be husband standing at the foot of the Moon gate. He tightened his grip on the crown, his stomach slowly turning over. Thorin was talking to another Dwarf – an advisor to one of his Lords, perhaps. He seemed to have so many. He had his back to Bilbo as he made his approach, but as Bilbo drew near, the advisor was dismissed, and Thorin turned to see him.

He had stayed true to his word. Thorin was not wearing armour, not even vambraces, and it was strange to see his hands and wrists uncovered. Bilbo drank in the sight of him, eyes raking over the Dwarf’s deep blue long tunic, high-collared and carefully fitted to his frame, a dark charcoal grey – nearly black – sleeveless jacket over the top. His hair had been neatly braided with the twin beads of Durin’s Line, his courting bead sitting happily behind one of them, incongruous compared to the precious beads of his family.

‘Bilbo,’ he said, an easy, warm-eyed smile lighting his face. He reached out to take Bilbo’s elbow, drawing him near so that they could touch brows gently. ‘You look very handsome indeed.’

‘So do you,’ said Bilbo in a hushed whisper.

Dís very pointedly cleared her throat. ‘If you would both be so kind,’ she said, ‘now would be a good time to exchange crowns. We must keep to some manner of schedule today, after all.’

‘Mahal forbid we enjoy ourselves today,’ said Thorin dryly, but he stepped away nevertheless.

‘Your enjoyment has not been scheduled,’ sniffed Dís. ‘The crowns, Thorin.’

Thorin ignored her, but held out the fine circlet of flowers in his hands regardless. ‘May I?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ replied Bilbo, bowing his head. A crown made of Bright blue Glory-of-the-snow flowers, woven together with almond-shaped leaves, and large white and yellow flowers with delicate petals that Bilbo did not recognise was placed atop his curly head. Thorin’s right hand brushed over the tip of Bilbo’s pointed ear as it made its way back to Thorin’s side, causing Bilbo to shiver.

Thorin bowed his head, but Bilbo still had to stand on his tip toes to place his own crown of pink, pale orange and deep red-purple flowers, threaded through with daisies, on top of Thorin’s dark hair.
‘How very fine you both look,’ said Dís, and for once there was no hint of teasing in her tone. She turned and gave the signal up to the Dwarves who were waiting by the gates’ mechanisms, high above them.

‘Ready?’ said Thorin, offering Bilbo his hand.

The clank and click of well-oiled and mighty machinery was so loud that Bilbo had to raise his voice a little reply. ‘I am,’ said Bilbo, holding Thorin’s endlessly affectionate gaze. He felt far more at ease now he was at Thorin’s side.

The colossal Moon gates slid open, the surface of the gates polished to perfection and living up to their name. As the opened, Bilbo could see the Sun gates beginning to open, their golden brilliance rivalling the Moon gates, and, finally, the solid outer doors folded inwards. The blue sky was starkly framed by the dark doorways, and beneath it lay their wedding. It was the first time Bilbo had laid eyes on the finished gazebo, and he saw with no small amount of amusement that Thorin had not been able to resist a touch of pomp, but with the kind of flair Bilbo could approve of. Flags in rich jewel colours flapped in the breeze atop long poles, lining the way. At the end of the path the flags had created lay the massive yellow-gold gazebo, big enough to be a palace in its own right, waiting for their entrance.

Bilbo took Thorin’s hand, Bilbo gave Thorin a nervous, faltering smile, and together they stepped from the cool shadows of Erebor and into the sun.

What a fine thing, thought Bilbo, feeling steadier with every passing metre. What a fine thing to walk with your intended in the sun and feel the grass under your feet, to know that before you is all that you hold dear.

With the sound of the flags flapping in the breeze, Bilbo and Thorin stepped into the tent, only for Bilbo to find that things were not quite as he had expected.

‘What,’ croaked Bilbo when he had caught sight of their assembled friends and family. For a good, long moment, he was utterly speechless, his mouth moving but no sound coming out. He blinked and said, loudly,

‘You’re not all supposed to be wearing flowers, you dimwits!’

‘But Bilbo,’ said Fíli, his eyes sparking with mischief, ‘I thought this was a Hobbit tradition?’

‘Just for the couple!’ Bilbo spluttered, ‘not for everyone else!’

‘Oh,’ said Kíli, attempting to frown but missing by a wide mark. His grin was simply too wide.

‘Maybe we misread that part.’

‘Easy mistake to make.’

‘No harm done, eh?’

Bilbo’s eyes darted around the tent. Gandalf was leaning on his staff, unbothered by the circle of daisies sitting in his hair. Every single member of the Company, along with their spouses and children, were wearing crowns of flowers. The sight of Dwalin crowned with pretty primroses was not something that Bilbo was about to forget quickly. Bilbo chanced a glance to the left, only to find that someone had heroically tried to put flower crowns on the eagles, too, though Tuit’s was slowly slipping off, and Luaithre and Gwaihir had both elected (very wisely) to wear theirs around their necks. King Grumach was actually managing to wear his with dignity, if such a thing were possible.
Bilbo glanced behind him at Dís, hoping to find some measure of sanity in Thorin’s sister, only to see she had managed to pull a crown of flowers seemingly out of thin air, and was wearing it with an expression of deeply dignified amusement.

Bilbo became aware that Thorin’s hand was shaking in his own. He turned to his soon-to-be-husband to find that the Dwarf’s shoulders were shaking with suppressed mirth, his face hidden behind his free hand. Well, thought Bilbo, if you looked at it a certain way, it was rather funny.

‘Yes,’ said Bilbo with a sigh, now attempting to fight off giggles of his own, ‘no harm done. But I would like you all to know that you have reached new heights of ridiculousness.’

They approached the head of the assembly, coming to stand before Balin. A ripple of laughter ran through the crowd when Thorin attempted to cover his chuckles with a coughing fit upon seeing that Balin had woven flowers into his beard.

‘Well, then’ said Balin, eyes twinkling, ‘shall we begin?’

They were completely at the mercy of the Schedule, and as such Bilbo did not have as much time as he would like to enjoy his newly-married status. They had had perhaps an hour’s grace between being wed and the inevitable hustling away by Dís – enough time to toast their union, and for speeches and much merriment, but not much more.

Still, though, they’d had time for some things. Bilbo suspected his lips were swollen, and it would likely be obvious to anyone with eyes that he had been thoroughly and most enjoyably kissed. He didn’t much mind, though. There was a gold ring sat on his finger, and a new courting bead braided into his hair. Chuckling, Bilbo recalled the way in which Thorin had struggled with the concept of having a simple, unadorned gold band for a wedding ring.

‘Not even a small gem? It would not even need a fancy setting,’ he had often said in the run up to their wedding. ‘Or some subtle engraving, at least?’

But Bilbo had persisted. He had wanted rings like the ones his mother and father had worn, and when he’d told Thorin this, the Dwarf had at last relented. Compromise by its very nature goes both ways, though, and so Bilbo’s requests for simplicity had been matched by Thorin’s insistence on grandeur for their coronation.

Unfortunately for Bilbo, this meant that while he had argued for simple clothes for their wedding, Thorin could argue for the exact opposite for their coronation. A change of costume was therefore necessary - Bilbo’s softly threaded waistcoat would be put aside in favour of hard armour. The Dwarves of Erebor had heard tell of his exploits on the journey. They considered him a warrior, and as such they expected him to dress like one. It was not something Bilbo felt he could refuse; this was a thoroughly Dwarvish coronation, and appearances were everything. It was something he knew he would have to get used to.

This would be the first time that Bilbo had laid eyes on his coronation outfit, and Bilbo was very curious as to what Thorin had picked out for him. The Dwarf had been extremely secretive over choosing what Bilbo would wear, and as Bilbo knew little about armour, he had been content to sit back and let Thorin decide his outfit. He just hoped it wasn’t dripping with too many jewels.

As soon as she had been able to, Dís had quickly and efficiently hustled Bilbo into the Royal living
quarters so that he could have some privacy while he changed. She led him to a spacious, richly
decorated dressing room, and Bilbo’s curiosity was sated at long last.

A wooden mannequin stood in the middle of the room. On it rested a long, sweeping, crimson-red
cloak, clasped at the neck with a broach of jewelled flowers. And underneath – underneath it sat the
most beautifully engraved breastplate Bilbo had ever seen. Bilbo could not guess at the metal it had
been crafted from, but its colour was an old gold, carefully and intricately engraved in parts, inlaid
with a lighter colour in others to convey overlapping feathers that flowed over the shoulders and
torso. Bilbo’s breath stuck in his throat. He knew Thorin’s handiwork when he saw it.

‘My brother has spent many an hour on this,’ said Dís from the side, confirming what Bilbo already
knew.

‘Dís,’ Bilbo said, but found that he had no idea what to say. He reached out with one hand to trace
the lines of a feather sweeping over the right shoulder of the breastplate.

‘He wouldn’t even let me help,’ Dís smiled at him. ‘Come, Bilbo, let’s get you dressed. We wouldn’t
want you to be late.’

The gazebo had been moved further away from the gates and numerous long tables set up next to it
for feasting, along with other, smaller tents. More brightly coloured flags had been raised alongside
coloured-glass lanterns, emphasising the pathway that had been created out of a bright purple fabric,
leading the way up to the two thrones that stood on the line between light and dark, on the threshold
of the front gates. Dwarves had begun to pore from the mountain and into the spring afternoon,
wearing their finery, and they were joined in short order by men, women and children from
Laketown. Bilbo had been told that there would be many a foreign dignitary in attendance from
distant lands, all here to witness the crowning of the King Under the Mountain. Among them would
be Bard, whose presence Thorin was tolerating, if only for the chance of peace in the future. But
harder still had been deciding if Thranduil should attend. Bilbo and Thorin had discussed this at great
length through the winter, until they had finally decided that it would be best if Thranduil was not to
attend. In his stead, they invited Legolas – a far less inflammatory figure to the Dwarves, and known
to be a friend of Bilbo’s. The deep rifts between the races had not yet been healed, but Bilbo hoped
that their coronation would be the first of many steps on the road to becoming allies once more.

Bilbo, dressed in his armour and crownless once more, hurried along the back routes of Erebor
towards the gates. He and Thorin would need to make their entrance before the crowd at any
moment, but for a few precious minutes, they were actually alone.

Thorin laughed when he caught sight of Bilbo, breathless and disbelieving.

‘I have tried to imagine you in that for many, many months now,’ he said, hands immediately going
to Bilbo’s armoured waist, eyes raking over Bilbo, ‘but you look better in it than I could have ever
imagined.’

‘It’s beautiful, Thorin. Thank you,’ said Bilbo, tilting his head upwards to meet Thorin’s mouth with
his own, loosing himself to the press of lips and the heated exchange of breaths.

When they parted, but only by a few millimetres, Bilbo could hear the sounds of the crowd waiting
for them outside. How much longer did they have before they would be called out, to stand before
the Dwarves of Erebor and take on the mantle of King and Consort? Taking his chance while he still
could, Bilbo turned his head towards Thorin’s ear and said, with as much clarity as his tongue could shape,

‘Ashimmemshêk.’

Bilbo would truly treasure Thorin’s resulting stunned expression for the rest of his life.

‘What did you say?’

Bilbo licked his lips and repeated, ‘Ashimmemshêk.’

Bilbo was suddenly and without warning swept up in Thorin’s arms, Thorin claiming his mouth in a wildly passionate kiss. He was all but lifted off his feet when Thorin tightened an arm around him, pressing them together, hand on Bilbo’s neck, thumb on the hinge of Bilbo’s jaw. Bilbo could do more than be happily carried away in it, and all thought left him for a good long minute.

‘How?’ croaked Thorin when he had to pause for breath.

Bilbo opened his mouth, let out an indiscernible noise, closed his mouth, swallowed, and tried again, ‘you know I’ve been taking Khuzdul lessons from Dís,’ he said, ‘which helped, but I couldn’t say your Name around her. I’ve been practising on my own. In secret.’

Thorin’s eyes were bright with happiness, and Bilbo felt breathless just looking at him.

‘I take it I pronounced it the right way, then?’

’Bundushathur,’ murmured Thorin.

Bilbo mock-scowled at him, ‘don’t think I don’t know what that means! That’s-‘

But his words were lost in another kiss, Thorin turning from his lips for a moment to press a series of butterfly kisses along the line of Bilbo’s jaw.

‘Thorin! We’ll be late for the coronation,’ said Bilbo, chuckling even as he said this, his hands finding their way underneath Thorin’s fine, layered clothes.

‘I do not care,’ rumbled Thorin, having reached Bilbo’s ear.

‘I think Dís will, and the Schedule-‘ a shock ran through Bilbo’s entire body as Thorin did something that caused him to gasp.

‘Bilbo,’ said Thorin, ‘I am King. I cannot be late for my own coronation.’

‘But you’re not King yet-.’

‘Will you ever stop talking?’ Thorin said, titling his head to look at Bilbo once more. And oh, if the Dwarves of Erebor could see him now, his eyes sparkling, colour splashed across his cheeks, a silly grin blooming across his face.

Bilbo answered Thorin’s question by diving forward once more, intent on making Thorin gasp as he had just done.

Needless to say, they were late for their coronation.
Gandalf, as promised, was there to crown them both. Bilbo didn’t think that they could actually stop him, had they wanted to.

Before the multitudes, before Lords and Ladies, princes and princesses and would-be-Kings, Thorin was crowned as King Under the Mountain. The crown sat easily on his head, and finally, finally, Thorin was granted the title that he had long fought for, and had longer still deserved.

Then, it was Bilbo’s turn. Gandalf eye’s had drifted to Bilbo’s slightly rumpled collar, but he passed no comment save for a slightly raised eye brow and an amused look. With the upmost solemnity, he placed the Consort’s crown on Bilbo’s head.

Gandalf turned to the assembled, silent crowds and said, in his loudest and most booming voice,

‘Hail, Thorin, Heir of Durin, King Under the Mountain...and his Consort, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire and of the Eagles of Manwē.’

The resulting cheer was a wave of sound, hitting Bilbo like a physical blow in the middle of his chest.

Gandalf continued, slightly quieter now, gaze hopeful as he spoke as if to Thorin alone.

‘May your reign see peace and plenty, at long last.’

The crown of flowers had been so light that Bilbo had barely noticed it at all. The crown that currently sat on his head was another matter entirely. It was much lighter, certainly, than Thorin’s, but even so the winding gold crown was a weight that Bilbo could not ignore. He felt conscious of it at every moment, and it was a strange feeling that he could not shake. Bilbo hoped that he would get used to it – he would be required to wear it at court. It would not do to appear uncomfortable before Thorin’s Lords.

There had been songs, and rites, and rituals. He and Thorin had stepped down from their thrones to walk the lined path, and all of the Company had bowed as they passed. Kíli and Fíli had been the first to bow low in deference to their King, looking very handsome indeed in their fine clothes, with a crown decorating each of their brows as befitting their status. Thorin had favoured them with a glance that Bilbo knew meant that he would put a stop to such behaviour, as soon as he was able.

With the ceremony completed, the celebrations could truly begin. It was late afternoon by the time the crowds began to feast and dance and sing, glorying in the fine day and the sense of happiness that pervaded the entire gathering. There are so many, thought Bilbo, and still more to come. Not all of the Dwarves had been able to return to the mountain before winter had truly sunk its teeth into the lands of the East. Many more were on their way even now, as Bilbo drifted through the crowds. He and Thorin had parted briefly – Thorin was required to speak to the Dwarven Lords, and Bilbo would be fulfilling his first duties as consort by doing what Thorin could not – seeing to the Elven delegations.

Legolas, it would seem, was happy enough to oversee the argument currently taking place between Kíli and Bard, occasionally chipping in with his own assertions, stoking and calming their bickering in equal measure. Bilbo could quite clearly hear strains of their conversation even from where he stood.
‘I’m telling you,’ Kíli was saying, ‘your arrow might have wounded Smaug, but it was mine that finished him off!’

‘From that distance?’ scoffed Bard, ‘come Kíli, you know that’s unlikely.’

‘He dropped dead immediately after I fired my shot!’

‘But he may have been mortally wounded. He may have died even without your well-aimed arrow, Kíli,’ said Legolas smoothly.

‘Don’t you start-‘

Trying to repress a smile, Bilbo turned to the high table set a short distance away from the crowds, in its own tent to provide more privacy to those who sat inside. It was here that Bilbo was surprised to see a familiar face.

‘Lord Elrond!’ said Bilbo delightedly. Time and distance had given him cause to remember Rivendell and its Lord very fondly indeed.

‘Master Baggins,’ said the Elf-Lord, smiling congenially. Unlike his kin he had elected to remain standing, hands clasped behind his back, surveying the merriment taking place before Erebor. ‘What a delight it is to see you well and safe, here at the end of your journey.’

‘You honour us with your presence,’ said Bilbo, ‘I wouldn’t think you’d travel so far from Rivendell!’

‘Of course. Erebor has not known a King for many years. It is a momentous occasion, one that has been made all the more unusual by the Consort he has chosen,’ said Lord Elrond with a kind smile.

‘Yes,’ said Bilbo, thinking back to his time in Rivendell, and couldn’t help but smile, ‘last you saw us we were at complete odds with each other. The whole thing must seem very strange indeed.’

‘Not quite as strange as you would expect,’ corrected Lord Elrond, ‘though, I must admit, I did not expect your journey to be as successful. It is an astounding achievement, what the Company of Thorin Oakenshield has accomplished. But your relationship with Thorin...’ amusement flashed through Elrond’s warm grey eyes, ‘that, in comparison, was not so implausible.’

Bilbo shook his head with a snort. Had they really been that obvious, even then? Even to the Elves, as far-sighted as they were? Bilbo supposed that he and Thorin had been circling each other, drawn together again and again, against their better judgement...but Bilbo’s line of thought then took a different turn as he alighted on one particular memory and began to wonder how far sighted Lord Elrond really was.

‘Did you foresee something, that day?’ said Bilbo, smile gone, a frown in its place, ‘in the library – what did you see?’

Lord Elrond turned his gaze towards Bilbo. ‘I foresaw it all,’ he said, ‘I saw great sadness in your future. I saw pain, and hardship, and heartbreak, and the shadow of death.’

‘Why?’ asked Bilbo plaintively, voice a ghostly whisper, ‘why didn’t you say something?’

‘Because I also saw happiness. I saw love,’ answered Lord Elrond simply, ‘and I ask you, Master Baggins, was it not worth every second of darkness on your journey here?’

Bilbo let out a whisper of an exhale, looking out over the happy crowds, imagining Thorin out there,
somewhere, irritated at having to stand on ceremony for his Lords, but *alive*. Kíli and Fíli, were out there, too, likely up to a great deal of trouble – they were his family, now, and Dís alongside of them.

‘Of course it was,’ sighed Bilbo, ‘of course it was.’

‘There was a chance that you would die here,’ said Elrond, turning to look out over the rolling foothills covered in green grass. ‘Your blood would seep into the grounds of the mountains and your body laid to rest in Erebor’s hallowed halls, deep at the centre of the mountain. But there was also a chance that you would *live*. I had to hope for the latter, that day in Rivendell.’

‘Well,’ said Bilbo with a laugh, ‘I am certainly glad it was the latter.’

‘As are many here today.’

A stretch of companionable silence passed between them before Lord Elrond said,

‘There are those who will be watching your reign with great interest.’

‘Yes, I can imagine we will be quite the talk of Middle Earth for quite some time. A Dwarf and a Hobbit is quite an unusual paring, to be sure.’

‘I am not just simply referring to foreign lands, Master Hobbit,’ said Elrond with a glance and a tilt of his head.

Bilbo caught his meaning quickly. ‘Ah, yes. I’ve been worrying about that,’ he confessed, ‘court intrigue is foreign to me, but I know that there are many Dwarves who are still waiting for me to just...trip up, and prove them right.’

He shook his head, at a loss. ‘I am made for the rolling hills of the Shire. I became a Hobbit of the Eyrie of the Misty Mountains. But I am unsure if I can be a ruler of Dwarves.’

‘Many think the same, when they begin their reign,’ said Lord Elrond, ‘and all of them have gone on to become great rulers. There is no reason why you could not do the same.’

‘You have done much that is surprising during your life, Bilbo,’ said another.

Lord Elrond and Bilbo both turned to see King Grumach approaching on foot. ‘When I first met you, you were a wide-eyed Hobbit, weak and frail. Look at you now.’

Lord Elrond bowed his head in acknowledgement to Grumach, and Grumach returned the gesture. Bilbo hastily bowed in turn.

‘We are all of us capable of great things,’ said Grumach, ‘all that is required is for us to be tested. This is just another test, another rock to jump from. Just imagine Deas is shouting at you to keep moving, and you will be fine,’ he said wryly.

‘Thank you,’ said Bilbo, ‘I’ll be sure to remember that. I hope that Deas himself will be around to shout it himself.’

‘I imagine you couldn’t keep him away, or my sons, or any of the fledglings,’ said the King with a long-suffering air, ‘but this is the nature of younglings, is it not, Lord Elrond?’

‘It is indeed,’ agreed the Elf, ‘my own children are just as far-ranging, and as troublesome. Woe betide they ever sprout wings! But, of course, I would not ask for them any other way.’

King Grumach hummed. ‘But a discussion of my children is not what I came to speak to you about,
Bilbo. I have a gift for you on your wedding day.’

‘You do?’ said Bilbo, eyebrows bouncing upwards in his surprise, ‘there’s no need, your highness – it’s enough that you’re here.’

‘Ah, but this is needed,’ insisted Grumach, ‘though I will surely irritate you thoroughly by giving you this, for I will not tell you what it is, and I know how much unsolved mysteries annoy you. But you can only know that it is the most precious gift of all, and that I am merely calling up a wind to turn a spark into a blaze.’

If Grumach had meant to ignite Bilbo’s curiosity, they he had certainly succeeded. What a riddle he had presented Bilbo with. He had not an inkling of what Grumach’s gift could be, but he trusted the King. Whatever it was, it would be for Bilbo’s benefit.

‘Do you accept this gift?’

Bilbo glanced at Lord Elrond, who shrugged delicately at the unasked question. ‘Yes, I do,’ said Bilbo with great bemusement, ‘though I have no idea what I am accepting.’

‘You will know, in time,’ said Grumach. ‘Here, turn your head towards mine.’

Bilbo obeyed, and Grumach simply bent his great head low to gently tap the curve of his beak against Bilbo’s forehead, Bilbo’s crown making a quiet chiming sound when Grumach’s beak connected with the metal. Grumach stepped back, and Bilbo opened his eyes.

‘I don’t feel a different at all,’ said Bilbo, utterly baffled, ‘am I supposed to?’

‘No – you will not be able to sense my gift, Bilbo.’

‘Do you not even feel a touch of difference?’ asked Elrond, smiling at the exchange.

‘Perhaps,’ said Bilbo, ‘but mostly, I’m just hungry.’

It was no small achievement, to make an Elf laugh, but Lord Elrond did just that, his rich, full-bodied chuckle filing up the tent, causing his kin to turn and try and see the source of his merriment.

The day was drawing to a close, but no one minded at all. Darkness meant fireworks, and Gandalf bested himself once more, setting off a series of rockets that showered all manner of coloured sparks on the crowds as the sun began to dip below the horizon. Several more were set off in quick succession – rockets that formed great constellations in the canvas of the sky with glittering stars, fizzing fireworks that formed a flock of blue birds that danced through the air, delighting the shrieking children, and many more wondrous sights besides, including fireworks Bilbo recognised from his childhood.

There were Dwarves and men and women dancing in among the lanterns, a large band keeping time with a fast-paced melody. Bilbo could clearly see Dwalin and Dís in amongst the revellers, laughing as they tried to keep time with the furious beat, Fíli not far from them and attempting to teach the jig to a young female Dwarf. Elsewhere the eagles rested, conversing with the Elves or, in the case of the fledglings, letting the young children of Dale and Erebor inspect them. For Gwaihir this meant having his feathers tugged by tiny hands and bearing it all with the upmost dignity. For the others, it meant nudging the children into some semblance of order, or opening their wings to hear the little
ones ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ in wonder at their feathers.

Bilbo, laughing, saw that Tuit had grown bored with his crown of flowers and had decided to present it to two very young girl Dwarves, who took it with the upmost care, despite the fact that they could barely carry it between them.

Bilbo tried to fix it all in his memory so that he would not forget even a moment, willing his mind to absorb it all. But the day was not done yet – there was still one last gift to be given.

He and Thorin had secreted themselves away from the main crowds. They had taken their turn at dancing, both with each other and the rest of their family, but were now content to sit on the grassy hills and watch the celebrations, and the fireworks. Their lovely coronation clothes were likely getting grass stains, but neither of them cared.

They were sat so close that Bilbo could easily turn his head slightly to the right to brush noses with Thorin. He thought of what he was about to do. He savoured the mountain air, fresh and clean with a hint of lit fireworks, his heart picking up speed with little prompting.

‘Thorin,’ he said, and his husband turned to him, ‘I have something to say to you.’

‘Hmm?’ said Thorin as he put out his pipe, laying it aside. ‘Oh, it must be something serious indeed, for you to frown like that.’

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that. Well, it is serious, but...’ he huffed and started again. ‘Thorin. It’s time for me to tell you my Name.’

Whereas before Thorin had looked almost drowsy with contentment and likely a little mead, too, Bilbo saw his whole attention sharpen, every inch of his focus turning to Bilbo.

‘Are you sure?’ he said, urgently.

This drew a startled laugh from Bilbo. ‘Am I sure?’ he said, incredulously, ‘of course I’m sure. I don’t know why you insisted on waiting so long-’

‘I would not have been right,’ said Thorin, ‘I had to-’

‘Earn it - I know, I know,’ completed Bilbo. This was an old and much-used argument. ‘But you could have heard this months ago. I could have just blurted it out one day – no need to stand on ceremony – good morning, dear, oh, and my Name is...’

‘I would have stopped you. Somehow,’ Thorin said, a smile tugging at the edges of his mouth.

‘And taken great delight in it, I’m sure,’ said Bilbo with a pointed look.

‘Of course.’ There was a hint of teeth in Thorin’s grin. Bilbo had to carefully ignore the resulting hot flush of heat low in his stomach at the sight of this.

‘Well, I suppose you can consider it a gift, on this, our wedding night.’

‘Not the only gift I’ll be getting, I hope,’ said Thorin with a healthy leer.

‘Oh, for goodness sake!’ exclaimed Bilbo, putting a hand to his face and laughing. He was fairly sure he had knocked his crown askew in the process. ‘Can’t you be a little more serious? I’m giving away my soul here, after all.’

He had intended it to be a joke, but Thorin purposefully did not take it as such. His smile – but not
his evident happiness – slipped away, to be replaced by something tentatively and achingly hopeful. Bilbo took heart at this new expression. It gave him courage, to know that he was trusted enough to see Thorin with his guard so completely dismantled.

It really did feel like he was giving his soul away, now. But Bilbo didn’t mind. He had given Thorin everything months ago. This would simply seal the deal, like the ring on his finger and the bead in his hair.

Bilbo clasped hands with Thorin, met his gaze, and said,

‘All that I am, I give to you. I am The-Hush-Before-The-Storm.’

Thorin sucked in a breath through parted lips. His dipped his eyes down and brought Bilbo’s hands up to his mouth so that he could kiss his knuckles.

‘Thank you, Bilbo,’ he said.

‘No, you idiot. Thank you.’

‘But you’re the one that just gifted me-‘ began Thorin, but Bilbo cut him off with a kiss, just because he could.

‘And you say I’m the talkative one,’ he said, smiling into Thorin’s mouth, heart singing in joy at the way Thorin put a hand to the nape of his neck to pull him in close for another kiss, noses bumping, breathless with happiness, fireworks bursting into colour above their heads.

Bilbo had known exactly why he had felt the need to thank Thorin. But even if Thorin had asked why, Bilbo knew he could not fully answer the question. He found himself unable to put into words the feeling that had been building inside his chest ever since he had woken in the aftermath of the battle. It was simply too much, too big a concept for him to confine it to a few simple words.

Because there, between earth and sky, Bilbo finally felt at home.

Chapter End Notes

_Bundushathur:_ Cloudyhead.

I have to start by saying this: this is not the last you'll see of this universe. As you can see by this chapter, I skipped a period of three months - I am fulling intending on posting a series of one-shots covering Thorin and Bilbo's first winter. It will involved quite a lot of bickering, fail!courting, and Bilbo and Thorin both sorting out the last of their differences, as well as some other hi-jinx involving the Company.

I'm also welcoming prompts! If there's something you'd like to see, or an idea you might have, then please feel free to drop me an ask over on tumblr at http://little-big-spoon.tumblr.com/ask or, if you don't use tumblr, you can always leave it in a comment below. I can't promise anything, but I'll take each one into account! Or, if you just want to chat/scream/ramble about The Hobbit, I'm game for that, too.
With that out of the way, I need to take a moment to say thank you, very much, to every single one of you who's read this and commented. You've kept me inspired and encouraged and you've done wonders for my confidence levels as a writer. I went from not showing anyone my writing at all, to finishing my first story in the space of a few months. If I write another story, it'll be because of you guys. So thank you.

And a massive, Dwalin-style bear hug for those of you who kept coming back, chapter after chapter, to leave comments every single time I updated. You're all awesome. You too, Lina and Kelsey, for all those long, rambling asks I sent you and all your enjoyable responses on tumblr. Come here, let me kiss your face and serve you tea and cakes and scones.

See you all soon!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!