Summary

The benevolent will of Gwaihir the Windlord, the unshakable loyalty of a hobbit, and the help of Lord Elrond change the course of the history of Erebor by seeing Thorin Oakenshield returned as King under the Mountain.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The Widening Gyre

In the end all we have is ourselves. Even in the company of countless others we are subject to the solitude of finality. Shadows fall, light flees, and all pain subsides. Life is to be marveled, and no less so than by he who teeters on its shared precipice with death. It is almost proud, drawing ever closer to the inherent quality of not-living, yet not wholly proud until it has you fully in its embrace. Tides trash and walls crumble and at once you are ensconced in a world utterly apart from the world of the waking.

Precious moments dripped by into darkness, and so too dripped the life of Thorin Oakenshield. Protectively clasped in Beorn’s mighty bear-arm, the noble dwarf lay with many deleterious wounds. The giant skin-changer smashed through any adversaries that crossed his path as he carried Thorin to someplace safe. His immense strides lent themselves to a quick retreat. Moving farther and farther from the front lines of the battle, no one pursued the great Beorn, for he possessed a might so massive that it would be folly to confront him.

Where foe would not follow, friend did; and so, Gandalf followed Beorn. Swiftly ran the wizard, with agility that surpassed his aged exterior, in pursuit of the bear. He passed hoards of goblins, wargs, orcs, and countless other fell creatures, killing some in his wake. He passed also the strong soldiers of Dain’s army, come from the Iron Hills. Ever and anon, as he drew farther away, he would see lingering members of their alliance rushing into battle. Gutural cries of anger and deep murderous rage rang across the fields, growing dimer in the ever-lengthening distance Gandalf put between himself and the battle. The Istar glanced back and looked on in dejection at what he saw: reams and reams of new orc soldiers pouring onto the field. This was the second wave of an army led by Bolg, come to the Lonely Mountain. *Gwaihir, if ever a time I needed you, let it be this time, and let you hasten to our aid!*

At length Beorn halted, now a reasonably safe distance from the carnage spread out against the land. Solemnly and with tremendous care, the shape-shifter placed Thorin on the ground. A pained *whoosh* of air escaped the dwarf king’s lips as the hard ground met his body. A frown formed on Beorn’s face while he looked down at his injured friend. Presently hatred for the goblins and orcs burned like fiery bile in his stomach. He pulled himself to his enormous height and, being consumed by rage and pain, he let out a deafening roar. Eyes alight and hackles raised, Beorn leapt with mighty bounds back toward the battle. In him all caution was lost and he mercilessly clobbered any foul thing that he met.

Careful not to get in the way of Beorn as he charged back into battle, Gandalf moved toward Thorin. Worry etched lines on the old and weather-worn face of the wizard as he bent down to examine the felled dwarf. It was plain that any vestige of consciousness had slipped away from the dwarf who now lay very still. Gandalf made a displeased humming noise while he considered his options. He wanted the dwarf king to stay alive, if it could be helped, but under the circumstances there was only so much to be done. Pensively he stared at the motionless Thorin Oakenshield set before him. At length he settled on a spell that was intended to summon light and life within a dying being. This, at least, would bide him some time.
“Anor valthen, togo laugas lín nestad enin gûr hen,” he whispered, a hand pressed to Thorin’s chest.

Blessedly some colour chased the pallor from Thorin’s face and his breathing evened out. The pained expression on the dwarf’s face was replaced by a blank expression of unconsciousness. The wizard carefully pried the rent armour from Thorin’s body to examine his wounds. He found that the wounds were many and they were ghastly. He tasked himself with stopping the bleeding and bandaging the wounds. The dwarf was badly bruised and Gandalf suspected he suffered from internal bleeding, in addition to the obvious abrasions that bled externally. He muttered another spell as he ran his hands over Thorin’s half-bare chest. To his pleasure, some of the dark bruises receded and the bleeding slowed. Gandalf was hopeful, but did not allow himself to feel relieved yet, for he knew that this was only temporary at best. Verily, his healing skills were superb, but the dwarf was in need of greater ability still.

Far off the sound of the battle raged on and Gandalf knew he must return. He did not want to leave Thorin alone to die and thus began contemplating who might be fetched to watch over him. Well, he would have to return at any rate and for a time Thorin must be companionless. Gandalf wrapped some last minute bandages around newly discovered wounds, returned Thorin’s clothes to his body, and did his best to hide the dwarf king with shrubbery and other foliage before heading out. He rather expertly camouflaged the dwarf so that he would be easily missed by any of the opposing armies’ soldiers. Scouring the depths of his great mind Gandalf began to devise a plan to deal with the particulars of Thorin, son of Thrain. Of course, much of what would be done was dependent on who he could find and who would not be missed from battle.

Rushing back, something stopped the grey wizard: a sound, a soft cry that could scarcely be heard over the sounds of war. He strained his ears and listened more carefully. “The eagles! The eagles! The eagles are coming! The eagles!” As sure as the sun will rise tomorrow he heard the small voice of his favourite hobbit. Cries of “the eagles” rippled across the field and Gandalf’s heart beat with hopefulness as he saw the great host of noble birds soaring proudly in the sky. They were Manwë’s eagles, led by Gwaihir the Windlord, King of the Eagles, descendent of Thorondor, and they had come in a time of need.

Like bolts of golden lightening they dashed to the earth. Their massive shrieks wrenched cried of agony from the goblins that clung protectively to their ears. With cruel and wicked grins the eagles snatched up evil things and dropped them to their doom or smashed them against the side of the mountain. Gwaihir, flanked on either side by Landroval and Meneldor, led the assault on the advancing front of goblins. Most of the rest of his convocation joined them in taking out the second massive wave of goblins and orcs, but some acted on their own authority to grab and kill the hordes of wild wolves that were also on the field. Flying over the South spur, where the e
When Gwaihir was confident that his flock had made the multitude of orcs and goblins less multitudinous, he went in search of Gandalf. He informed his close kin of his errantry, and with a tip of the wing dipped away south. In no time his keen sight led him to the grey wizard and he began his descent. The eagle lord saw Gandalf walking hastily toward Ravenhill, as if in search of someone or something. The wizard stopped, however, when he saw Gwaihir coming closer to him. The prodigious golden eagle stopped five metres shy of the wizard who had now changed his course and was walking to meet him.

“Gwaihir!” Gandalf greeted.

“Gandalf, my friend,” Gwaihir greeted in return, his rich throaty voice thick with the pleasure of battle. “Long have we been suspicious of the goblins’ mutterings, and we have watched their movements, however hidden they thought they were. It seems that we have come to aid none too soon. But lo! still the battle rages and soon I must return to fight alongside my kin and our allies. As always, though, I have a moment to spare for you.”

Gandalf disregarded pleasantries in place of haste, for speed was what he needed and he would waste no time. Gravely he said, “Thorin Oakenshield is terribly wounded and only in the capable hands of Lord Elrond might he survive. Two favours this will be in the same year to the same company, but it would do my heart well to see Thorin returned as King under the Mountain.”

“I sensed that our parting at the Carrock would not be the last that I would see of Thorin Oakenshield and company. It is a dangerous world in which we live and few are spared.” Gwaihir began pensively, and then his tone sobered as he said, “It was you, Gandalf the Grey, who saved me from certain death at the hands of a poisoned arrow, and indebted am I to you. You are counted as a friend and gladly I will help.”

The Windlord looked out on the field below him to see elves and men and dwarves strewing bodies of dead orcs and goblins about them. His eagles were making a sizable dent in the advancing armies, but as darkness approached it seemed less hopeful. Then in was evident that darkness came not only from the setting sun, but the sky was masked by many bats that flew to the aid of the goblins from the Misty Mountains. Gwaihir could see the advancing front switch from his allies to the enemy. Once the armies of men, elves, and dwarves alike had made progress, but it was dashed altogether by increasing numbers of evil creatures lumbering forth.

“Victory is not a certainty and I do not like to leave in such a state,” the eagle lord said after a moment’s consideration.

“Please Gwaihir, Thorin does not have much time!” Gandalf pleaded, though he knew that it would matter not if they lost in the end.
“Now, I said that I do not like to leave in such a state,” the great eagle reiterated. “I am the swiftest and the strongest to be sure, which is why I will remain to fight. Meneldor has immutable stamina and he is a fleet-winged traveler. I shall send him to retrieve your Lord Elrond.”

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With a nod Gwaihir was off. Gandalf braced himself against his staff as the eagle’s giant wings, lifting his golden body upward, sent gusts of air hurling toward the wizard. After the briefest moment of watching Gwaihir go, Gandalf returned to his task. When he had heard the first calls of “The eagles!” he knew it was Bilbo’s voice. Despite the recent unpleasant exchange between the dwarf king and hobbit, Gandalf thought that Bilbo would be the best choice to watch over Thorin until Lord Elrond arrived. The wizard knew him to be a kind soul and very forgiving; a few harsh words would not shake the hobbit’s loyalty or concern for his friend. Regardless of that, Bilbo would not be terribly missed from battle. While previously he had accosted Azog and valiantly defended Thorin from certain death, it was not in his nature to be a fighter.

The wizard was a good judge of a great many things and he was certain that he heard the sound come from Ravenhill. Upon reaching the South spur, however, Gandalf found it quite unoccupied. He scoured the rocky slope and the lays around it, but yielded nothing in his search. As it happened, Bilbo was there, but by the grace of his magic ring he was not to be seen by anyone for a long while. He lay invisible and unconscious, having been knocked out by a hurled rock shortly after seeing the eagles. The Istar sighed in exasperation, but nothing could be done. Gandalf returned to fight amidst the grounds littered with scimitars, axes, and dead bodies.

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Gwaihir let out a peal call and summoned Meneldor to him in the sky. Talons and beak stained black with the blood of the enemy and eyes all aglow Meneldor quickly flew to meet him. “Yes, my lord?”

“Gandalf the Grey has informed me that the dwarf king is gravely wounded and near death. He has asked that we bring Elrond, Lord of Rivendell, here to heal him,” stated Gwaihir.

Without need for more words to understand, Meneldor said, “I am not wont to leave battle while it rages, but if that is your will I must comply. I will fly tirelessly and quickly as I can.” The golden eagle opposite Gwaihir shook his head with displeasure of having to leave battle. Not only was he loyal to his friend, but he was forever grateful to the wizard who saved his lord. So, with a final glance down at the raging battle, Meneldor set off toward the westering sun.
Glad to be of Use

Bilbo groaned as he regained consciousness. He pressed a hand to his head and inhaled sharply, promptly withdrawing said hand. The world spun around him as he staggered to get up. He immediately laid back down to save him falling on his face. The chipped rocks afoot made an uncomfortable bed of shale on which he rested, eyes fixed on the sky. It was a grey morning, but he squinted at the brightness of it anyway. Gingerly he pressed a hand to his head again and found his hair to be matted with blood. Some object’s trajectory had been trained unwittingly on his head, doing as much damage as it would. His jugular pulsed with the added effort of wakefulness and his whole body throbbed with pain.

At length the pain dulled and the world stopped spinning, so he sat up. In waking, he found himself alive, but it was bitter bought; the lays about him were sullied by the black blood of the enemy which mingled with the red blood of his fallen comrades. Amidst the scathes of orc and goblin bodies Bilbo saw also man and elf bodies flaccid and lifeless. The elves should have lived merrily in the woods for many years to come, but now their jocund voices would no longer be heard singing through the trees. Pity it was, and almost too much for Bilbo to take, so he turned his gaze skyward. Fog cloaked the land in a haze that was almost beautiful. It wisped and danced listlessly in an otherworldly fashion, favouring the high peaks of the mountains and the low valleys below. Through the gathering fog he could have sworn he saw the shape of an eagle approaching one of the valleys nearby.

After sitting for some time, Bilbo decided that he would try to walk. Up he got, stumbling about like a newborn foal on wobbly limbs. Step after step his legs grew stronger underneath of him and soon he was walking normally, if not a little slowly. Still, he tripped occasionally as he ambled down the hillside. Ravens circled overhead, but they did not seem to take note of the halfling. Likewise, Bilbo was too distracted to notice the ebony birds of yore. He was not, however, too distracted to notice a man walking just ten metres away from him.

“Hullo there!” Bilbo called to the man. “Pardon me!”

The man looked about, confused. “What trick of the mountain is this? I hear voices, but see no one to whom they belong.”

Frustrated, Bilbo thought the man must not have seen him through the mist, but then he realised that he still wore his ring. Good gracious! I guess I might have been found earlier if it weren’t for this ring, Bilbo thought. Then again, I might also have been found dead. Quickly he removed the ring and shouted again. This time the man did see him and rushed to greet him. The brown-haired man looked down at the unfamiliar creature before him and waited for it to speak.

And speak he did: “I am a companion of Thorin. Bilbo Baggins is my name,” Bilbo introduced himself.
The man’s expression changed from one of confusion to one of relief. “Scouts were sent out to look for you days ago. It is well that I have found you, else you would have been left here. The grey wizard Gandalf said that this was the last place your voice was heard, but we had already looked. I came back for chance that you might still be found. But come! We must return down to meet Gandalf, and quickly.”

To where this “down” was Bilbo could only guess he meant down the mountain, but after that he was lost. He toddled as fast as he could after the man who sprang away fleet-footed. He had mastered walking in his newly returned state of consciousness, but running was out of the question entirely. With a glance over his shoulder the man saw that the hobbit lagged, moving painfully slow. He smiled good-naturedly at Bilbo and returned to easily scoop him off his feet. Without a moment to protest, Bilbo found himself being carried down the mountain by his new acquaintance. The man— who Bilbo later learned was called Belemar— ran tirelessly, but began to breathe heavily by the time they neared the foot of the mountain.

There was a camp in the valley near Dale— the “down” to which Belemar alluded. When Bilbo arrived he was not sure what he had expected, but it certainly was not this. Tents had been erected sporadically and busy healers moved among them carrying pots and cloth and herbs. The hobbit would have thought that there would be wails of pain or perhaps muffled screams, whimpers, sobs, anything! But instead the valley was eerily silent, the air was sorrow laden, and the only sounds to be heard were the scuffled hurried footsteps of the healers. Bilbo scanned the faces that popped out of tents, but was yet to find a familiar one. Then, to his pleasure, he heard a voice calling to him, a voice that he knew well.

“Baggins!” Gandalf’s voice broke the stillness of the air. “What a sight you are, dear Bilbo. I am very glad to see you. I had almost lost hope for our burglar, but I knew your luck could not have worn out just yet.”

Gandalf appeared beyond glad to see him, but Bilbo noticed that he was not altogether well. The grey wizard looked more worn than usual and one of his arms was hung up in a sling. With his free hand he braced heavily against his staff. Even the great wizard had not been fated to emerge unscathed from battle. From what Bilbo had seen of the destruction thus far no elf, nor man, nor dwarf had been untouched by the fighting. Gandalf was but another casualty in the wonton desolation of battle. The wizard lingered outside of a tent, glancing with a worried expression between Bilbo and the closed flaps. Then, for the first time since their reunion, he seemed to really look at the hobbit, and so noticed the gash on the side of his head.

“How are you?” He inquired. “Your head is hurt.” Without waiting for a response the wizard hailed a healer who brought them a pail of water and a cloth which Gandalf held out towards Bilbo.
Bilbo chuckled a bit, more out of the settling shock than humor. “Just a bump, nothing to fret, I have a thick skull.” He winced as he pressed the cloth to his aching head. “It seems you didn’t come out of this without injury either,” he said nodding at Gandalf’s slung arm.

Gandalf glanced toward the tent again; a profound frown creased his face. He steeled himself against his malaise and smiled weakly at Bilbo. “Right you are. If only we had all been so lucky…”

“Lucky”, that’s an odd way to put it. It would have been lucky not to happen at all! Bilbo thought. He mulled over the wizard’s words and reconsidered: well, perhaps we are; we made it out of this mess alive, and not much worse for wear. Oh! but what of my friends? What of Thorin? Then it hit him. “Gandalf, who is in that tent?” Bilbo asked, not entirely sure he wanted to hear the answer, but almost certain he knew it anyways. When immediately he received no answer he pressed, “Gandalf?”

Gandalf sighed and then said, “That would be Thorin Oakenshield.” And in anticipation of Bilbo’s questions he added, “He is alive, yes, and in the skilled hands of Lord Elrond.”

Bilbo eyes were rimmed white in terror, but in spite of himself he let out a sigh of relief and asked, “May I see him?”

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Lord Elrond had not been terribly surprised to see Meneldor, though it had been some time since the elves of Rivendell had had any dealings with the eagles of the Misty Mountains. His was a land untouched by war and hate, but that was not to say that he was blind to it in other parts of Middle-earth. Upon hearing the news from Meneldor and of the plea from Gandalf, Elrond gathered his necessary affairs and leapt astride the golden eagle. The pair journeyed through the skies at breakneck speed, albeit slightly slower than when Meneldor had set out from Erebor. Two days’ flight without rest took them where they needed to go.

Once he arrived, the halflven lord had set to work quickly, unrobing Thorin, and unwrapping Gandalf’s makeshift bandages. The filthy, blood-soaked clothes that Elrond peeled off Thorn were discarded, as there was no hope of resurrecting even a semblance of presentable garb. Keeping Thorin in naught but his skin would make tending the injured dwarf’s wounds much easier, as well as providing a better chance for staving off infection, but there was not much hope for that. There were many gashes and they were very deep, but one in particular worried Lord Elrond. It was not terrifically long, but it was deep and jagged. It was likely the work of a scimitar, and just as likely one that had been poisoned.
Autumn had settled on the boughs of trees, chilling the air about Erebor. A breeze carried through the tent and Elrond piled another blanket on Thorin to keep out the cold. He had cleaned and dressed Thorin’s wrecked body as haste would allow, for the poisoned scimitar wound would need immediate medicine. Presently, satisfied with the dressings and the amount of blankets covering Thorin, Elrond preceded to leave the tent. They were too far east to find the healing plant Athelas that the Men of the West had brought to Middle-earth, so Elrond would need to scout the lands for other foliage with healing properties.

The halfelven lord exited through the flaps of the tent, deep in thought. He expected to find Gandalf still waiting outside of the tent, but was mildly surprised to see the hobbit standing with him. Elrond liked the hobbit and was pleased to see him alive. Elrond knew him to be kind and agreeable, intent on helping in any way that he could. Last they had met was to pour over Thrain’s map in Rivendell in the light of a crescent moon. Curiosity had consumed the hobbit, who confessed to being endlessly intrigued by maps. He had been polite, but his eyes had glittered with excitement as a child who had discovered something fascinating and very special. Now, however, no glee met him, only the face of one stricken with worry and grief.

The hobbit stood in silent anticipation, certain that Elrond would say something of Thorin’s condition. Taught like a bowstring, Bilbo waited. His face was pale and scores of tremors ripped unnoticed through his body. He glanced between the halfelven lord and the wizard, watching them pass knowing looks. They shared a silent conversation that he was not privy to. Gandalf knew quite a bit more than his hobbit companion and could have deduced as much before Elrond emerged, looking stern and concerned.

At last, Bilbo could take no more and asked: “Is he- will Thorin be alright?”

Elrond looked gravely at the hobbit. “It is…hopeful,” Elrond said with some hesitation. “Orc poison is potent indeed, but his stout strength and stubborn will might yet serve him.”

Bilbo worried his lower lip. “Orc poison?”

“Yes. Quite dangerous and very deadly,” Elrond replied. “Now, I must leave to search for plants of healing.”

Bilbo opened his mouth to say something, but the words died on his lips. He bit the inside of his cheek when he noticed the bloodstains on Elrond’s lovely purple raiment. He wanted desperately to help, but was not sure in what way he would be useful and he was too in shock to ask.

“Might I suggest Master Baggins stay with Thorin?” Gandalf offered.
Hurriedly, Bilbo said, “I would like that very much!” He wanted nothing more than to see Thorin.

“Very well,” nodded Lord Elrond, pleased with the suggestion. “It would be ill-avoided to leave him unattended. I shan’t be long, Master Baggins.”

And so, Elrond departed and with him went Gandalf. A chill struck up Bilbo’s spine and drove him inside the tent. Upon entering, Bilbo was no longer certain that he wanted to see Thorin. The dwarf’s hair was sullied by blood, dirt, and twigs. His face too was marred with blood and streaks of dirt beneath the sheen of cold sweat. Bilbo was thankful for the many furs and blankets covering the rest of the dwarf, for he was not ready to witness his once glorious friend riddled with marks of woe.

The hobbit stood gaping at the former leader of their company. What little anger that lingered at the king’s remarks to the hobbit about the Arkenstone withered into overwhelming concern. Bilbo moved in a slow, halting gait toward Thorin. The tent—which Bilbo noticed not at all—was large, but not spacious. The cot which Thorin lay upon was in the corner farthest away from the door-flaps, so as to avoid as much draft as possible. A small table occupied the space opposite of Thorin, and on it was set a mortar and pestle for Elrond to blend plants. Indeed, Elrond had already brought lavare, nepeta, peppermint leaves, leonurus, and a number of other plants, and had set them next to his mortar and pestle. Extra blankets, thick and made of wool, were folded and stored under the table along with extra yards of cloth bandages. There were buckets of steaming water with bloodied rags soaking in an attempt to get them clean, but all this succeeded in doing was to turn the water a soupy red mess.

Bilbo did, however, notice a chair placed next to Thorin’s cot. His legs took him there by their own will, as if carried through a lucid dream that he scarcely maintained control of. He sunk into the chair, shut his eyes, and breathed a tired sigh. Images of a broken Thorin being thrown down in battle danced behind Bilbo’s tightly shut eyelids. The imagined scene of how Thorin sustained the injuries was almost worse than facing the injured Thorin himself. And so, Bilbo opened his eyes to take in the battered dwarf.

Seeing Thorin, Bilbo was confronted again with the unpleasant sight of majesty marred. He tentatively reached a hand toward Thorin to clean away some of the muck, but pulled back. In that instant he was struck by memories of their last encounter. *I will throw you to the rocks!* He wondered if Thorin would welcome another helping hand, or if his touch would be chased away like so much unrequited love. *May we never meet again!*

The words stung even now, but Bilbo was driven by a deep-seated caring for the dwarf, no matter how many hurtful things had been said or done. Once again, Bilbo reached forward, this time heedless of how Thorin might feel. He found Thorin’s thick hair to be dreadfully tangled and sanguine-streaked and muddy. The thought briefly crossed his mind that he had once fantasied about
running his fingers through Thorin’s hair. Well, perhaps more than once. Dwarves took particular care in braiding and keeping their hair in order. Bilbo had learned that it was a practice derived to keep their locks tame while in battle, but also that there was a great deal of cultural significance attached to braiding and plating the hair. Bilbo imagined that it would make their hair pleasing to touch, maybe like the mane of a pony, but no so coarse. Dwarf hair was thick and long, not at all like his own short and curly hobbit hair.

Presently he focused on the task at hand: sorting the mess of Thorin’s hair. In its current state it was not at all how Bilbo imagined. Sure, it was like pony hair, but not very pleasing to touch. This was hardly a fair assertion though, considering the circumstances. The hobbit’s hands navigated the black depths of dwarf mane with fumbling, unpracticed fingers. He sought out all the beads that remained braided into the hair and pocketed each one before proceeding to unwind the braids themselves. Bits of dried mud or twigs were loosed as the hobbit worked and they would fall to the cot with no mind paid to them by Bilbo. He had become transfixed in his work and his unpracticed fingers became far steadier as time went on.

Bilbo shivered in the cold November air, though he felt heat pouring off of Thorin. He had sifted through a large portion of the tangled mess and he noticed his fingers starting to ache. Sitting back in the chair he saw that his hands were red-raw and mired. He glanced to his left and noticed the buckets of water and rags. Hopeful for something to clean himself with, he rose and walked over to them. All of them, water still steaming, were pooled with Thorin’s blood. Bilbo frowned and considered trying to find some water someplace else. He really did not want to leave Thorin alone and almost resigned himself to wiping his dirty hands on his clothes, then he remembered that Gandalf had got a pail of water for him earlier to wash his head.

Bilbo exited to fetch the pail and was pleased to find that his rag was still there as well. He was about to dip his hands in when he remembered Thorin’s face, marred and sweaty. He weighed his options and decided that Thorin’s need to be wiped clean vastly exceeded his own wish to clean his hands. And so, Bilbo scuffed his hands on his trousers and carried the pail back into the tent.

Dipping his hand in to retrieve the cloth, Bilbo found that the water was still warm. He wrung it out and pressed it to Thorin’s forehead. The dwarf did not stir at the touch, not a flinch or a wrinkle appeared to denote the recognition of sensation, for he was truly and deeply unconscious. He did not wonder if it would be awkward had Thorin been awake, did not consider if Thrain’s son would even allow such a thing had he been awake. He thought only of Thorin as he was, covered in grime and still as a stone. With great care, Bilbo removed the dirt, blood, and sweat from the dwarf’s face. He moved gently at first, but the state of the dried mud and coagulated blood required a firm hand to remove.

Hot tears pricked the corner of Bilbo’s eyes as he tended to Thorin. Until this point he had not wept, had not had time to think of weeping or to concentrate on any one grievance. They were silent tears that stung his eyes as he continued to wipe the evidence of battle from Thorin’s face. He stopped momentarily to press a hand to his mouth as a wave of grief and tears passed over him. He restrained himself from sobbing openly, but his face was soaked with the strains of sorrow. He returned the
cloth to its bucket and took up a piece of Thorin’s hair with his free hand. He twisted the hair, wrapped it around his fingers, combed through it, and stroked it, none of which served any purpose but to comfort the aching heart of a kind creature.
Funeral pyres burned hot and bright at various locations throughout the camp. Despite the healers’ best efforts it was impossible to save everyone. Gandalf and Elrond wore solemn looks as they walked among tents and burning bodies. They half-listened to the conversations being held around them so as to pick up any news that circulated. As of yet, no word had spread to them about the rest of Thorin’s company. Gandalf felt that it was high time someone checked in on the other twelve dwarves. It was mid-way through the sea of tents that Gandalf left Elrond in search of any of his former companions.

At their parting, Elrond walked as one determined in the direction of the nearest forest. In true form he retained the poise and grace that is typically forfeited to haste. If memory served him well, which it invariably did, the plant Heilleir could be found in this part of Middle-earth. It was not as potent as Athelas, but it would have to do to serve Thorin. Away from the tents and pyres the morning silence was unbroken, but for the soft crunch of fresh snow beneath his feet.

Elrond needed very little sleep, and rejuvenated mostly through walks in the forest. This was an admirable quality to possess, as his time was in high demand. His current foray into the woods afforded him the recuperation that he sorely needed. He had worked tirelessly tending to Thorin and dressing his wounds since Meneldor had carried him to the lays about Erebor. It took the combined effort of his magnificent healing abilities and his arsenal of plants to stabilize the dwarf king. But, as Elrond found after sorting the mess that was Thorin Oakenshield, his endeavour was not a lost cause. The dwarf king was in remarkably good shape considering his afflictions. His greatest concern was drawing the poison from the orc wound. Thankfully Gandalf had done a great deal of good finding Thorin and healing him as best as time would allow.

Presently Elrond slowed his pace. The halfelven lord walked silently, like a hart through the mist. The fog was still thick in the dense forest and would take longer to burn off, provided it would actually burn off. The desolation of Smaug was far reaching indeed, but it was as if this forest was enchanted and immune to the evils of a dragon. It alone stood as woodland unscathed by either the great worm or the terrible battle. The forest was almost exclusively coniferous, but a few deciduous oak trees, maples, and silver birches stood stark and barren in the brisk November air. This land was distant from his own home, but it seemed to Elrond that regardless of the location the scent of approaching winter tied everyplace together with a likeness that belonged to the circadian rhythm of the world.
Elrond closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. The enormity of the forest caressed and consumed him. The trees swayed in the breeze and the forest hummed with life and energy. The scarcely heard rustle of pine needles was courtesy of the jilted flutter of a cardinal rushing to somewhere or from something. Elrond had no memory of this forest, but yet it brought him comfort. The feeling was akin to the remembrance of a long forgotten childhood dream that felt real despite reason claiming it had been fabricated. There was a friendly bite to the air; some might call it “fresh”. It coyly teased its way between fall and winter. In a certain light it felt like a warm autumn day, but in others the hash promise of more snow seemed not far off. This time of year was, after all, rather fickle.

Now it was a breeze that rustled the pine needles. The change of air movement carried with it all the scents of the forest including, Elrond noticed, the subdued floral scent of Heilleir. This plant was curious, in that it bloomed between September and early November. Elrond skimmed the needle-carpeted floor as he moved toward the faintly odorous plant. He had only to walk a short distance to find Heilleir. A small patch was nestled close to an ancient oak tree. The tiny light blue flowers were a lovely juxtaposition to the decaying leaves and mulch from which it grew. Elrond was in luck, for the leaves were thick and a healthy dark green. The plant was not ubiquitous by any stretch of the imagination, but the amount that was there would suffice.

Elrond produced a velvet satchel from his raiment to collect the leaves of Heilleir. Standing, Elrond looked up at the trees that sheltered the forest floor from the snow that had fallen the night before. They were ancient trees, and very strong. The forest was vast and beautiful; all evidence suggested that it was entirely passed over by the battle that had ragged not far from its borders. Perhaps that was why a blithe mood struck the halfelven lord in this unfamiliar place; like his own land, it was one untouched by evil.

…

Elrond heard Bilbo before he saw him. It was a sound that would have escaped any other passer-by, save perhaps Gandalf. The halfling’s gasping sob was muffled by a hand -his own- pressed against his mouth. Carefully and quietly Elrond peeled the flaps of the tent open to look in at the hobbit and injured dwarf. Elrond could only see half of Bilbo’s tear-stained face, but he could clearly make out the deep creases of sorrow etched on his brow.

The scene was lugubrious, but seeing the concern that the halfling felt for the dwarf king only reaffirmed the halfelven healer’s decision to have come to Thorin’s aid. He slipped quietly into the tent, bringing with him not only the plants that he had harvested from the forest, but also two pails of boiling hot water that he acquired on his walk back. Elrond let the pails down so that they made a light thud on the ground. It was intended to alert the hobbit of his presence, but not to startle him.

Indeed Bilbo heard it and it did not startle him tremendously, though he did give a brief start. He
wiped his eyes and cleared his throat as he turned to address Elrond. “Hello, Lord Elrond.” His voice was a low monotone, almost a whisper.

“Greetings, Master Baggins,” Elrond returned. “Has Thorin’s condition changed since I have been away?”

“I’m afraid not. He still has a terrible fever and hasn’t shown any sign of getting better.” Bilbo frowned as he looked down at his very still and silent friend.

“That is the most we can hope for now. It is well that his condition did not deteriorate. I found the plant that will draw the poison from Thorin, and it will only take a moment to prepare what is needed.”

“That’s wonderful,” Bilbo said a bit hollowly, but excitement was creeping into his voice. “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Certainly,” Elrond replied as he began to lay his dried herbs and fresh plants out on the table. “I brought water back to cleanse Thorin’s wounds again. It would be a great help if you would clean them while I prepare the Heilleir.”

“Yes, of course,” Bilbo replied hurriedly as he grabbed one of the buckets and a clean cloth.

As eager as he was to help, Bilbo hesitated when he got to Thorin’s side. His wavering at the bedside had little or nothing to do with the fact that Thorin was in naught but his skin under all those piles of blankets; after all, he had seen Thorin and the rest of the company in various states of undress so often that it was no longer an issue for the once prudish hobbit. No, it had almost everything to do with the fact that Thorin was terribly hurt and Bilbo was not sure whether he would be able to stand seeing his noble friend desecrated so.

The pounding of Elrond’s pestle into the mortar was a reminder that time was passing and he should begin the task set to him. So, slowly he reached up and layer by layer he peeled back the thick wool blankets to reveal Thorin’s broad chest. Bilbo gaped at the damage he could see on Thorin’s body. The first gash that caught his eye was the one Elrond had mentioned – the orc wound. It looked like a black grimace, delighting in the pain it brought to the dwarf’s flesh. Bilbo quickly turned his glance away. He looked at the blank canvas tent wall on the other side of Thorin and let out a slow, puffing breath. After taking a moment to regroup, the hobbit looked back at the body in front of him. There were many livid bruises and other lacerations scoring Thorin’s torso. It appeared as though they had been cleaned and dressed at one point, but now loose bits of wool from the blankets clung to the half-dried half-coagulated blood.
Bilbo decided that working from the top down was the best course of action, so he began with the ugly, crooked orc wound. The cloth moved methodically and mechanically over each affliction, one at a time. Oscillating from hot water to warm body was almost meditative. With each swipe of the cloth fresh blood pricked around the edges of the cuts. The newly surfaced blood mingled with water only briefly before the mixture was cleared away by Bilbo’s cloth. Thorin’s flesh pinkened in response to the added stimulation.

Elrond’s pestle came to a rest, and presently the halfelven moved from the table to Thorin’s bedside. Bilbo said not a word as he stood up and cleared away from where he had been seated. He watched Elrond quietly as the skilled healer sat and prepared to dress Thorin’s wounds. In addition to the mortar which held the ground *Heilleir* Elrond also had a small blade. He produced it from an ornate sheath, carved with elfish letters and beautiful symbols. When Elrond unsheathed the blade Bilbo could see that it was no more than seven inches long. It had a stunning silver handle that matched its sheath and it was set with amethysts.

Elrond steadied a hand on Thorin’s chest, just below the orc wound. Bilbo gasped when gleaned a hint of what Elrond intended to do. “What are you doing?” he asked in a pinched voice.

“The wound must be lanced and properly drained in order for it to heal and not infect the rest of Thorin’s body,” Elrond said, stopping to explain.

“Oh,” Bilbo said weakly as he watched the first cut of Elrond’s beautiful blade into Thorin’s already damaged body.

The wound oozed blood and black bile, but Elrond was quick to sop it up. Elrond worked as methodically lancing and wiping the wound as Bilbo had when he cleaned it only moments ago. He whispered Sindarin words in a low voice that Bilbo could not make out. This went on for what felt like ages before Elrond brought forth the *Heilleir*. He packed the gash with the pounded plant and stood to return to the table. Bilbo stared at it with morbid fascination. Already he could see the angry flesh starting to be soothed and the dark red skin fade to a healthy pink.

In the untouched bucket of water Elrond began to mix the remaining *Heilleir* with sandalwood, mint leaves, lavare, nepeta, and honey. The tent was splendidly fragrant in a matter of moments. Elrond took the still steaming bucket of water over to Thorin’s bedside. With a new cloth he bathed Thorin’s entire torso in the lovely smelling concoction, being careful to avoid the *Heilleir*-packed wound.

“I will need your assistance again in a moment, Master Baggins,” Elrond said, returning the cloth to the bucket for the last time.
“Of course,” answered Bilbo. “What would you like me to do?”

“Thorin will need to be re-bandaged, but it will take us both to do it. I will lift him forward and you will run the bandaged behind his back so that we can keep them clean,” Elrond explained. “But first I will dress the wounds with adeps lanae.”

Bilbo was very familiar with adeps lanae. It was used in the shire for a great number of things, mostly by farmers who had cows with chapped teats, or to weather-proof woollen garments. He could vaguely remember returning home as a young child, scraped up from a day of adventuring through the woods, and having his mother put it on his small cuts. Evidently it was good for healing more than just little hobbitling scrapes, for Elrond applied it to each of Thorin’s wounds, small or large.

When Elrond was done he wiped his slick fingers on an old cloth and fetched the yards of bandages stored under the table. He instructed Bilbo to go on one side of Thorin’s cot while he stayed on the other. Bilbo fussed with the cloth while he waited for Elrond to lift Thorin’s body. When he did, Bilbo leaned close and passed the cream-coloured yardage under the dwarf’s back. They played this game of lift and pass until Elrond was satisfied that all the wounds were securely covered on the torso. Once secured and cut, Elrond portioned out what he needed of the remaining cloth for the smaller cuts on Thorin’s arms.

With the blankets returned to Thorin’s fully bandaged body, Elrond and Bilbo felt as though they could relax a bit. A silence brought on by Bilbo’s weariness spread between them as they sat. It was nice to sit in the quiet of the tent, feeling at least a bit more optimistic than hours before. All that was missing for Bilbo was a nice pipe to smoke and some food. How long has it been since I’ve eaten? Bilbo wondered for the first time in a while. He vaguely remembered eating cram or some such thing at some point, but when exactly he was uncertain. He thought, not for the first time, back to his cozy hobbit hole and his pantry filled with cheeses and meats and bread. I could certainly do with a large plate of bacon and eggs right now!

“His fever should break sometime tonight or tomorrow,” Elrond said, ending the silence and diverting Bilbo’s thoughts. “And I should expect him to wake within two or three days.”

Bilbo, who had been looking a bit lethargic, brightened at this. “Wonderful! I surely hope he does.”

Elrond offered him a smile and began to say something else, when Gandalf rushed into the tent. The halfelven and hobbit were both instantly on alert.
“Lord Elrond, you must come quickly,” Gandalf said in a barely contained huff. “Bring your healing supplies.”

All in a flurry of motion, which Bilbo could barely follow, Elrond began whisking things into satchels and handing things to Gandalf. It took mere moments for Elrond to gather all that he needed. He hurriedly followed the wizard, but stopped and turned to Bilbo before exiting the tent. “Stay here with Thorin. If anything changes for the worse then come find me.” Without waiting for a response he breezed out of the tent.

Bilbo, who had been startled into silence, ran to the tent flaps and called after them, “What has happened?!”

Gandalf slowed his pace briefly to call back to him, “Fíli and Kíli…” was all Bilbo heard before the wizard continued on his way.

Bilbo’s heart sunk at Gandalf’s words. He had grown to love the boys and he knew Thorin would be heartbroken if he lost either of his sister-sons. The hobbit was left feeling dejected, worried, and tired. A wave of fatigue washed over him so quickly that he had to hold out a hand to brace himself on the table. His heart clenched and his stomach did flip-flops thinking of the youngest dwarves of the line of Durin. Surely with Elrond there they would be alright… Right? He was too tired and too overcome not to sit down, so he settled himself in the chair at Thorin’s side.

His mind reeled and competing scenarios chased around in his brain, like savage dogs tumbling and running one another down. Bilbo’s own injuries had not been terrible, but he had seen what had become of others not as fortunate as himself. He glanced over at Thorin and a wave of pain crashed into his heart. What had happened to Fíli and Kíli? His head throbbed where he had been hit and he squeezed his eyes shut tight against the pain. His injuries may not have been great next to Thorin’s, but they were still taxing, and despite the anxiety that gripped his chest, the need for sleep was stronger and would win out.

The tent was still perfumed with Elrond’s mixture and pleasant memories were conjured up in Bilbo’s half-sleeping mind. The memory that presently struck him was tied to the sweet-smelling honey; he thought of their brief, but enjoyable stay with Beorn. Bilbo clearly remembered the queer, but beautiful lodgings of Beorn the skin-changer. The bright flowers which he did not know the names of and the bee-loud pastures stood out among the scenery he recalled. Of all the memories of horses, dogs, Beorn’s great hall, bees, bears, and other foreign things he could have focused on, one thought in particular stuck out to him…

That first night at Beorn’s had done wonders to boost Bilbo’s morale and the morale of the entire company. The warm hearth, honey, bread, and mead greatly soothed his aching homesick heart. At that point in the journey Bilbo had lost track of the number of days since he had slept in a proper bed.
It seemed as though an unfathomable amount of time had passed since he had slept in his own bed at Bag End. But there he was tucked snuggly into a straw bed covered in warm woollen blankets, and he felt comfort.

Bilbo had been gloriously sated and succumbed to sleep almost before his head hit the pillow. Unfortunately his moment of easy restfulness would not last long. Terrifying visions of raging fires and fell creatures growling in the dark world around him caught him in a panic. He gasped and woke with a start, trembling in the pale light that shone through the smoke-hole. It had been a night terror. Once awake he could no longer remember the specifics of the dream, but his heart pounded in his chest and he was all in a cold sweat.

A quick look around informed him that he was the only one awake. His eyes adjusted more to the dim light and upon closer inspection he found Thorin’s bed to be empty. Panic gripped his chest anew and added to the adrenaline that still coursed in his veins from the night terror. Maybe it hadn’t been a dream. Maybe something really had happened, or there was some snarling, growling beast among them! But no, another sweep of the area found the dwarf king reclining against the back wall. Bilbo sighed with great relief.

An overwhelming urge to be close to Thorin had taken hold of Bilbo. He stared almost mournfully at the stoic silhouette across the room. A flash of moonlight caught Thorin’s eyes and their gaze met. Now he had to get up to meet him, if for nothing else than to explain why he was gaping at their leader in the middle of the night while everyone around them was asleep. He had not quite admitted all of his feelings to himself, but he would confess that he was remarkably protective of the dwarf, especially after their encounter with Azog. There was also no denying that he enjoyed Thorin’s company more than that of anyone else, but feelings that reached beyond that were debatable.

And so, Bilbo had found himself negotiating the maze of sleeping dwarves to meet Thorin, who looked on passively as the hobbit approached in the darkness. Bilbo had thought that his eyes must be cheating him when he saw the faintest flicker of a smile grace the usually controlled features of Thorin Oakenshield. Surely that gleam of joy was not directed toward the approaching hobbit. Or maybe there had been no smile at all. Maybe he had imagined it. Bilbo thought back to their embrace atop the Carrock. Well, stranger things have happened… Bilbo thought, then decided that he was thinking too much.

Wordlessly Bilbo settled himself beside Thorin. He opened his mouth to say something, but decided against it. They sat like that for some time, neither saying a word. They were so close that the energy of their bodies could be felt passing between the slight hobbit and stout dwarf, yet not so close as to touch. They both secretly relished in the closeness of one another, but privately guarded the feelings. All around them the sounds of snoring dwarves could be heard and somewhere off in the distance the sound of growling grew louder.

Finally the silence was broken. “It’s funny how all I’ve wanted was a nice bed to sleep on and now
that I have it I can’t sleep at all!” Bilbo jokingly lamented.

Thorin was pensive for a moment. At length he asked, “What was your dream about?”

“How could you possibly know it was a dream?” Bilbo’s cheeks flushed, slightly embarrassed by how evidently transparent he was.

“How many other things could it be, Master Baggins?” Thorin said. “After all, you said it yourself: all you’ve wanted was a nice bed, but now that you have one you can’t sleep.” After an extended silence Thorin added, “Dreams of dragon fire so real that I can feel the heat of it still haunt me. I am well versed in the language of sleeplessness.”

“Of course,” Bilbo replied. He supposed that Thorin hadn’t spent 195 years on this earth not to learn a thing or two about the ways of the mind.

He sat quietly for a moment, and then it hit him. All of it. The events of his terrible nightmare played out in quick succession behind his eyelids. He vaguely remembered that Thorin had asked him a question, and started spilling out every detail he could remember. “There was fire everywhere. It was tall and all around me. I could hear this terrible growling, like hundreds of wolves or maybe bears. The growling got louder and the flames got higher. I saw you in the distance. I couldn’t get to you because of all the fire. And all I wanted to do was save you but I couldn’t! I tried running, but it was like trying to run through cold molasses. I cried out, but you couldn’t hear me. I kept yelling to you. I would have done anything—" Bilbo stopped, suddenly aware that he just confessed to dreaming about Thorin to Thorin. He knew his dream had been terrifying not only because of the fire and growling, but in fact it was chiefly terrifying because he thought he might lose Thorin.

After a moment Thorin prodded, “Go on.”

_I would have done anything for you_, is how it originally sounded in his head, but Bilbo checked himself and said, “I would have done anything to save a member of our company, but there was nothing I could do. The sounds were getting closer, then you slipped away into the darkness.” Bilbo shook his head as if the simple act would wash away the memory. “That must be how it ended because I don’t remember any more.” The hobbit shuddered, like a cold breeze had struck up his spine.

Then he glanced sheepishly at Thorin, partly to gage his reaction, but also making sure he was still there. The dwarf was, of course, still there. Presently he looked down at Bilbo. His face was serious, but friendly with an almost affectionate tone to it. The hobbit only blushed deeper in the light of Thorin’s gaze, continuously made aware that he was being childish. When he had set out from Bag
End he had been Tookishly determined to live up to Gandalf’s recommendation, but in this moment he felt as far from a burglar as Beorn’s home was from the Shire.

To conceal his growing embarrassment, Bilbo asked, “What kept you from sleep? If you don’t mind me asking.”

Thorin did not answer right away. Instead, he placed an arm around Bilbo’s shoulder and gently pulled him closer. When the hobbit stopped shivering and relaxed into him he said, “There is neither time enough, nor words enough for me to explain.”

Those were the last words spoken by either friend that night. They enjoyed the companionable silence, pressed close to one another in the dim moonlit night. Sometime later, with a comforting arm wrapped around his shoulders, sleep once again had seemed a not-too-distant fate for the hobbit. A very bold part of him had thought that Thorin would make a far greater bed than the one laid out for him only metres away. He quickly glanced up to see Thorin already nodding, so he snuggled closer to the dwarf. Thorin had been clad unusually simply, only in a tunic and light trousers. Bilbo was glad for it and found the hard muscle and soft fabric a pleasant combination.

Convinced that Thorin was asleep and he could relax into the warm of another body, Bilbo’s breathing slowly evened out as he succumbed to slumber. Thorin, however, had not been asleep just then. He waited for his companion to nod off before he let his arm slide from Bilbo’s shoulders to his midsection, carefully pulling the hobbit closer. Thorin dropped his nose to nuzzle the honey coloured curls and gently placed a kiss there. He rested his head on Bilbo’s and the two fell into a blissful sleep.

…

Bilbo played that memory over and over in his head, twisting a lock of Thorin’s hair in his fingers. When his fingers became idle and he could hold his drooping eyelids open no longer, he gathered his blankets and nested uncomfortably on the cold hard ground. The wind howled outside and the snow pelted the tent, making the scene altogether unpleasant. To try to ease the transition into sleep, he considered the happy memories he had of Thorin; the evolution of their friendship, every emotion he had felt, the way the moonlight illuminated the silver in Thorin’s hair. This he did until sleep took him. It was to be a fitful sleep and he seemed fated to have nightmares of the worst sort. Except this time there would be no Thorin to soothe him when he awoke. Not really.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter I promise more Fíl, Kfìl, and Company!
Dís, Thrain’s daughter, sister of Thorin Oakenshield, was one of very few dwarf-women. She had been steeped in nobility and –like any good dwarf- possessed a hardy character. She was as strong and fierce as he two brothers, and just as obstinate. She could be headstrong, a defining characteristic of the line of Durin, but she was compassionate and cared deeply for her family and her people. Because of the fewness of dwarf-women in addition to her lineage, she was revered and greatly loved. The love for Dís only grew when she welcomed not one, but two sons into the world.

The lays which surrounded Erebor, the home of Dís, had never been seen by her sons, Fíli and Kíli. They had been born in Ered Luin, many miles west of the homeland of the House of Durin. They knew not the secret places she adventured as a young dwarfling. Nor had they filled the great halls of the Lonely Mountain with the laughter. Dís wished many times over that her sons could share in the splendor of the Kingdom of Erebor that their great-grandfather had reclaimed. That was not the home they knew, but they fought fictions of finalism for the home that had belong to their mother.

Miles away, Dís knew not that her sons were on the verge of death. She knew not that her sons were fighting for her, for her home, for her brother, for the honor of the House of Durin. It would be long before news reached her, but within her she felt something shift. Uncomforted by her solitude, Dís steeled herself against her sadness. Her heart had known loss and it could take no more.

The battle, unexpected and brutal, had claimed the lives of countless dwarves, elves, and men, and many would sacrifice themselves honourably to save their kin. Fíli and Kíli quite nearly fell defending their mother’s oldest brother. They stubbornly stayed alive, but just barely. Hair wild and clothes tattered, dishevelled and marked by battled, they were a ghastly sight. Dís would have wept to see her sons in such a state. Fíli was stuck with an arrow in his chest. A deep red stain appeared around the jagged protrusion. Half of Kíli’s face was covered in his own blood. Just above his right eye moving in a diagonal line to his right ear was a massive gash from which a great deal of blood had been lost. Wounds of the past -that is, feelings of tremendous loss with the deaths of Thror and Frerin at the Battle of Azanulbizar- would be opened again in the hearts of those who remembered upon seeing the young heirs of Durin.

The days were growing shorter as November approached December. It was now frigid in the camp. Dark clouds were spread out in a cyclopean mass across the sky, chilling the air and promising snow. The weather changed quickly and how it pleased. As of yet there was no ground-frost, but with each day being colder than the last it would not be long before what remained of the plants would turn to sleep for the winter.
The two wounded brothers were set side-by-side on one cot, nearly breathless and unconscious. Kili was especially pale, having lost a lot of blood. Beneath the hardened cloak of red that covered most of his face, Elrond could see his lips turning blue. Fili would not have lost as much blood from his puncture, but by that pallor of his skin, Elrond suspected there were deeper abrasions elsewhere that were draining the young dwarf of his fluids.

There were two conscious dwarves in the tent, along with Thorin’s unconscious sister-sons. One was broad and fierce looking, a true warrior. This was, of course, Dwalin. The other was young and trying to look brave in the face of all the terrible suffering he had witnessed, but ultimately he just looked frightened and sad. That would be Ori. Both dwarves who had been part of the company of Thorin Oakenshield managed to survive the battle with comparatively few injuries. Their bruises and gashes had been hurriedly attended to by healers who had many other more severely injured dwarves to care for.

“When did you find them?” Elrond asked Dwalin as he looked down at the pair of unconscious dwarves.

“Gunnárr, one of Dain’s soldiers, found them soon after the battle,” Dwalin answered. Ori had found Dwalin first, and together they came across Gunnárr trying to tend to their companions on the field.

“Mister Dwalin and I helped carry them down to camp,” Ori added. He looked suddenly sad, and turned his gaze to Gandalf. “We didn’t know anyone else out there. We haven’t seen our friends or family. Have you seen anyone, Mister Gandalf?”

“Yes, I have Ori,” Gandalf replied slowly. “Thorin is in good hands.”

“Thorin!” Dwalin interrupted in his excitement.

“Yes, but he, Bilbo, you, and Ori are the only members of the company that I have encountered so far.”

“Is Thorin well? And what of that burglar of yours? What of Bard and Thranduil and the Arkenstone?” Dwalin asked a slew of questions in quick succession.

“These are questions that require more time and less urgency,” Gandalf replied, tone short. “You will learn their fate in due time, but for now make yourself useful and fetch a pail or two of hot water.”
Dwalin was hustled out of the tent by a concerned Ori before he had time to be too cross with the wizard for what he had said. Ori knew that the great warrior had a deep fraternal bond with Thorin and loved him immensely, sometimes causing his concern for his friend to override rational thought. Gandalf had said Thorin was in good hands and that would have to suffice for now, seeing as how Fíli and Kíli were in greater need of their services at the moment. It had begun to snow shortly before they left to get water. It was not a heavy snow, not yet, but the clouds were heavy and ominous.

When Dwalin and Ori returned with a bucket of water each, Gandalf began cleaning Kíli’s head wound. He could not tell if the deep gash had reached the skull or not. The bone was certainly not broken, but it may have been notched by the abrasion. Gandalf worked quickly and with great skill, even if one of his arms was still in a sling. It took some time, but at last Kíli’s wound was cleaned, treated, and bandaged. Near the base of the gash was an avulsion, and Gandalf took special care in laying it flat so that it would heal properly. Although Gandalf had used some of Elrond’s adeps lanae to help fight the impending infection, there was a high risk of it happening regardless. The air was cold and Kíli’s body was weakened by blood loss.

Next to the wizard Elrond worked diligently. He had cut away what remained of Fíli’s furs and tunics so he had better access to the site of the arrow, but the dwarf’s chain-mail remained. The mail had been pierced by a wretched orc arrow, but it was heavy and strong, therefore it could not simply be cut away. Elrond would have to work around it until the arrow was removed. The skin surrounding the lodged arrow was unnaturally black, and what looked like dark spider veins crept just below the surface. He reached a cloth into the bucket that Gandalf had left untouched and squeezed the water out just above the arrow. Appearance suggested that the shaft of the arrow had only plunged an inch or two into Fíli’s body, but it was difficult to be certain. The chain mail, while it had not stopped the arrow completely, at least prevented the shot from being fatal. The young dwarf was remarkably well-muscled, and if he were lucky his thick chest would save him from a collapsed lung or broken ribs.

The flesh around the affected area became hot and angry, and under the mail it suffocated further. Some of the runoff from the cloth carried to the skin that was hidden by metal, which only succeeded in irritating the skin more. When he was satisfied that the punctured skin was clean enough, the halfelven healer produced a small satchel of salt from his raiment. He added the salt to the steaming water and began to douse the skin around the arrow. It was some time before he was satisfied with the state of purification, but at length he returned the cloth to the water.

Elrond pulled a small phial from his raiment and proceeded to pour its content down the shaft of arrow to pool around the puncture wound. It was a clear and odourless substance, but it made the skin swell enormously. The amount of angry flesh increased until all of Fíli’s right pectoral muscle was enflamed. The heat was so great that the spider-vein-looking tendrils melted away into the muscles below the skin. Then, almost as suddenly as it had flared up, the swelling began to recede. The oscillating inflammation would have the skin swollen with heat at one time, only to be tempered, then to resurface as livid flesh moments later.
As Fíli’s body struggled to rid itself of the arrow, Elrond reached for the shaft and firmly took hold. As the pressure under his hand began to slacken, he ever so gently pulled it a little closer to the surface. One could not rush the body on manners such as this, and Elrond was careful to read the signals of when to pull and when to wait. Inch by inch and with a great deal of patience, Elrond freed the arrow from Fíli’s chest. The next task for Elrond would be to remove the stifling chainmail. This was a much easier task and soon the mail discarded at Fíli’s bedside. Elrond could now properly drain the wound. He put pressure around the void in Fíli’s chest and found that blood flowed freely, but not profusely from the wound.

The arrow was barbed and while it had been skillfully removed, there was still a terrible bit of damaged caused by pulling it out. The amount of care that Fíli would require would surpass that of any other dwarf under Elrond’s care. What was imperative—after the draining of the poison—would be to keep it clean. In what remained of the hot water Elrond mixed some Heilleir and doused the open wound. The gentle pressure of Elrond’s steady hand, the warmth and steam of the water, and the salt and Heilleir in the water all helped to draw the poison out from Fíli’s wound. It ran black as polished obsidian and thick as blood from the gaping hole in Fíli’s chest.

Elrond’s earlier speculation that there had been other wounds was correct, and Fíli had lost a substantial amount of blood from one wound in particular on his thigh. That abrasion had required some care and time on Elrond’s part, but it was truly the last great wound that would bother the dwarf. The other lesser cuts were wiped, treated, and dressed as severity required. Most of the remaining wounds were glazed with adeps lanae and bandaged. Elrond applied the salve to the puncture wound as well, but only around the edges and only a little bit.

Gandalf and Elrond had covered the young dwarves as best as they could to keep the cold out, but it was still insufficient. The hour was late and the sun had long since made its descent away west. A small lantern burned in the tent, but it offered no heat. The air was much colder and the snow was falling faster. This was not snow that fell pleasantly in fluffy flakes on a fresh winter’s day. No, it was a snow made small pellets of frozen water, accosting the earth with the bitter sting of a million needles.

“They will not survive in this cold,” Elrond said matter-of-factly. “Nor will Thorin.”

Dwalin, who had been restless in the background, spoke up: “The lads can have my rug if that will help at all.” He offered as he peeled a thick blanket from his shoulders. “I’m not cold,” he added, but his body shook with the sudden chill and gave him away.

“I’m afraid one more blanket will not do them as much good as it will do you,” answered Gandalf. “We will have to move them into the mountain.”

“Agreed,” Elrond said. “But it will have to wait until tomorrow. Already it is dark and the snow
would only compromise our efforts.”

“Indeed. Though this will not be a large storm,” Gandalf, who had lived through countless winters, asserted. “The air is not right for a big storm yet. By morning it will have stopped and we can make to enter Erebor. Until then, I suppose we should rest.” Suddenly Gandalf felt very old and very tired.

In the faint candlelight Elrond quietly tended to Gandalf’s bandaged arm. Verily, it was almost healed and Gandalf felt no need for the sling anymore. But fatigue would stay him from refusing the help of Lord Elrond. Sleep would follow after, both for the half-elven and for the wizard. They found themselves huddled together under a thick woollen blanket. In another corner of the tent, Dwalin and Ori were sat close to one another under their own wool blanket. All in pairs, the various bodies tried to fight off the winter chill that was determined to find its way into the tent.

...

When Bilbo woke he was almost certain he was still dreaming. The lovely memory of that night at Beorn’s clung peacefully to his mind. The feeling of Thorin’s body pressed close to his own was almost tangible in this state of half-waking. The stout frame, emblematic of dwarves, was a beacon of comfort and strength that Bilbo had blessedly experienced more than once throughout their journey. On a purely platonic level, to be assured. All his memories of being close to Thorin coalesced into a semi-lucid replication of the comfort he remembered. Wondrous emotion bloomed in his chest and every fibre of his being was alight with joy and affection.

Perhaps not so platonic after all.

Bilbo felt warm and cared for, despite the cruel remembrance that he was in a camp at the base of a mountain in coming winter with a fallen dwarf king. Pinching his eyes shut tight he tried to put the harsh images out of him mind and instead relished in this imagined warmth for as long as he could before he had to face another day of uncertainty. As reality slowly floated down to him he realised that the Thorin beside him was no more a figment of his imagination than were the blankets around them. His eyes flew open, but he kept stock-still. A piece of Thorin’s hair remained clasped lightly in his hand like a safety blanket to a child.

Evidently at some point in the night, Bilbo had been driven from the cold uncomfortable ground to the welcomed heat and softness of Thorin and his cot. For once, Bilbo was grateful that Thorin was unconscious. This way he would not have to explain how he came to be pressed against the dwarf king’s side.

Presently he made quick to untangle himself from the perpetually sleeping dwarf and left the glorious
heat. His muscles were stiff, due in part to the shivering he had done most of the night, but the fact
that he had been cramped up on the small cot might also have contributed a great deal to his aching
muscles. He could hear the symphony of pops and cracks that stretching elicited from his back, neck,
and hips. It was a satisfying feeling, but a dull ache persisted throughout his body. Before doing
anything else he carefully rearranged the covers as they had been before he invaded the cot.

A quick glance around the tent informed him that only he and Thorin were present. He let out a sigh
of relief that Gandalf and Elrond had not played witness to his nighttime escapades. But he was
relieved for only a moment, because then he started to wonder what had kept the wizard and
half-elven from returning. As the sleep-fog began to lift from his mind he remembered all the events
of the night before and what had called his two friends away. A surge of worry cours ed through his
veins when he remembered that Fíli and Kíli had been found injured.

A grumbling from his stomach stole his attention. Bilbo had eaten only one or two small portions of
cram since being found and brought to the camp. On the road he had gotten used to eating fewer and
fewer meals, but it was still more than he had eaten yet. Even in Mirkwood when Beorn’s food was
getting low he had had more to eat than now. He pondered long over the question of food; is there
any more food about? Will I have to find it for myself? Maybe someone will bring some. I hope there
is more than cram… He did not want to leave Thorin, but his loudly protesting stomach made him
consider that he might have to.

Bilbo wondered in hungry agony, but he needn’t wonder very long, for moments later Gandalf
entered the tent carrying a loaf of brown bread. “You must be starving, Master Baggins!” Gandalf
greeted as he tore off a hunk of bread and handed it to the eager hobbit.

Bilbo hurriedly, but politely, took the bread from Gandalf. When he noticed Dwalin walk in behind
Gandalf he almost dropped the highly coveted bread. He did not know what to say, or if he should
say anything at all. Dwalin was imposing and still impressive despite the obvious toll the battle had
taken on him. Bilbo was not sure whether or not the rest of the company felt the same way Thorin
had when, in a fit of dragon sickness, the king had thrown him out of the mountain. If any of the
dwarves shared Thorin’s thoughts on the burglar it would probably be Dwalin. He was so close to
Thorin that he likely would never go against his will. Bilbo’s thoughts raced through his head and he
was slightly terrified that the warrior dwarf would tear him up right on the spot. This was a ridiculous
notion on the part of Mister Baggins, for Dwalin paid him no heed. He simply walked over to
Thorin’s cot and gingerly reached out for his friend’s arm, leaving Bilbo to awkwardly stare at the
ground and munch his bread.

Gandalf placed a hand on Bilbo’s shoulder and gently led him out of the tent. The morning sun
shone bright in the cloudless sky. The rays of light reflected off of the snow covered ground and
Bilbo found himself squinting against the brightness. Gandalf walked slower than he might have, had
he been alone, but still fast enough that Bilbo almost had to jog to keep up. The hobbit followed the
grey figure in front of him through the maze of tents, but did not bother to ask where they were
going. His attention was fixed on eating the delicious molasses bread and not getting lost in the sea
beyond Thorin’s tent.
Despite the bright sun that morning it was dreadfully cold; the first true cold snap of the year. This made the air thin and sound carried very poorly through it. Bilbo and Gandalf trudged on through the ankle-high snow, but something stopped the hobbit. He thought he heard a familiar song, but it was distant and quiet. Straining his ears against the chilly air he was thrilled to find that he did know the song*:

*The wind came down from mountains cold,*

*and like a tide it roared and rolled;*

*the branches groaned, the forest moaned;*

*and leaves were laid upon the mould.*

That was one of the many verses the dwarves had sung round a fire in Beorn’s hall.

Apparently Gandalf heard it too, for he stopped and strained to listen for the direction from which it came. Bilbo began walking again, but veered from their original path. Gandalf followed, and the pair began walking in the direction of the sound. Luckily there were many verses and the dwarves kept singing. Within minutes of first hearing the sound, Gandalf and Bilbo were almost on top of it. They navigated the sea of tents with no obvious direction, but managed to draw closer and closer still. Finally, they rounded a block of tents to find Balin, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, Dori, Nori, Glóin, and Óin singing together. They stopped all at once when they spotted the wizard and hobbit.

After the shock wore off, Dori was the first to speak, “Gandalf? Is that really you? Bless me, it is!”

“And Bilbo, too!” Cried Bofur.

The joy in their voices quickly spread to grins on their faces. For the moment it did not matter what Bilbo had done, or that most of them thought that it was all Gandalf’s fault for sending him in the first place. The dwarves were just glad to see some familiar faces. They had, after all, been companions and friends for the better part of a year, and all their solidarity through thick and thin would not be so hastily tossed aside. Along with the joy of seeing old friends came the promise that these friends might have seen others that were missing from their group. Balin, the old white-haired dwarf, was the first to bring the point to conversation.

“Do you bear news of Thorin or of my brother?” he asked, eyes bright and hopeful. “And what of the lads, Fíli and Kíli?”

“They have been found, and now – ten, eleven, twelve, and Balin makes thirteen-” Gandalf interrupted his own sentence to take stock of the dwarves he had found thus far. “Now, you have all
been accounted for.”

“You’ve found Ori!” Nori and Dori piped up.

“Yes, yes,” replied Gandalf with a smile growing on his face. “And Dwalin and Thorin and Fíli and Kíli.”

Great smiles and looks of relief spread through the misfit troop of dwarves, and questions soon sprang up in their minds.

Gandalf, sensing the impending questions, tried in vain to head them off. “We are quite busy, Master Baggins, Lord Elrond, and-”

“Lord Elrond?” A voice from the crowd interrupted.

“Yes, and as I was saying-”

“What is he doing here?” another voice questioned.

“He is here on important business. What I had begun to say was –”

“Well, what business is that?” A third voice piped up from the crowd.

“Does it have anything to do with Thorin?”

“What about Fíli and Kíli?”

“Where are they all?”

“Enough!” Gandalf’s patience had been pushed a bit too far. With some force to his words, he began again, “As I was saying, Master Baggins, Lord Elrond, and myself have been making preparations to
enter the mountain for the winter. We need all the hands we can get to help and it would certainly be in your best interest to do so.”

“Yes, of course we will!” They all offered their services over and over again.

The first sober tone after the joyful news came from Balin. When the dwarves around him quieted down, he asked, “I am afraid there are those among us who would have something to say about Bilbo returning to the mountain.” It was a noncommittal comment, meant to not belie his own feelings toward the hobbit. He liked Bilbo and truly hoped that he could stay, but Thorin was his king, and he had made his wishes abundantly clear.

Bilbo looked down at the ground, trying to mask the pain he felt at Balin’s words. He started to stammer out a reply, when Gandalf saved him. “Thorin,” Gandalf correctly assumed that the ‘those among us’ Balin referred to was their king, “at this moment, is not entirely in control of his faculties.”

“Do you mean to say he is dead?” Balin asked, dread clear in his voice.

“No, no Master Balin,” Gandalf assured the old dwarf and the rest of the small company, “He is merely unconscious. But come, I will explain as we walk. Already we have wasted precious daylight moments talking here.”

And so, Gandalf led Bilbo and the eight dwarves through the tent village. As promised, the wizard recounted his story of sending for Elrond, and how he saved Thorin. He minced no words in describing what a great help Bilbo was in caring for their wounded king, and how he cared so selflessly for him. There were cheers and sighs and gasps and shouts that erupted appropriately at various points in Gandalf’s story, and it’s telling was completed by the time they reached Fíli and Kíli’s tent.

There was a joyful reunion of Dori, Nori, and Ori when the young dwarf emerged from the tent to find that his brothers had suddenly appeared along with most of their former company. The two older dwarves mother-henned little Ori, checking him over and heartily embracing his lithe frame. Balin looked on at the happy brothers and smiled sadly to himself. Gandalf had explained that Dwalin was in Thorin’s tent and soon enough they would be reunited. And while the old dwarf was not expecting to see his brother there he was no less disappointed when the warrior dwarf was nowhere to be found.

Elrond followed shortly after and appeared nonplussed by the addition of eight more dwarves. He scanned them over to find that they were all in relatively good condition. Bofur had his arm in a sling, but a silly smile was still plastered on his face as if nothing could challenge his good-natured
optimism. Óin needed the help of makeshift crutches to walk, but he was doing a good job of it. Everyone else was scathed in some way; all had abrasions that tore through their clothes to the skin, and most, if not all, had soft-tissue damage. It looked like Bombur had dislocated his shoulder at some point, but it appeared to be properly set now.

“As you all must be aware, it has become quite cold and winter is approaching. We must get the injured dwarves into the mountain before more snow comes if there is any hope of saving them. Our priority now is to move Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli into the mountain without doing them more harm,” Gandalf explained to the group of dwarves in front of him.

To the dwarves who had traveled from west to east, meeting countless perils along the way, and emerging victorious from a battle, the thought of moving three infirm dwarves into the mountain they had already claimed seemed not at all like a challenge. Morale was good among the troop of dwarves now that they were all together in one place—most of them, anyway. But it would still be a daunting task. Prior to what would become known as the battle of Five Armies, the dwarves had erected a large wall of square stones, laid dry, but very thick and high, to protect the main entrance to the mountain. The wall had been felled from the inside when Thorin and his loyal band of dwarves had set out to battle, so that obstacle was of little concern. There did remain, however, one challenge that they would have to face: the large pool in front of the gates. Early in the reclamation of Erebor they had so altered the narrow bed of the river stream that a wide pool stretched from the mountain-wall to the head of the falls over which the stream went towards Dale. Approaching the gate would be near impossible without swimming, so they would have to move along a narrow ledge of the cliff. Bilbo remembered scurrying across a ford of dubious stability, the only other alternative to swimming or climbing, but it would be challenging to negotiate whilst carrying Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli.

None of the dwarves seemed to think this would be a hardship, or that it was worth discussing, so they turned to talk of the means with which to transport the three wounded dwarves. Some suggested they try to find ponies, while others vehemently denounced the idea as rubbish. Some said to simply carry them, slung over their shoulders, which was met by the argument that that was not at all what should be done. While the dwarves bickered among themselves as to what would be the best way to carry the king, Fíli, and Kíli, Gandalf and Elrond held council with each other. They too were discussing the various options for returning the injured dwarves to the gates of the mountain, but in a much more productive manner.

At last, Gandalf had grown tired of listening to the sound of bickering, and spoke so that they would listen, “We have established that it is not possible to simply carry them,” to this the dwarves all nodded, “Or to set them on ponies,” again, the dwarves nodded in agreement. “It appears as though the easiest way to accomplish our goal is to simply move them in their cots.”

“You mean to have us lift the beds up with them still in there?” Asked Dori.

“Well, I don’t see why not,” Gandalf replied simply.
The dwarves mumbled amongst themselves for a moment before Bofur spoke up, “Seems as good a plan as any!”

“Aye, that’s a good enough plan, but what of the pool near the gate?” Glóin asked, finally considering other challenges they would need to face.

The dwarves held another grumbled conversation before Balin spoke, “We will have to send someone up to make a bridge, or at least return the river to its original course.”

“Or you could all go up, with the obvious exception of the most injured among you. That way the work would be done a great deal faster,” suggested Gandalf.

Sounds of agreement rose up among the dwarves.

Bilbo, who had been rather quiet up until this point, spoke up, “I can fetch Dwalin if you like.” He did not like being away from Thorin for so long and he did not feel as though he would be terribly useful moving heavy stones.

Balin brightened at this. “I’ll go too, if it makes no difference to you, laddie.”

And so, Bilbo set off once again through the winding sea of tents and with him went Balin and Elrond, who said he would need to check Thorin’s wounds again. Gandalf stayed behind to tend to Fili and Kili while the dwarves prepared for their excursion to the mountain gate. Despite not having ventured far from Thorin’s tent in the past, Bilbo found his way back, like a homing pigeon returning from its first flight.

Elrond, Bilbo, and Balin opened the flaps of the tent to find Dwalin sitting in the chair next to Thorin’s cot, face grim. Without moving, without even looking up, Dwalin said, “He is a fighter and he will survive.” He was not being optimistic, per se, more stubbornly and dwarfishly resolute, as if his affirming words alone would keep his friend alive.

“Of course he will,” Balin said, startling his brother out of his morose mood.

“Balin!” Dwalin sprung up and embraced his brother, knocking their heads together. They chatted
briefly, each making sure the other was safe and well.

Elrond brought their reunion short. “We plan to move Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli into the mountain, but certain preparations must first be made.” He explained to Dwalin that the members of the company of Thorin Oakenshield were all accounted for and that plans were being made to cross the water and enter Erebor.

“Well, what are we waiting for?” Dwalin said as he looked at his brother who was grinning back at him.

Before leaving, Balin went to Thorin’s side. His grin was quickly cast off and replaced by a frown. He had seen Thorin through many things, and while he wanted to believe that his king would survive, he was not hopeful. He sighed and shook his head. He offered a sad smile and brief “thank you” to Elrond as he and Dwalin left the tent.

Bilbo—who was feeling much better now that he had eaten—was a bit more hopeful than Balin and Dwalin had appeared to be. Thorin’s company had been reunited and all the dwarves were alive and as well as could be expected under the circumstance – all except Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli. There was food in their bellies, a song in their hearts, and a plan in their minds. According to Elrond, Thorin would be waking up any day now, and the hobbit was sure the same could be said for Fíli and Kíli too. Bilbo found it hard not to feel at least a bit lighthearted.

Presently Elrond uncovered Thorin’s torso and removed his bandages. When he examined the orc wound he found, to his pleasure, that the Heilleir was almost completely black and perfectly dry. This meant that the plant had done its job by leeching all the poison from the orc wound. Elrond began to carefully remove the dried Heilleir. When all of the packed plant had been removed and discarded, Elrond rinsed the wound with cold water. Bilbo, who had been watching nearby, could see flecks of remaining Heilleir being washed out by the steady stream of water being poured on the cut.

If Bilbo’s eyes were not mistaken, the cut had grown smaller. Without knowing whether he was right or wrong, the hobbit asked an ambiguous question, hoping for that Elrond would confirm what he saw. “He looks much better, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed he does. This wound and all the others are healing quickly; they are following the course they should,” Elrond told Bilbo. “You must continue to keep it clean, along with all the others, to make sure infection does not take hold. Once his fever breaks and he wakes, it will be imperative that he gets wholesome food and that care for his wounds continues.”
“You speak as if you’re leaving soon,” Bilbo said, a twinge of worry in his voice.

“I had not planned to leave quite so soon, but foresight is upon me,” Elrond replied cryptically.

That answer was not the one Bilbo had hoped for; he wished that Elrond would stay forever. Or at least until Thorin was fully healed. The look on his face said as much.

“Come Master hobbit, you need not worry. Soon the weight of Thorin Oakenshield will be on your shoulders. But do not doubt yourself; already you have shown a great deal of courage and kindness in your handling of him.”

Elrond’s words were odd, and vaguely reminded Bilbo of the tone of Gandalf’s parting at the border of Mirkwood. Bilbo did not have long to consider Elrond’s speech, for presently a voice spoke outside Thorin’s tent. “Elrond of Rivendell, your presence is requested!” The voice said.

Elrond left Bilbo at Thorin’s side and emerged from the tent to find two dwarves clad in iron mail waiting for him. “Travellers have come requesting an audience with Elrond, Lord of Rivendell. They claim to be your high-born kinsmen. Elves, but not woodland elves. They speak of pressing business, but refuse to say more to any but you.”

“Pray, bring them forth,” said Elrond to the dwarves.

The dwarves bowed long and low before leaving. When they returned a short time later they were followed by two elves that bore striking resemblance to Elrond. Verily they were not woodland elves, but elf-fair descendants of the line of the first High King of the Ñoldor. Their hair was long and dark, and their eyes were grey to match Lord Elrond’s. They were, of course, Elrond’s sons: Elladan and Elrohir.

The dwarves were thanked by the halfelvens and they bowed low again before leaving. When they found themselves alone, Elrohir spoke; “We are sent by Lady Galadriel. There is a wicked shadow that passes through the South. The Lady of Lothlórien wishes to seek council with you and Mithrandir. Already the Lord of the House of the Golden Flower and Curunir have been summoned.”

“And we shall join them,” replied Elrond. “But first, rest for you both. It will have been a long hard ride to this part of Middle-earth. We shall depart come first light tomorrow.”
Bilbo, who had picked up on the last part of the conversation, felt dread gnawing at his stomach. He had liked Lord Elrond from the first time they met, and was very glad to meet him again. His anxiety was chiefly due to the fact that he did not want to see Elrond go, as he was a marvellous healer and Bilbo was not yet confident in his own abilities to care for Thorin. But partly he worried about what greater darkness could be passing through Middle-earth. He himself had played but a very small (albeit remarkably important) role in defending the good of far-off lands. Would all the efforts to save Erebor be in vain if the rest fell to ruin? How deep must a darkness be for members of the White Council to be called again? The thoughts of evil things sent a shudder down Bilbo’s spine. He looked down at Thorin, trying to focus on the friend in front of him instead of the one that was soon to leave him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, this was much later than I had planned. Life kind of exploded, but here we are! I’m not terribly pleased with this chapter, but I promise the next one will be better.

On another note… anyone up for some angsty Thilbo in the next chapter?

* The song that the dwarves are singing when Bilbo and Gandalf find them is from The Hobbit, Chapter 7: Queer Lodgings.

Oh, aaaaand I now have a tumblr for all my Tolkien/LotR/Hobbit/Thilbo feels: http://ashmiliutave.tumblr.com/
For Balin it was interesting to return to his childhood home. Like being very young and very old, both at the same time. The halls he walked now he had once walked with pride as a warrior many moons ago. It was silent. He walked through the winding paths, touching the marvelous stone walls that had withstood Smaug’s attack and residence. It would have been impossible for the old dwarf to forget how to negotiate the numerous passages of the mountain core. He knew his way around, and his feet carried him someplace before his mind had a chance to acknowledge where he was going.

Deliquescent tears formed on his face, as if the moisture pooling in his eyes had been pulled from the air. He was in Thror’s throne room. It would have been Thráin’s throne room. It would become Thorin’s. An age had passed since the last time he walked these halls and stood where he stood now. He could see Thror’s beautifully carven throne, specially designed to display the Arkenstone, which was, of course, currently in the possession of Bard and Thranduil. Thror had once made a great picture as King under the Mountain, Lord of Durin’s Folk. Standing in the throne room, that was how Balin chose to remember him.

Balin lost time in Erebor and time forgot him. In reclaiming the mountain with Thorin and company there had been issues at the forefront of his mind which begged attention in a way that could not be ignored. That was not to say that there were not currently issues that begged his attention, but now it was his heart’s will to wander that could not be ignored.

Hours had lapsed since he had left the others at the gate. They had worked long and hard to create a path to traverse the large pool in front of the main entrance. Once they had forded the river by means of a narrow section of shallow water, the plan had been to reverse the alteration they made to the stream and lay the stones that had been used to fortify the main entrance. Balin would not learn how that venture turned out until he returned later. The nostalgic pull of saudade had been too great to overcome. And so, Balin had left his brother and companions to examine the home that had never been far from his mind.

At length he did return. Only instead of the handful of dwarves that had first ascended to create a path, now stood Bilbo, Gandalf, Ori, Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and Óin; and Fíli and Kíli in their cot. He had not thought that he had been gone for so long, but evidently he had spent quite some time examining the ruined halls of Erebor. He was returning to the small congregation of dwarves just as Dwalin, Glóin, Dori, and Nori were carrying Thorin into the mountain. The dwarves must have unquestioningly accepted the old dwarf’s wisdom and assumed that he had been doing something important, for no one asked where he had been, nor did they chide him for disappearing.

“Did you happen to see which rooms have been the least damaged?” Asked Dwalin after catching
“The withdrawing chambers look to be in proper order,” answered Balin.

Dwalin nodded in acknowledgement and gave the cue to lift the cot once again. He, along with Glóin, Dori, and Nori followed the white-haired dwarf across the mezzanine, down the scorched halls, and to the withdrawing chambers. It was not terribly far from the main entrance, but it was a great enough distance so as to wind the dwarves who had been carrying cots and lifting stones for the better part of that day. Dwalin and Dori, being among the strongest and least injured, had certainly done their fair share of lifting and hauling, but it was not over yet. Seeing as how only two other able-bodied dwarves remained, Elrond was nowhere to be seen, and Bilbo would be all but useless in carrying a cot full of dwarves, Dwalin and Dori carried Fíli and Kíli with the help of Bifur and Balin in place of Glóin and Nori.

Balin had spoken the truth; the withdrawing room was all in proper order. Upon entering the room, the dwarves moved the furniture in the main drawing room aside, so there was ample space for both cots. Everything in the room, from the chairs to the fireplace, was still in very good shape. A thick layer of dust covered every inch of the room, but nothing that could not be amended by a bit of cleaning. The door that joined the main drawing room to the adjacent drawing room could be opened, only the hinges creaked when the door was pushed. The dwarves were exhausted and hungry, so they explored no further for the time being. Each weary dwarf sunk into a chair, found a place on a sofa, or simply sat on the ground.

It was silent for a moment, before Bofur asked, “Where did Bilbo and Gandalf go off to?”

The dwarves glanced around, but neither the wizard nor hobbit could be seen.

…

Gandalf had remained at the entrance to the mountain, and had asked Bilbo to wait with him. The westering sun blazed bright along the horizon and the earliest stars could be seen in the night sky. Bilbo sighed as he watched the light dip away to where his home lay. The hobbit was so caught up with wishing to head west with the sun that the beauty of the approaching night escaped him. The bright orange, red, and pink hues followed the sun away and were replaced by cold blue, purple, and black colours in the night sky. The full moon’s pale loveliness illuminated the snow-covered ground and made silver sparkles dance among the trees. Out of the great still sky crept thousands of glittering stars, bathed in the surge of light cast out by the moon.

Bilbo missed his home in the Shire. This was not to say that he wanted to leave the dwarves –least of
all Thorin-, but only that he longed for the comfort of his bed in Bag End and the many meals he once had every day. He thought fondly of having a proper afternoon tea and all the cakes and pastries that went along with it. A cold wind blew and sent a shiver up his spine, waking him from his reverie of tea and cakes. It was just as well, for presently Elrond, Elladan, and Elrohir rode up to the front gates of Erebor. The dwarves had done a marvelous job clearing the pool and creating a path, so that now the rhythmic sound of hoof beats carried through the air.

Elrond rode a stunning black stallion that was brought to him by his sons. The horse was proud and strong in body and leg. His gaze was hard, but there was a kindness behind them. Elladan and Elrohir rode matching dappled grey mares. While they may not have been as broad as the stallion Elrond rode, they were swift and sure-footed. A small chestnut stallion, weighed down by bags, brought up the rear; this was the horse they had brought for Gandalf. The little red horse had accompanied the grey wizard on many adventures, and would surely continue to do so for as long as he could.

Gandalf stroked the fiery-red chestnut’s neck as he spoke to him. “Ah, Rusc, mellon, what have you brought us?” The horse whickered in response and nuzzled the wizard’s side, happy to see his friend.

“We have brought with us a great store of food, Mithrandir,” Elladan spoke, as if answering for Rusc who clearly could not speak.

“And just now we have gathered firewood,” Elrohir added.

“Splendid,” Gandalf smiled at the two brothers, then at their father. “Let’s get us into the mountain. It will be a nice rest before we set off tomorrow.”

Gandalf was trying to mask to growing dread he felt in his chest. What is was that Galadriel had called them for, he did not know, but he could guess. The White Council had banished Sauron from his hold at Dol Guldur, but his fate after that was uncertain. There were some among them who thought that that was the end of Sauron, but Gandalf was not convinced. It did not feel like a victory, nor was his soul eased by their victory in the Battle of Five Armies. Gandalf was dismayed; as a guardian of Middle-earth he could sense when things were amiss.

He thought deeply of the current state of the world, even as he helped unburden the horses. With a practiced and familiar motion, he uncinched the saddle and removed the saddlebags from the back of his red horse. The wizard slung the bridle over his shoulder so his hands would be free to carry the packs into the mountain. Rusc, now free of his tack and packs, lipped through the snow to find some grass to eat and he was sorry not to find any. He was joined soon after by Elrond, Elladan, and Elrohir’s horses. Before entering the mountain, Elrond put out grain for the hungry horses to munch on. They too, would have a nice rest in the shelter of the mountain before their journey picked up the following morning.
Gandalf called to Bilbo who had been standing just out of the way. Among the five of them, the various gear, food, and supplies were carried into the mountain. The wizard and three half-elvens carried their loads easily and gracefully down the hall, with Bilbo puffing to keep up behind them. The hobbit had a saddlebag slung over his back and his arms full of wood for a fire. The pack felt heavy, but it looked as though the packs of his companions were larger and heavier than his, so he kept his mouth shut.

The dwarves grew immediately suspicious of Elladan and Elrohir upon their entry into the withdrawing room. They were weary of these elf-looking creatures, much the same way they had been when meeting Lindir in Rivendell. But when Elrond explained that they had brought food all the dwarves’ misgivings were set aside. The dwarves were further pleased when it was revealed that the food they brought was more than just cram. Staples such as lembas and honey-cakes were counted among the foodstuffs they brought, but there were also stores of nuts, hawthorn berries, dried apples, and other fruit that had been preserved for the winter. Most surprising to the dwarves and Bilbo was the miruvor that Elrohir drew from one of the saddlebags. They passed the miruvor around and each took a sip. It was a fragrant cordial, and almost instantly warmed and strengthened the body of whoever tasted it.

After a short rest, Glóin was quick to start a fire with the wood that Bilbo had carried in. The fireplace in the main drawing room was large and within moments blazing warmth filled the area. Basking in the glow of the bright fire the dwarves shared stories of their youth and folklore that had been passed down for generations. They were almost a merry gathering again, had it not been for the worry each dwarf, hobbit, halfelven, and wizard felt for the wounded and unconscious Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli. With food in their bellies and drink in their throat they were beginning to feel hopeful for the future of Erebor.

The stories and songs carried on long into the night, but at length the dwarves grew drowsy and settled down to sleep. The withdrawing room afforded a great deal more comfort than the cold hard ground under the tents had. There was even one particularly long sofa that would become Gandalf’s bed for the night. The dwarves slept half-sitting in cushioned chairs, and when there were not enough chairs in the main drawing room, they crossed to the adjacent drawing room to take what they needed to be comfortable. Bilbo sat with his legs neatly pulled up and hidden under a thick wool rug on a chair he had placed in between Thorin’s cot and Fíli and Kíli’s cot. It should have been easy for him to fall asleep. After all, he had had quite a long day and should, by all accounts, be exhausted. But Bilbo tossed and turned, slipping into sleep only to be roused moments later by the sound of dwarven snoring that he had grown used to on the road.

Near an hour of tossing and turning had Bilbo feeling a bit defeated. He sighed heavily and opened his eyes. The still-blazing fire bathed the room in a warm red glow. In the cozy light of the fire Bilbo was reminded of Bag End and scenes of himself settling down in a chair with a cup of tea and a good book. He looked around at his slumbering companions, all of whom were blind to his troubled sleep. When his eyes were cast over the long sofa he noticed that Gandalf was gone. Surely he hasn’t made west yet, he wouldn’t leave without telling us… Bilbo hoped they had not left, but he could not see Elrond or his sons either. Panic flared in his chest at the prospect that they had, in fact, gone.
Bilbo threw down his woollen rug and got up. *If I can't sleep, I might as well look for Gandalf. I have some questions for him anyway,* he reasoned in his head.

In leaving the withdrawing room Bilbo also left the warmth and light provided by the fire. It was dark in the grand halls of Erebor and Bilbo could scarcely see. The hobbit braced a hand against the rough wall on the side of the mountain to guide him. If he remembered correctly it had been a more or less straight walk to the main gates. It was a lengthy walk at night when one could not see. His path followed the curve of the mountain and there were no complicated turns. At length the main gates were in sight. Bilbo drew a long breath of chilly air as he stepped out of the darkness and into the silver moonlit night. Carried by the wind was the scent of…

“Old Toby?” Bilbo asked nobody in particular as he smelled the familiar pipe-weed.

“Hmm yes, I thought you might join me for a bit,” Gandalf said.

Unexpected joy burst in Bilbo’s heart at Gandalf’s offer. He gladly accepted the satchel that contained the pipe-weed and he filled his pipe. Remarkably throughout this whole adventure he had managed to hold onto his pipe, though he had nothing to light it with. Noticing the hobbit’s conundrum, Gandalf lit the pipe for him with an expert flick of his fingers. The two friends sat side by side pulling on their pipes and blowing the occasional smoke ring. Bilbo was so pleased with this surprise that he did not even think to ask Gandalf how he had come across Old Toby out here, so far from where it originated.

As pleased as Bilbo was with Gandalf’s surprise, he still had questions for the wizard, and they were regarding rather pressing matters. He was not sure quite how to begin discussing all of his worries, but since the Old Toby brought back memories of home, he decided to start there. “How will I get back to the Shire, Gandalf?”

“Do you want to go back?” The wizard answered with another question.

“Of course I do,” Bilbo replied immediately.

“Are you quite sure?”

“What else is there for me in Erebor? I have far surpassed my burglarious commitments and now that the company is all together I should leave them with their kin and king.” Bilbo’s voice was measured as he explained his rationale, but Gandalf detected a quiver of emotion in his controlled manner.
“That is not the question I have asked.”

“Well, that’s my answer,” Bilbo said firmly and took a long pull at his pipe.

“What else is there for you in Erebor?” Gandalf said, raising an eyebrow. He stood up and patted the hobbit on his shoulder, leaving Bilbo with his thoughts.

Bilbo watched Gandalf walk down to where Elrond and his sons were checking on their horses. He wondered briefly how it was that elves never seemed to sleep. He did not want to think about Gandalf’s question and he was a bit cross that he did not receive a straight answer from the wizard. He had stubbornly resigned himself to a solitary life, partly through circumstance, but chiefly by his own will. He liked visitors as much as the next hobbit, but when the sun set on a day filled with others he was quite glad solely for his own company. Besides, how could there be anything for him in a great dwarf kingdom? There were no gardens, no brightly coloured coats and trousers matched in brilliance only by wild flowers that grew out of fresh green grass. There was no green grass. This was a harsh land, met by war and violence and greed. This part of the world was more complicated than it needed to be, when all his life had been simple.

What is there for me in Erebor? This was, after all, not his journey, not his mountain, and not his purpose. His own adventure had come to an end and he was eager to return home. And yet the thought of leaving sent a pang on sadness through his core. It would be folly to suggest that any one thing could keep him contained in a mountain on top of a pile of gold when all he wanted was some supper, followed by a few scones with clotted cream and berries in his hobbit hole to the west. But it had been implicit in Gandalf’s question; there was something for him in Erebor, even if it was only one thing.

It was getting harder and harder for Bilbo to ignore the impact of his fondness for Thorin. The dwarf king had stirred within him a spark. The Baggins in him -that is, the prosy part of his make-up- overthought everything. But it was impossible to overthink what he currently meditated on, for he was feeling it. A void, dark and boundless in his heart, was filled with the fire from Thorin’s soul. It did not burn him, but made him warm. Did not starve him, but brought new life. Would not kill him, but pulled him farther from the end with each passing moment.

Suppose I do stay, then what? There is only one thing that would keep me happy here... Thorin. Why? Why Thorin? Why me? Why now? His mind had protected him from the answer to these very questions for far too long. Sitting alone in the dark night, Bilbo began to realise something. It was a funny little thought dredged up from some long hidden part of his mind. The Tookish spirit of adventure had been awoken all those months ago, long in coming as it had been, but what else was there? Slowly at first then quite suddenly it occurred to him. A word danced at the back of Bilbo’s mind. An amorphous, half-formed jangled of letters came into focus and, for the first time, spelled
out clearly a four-letter word. Love.

As Bilbo navigated his way through the dark corridor he tried to push the thought of love from his mind. He was utterly flummoxed that such an idea would exist in his mind in the first place! He was no less distraught by the time he reached the dim-lit room full of sleeping dwarves. Bilbo wandered over to his seat by Thorin’s cot and watched the dwarf with contemplative disengagement. A small smile played on his features as he stared down at the dwarf he loved. The glowing embers of the fire cast a healthy looking glow across Thorin’s face. The wild dancing of light and shadow from the dying fire almost made it look like the dwarf was stirring.

Bilbo’s heart gave a start. He was stirring!

A slightly pained expression formed on the dwarf’s face as he shifted on his cot. Thorin opened his mouth as if to talk, but no sound emerged. Bilbo gazed on with bated breath as Thorin’s eyes began to flutter open. The dwarf squinted against the muted light that met him, dim though it was. At length his sight adjusted to the light and he began to gaze around. The dwarf noticed the being beside him and turned his head to look. Their eyes met in the darkness and Bilbo smiled. He was happy beyond belief that Thorin was awake! Moments dripped off and for a time he simply lay still. Being conscious was obviously quite trying for Thorin. Then Thorin made an attempt to speak again. His dry, cracked lips moved, but Bilbo could hear no sound. The hobbit moved closer and rested a hand on his blanket-covered arm. With his free hand he braced against the cot and moved closer so he could hear what Thorin was trying to say.

“Thorin,” Bilbo breathed, lightly squeezing the dwarf’s arm through the blankets.

Thorin made a sound lower than a whisper which Bilbo did not hear.

The hobbit leaned closer. “Try again, I can’t hear you.”

Bilbo was now almost touching Thorin, and this time he heard the whispered word, “…cold…”

“Oh! Oh, yes, you must be,” Bilbo whispered back as he tried to tuck the blankets tighter around the dwarf.
With Thorin shivering, the only other thing Bilbo could do to ease his discomfort was to add his own blanket to the heap of blankets already on the dwarf. He thought briefly that curling up next to him would provide them both with a great deal of warmth. Then he remembered all the dwarves around him and thought against it. So, he gathered up his warm woollen rug and laid it on top of Thorin. Bilbo tucked that blanket in as snugly as the others so he would lose as little heat as could be helped.

Thorin’s eyes closed again and his body ceased shivering. Bilbo watched as the dwarf’s breathing evened out and he was once again taken by sleep. This time, hopefully to rise again in the morning. Bilbo reached forward to brush away a stray lock of hair that had fallen on Thorin’s face while he had briefly been awake. He let his hand rest on Thorin’s cheek for a moment, stroking it gently, before he let his hand fall to his side. Thorin’s shivering may have stopped, but his own was just beginning. He realised that it was much colder now without his blanket.

All around him the dwarves snored, but moved not a muscle. Bilbo saw the pile of firewood and put an extra log on in hopes that it would heat the room. The fire was happy to be fed and repaid him kindly with extra warmth. Deciding that in front of the fire was the likeliest place to shield him from the cold, Bilbo pulled his chair as close to it as he could get. Sitting on the cushioned chair he curled in upon himself. It was not perfect, but it would have to do for that night. Before long, the sound of soft hobbit snores were added to the sound of loud dwarf snores.

…

It was Bofur who woke Bilbo in the morning. After stretching and yawning, the happy-go-lucky dwarf preceded to walk smack into the quietly sleeping Mister Baggins and his chair.

“What are you doin’ sleepin’ right in front of the fire, Bilbo?” Bofur asked when he regained his bearings.

“Uh, well, Thorin was cold, so I gave him my blanket,” Bilbo replied blearily, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. “And then I was cold, so I put a log on the fire and slept right here.”

It was in that moment that Bilbo regained his wits and remembered the events of the night before. “He was awake last night! Thorin was awake!” Bilbo said.

This drew the attention of a few more dwarves who were also just waking up.

“Are you sure, laddie?” Balin asked.
“Yes, yes I’m positive! It was only for a moment, but I am certain,” Bilbo replied. But now, looking
down at the quiescent dwarf, Bilbo wondered if maybe he had dreamt it.

Now all the dwarves were wide awake. But, early as the hour was, they noticed that neither Gandalf
nor Elrond were among them. The blankets were shifted on the long sofa which indicated that at
some point through the night Gandalf had slept there, but where had he gone now? The dwarves and
Bilbo had learned many times over the course of their adventure that wizards do as they please, and
he was bound to turn up sooner or later.

Sure enough, it was not long before Gandalf reappeared and greeted them. “Good morning, my
friends.”

Elrond had joined Gandalf and brought some unfortunate news for the dwarves. “It seems our time
here has come to a close and shortly we shall be leaving you.”

After the initial shock of Lord Elrond’s statement sunk in, the dwarves began to grumble their
protest. Not only were they losing their wizard again, but they were losing a marvelous healer too!
They pleaded with Gandalf and Elrond to stay, at least until the lads and Thorin woke up, but it was
to no avail. Bilbo knew their attempts were futile because he had heard Elrond speaking with his
sons. Whatever it was that required their attention it was far greater than the dwarves of Erebor.

“I’ve gone farther and done more with you dwarves than I had originally planned. After all, this was
not my adventure.” These were familiar words to the dwarves who were sighing in exasperation.
“And besides, there is no need to fret: I am leaving you Master Baggins!” The wizard winked at the
hobbit and smiled broadly at the dwarves.

The dwarves were far from satisfied with the current state of affairs, but they let it go. They knew
there would be no moving Gandalf once he had made a decision, and in this one he seemed quite
resolute. The dwarves, Bilbo, Gandalf, and Elrond shared one last meal together in the withdrawing
room. This raised their spirits, but only for a short time, as they knew it would not be long before
they would lose two valuable companions.

After eating his fill, Bilbo decided to recount the events of the previous night to Elrond. “Thorin
woke last night. It was late, after I came in.”

“Very good,” Elrond said. “For how long?”
“Not very long, I’m afraid. Just enough to tell me he was cold.”

Elrond walked over to Thorin’s cot and looked down at the sleeping dwarf. “He looks well this morning. I will take a closer look at his wounds, but it would not surprise me to find him nearly healed. Dwarves are remarkably strong in body.”

Elrond’s words were encouraging, but as he pulled the layers of blankets and bandages off, Bilbo noticed that the wounds were still ghastly. Really, they had healed a great deal considering their severity and the fact that not much time had passed. The inflammation had all but gone and the skin looked healthy. There did not appear to be any infection and a protective layer of skin was starting to scab over the tender abrasions. Thorin remained motionless as he was examined, tearing apart the hope that had blossomed in Bilbo’s chest the night before.

“Thorin’s wounds will need to be cleaned once a day. I will leave my Heilleir for you to mix in water for cleaning. I will leave the adeps lanae as well. Use it sparingly, for it is just as potent in small doses as large.” Elrond explained this while he applied some adeps lanae to the last of Thorin’s wounds. He then bandaged him up and moved to Fíli and Kíli.

The halfelven spent far more time tending to Fíli and Kíli than he had tending to Thorin. Kíli was healing quickly despite the tremendous blood loss he suffered. The bright red flesh on his head wound had soothed to a pinkish hue. It appeared to be healing well and would leave a handsome scar. Fíli was not doing well. In spite of all Lord Elrond’s efforts, infection still took hold in his puncture wound. It was only the beginning of infection, but it could be deadly if it got into his blood.

“There is not much Heilleir left, Bilbo,” Elrond began, “I will make a poultice to pack his puncture wound, but there will be little that remains. Kíli and Thorin are doing well and will almost surely heal without much more help, but it is not so certain for Fíli.”

Hurriedly, because he had planned to be off long before now, Elrond blended the Heilleir to make a poultice like the one he had used to pack Thorin’s wound. He did not like to pack puncture wounds, but it did not appear that he had a choice. The poison may have been drained, but infection could be just as lethal if not treated. If the infection spread or entered his blood stream, the young dwarf would be doomed.

The dwarves heard the sound of soft footfalls coming from the mezzanine. They all turned to see who it was and found Elladan and Elrohir standing at the entrance. They each had a medium size leather bag slung over their shoulders and they looked ready for travel.
“Ada, the sun is climbing higher in the sky and we must depart soon.”

It was true: the time was approaching half-nine and they had meant to leave no later than half-eight. Elrond finished packing the gaping hole in Fili’s chest with Heillier and quickly cleaned the rest of his wounds. Thankfully Fili was not afflicted by the same number of abrasions that Thorin was, so it did not take Elrond long to clean and dress the rest of his wounds. With all three injured dwarves bandaged and tucked tightly under warm blankets, Elrond made to leave.

Before they left, Elladan and Elrohir gave the dwarves more packs, full and heavy. In them were stores of food that would last the company almost the full cycle of a moon if they were careful. They also left the miruvor which would be wonderfully helpful for when Thorin, Fili, and Kili woke. Bilbo and the dwarves were thankful for their gifts and bowed and offered their services many times over. As appreciative as they were for their gifts, Thorin’s company would rather have kept Gandalf and Elrond in place of lembas and even miruvor. But, as it stood, they were already late in leaving and would be no further delayed.

“Take care and farewell! May your beards grow ever longer!” Elrond said as he bid the dwarves goodbye. “And may you find comfort wherever you go, Master Baggins,” Elrond smiled warmly down at the hobbit.

“Farewell indeed, my friends, wherever you fare!” Gandalf said. Then he turned to Bilbo and privately (as privately as one could in a room full of dwarves) spoke to him. “We will meet again, my friend. And since you are not begging to come along, I have a feeling that you’ve answered my question, hmm?”

Bilbo smiled shyly at the wizard, for he felt like Gandalf had guessed his heart long before he figured it out for himself. “I do want to go back to the Shire,” Bilbo began, “Just not yet. I will miss you, Gandalf. Please promise you will come back?”

“If all goes well, then yes, I will come back.”

With a heavy heart Bilbo embraced the wizard. The hobbit and dwarves then watched as Gandalf, Elrond, Elladan, and Elrohir strode down the halls and out of sight. Before long the sound of hoof beats on stone could be heard, carrying them far, far away from the dwarves and the hobbit.
The mood was dour in the withdrawing room. They sat around and munched lembas and kept mostly to themselves. Bilbo had been lucky in that he was hardly injured during the battle. Even his small head wound had healed quite quickly. The dwarves, however, had sustained a number of injuries. They quietly tended to their own wounds, or helped to tend to those of their kin. Dwalin’s muscles were especially sore, and Ori was carefully massaging snow and ice onto his friend’s muscles in hopes of subduing the inflammation. Óin was being helped to stand without his crutches by his brother, and Bifur and Bofur helped see to each other’s injured arms. For a time the hobbit watched his companions tend to each other with a love and tenderness he had not thought possible for such a hardy group of dwarves.

In a way watching the dwarves made Bilbo sad. Since his mother and father died he did not have anyone who cared for him like the dwarves cared for each other. As he sat in his chair between the princes of Erebor and the King under the Mountain he turned his attention away from the others and to the one dwarf he cared for most. Much to his surprise, Thorin was stirring again! Bilbo jumped to his side in case Thorin were to speak. As had happened the previous night, Thorin writhed under the cover of his many blankets. He slowly opened his eyes and gazed around the room. He opened his mouth, but no sound emerged.

“Dori, bring over some water and miruvor,” Bilbo called. “Thorin is awake!”

The dwarves were all immediately alert and looking over at the hobbit and their king. Dori was quick to fetch a flask with water and the miruvor. He joined Bilbo at his side and handed him the water first. Bilbo supported Thorin’s neck and head as he slowly poured the water into the dwarf’s eager mouth. When he had had his fill of water, Bilbo offered Thorin a sip of miruvor. The change in the dwarf was instantaneous, and Thorin felt invigorated, if not still a bit sore.

“Thorin…” Bilbo began, but found himself so overcome with joy that he had no words, and simply stood smiling down at his friend.

A puzzled cleft, like a dry knife-cut between his eyebrows formed on Thorin’s face. With a voice that he dragged up from the bottom of a well, Thorin said, “You… I know you… are important… to me. But… I cannot… say…why…”

Bilbo was floored. He had been prepared for Thorin to hate him, he had hoped Thorin would forgive him, but he was in no way ready for Thorin to have forgotten him. The hobbit’s heart ached painfully with the words of the dwarf king and it was all he could do not to break down and weep. Moments dragged on and all Bilbo could do was stare into the uncomprehending eyes of the one he loved. The one who had forgotten him.

Chapter End Notes
I plan on doing with Thorin’s character what I have been doing with Bilbo’s character; that is, I will conflate book!Thorin and movie!Thorin and just take the bits that I think work well together. If it seems like my characterizations stray too far from canon please tell me and I will try to fix it. Cheers!
As Freezing Persons, Recollect Snow

Chapter Notes

I don’t know if anyone has noticed, but each chapter title is from a line in a poem that I think pertains to the chapter. If you did - major kudos to you. If you can name all the poems and authors - super extra bonus points for you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo might have been floored by this new revelation that Thorin could not remember him, but the dwarf in question was perfectly flummoxed. What was this halfling doing in the Lonely Mountain? Who was he and why did he feel so important? Why did he seem on such good terms with his kin? How did they ever end up in Erebor?! The last thing he could remember was having supper with Dís in his home in Ered Luin. They had been planning a meeting with the dwarves from the Iron Hills for some time, and he and Dís were finalising some details. Now, here he was, incredibly injured and many miles east of his most recent dwelling in the Blue Mountains.

“Balin,” Thorin addressed his old friend. “Pray tell what is going on? I am returned to the halls of my grandfather, but how?”

Balin paused for a moment before responding. “You remember me, Thorin?”

Thorin appeared even more perplexed after hearing Balin’s question. “Yes, of course I remember you. You are one of my oldest friends. I know all of you. All, that is, except the halfling.”

The company glanced over at Bilbo, who was looking more miserable by the minute.

“Tell me, Balin,” Thorin went on, “What has happened? Preparations have been long in coming for this journey, yet I do not recall leaving Ered Luin.”

So, at Thorin’s request, Balin began the story from the very beginning, albeit a slightly abridged version. Most of the story told by the white-haired dwarf was as Bilbo remembered it, save the introduction. He was aware that the dwarves’ story had started long before they arrived at his hobbit hole in the Shire. While he had entertained stories of the history of dwarves and the coming of Smaug, he had yet to hear how this particular journey had begun. It was not so long ago, though long it seemed, since Thorin had sought council from Gandalf on a chance encounter while he and his companions were travelling. Bilbo listened, rapt, to the whole strange story of how Gandalf had persuaded Thorin into accepting the wizard’s offered burglar.
“We had accosted the wizard Gandalf while in Bree,” Balin explained. “Well, Thorin, you accosted him and quite nearly scared him off! He left us in Bree, not excited for battle; such talk of gold and wars and revenge were not what the wizard sought. With or without him, we continued to make plans to travel east. The portents had been read and that was the time to take back the last great dwarf kingdom of Middle-earth. But Gandalf came back, after a while. His wisdom was known far and wide, though we did not think we needed him. But it does no good to anyone to anger a wizard, and he was quite adamant that we should heed him. Even then, he had to speak privately to you Thorin for quite some time before you agreed. He brought us all to the Shire and introduced us to the fourteenth member of our company: Bilbo Baggins, burglar extraordinaire, or so Gandalf claimed. We thought he was making a mockery of us at first!” Balin laughed good-naturedly at the memory.

“Aye, he did look more like a grocer than a burglar!” Glóin joked, and all the company started to laugh. Even Bilbo, who was utterly beside himself at the moment, began to chuckle.

Thorin looked entirely unimpressed with the hobbit at this point in the story, even though Balin had more or less omitted Bilbo’s less flattering moments in Bag End. But, as the old dwarf continued to recount their tale, some form of speculative appreciation began to grow in Thorin for the halfling. In light of their changed perspective on Bilbo, when Balin or anyone else spoke of his actions they were careful to stay true to the story while downplaying his misgivings and blunders. Truly it had taken Bilbo a good long time to grow into being a proper adventurer and there was not much use hiding that, but when the story arrived at Thorin’s rescue from Azog by Bilbo after they escaped from the Misty Mountains, Thorin seemed to see the hobbit in a new light.

Like any proper adventure story, this one was long in the telling. By the end of it Thorin had heard about Elrond, the escape from Goblin Town, his rescue from Azog, their rescue by the eagles, the skin-changer Beorn, the terrifying spiders of Mirkwood, the Elvenking, their escape from his realm in barrels, their much needed rest in Lake-town, Bilbo’s confrontation with Smaug, the slaying of the great dragon, and finally, the Battle of Five Armies. Balin was careful to leave out the rather awkward business with the Arkenstone. None of the other dwarves protested or added it to the story themselves, and Bilbo was glad for it. Thorin, proud as he was would not let it show, but by the time the tale was told he felt an inkling of respect for this strange creature in front of him.

“A great story indeed, Balin!” Thorin praised at the end. “How my sister-sons will love to hear it when we meet again.”

The company shifted uncomfortably and looked around at one another. They had all gathered around Bilbo’s chair which was between the two cots, thereby blocking Thorin’s view of Fíli and Kíli. Evidently his memory did not stretch far enough back to when he conceded to bring his two sister-sons along with them. It had taken a great deal of coaxing and begging for Thorin and Dís to decide to allow the two brothers to join the company. They really were too young and too foolhardy to be anything more than a liability, but Thorin could not help it. They were so full of the spirit of adventure that they reminded him of himself and his brother Frerin at that age.
The Thorin that lay on the cot could not remember that they had come, but he was growing agitated at the sudden change in his friends. “Pray tell why suddenly a tale of adventure has you all shifting like naughty dwarflings who have been caught stealing sweets!” Thorin barked at them.

“Well, Thorin,” Balin began slowly, hesitating because he was not sure he could tell Thorin the awful truth.

“Thorin, the lads came with us,” Dwalin picked up.

The great warrior dwarf stepped aside and was followed by the others so that Thorin could see his sister-sons lying motionless on the cot across from his. Thorin’s stern façade melted away into utter devastation. He was dead silent and still as a statue. He stared blankly at the cot adjacent to his own. He wanted desperately to know if Fíli and Kíli would be alright, but it would be some time before he got his answer. He did not have a chance to even ask a question, for just then Bombur (who had been set out to watch the gate) plodded into the room, followed closely by Dáin Ironfoot.

“Dáin, cousin, it is good to see you,” Thorin greeted, his measured and controlled to hide the pain he was feeling at the newest revelation and also to hide his confusion that his kin from the Iron Hills was here.

“Thorin, it is well to see you in such a healthful state. I was informed that you had not yet woken,” Dáin said and glanced over at Bombur.

“Bombur would not have known Thorin was awake,” Balin said. “He has been on watch all day and Thorin has not been awake for long.”

“Very well,” said Dáin, brushing it off. “At any rate, I have come on two matters: first, to request shelter in the mountain for me and my soldiers.”

“Granted,” Thorin replied without hesitation.

“And second, to offer you council.”

“…Go on,” said Thorin after some consideration. He was in no position to argue, for he knew not
what the offered council would pertain to. There were too many gaps in his memory, so all that
remained was for him to listen as Dáin spoke.

“I have come to discuss potential plans, means, and policies regarding the neighboring kingdoms of
eves and men. Far from here I might live, and long has it been since there was a King under the
Mountain, but I remember well the friendship of men and elves and dwarves. Paramount to the
survival of your dwarves is the alliance of the three kingdoms. The solidarity forged by the
forefathers of the line of Durin with the elves of the Woodland Realm and the men of Dale should be
of utmost concern.” Dáin’s tone and speech reminded Bilbo of Thorin –if not less longwinded- when
first he touted his speech back at Bag End in the spring before they left. “It should be understood, as
I am sure you understand it, that the elves and men have been very patient. I think it would be wise
to give them what they are owed.”

“And what are they owed?” Thorin asked in return.

Dáin raised an eyebrow at the dwarf in front of him. “It would seem that of all who are involved in
this dreadful business that you, Thorin Oakenshiel, would know.”

“I have only recently returned from the brink of death, cousin,” said Thorin, “So it would seem there
would be no expectation for me to know more than what I know now.”

Dáin was familiar with Thorin’s style and he was aware that, well or not, Thorin could talk circles
around anyone until he was blue in the face. And so, instead of pushing any further into a rhetorical
argument with his cousin, Dáin told him what he asked, “From what Bard and the Elvenking say, at
least one fourteenth the gold under the mountain was the agreed upon price.”

“Preposterous!” Thorin roared. “That is absolutely ludicrous! I understand from Balin that Bard the
Bowman, heir of Girion, slayed the dragon Smaug, but that in no way entitles him to one fourteenth
the share of gold. And what claim may the Elvenking lay on my gold? The friendship of dwarves
and elves has been tenuous at best and I do not love Thranduil. How dare he be so bold as to
demand a share of my gold! And after he abandoned us when Smaug descended upon the mountain!
Not one ounce of gold will enter his possession,” the dwarf king seethed.

“Perhaps,” Dáin said. “But if you recall, Smaug the Magnificent hoarded wealth beyond measure in
the eons he spent in Erebor. Much of the gold within this mountain is that which he plundered from
the lost city of Dale. The people of Lake-town are suffering, Thorin, and desperately need aid.”

“I hardly see how the destruction of Lake-town is my responsibility,” retorted Thorin, who had
retreated to oppositional defiance.
“Bard is a reasonable man and, as such, the claim he makes is a reasonable one. Even before the part of Bard and the men of Lake-town in the battle there was some merit to his claim. Regardless, you cannot survive without the friendship from the other two kingdoms,” Dáin said.

Thorin was unimpressed. “Dale is destroyed and Esgaroth is not a kingdom. It would do me no good to follow your council, for they have nothing to offer.”

Dáin was growing frustrated with Thorin. It seemed plain as day in his mind what should be done, but Thorin clearly had other thoughts in mind. “They will rebuild! It is imperative that they do rebuild if you wish to see your dwarves fed. When Thror ruled under the mountain the dwarves of Erebor did not grow anything for themselves, they simply traded with the men of Dale for services and the great craft of the dwarves. You need the men to return and rebuild Dale and be on good trading relations at least so you will not starve!”

Thorin seemed to consider this. “That may be so, but what of the elves? Not only have they betrayed us in the past, but they are of little value to me now.”

“While Thranduil’s realm in the forest Mirkwood may be corrupted by evil, he himself is not. Nor are his elves or their will. He is watchful and protective; not a bad thing to be in this part of the world. Allying with him would be wise if you value the safety of your kingdom.”

“I understand all of those merits, but nothing, nothing they have to offer is worth one-fourteenth of the share of my treasure!”

Dáin sighed in exasperation. “As I understand it, there was an agreement reached among you and Bard and the Elvenking that you would surrender one-fourteenth of the share of the treasure to them.”

Thorin was growing more irate by the moment. “How did such an agreement come to be in the first place? As I have just said there is nothing they have to offer!” Of course, Thorin had forgotten all about the theft of the Arkenstone and his reluctant agreement to forfeit Bilbo’s fourteenth share of the treasure to recover it.

Dáin, who had long since grown tired of Thorin’s obstinacy, made his point very clear, “As I recall, it was one of your companions that handed over the Arkenstone of Tháin to Bard and the Elvenking. Surely you would agree that that is worth at least as much as they ask for.”
Thorin was livid. “That stone is the treasure of the House of Durin! I alone may lay claim to it! Who would betray me so?”

Everyone was silent, not daring to make a sound or move a muscle.

“Well, we’ve already been through this once, thought Bilbo, no use in dancing around it. “I-I did, Thorin. I handed the Arkenstone over to Bard and Thranduil.” The hobbit braced himself for what was sure to be a tirade of brash anger, hurtful words, and threats.

“You! You traitor! Would that I never brought you along,” Thorin snapped at the hobbit. This new revelation was all that Thorin could focus on. He did not think back to Balin’s story or all the times that the dwarves assured him Bilbo was invaluably useful. That was, after all, only a story, and this was happening right now. Thorin may have been moved briefly to regard the hobbit with something akin to respect, but that view was utterly decimated with the information that he betrayed him in such a monumental way.

The hobbit drew himself up to his full height. He felt that he had done nothing wrong and was only trying to help. He said nothing, but looked the dwarf king right in the eye. It was not a challenging look, but it was to say that he was not remorseful, not ashamed, and would not tolerate Thorin’s bad behaviour. This was a different hobbit than the one who let dwarves walk all over him back in Bag End. He had not spent nearly a year traveling and adventuring with these dwarves (and saving them on more than one occasion) only to be treated like rubbish at the end of it.

With their eyes locked in a silent confrontation, Thorin’s rage nearly boiled over. Something in him was about to brake. With the recent knowledge that his sister-sons lay dying next to him and this despicable betrayal, it was almost too much for Thorin to handle. But, angry as he was, he had grown quite tired, so that when he spoke it was not with the force that he felt. “Leave now,” he growled at Bilbo. “Be gone with you.”

“Thorin-” Balin began to protest.

“No!” Thorin cut him off. Turning to the hobbit he composed himself and said in a tone as cold as ice, “No, I said be gone – and may we never meet again.”

“At least he did not call me a descendent of rats,” thought Bilbo, humourlessly as he made to leave. He quickly gathered his pack in silence, the only possession of his that remained. He chanced a glance back at Thorin to find the dwarf glowering at him from under a heavy brow. Then his feet carried
him away, down the hallway of cold stone, out of the mountain to the chilly air, and down, down
ever farther away from his friends.

... 

“And all of you!” Thorin growled, addressing his company after Bilbo had left. “How could you let
him stay? It is evident that it was well known to you what he had done. I am betrayed twofold.
Never would I have thought that my own kith and kin would forsake me so.”

“Bilbo only meant to help, Thorin,” Balin said softly, trying to soothe the angry king. “There was a
time, all the same, when you seemed to think he had been of some service.”

“I hardly see how he could have been of any service,” Thorin retorted. “Never again will I have
dealings with undersized burglars. Drat that miserable halfling.” As Thorin spoke a pained look
crossed his face. His chest and shoulder ached, his head felt as though a heavy stone had been
dropped upon it, and he was fading fast. The culminating aggravation of hobbits and elves and men
and dwarves was grating on the injured dwarf king and he could take no more. “I am in no mood for
council or talk, Dáin. Move your dwarves in as you will, but do not bother me again this day.”

“I do hope you see sense, Thorin,” Dáin said as a final thought.

Thorin said nothing, but scowled fiercely as he watched his cousin part from their company.

...

At the coming of battle, all quarrels had been forgotten. The hasty alliance that had formed among
the elves of the Woodland Realm, the men of Esgaroth, and the dwarves of Erebor and the Iron Hills
was key to their success. With Smaug dead, the insidious sickness that had come with him began to
pass from the land and long forgotten friends once again became allies. Elven bows twanged and
shot arrows through the air amidst the loud clash of dwarf iron on orc iron.

Doubtless, the battle had been brutal and claimed the lives of many good folk, but it had done some
good before all was over. All of the goblins of the Misty Mountain army were slain in battle, as were
the wargs and Wild Wolves. The armies of evil would have been far greater had it not been for their
obliteration in the Battle of Five Armies. Middle-earth’s hard-won, watchful peace slowly returned.
Now the King under the Mountain was no longer suffering from the dragon sickness, though its effects lingered, leeching slowly away. Like wiping off layers of thick mud that once clouded one’s vision, the greed ebbed, and the seductive pull of hoarded treasure grew less fierce. Treasure on its own had magnificent influence over dwarves as it was, and Thorin was in no shape to combat the inner demons that had claimed so many before, and that threatened to claim him if he were not careful.

Thorin could not at the moment remember the life-changing journey that he had taken across Middle-earth. He did not remember the heroic things Bilbo had done. Nor could he remember all the times the hobbit saved his life. The telling of the Battle of Five Armies could not make him recall the solidarity he felt with the men of Lake-town and the elves of the Woodland Realm. As it stood, Thorin’s biggest obstacle in becoming a truly great King under the Mountain was himself.

…

Bilbo fled hotfoot from the mountain. His lungs filled with fire and every muscle ached painfully, but he kept running. Down the recently laid path he ran, and through the biting snow and through the cold. He hardly noticed the scores of dwarves that he passed, and they did not see him. Dáin had wasted no time in gathering his dwarves to enter the Lonely Mountain. The tent village—now devoid of dwarves—was in sight, but he did not slacken his pace. He was running from the mountain, from his friends, from the horror of losing the one he loved, and there was nothing that would slow him down. Bilbo felt like he was going to throw up, but still he ran. He moved unthinking in dusk’s falling darkness, feet moving by their own will, until he stumbled on a hard packed ridge of snow and fell.

Bilbo lay pitifully in the snow. He dared not make a sound and he was too tired to try to move. But he wept. He wept for the uncertainty of his friends, for his own uncertainty, for the loss of Thorin’s memory, and for the loss of their friendship. I wish I had never taken the Arkenstone, Bilbo thought gloomily, it has found me nothing but trouble since I gave it up. But then, I suppose, the men and elves would not have been here, nor Dáin, and we surely would have been defeated by the goblins and orcs. Blast it all! I wish this whole mess would just sort itself.

Just then, as Bilbo brooded miserably in the cold snow, a man walked by and spotted him. It was none other than Belemar, the man who had carried him off the mountain after the battle. Bilbo was so consumed by grief and agony that did not notice the other being approach him. Belemar moved slowly, so as not to startle him, but all the same by the time Belemar was close enough that the hobbit had to take notice, he was caught off guard.

“Oh! Belemar, you gave me a bit of a fright,” Bilbo said as he gathered himself.

“Whatever are you doing down here, Bilbo? And in the snow no less!” Belemar seemed genuinely
concerned for the shivering hobbit. “Come, you may rest in my tent and tell me what has happened.”

It was some time before Bilbo would speak. Belemar brought him a steaming cup of hot water to try to warm him. The shivering hobbit accepted it eagerly, though he longed for the water to turn to tea. The man had few blankets in his small tent, and he draped them all over Bilbo to stop the shivering. At length the hobbit warmed up and he felt comfortable enough to speak with Belemar. He did not think it would be wise to divulge the story in its entirety to the man. Even if Belemar could be trusted with the knowledge that Thorin was not altogether well, there was nothing to stop others in the camp from overhearing. Word spreads fast in small places when men are cold and long for some distraction from their discomfort.

“So, the King under the Mountain is awake?” Belemar asked. The men had known that Thorin was not well when he was in the tent encampment; that fact Bilbo could not disguise.

“Yes.”

“That is well, indeed! Perhaps some talk will happen and peace will be returned to this land,” Belemar said optimistically.

“I surely would like to see it so,” replied Bilbo. The hobbit yawned and drew the blankets in around himself. “I am quite tired, Belemar. Maybe I will tell you more come morning, but I don’t think I can keep my eyes open any longer.”

There was but one cot in the tent and it belonged to Belemar. By now, Bilbo was used to sleeping on the ground, so it was little bother to be curled up on the dirt. It was cold and hard, but he had blankets for warmth, and it certainly beat sleeping out in the snow. Exhausted, Bilbo nodded off moments after closing his eyes. His sleep that night was wrought with nightmares of battle and dwarves and men and elves and Thorin. He could not get to Thorin, could not save him. He wondered if he ever would.

…

Bilbo had been in the tent village now for over a week. Never again did Belemar ask what had driven Bilbo from the mountain, and never would Bilbo have offered the information freely. The hobbit helped Belemar tend to the injured men remaining in the tent village, but mostly he helped build pyres for the ones who succumbed to their injuries. The hobbit was quite resourceful, however, and he did manage to save a great many lives. With the knowledge that he had acquired from Lord Elrond he helped stave off infection and speed the healing of some of the worst gashes. In his pack, along with the food, Bilbo had safely stowed the Heilleir and adeps lanea. He would not use the
Heilleir for there was very little left, but he did apply the adeps lanea to whomever he thought needed it most. But even with his plants, salves, and knowledge, there were some among the injured that presented a greater challenge than others.

Gildis was one among many of the severely wounded men. He was lithe and toned with a shock of black hair. He had many gashes, but the one wound which threatened to bring about his doom was on his arm. A jagged tear streak across his bicep, it was covered in black ooze and dried blood. It looked as though an orc spear had been thrown and just grazed his arm instead of piercing it. The great force exuded by the spear caused a fracture to his humerus.

Between Bilbo and Belemar the pair had a rather impressive store of knowledge. Gildis was feverish and unresponsive when they first encountered him, and the most they could do was tend to his injuries. Bilbo flushed the spear wound out as best he could without the Heilleir and cleaned that as well as the rest of his wounds. At first the same black liquid that had been drawn from Thorin flowed freely from Gildis’ wound, and then it stopped almost at once. The hobbit was not sure whether or not this was good, but hoped that it meant there was not much poison to be drawn. While Bilbo had been cleaning, Belemar had found a sturdy stick to use as a brace for Gildis’ broken arm. Bilbo held the stick in place while Belemar wound a length of cloth around it. The man was careful not to wrap it so tight as the cut of blood flow, but tight enough that it would stabilize the bone while it was healing.

When he was satisfied with the work that he and Belemar had done, Bilbo snuggly tucked the blankets in around Gildis. The man was still unresponsive, but his breathing had evened out and some colour had returned to his cheeks. This was a promising sign and gave Bilbo more reason to believe that there had not been a great deal of poison bound up in his blood. The hobbit gave one last look at the man lying on the cot and thought sadly of when Thorin was in a similar position. He shook his head and sighed. There was nothing else to be done that day, so Bilbo gathered his pack and made to leave with Belemar when the flaps of the tent flew open.

“Gildis, my dear friend!” It was Bard. He looked overcome with job and fraught with anxiety at the same time. Heedless of Bilbo and Belemar, Bard threw himself down at Gildis’ side. “Oh, my friend, I thought you were lost.”

Unsure of what to do, Bilbo and Belemar simply stood and watch Bard the Dragon Shooter be reunited with the man they had just tended to. Bard tenderly stroked Gildis’ jet black hair and whispered kind words to his unconscious friend. Gildis had been a friend of Bard’s since their boyhood, and the two were seldom seen apart. After the battle, Gildis had been lost in the chaos and carnage. But even when he had been found he had been among so many recovered that no one had informed Bard until now.

At length Bard noticed the man and hobbit and then addressed the pair. “The dwarves’ hobbit, Bilbo, and one of my comrades, Belemar, how good it is to see you,” Bard greeted. “Am I correct in
assuming that you have cared for Gildis?”

“We only just came upon him today,” replied Bilbo. “But yes, we have cared for him.”

Bilbo noticed that despite the joy in his voice Bard was tired. There were dark circles under his eyes and his shoulders slumped forward. Bard had been working very hard to ensure the safety of the men who were still in camp, along with a number of other duties he had tasked himself with. The strain of it all had manifested itself physically, but Bard’s spirit would not be so easy to break.

“Will he live?” Bard idly brushed the thick black hair back from Gildis’ brow as he spoke.

“It is too early to tell,” Belemar answered.

“It does look hopeful,” Bilbo added after an extended silence.

“I am thankful indeed. Gildis is my oldest and dearest friend. I thought he was lost in battle, but I am overjoyed to see that he is here. If there is anything I can do to help you, you have my word that it will be done.”

“We will see how this night passes. He is fine for now, but by morning there will likely be more to be done.”

All that night Bard slept in the tent with Gildis. He had returned briefly to his own tent to fetch some blankets and a bite to eat, but he did not tarry long. Comforted by the fact that Gildis would not pass another night alone, Bilbo and Belemar returned to their own tent. The pair promised to check in on Gildis first thing the next morning.

Seeing Bard with Gildis stirred up a flurry of uncomfortable emotions in the hobbit. Of course, seeing Bard served to remind Bilbo of the terrible rift in his relationship with Thorin that he had created by handing over the Arkenstone. But more than that, Bilbo could see the love that Bard felt for his friend. He could see the devotion and compassion in the man’s deep brown eyes. The hobbit had felt like that about Thorin. He had tirelessly tended to the dwarf and had looked upon the King under the Mountain with love in his eyes. But Gildis would not hate Bard when he woke up. Gildis would not throw Bard out of a mountain. They would embrace and rejoice and be merry. The sting of loneliness and heartache plagued Bilbo as he fell into another night’s restless sleep.
Come morning Gildis was looking much better. Far better, in fact, than Bilbo could have hoped. The hobbit thought that his assertion must be correct: the poison must not have entered Gildis’ bloodstream the same way it did Thorin and Fili’s because neither dwarf healed as quickly as Gildis appeared to be, despite being made of sturdier stuff. Bilbo would not be able to check the wound from the spear because of Gildis’ broken arm. It would be dangerous and more detrimental to his healing to remove the brace than it would to clean the wound again. So, they took their chances and left the bandage on.

Bilbo cleaned the rest of Gildis’ many wounds while Belemar went to find and check on some of the other men. Bard insisted on staying with Bilbo and promised to keep from being a bother. Bilbo had no objection to this –Bard was hardly a bother-, and continued tending to the man. Despite the fact that Bilbo had seen a greater amount of carnage than he ever could have imagined back in the Shire, he was still not numb to it. On more than one occasion while cleansing Gildis’ wounds he needed to look away and take a deep breath. He did not think that he would ever get used to the sight of blood, and he hoped he would not have to.

After Bilbo had dressed the last of Gildis’ wounds and returned the covers to their proper place, Bard took the opportunity to have a word with the hobbit. “Most of the men I have spoken to say they owe their lives to you. I have been hearing that for more than a week now, but I have finally found you to thank you properly. I owe a debt of gratitude to you, Bilbo Baggins. There is more to you than I ever could have thought. All the same, I imagine you could use some help.”

“I don’t claim to be any sort of master healer, but I have done what I can. I will not deny any help offered in good faith,” Bilbo responded.

“Very well. When Belemar returns I would have you follow me;” Bard said. “It may interest you to know that there will be food at the end of it.”

It was not long before Belemar returned and Bilbo followed Bard out of the tent. The hobbit was not sure where they were going or who he would be meeting, but the promise of food all but stopped him running after Bard. He followed the man through the sea of tents and snow for some time before they reached their apparent destination. It was a large tent, erected among the myriad other smaller tents. Its entrance was guarded by two tall sylvan elves. Bilbo made the correct assumption that the person of whom Bard spoke was Thranduil, the Elvenking. While many of the elves had returned to Mirkwood or to Lake-town to help the townsfolk rebuild, a handful of elven soldiers and guards remained at the foot of Erebor with their king.

The tent was cozier than any other that Bilbo had stayed in; a small fire in the centre provided light and warmth, there were chairs to sit on, and ample amounts of cots for the elves that stayed behind. There was a table set just behind a fire pit and Bilbo could see a modest feast spread out upon it.
“We meet again, Master Hobbit,” Thranduil greeted. “Won’t you join us for a meal?”

“Hello,” Bilbo returned guardedly. “I would be very grateful to join you.” The hobbit had a feeling that Bard had brought him here for reasons other than to help him as a healer.

Once they were sat around the table and had begun to tuck into their food, Bard spoke: “On a first matter of business, I would like to offer you my gratitude once again at the care you have given my men. Especially in healing my dear friend Gildis.”

_Ah, so this is business, thought Bilbo, first matter surely means a second will follow._

“Well, I help when I can and where I am wanted,” Bilbo said cautiously.

“That brings us to the second matter: why exactly _are_ you down here when you had been snug in the mountain with the dwarves?” Thranduil questioned.

Bilbo did not know how much he should reveal to the Elvenking and Bard the Bowman. He would need their help to amend the relationship of the three kingdoms, but he did not want to betray his friends. He decided that he should be as honest as he could be with them. After all of the trouble he had caused with the Arkenstone, how much more could be caused by a little hobbit? “That is a good question. You see, Thorin has regained consciousness. He is awake and doing very well, but it seems that, well, he doesn’t remember much of the past year or so.” Bilbo hesitated, not eager to voice his eviction from the mountain. “And, uh, when he learned what I had done he kicked me out... again. So, here I am.”

“As you see it, Master Hobbit, it would not seem that he will be moved to share the vast wealth under the mountain?” Bard asked.

“It does not seem so,” Bilbo replied sadly. He wished that Thorin would put aside his pride and listen to what Dáin said, for neither he nor the men of Lake-town would survive without the cooperation of one another.

“I have seen Dáin Ironfoot march on the mountain,” Thranduil said gravely. “His army is strong and has been well received by Thorin, son of Thráin. What is to stop them from taking the Arkenstone by force?”
To which Bilbo replied, “You needn’t worry over that. Dáin wants to see your friendship restored as much as you do.”

The assumption made by Bilbo that Thranduil wanted to see friendship restored was questionable at best. Had that assumption been made before the Battle of Five Armies it would have been entirely fallacious. Bilbo had not thought of what brought the Elvenking and his army to the foot of the Lonely Mountain. After the fact Thranduil had said that when he had learned of the destruction of Esgaroth he made to help them. What he could not explain—and what no one seemed to question—was why he had been marching his army out before then. The men of the Lake had met Thranduil on the path—before word had reached him of the destruction of Lake-town—, and he had not been heading for Esgaroth, but to Erebor.

After a pause Bilbo said, “But Thorin would sooner sit on a pile of gold and starve than share. It seems that not even his kin can save us from the stubbornness of Thorin Oakenshield.”

“But what of your share?” Bard asked, his tone slipping to impatience. “You were to be given one-fourteenth the share of gold which would be given to us in exchange for the Arkenstone. Gold that I certainly have a right to.”

“I agree, I think your claim is perfectly reasonable, but Thorin doesn’t seem to remember our original bargain. As I said, he doesn’t seem to remember anything beyond the spring before we left the West.”

Their discussion carried on much the same way from midday well into dusk. The meal had been splendid, but Bilbo could hardly enjoy it over his anxiety and frustration. He wanted badly to help and for everything to end peacefully. This seemed less and less likely as their conversation progressed. Bard and Thranduil would not be moved, and it was a certainty that in his current state neither would Thorin. Not one of them disagreed that Thorin should, by all rights, share the treasure with at least Bard. But even with that concession the hobbit, man, and elf were feeling the strains of uncertainty. And all for the will of one powerfully obstinate dwarf.

Chapter End Notes

I am sad to say that updates will be much slower in the coming. I have been preparing for the fall semester which has been taking up a great deal of my time. I am a TA for one of my professors, volunteering at the hospital, taking a full course load, and working part-time. Not to mention caring for my African Grey feather-baby and keeping my flat from becoming a mess. Anyway, I won’t prattle on any further about my life.

Also, just wanted to give a huge thanks to everyone who has taken the time to read this!! I love you all <3
The Elvenking proposed that Bilbo spend the night in his tent. That way their conversation could reconvene as soon as they woke. He would be provided a proper cot and many warm blankets, though they were hardly necessary with the fire roaring in the middle of the tent. The events of that night had drained nearly all of Bilbo’s energy, but he insisted on checking to see how Gildis was doing before he turned in for the evening.

Bard had not spoken falsely when earlier he offered healing help to Bilbo, though it was not quite what the hobbit expected. Thranduil had agreed to accompany him on his visit and perhaps make some suggestions pertaining to the care of the injured man. Upon entering Gildis’ tent they were greeted by Belemar, who told them that Gildis had stirred earlier that evening. He had not yet woken fully, but this was a promising sign. The Elvenking looked the man over briefly, but declared that it was not necessary for any further intervention at this point. Before they left to return to the Elvenking’s tent, Thranduil gave Belemar a small pouch that contained a collection of soft green leaves. Thranduil told Belemar to give two leaves to Gildis if he woke, and to make him chew them thoroughly.

Bilbo’s eyelids were drooping, but he was too curious about the plant to be tempered by fatigue. So, he asked: “What was that - the plant that you gave Belemar?”

“That was Acullico,” Thranduil replied. “It grows on the boarders of my forest, but it has been an age since I have seen it in my realm.”

Even in Bilbo’s sleep-addled brain he could recall having read about the plant before. His knowledge of plant lore was quite admirable for someone who had not, until recently, strayed far from his home. This was due chiefly to the multiplicity of books he had read, but he also learned a great deal from his gardener and, more recently, from Lord Elrond. He remembered reading about the plant that Thranduil had, and remembered that it grew far outside the reaches of his grassy homeland and that it had great analgesic properties. The leaves grew on medium-sized trees and were accompanied by little pink fruit which were not very palatable. If you chewed the leaves it would almost instantly relieve any pain that you were afflicted with; very useful indeed.

Bilbo walked slowly behind Thranduil, and by the time they returned to the large tent, the hobbit was utterly drained. He did not think that he could even make it to his cot he was so tired. His legs felt as though they were made of lead and his head throbbed painfully. Bard and Thranduil stayed up and talked to each other with low voices by the fire, but Bilbo was scarcely bothered. He was certain that nothing could impede his sleep. But just then, as his eyelids began to shut, he heard a voice outside that said something that sounded like his name. Nobody else seemed to notice it, so he snuggled
deeper into his blankets and closed his eyes.

But the sound came again, louder this time. “Bilbo!” The small party inside the tent grew suddenly quiet upon hearing the sound. “Bilbo, are you in there?” The sound was almost outside the tent. It was a familiar voice, so the hobbit sat up in his cot and looked with anticipation to the tent flaps.

Bilbo could hear the voices of the elven guards exchanging words with the being who belonged to the voice. Then it was silent and the guards entered the tent. “You have a caller, Master Baggins,” one of the guards said. “A dwarf wishes to speak with you.”

Bilbo heart gave a start and he hastily scrambled off of his cot and followed the elven guards outside. In the darkness, Bilbo could see a stout figure with his white beard wagging in the moonlight. “Balin!” Bilbo called.

“Bilbo, you must come quickly,” Balin said, voice full of worry.

“What’s all this about? And what about Thorin?” Bilbo frowned.

With the elven guards standing watch a short distance from them, Balin refused to say any more. “Never mind that, laddie; I’ll take care of him. But please, you must come.”

Really, Bilbo did not have a choice. The desperation in Balin’s voice was enough to send adrenalin coursing through Bilbo’s veins and shake him from his fatigue. There were presumably few things that would send Balin down the mountain in search of Bilbo with such urgency at such a late hour, and Bilbo guessed it likely had something to do with Fíli. He loved all of the dwarves as one loves his companions, but with Fíli being Thorin’s heir presumptive he felt an almost avuncular love for the young blond-haired dwarf. Before leaving he darted back into the tent to quickly gather his pack. He fumbled through it to make sure he had everything and found that all was accounted for, albeit with diminished food stores.

Bilbo bid the Elvenking and Bard farewell, pretending not to hear them when they asked where he was off to, and dashed after Balin in the darkness. Thorin willing or not, Bilbo would do his best to care for the young dwarf. He could only imagine what terrible state Fíli must be in. Elrond had been very specific when he had said that Fíli would need extra attention and care. Puncture wounds, even when diligently cared for, are especially prone to infection. Bilbo’s worry grew greater and greater as he hastened up the mountain behind Balin.
When they reached the entrance, Bilbo noticed dwarven soldiers set out as watchmen. Balin explained that Dáin had posted soldiers at the gate to the mountain to guard its entrance upon Thorin’s request. They had been explicitly instructed by Thorin not to let anyone into the mountain who was not of his company or Dáin’s army, and especially no men, elves, or hobbits. But Dáin, being of a different mind than Thorin, covertly told his soldiers that if the hobbit were to return to the mountain that he be permitted entry. It was not so much that Dáin liked the hobbit -although he did, in fact, like the hobbit- but more he knew that if anyone had a chance of swaying the mind of the King under the Mountain it might be Bilbo. So it was that when Balin came to the entrance with a hobbit in toe they passed easily by the two guards.

The withdrawing room was dimly lit by a smoldering fire when Balin and Bilbo entered. All the dwarves were accounted for except Dwalin and Ori. Balin informed Bilbo that since Dáin’s visit, Thorin had become far more protective of his treasure. He had grown suspicious of everyone, so he posted guards not only at the entrance to the mountain, but also at the room containing the hoard. In fact, he was so suspicious that he would not even trust Dáin’s soldiers to guard it, so the company took it in turn to guard the gold in pairs. This is the power that gold has over dwarven hearts. On this night Dwalin and Ori had volunteered. Of the dwarves that remained, only Bofur, Óin, Nori, and Dori were awake and they were very happy to see their hobbit. Everyone else, Thorin included, was asleep.

Bilbo had guessed correctly that the reason for his returning to the mountain was Fíli. The young dwarf was feverish and his body was racked with shaking chills. Bilbo could hear his raspy breath coming rapidly and shallow. When Bilbo peeled back the covers and removed his bandages he could see that Fíli’s bruises had multiplied and were dark red in hue. The infection had almost certainly grown and spread to his blood.

“Sepsis,” Bilbo muttered mostly to himself as he continued to look over the dwarf.

Granted, Bilbo’s medical knowledge was limited, but he had seen sepsis before. His adventurous cousin Adelard Took had been afflicted once before he came of age. It was very uncommon for hobbits to fall ill with any sort of sickness, let alone sepsis. But, being every bit a fool of a Took, Adelard had managed to fall into a terrible state. Bilbo could remember visiting him while he was ill with his mother, Belladonna. The young hobbit had looked much like Fíli did now, gasping for breath, heart racing, and dreadfully feverish. It had only been his mother’s knowledge of plant lore that saved the young Took an untimely death.

He turned to Balin, a pale and terrified look on his face. “If-if this is what I think it is, well, there is very little hope.” The look on Balin’s face nearly ended Bilbo; the sage-like dwarf was crushed and looked lost.

“You have to do something,” Balin pleaded.
Bilbo sighed. “I will try my best, but I am not a healer. I think it is sepsis- a poisoning of the blood.”

The conversation between Balin and Bilbo had drawn the attention of the few dwarves who were still awake and they joined their companions by the cot. Previously they had kept a bit of distance between themselves and their ex-burglar, so as not to get in his way, but now with grim words and even grimmer looks, the dwarves drew in closer.

“What is the matter? Will the lad be okay?” Bofur asked.

“I-I don’t know,” Bilbo said, downtrodden. “I will need some other supplies before I can even try…”

“What is it that you need?” Óin asked loudly. He was quickly shushed by Balin. “I’m sorry, I don’t hear well.” He explained, not for the first time.

“The last thing we need is to wake Thorin!” Balin scolded in a harsh whisper, and with that everyone quieted down.

The first thing Bilbo needed was some water, and Óin was quick to fetch it for him. He wasted no time on the lesser wounds, and instead turned immediately to the evident source of the infection: the puncture wound. It was still packed with the Heilleir that Elrond had put there shortly before his departure. It was all dry now and jet black, looking very much like the Heilleir they had removed from Thorin’s wound. Bilbo pulled the dried black leaves out of Fíli’s chest to find that his worst fear had come to life: the wound was very much infected. At the bottom of the puncture was a collection of whiteish-yellow pus. Not good at all, Bilbo thought hopelessly as he stared down at the mess of Fíli’s chest.

Bilbo turned away, took a deep breath, and reached for his pack. As painful as this was, as much as Bilbo just wanted to hug the dwarf to him and mourn his inevitable loss, Fíli was not yet dead. As long as Fíli was alive Bilbo pledged to himself that he would do everything in his power to save the dwarf. From his pack he gathered some of the remaining Heilleir and mixed it in with the water that Óin had brought. He doused the puncture wound with the water mix in an attempt to flush out the infection that had already taken hold. It seemed to be working quicker and better than Bilbo ever could have hoped. With the pus flushed out the redness began to recede and a smile slowly formed on Bilbo’s face.

Winter nights were deathly cold, and this particular night was no exception. As Bilbo continued to cleanse Fíli’s wounds he was aware of how long the dwarf’s bare skin had been exposed to the
chilly air. The withdrawing room was far warmer than the outside air, with the fire blazing and the number of other bodies producing heat, but it was still too cold to be exposed for long. Bilbo applied some adeps lanea to the puncture site and bandaged it quickly before returning the blankets to their proper place.

The hobbit could not have been in the room for even an hour, but with every passing minute he grew more fearful that Thorin would wake. He glanced over at Kíli and found with joy that the dwarf appeared in very good health. Regretfully, he dared not linger to examine Fíli’s younger brother at the risk of pushing his luck. So, Bilbo gathered up his pack, bid farewell to his friends, and followed Balin out of the withdrawing room. Before getting too far down the hall, Bilbo cast a longing glance back at Thorin and sighed. He missed his friend dearly and wished for him to be returned to his proper mind.

When they reached the gates Bilbo could stand it no longer. He was desperate for some news of how Thorin was doing and where his mind was. “How is Thorin?” Bilbo asked plainly, not sure how else to start the conversation.

Balin pulled him back from the gates enough so that the guards would not hear them speak, before he addressed Bilbo’s questions. “Thorin is not well, Bilbo. Overall he seems to be getting stronger; he has even been up to walk around quite well. But even though his shoulder is healing it hurts him a lot. Of course, he would never say anything, but I have known Thorin my whole life! I can see him wince when he moves and I can hear the hitch in his breathing. He has put on a strong front for Dáin and the rest of us, but there is no way to hide it from an old dwarf like me.”

“And what of his mind? Has he remembered anything?” Bilbo asked, though he felt he knew the answer.

“I’m afraid not,” Balin said with an exasperated sigh. “Thorin’s resolve seems to grow stronger as his body does. Nothing Dáin has said will sway him either. He is a good dwarf, and is of our mind. That is, he does not want to go to war with the elves and men.”

An unsettled feeling gripped Bilbo. “But, are you saying that Thorin does?”

“I have already said too much,” Balin scolded himself. “Just know that we are trying to keep it from coming to that.”

Bilbo was not terribly pleased with that answer, but his fatigue was once again catching up with him. Instead of pressing the issue further, he said, “I will return tomorrow night at the same time. Meet me by the gate so I may know that it is safe.” And with that, Bilbo bid a final farewell to Balin and
descended back to the camp of men.

The elves that were guarding the Elvenking’s tent let Bilbo enter without question. Bard and Thranduil were still awake when the hobbit walked in. They tried to question him as to what business was required of him, but he waved them off, mumbling “too tired”, and fell into the cot. He was taken almost immediately by sleep and he passed a dark and dreamless night.

…

Despite the late hour that Bilbo succumbed to sleep he woke bright and early with the rising of the sun. A small breakfast was laid out on the table. Bard and Thranduil were once again in conversation with each other, and Bilbo wondered if either of them had had a chance to get some sleep. Bilbo stretched in his cot and then stood to join the others for breakfast. He silently settled himself in a seat by Bard and tuck into some brown bread that was on the table.

“Where did you disappear to last night, Master Hobbit?” Bard asked.

“Oh, nowhere really,” Bilbo lied as he took another bite of bread.

“This is no time to be surreptitious,” Thranduil’s voice was tight and controlled. “There have been rumours of possible attacks from the dwarves. You were summoned by a dwarf last night and if you followed him to the mountain I would ask of you to tell us all you know.”

“As I said before, you need not worry. Dáin is of a different mind than Thorin. He would not send his troops after the armies they fought alongside scarcely a fortnight ago!” Bilbo was barely convinced of this himself, but he hoped that his comment would ease the minds of Thranduil and Bard.

“And you would know that because you spoke to him last night?” Thranduil pressed.

Bilbo remembered what an awful state Fíli was in on his most recent foray into the mountain. He knew that he would need the help of Thranduil and Bard to heal the dwarf, which would mean that he needed to be honest. “No. I did go to the mountain last night, but I did not speak with Dáin.”

“Go on.”
“One of my friends is very ill and needed my help. It was Balin who told me that Dáin would not go to war.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes, it is,” Bilbo replied. “As I have said before, I may be a burglar, but I am an honest one. And have I not been honest in all my dealings with you?”

“You speak the truth, but your loyalties lie with the dwarves. Why is it that we should believe you now?” Thranduil asked, ever skeptical.

With some reluctance, Bilbo answered: “Because I need your help.”

“And what is it that you seek from us?”

“My friend is dying, that much was clear when I saw him last night. It’s a poisoning of the blood. The plants that I have had helped at one point, but their store is almost used up and my friend is still dying!” More force was growing in Bilbo’s voice as he spoke, thinking of Fíli and Kíli and Thorin. “I do not wish war upon anyone, man, elf, or dwarf. I only want peace in this land and for my friends to be happy. I think if you show some compassion Thorin will see it all in a new light.”

Thranduil found the hobbit’s claim of Thorin turning the other cheek at a show of compassion to be dubious. “What, pray tell, could be more compassionate than fighting alongside one another in battle, protecting a mountain that is not even ours?”

“Yes, yes, but Thorin doesn’t remember that. He will know this and remember this.”

“So, you have spoken to Thorin Oakenshield, O! King under the Mountain, and he has said that this will be so?”

“Well, no, but-”
“That is what I thought,” Thranduil cut Bilbo off mid-speech. “Now that Thorin is awake, we shall plan to march on the mountain.”

“No,” said Bard. “After all that Bilbo has done for my fellow men and for all the good he has already done in the mess we should help him in this small way. I grow impatient for what is rightfully mine, for what will help my people, but marching on the mountain and starting a war will do us no good!”

Thranduil said nothing, and kept his face a barely disguised mask of contempt.

“Well, I am not going to sit about arguing with the lot of you while there are people that need my help,” Bilbo said, breaking the tense silence that had stretched long between them. “I surely hope that unlike Thorin you will see sense! I am going to check on Gildis if you care to find me.” And with that, the hobbit stormed out of the tent, more frustrated than ever.

…

By the time Bilbo reached Gildis’ tent, much of his frustration had ebbed. A great deal of his aggravation was due to how tired he was. He had not had a truly good sleep since the company had been in Lake-town. Another factor that added to his agitated state was that he wanted to leave this place and return home. It seemed to be an endless pit of disappointment and enmity. Bilbo knew in his heart there was no way he could leave before he saw the three kingdoms at peace. He could not possibly leave before he made his own peace with Thorin.

*Thorin,* Bilbo’s heart hurt at the thought of the dwarf he loved, the dwarf that now apparently hated him. *When his memory returns it will be different…* But even though Bilbo hoped, he was not certain it would be so. They had had many moments of camaraderie on the journey to Erebor, but after the sticky business with the Arkenstone Thorin had treated him much the same way he was treating him now. If only he could make them all see sense, then maybe there would be some hope of repairing their fractured friendship.

The hobbit pushed aside thoughts of Thorin and love and friendship as he walked into Gildis’ tent. Belemar was nowhere to be seen. Given that it was still early, Bilbo thought that he must still be sleeping. The hobbit thought that even if he had not had the best sleep, he should allow his friend to sleep for as long as possible. He walked over to Gildis’ side to examine him. There was very clearly a change in the man, which pleased the hobbit greatly. The injured soul was still a bit feverish, but his breathing had evened out and returned to a normal rate.

Bilbo was about to leave the tent in search of water to cleanse his wounds when he noticed movement on the cot. Gildis was beginning to stir! The hobbit rushed to his bedside to see dark
brown eyes flutter open. The man groaned in pain and shut his eyes tightly. *The plant,* Bilbo thought and ran for Belemar’s tent.

The hobbit burst into the other man’s tent in an excited flurry. “Belemar, Gildis is awake! Do you still have the leaves that the Elvenking gave you?”

Belemar, who was slightly surprised at the suddenness of Bilbo’s appearance, nodded his affirmation. “I have it with me. Is Gildis awake?”

“Yes,” Bilbo said joyfully. “But he appears to be in pain. I am sure he will appreciate the *Acullico.***

Belemar had just woken up, so he took a moment to pile more layers on top of the clothes he had slept in. When he was fully dressed, the pair returned to Gildis’ tent to find the man groaning quietly in pain.

“Gildis,” Belemar greeted softly as he approached the bedside.

The man on the cot looked up. Recognition flooded his senses, and then joy came upon his face. “Belemar?”

“Yes, it is me,” a smile swept across Belemar’s face. Gildis smiled back at first, then winced slightly as a spike of pain ripped through his arm. “Here, chew these, it will make you feel better.” Belemar reached into the satchel and placed two *Acullico* leaves in Gildis’ mouth.

After a moment of chewing the pained crease in Gildis’ forehead smoothed and a small smile found its way onto his face. “Thank you,” Gildis said with a raspy voice. “I had… woken once before… but it was… too painful. I slept.”

It was evident that speaking was a great effort for Gildis, so Belemar said, “Rest again, Gildis, there is no need to talk.”

Bilbo knew that Bard would be overjoyed to hear that his friend was awake and well, so Bilbo went off to find him. He did not want his happiness at the waking of Gildis to be disturbed at all by the inevitable confrontation he would have when he once again faced the Elvenking and Bard, so he tried to push the thought away as he walked toward the largest tent in the encampment. Much to his surprise, Bilbo met Bard and Thranduil halfway back to their tent.
“Master Hobbit, we were on our way to find you,” Bard said. “What has you returning from Gildis’ tent so soon?”

“It is good news that finds me meeting you here,” Bilbo replied, smiling. “Gildis is awake.”

“How marvelous!” Bard exclaimed. “It is well that we found you and this joyous news,” he said to the hobbit before hastening toward the tent of his friend.

Bilbo smiled sadly as he watched Bard nearly run to his friend. That was how he had felt when Thorin woke, but his own situation had come to a less fortunate end… “What has come of your discussion?” Bilbo asked the Elvenking, looking for a distraction from his thoughts of Thorin.

Thranduil pulled two satchels from his raiment and handed them each to Bilbo. “One is Acuillico, a powerful analgesic plant. The other is tenebrea, it will take care of the sepsis in your dwarf-friend.”

Bilbo was elated that the Elvenking had decided to help. He opened the satchel to peek at the tenebrea and found that it was not a plant like he had expected, but a powder. “I am familiar with Acuillico, but I know nothing of this powder. How do you use it?”

“Take a pinch a put it under the tongue. That way it is absorbed more quickly into the bloodstream and not damaged by the stomach acid. This needs to be done twice a day,” Thranduil explained.

“Thank you, Thranduil,” Bilbo said, hoping his voice conveyed his deep sense of appreciation.

The Elvenking said nothing, but nodded to indicate his acknowledgement.

“And what of marching on the mountain?” Bilbo asked.

“For now it will wait,” Thranduil replied. “You have been of great service and it is in our vested interest not to stray from your advice on matters concerning these dwarves. But know, Master Hobbit, that I may have tarried long, but not for much longer.”
After their exchange he began walking away from Bilbo and back to his tent. Bard may have convinced him to help the hobbit, but he was evidently not happy about it. Helping the hobbit meant helping the dwarves and that was not high on his list of priorities. But it was difficult to argue with Bard’s logic, having been reminded of the things Bilbo had done for them, from stealing the Arkenstone and handing it over, to healing the men who had sustained injury in battle. But on top of all of that Thranduil knew that he really had no claim at all to the treasure under the mountain. The only one who owed Thranduil anything was Bard, for the elves had helped build shelters for the people of Esgaroth. Bard had a suspicion that Thranduil was on a privateering mission when he came to the foot of the Lonely Mountain, but he did not voice it. After all, without the help of the sylvan elves most of the people of Lake-town likely would have died from exposure by now.

There were no further discussions held among Bard, Thranduil, and Bilbo that day. Bard was far too occupied with his newly wakened friend and Bilbo had taken the opportunity to see to some of the other injured men in the camp. Even though Bilbo was occupied with the endless stream of injured men, he was feeling more and more distracted by the approaching night. Soon he would return to the mountain and be able to see his friends again. And hopefully, with the gifts of the Elvenking, be able to set Fíli on the path to recovery.

At length night fell, but it would still be some time before it was safe to enter the mountain. Bilbo was alone in the tent; Bard was still with Gildis and he had no idea where Thranduil had gone off to. Time passed slowly with no one to talk to. The hobbit nibbled some lembas and paced around to try to pass time. At length he decided it was a safe hour to return to the mountain. He gathered his pack, which now had Acullico and tenebrea alongside the Heilleir and what remained of his food stores.

When Bilbo reached the front gate he noticed that Balin was not yet there. The hobbit nestled himself against a wall of rocks, somewhere that he could still see the entrance, but would remain unseen to anyone else. He slipped his magic ring on as a precaution, even though it was unlikely that he would be spotted. Bilb waited for what felt to him like hours, when in reality only thirty minutes had passed before Balin appeared. Bilbo hurried over to the gate at the first sight of the dwarf. He remembered to slip off his ring before reaching the gates so they would actually be able to see him. When Bilbo arrived Balin gave a nod to the dwarves who were on guard that night as he hustled passed with the hobbit.

“I have a bit of good news,” Bilbo whispered as they walked through the halls. “I acquired something that I hope will clear Fíli’s sepsis.”

“Excellent!” Balin whispered his reply. “I have some good news of my own. Well, I’ll let him tell you when we get there.” The white haired dwarf winked at Bilbo when the hobbit looked at him wanting more of an answer.
Bilbo was confused, but said no more as they had almost reached the withdrawing room. Upon entering the room he learned what Balin’s surprise was: Kíli was awake! The youngest of the line of Durin was sitting in a chair next to his brother and stroking the blonde dwarf’s hair. In the light of the fire Kíli looked just as healthy as all the other dwarves. The only obvious thing that gave away his deteriorated health was the bandage that was still wrapped around his head.

Bilbo gasped in relief and joy. Upon hearing the sound, Kíli turned his head and saw their former burglar standing in the doorway. “Bilbo!” Kíli exclaimed, and then promptly clapped a hand over his mouth. He anxiously glanced over at Thorin’s cot to make sure the dwarf was still asleep. When he was satisfied that Thorin was not roused by his enthusiasm, he waved Bilbo over.

The hobbit walked silently and quickly over and was immediately crushed into the dwarf’s chest in a suffocating hug. “It is so good to see you.”

“It is good to see you too Kíli,” Bilbo replied when he was set free. “How are you?” He asked as he quickly scanned the dwarf. It seemed like a lot to Bilbo to go from unresponsive on a cot to sitting up and talking. But then again dwarves had surprised him more than that in the past.

“I was in and out of waking for a bit, but I’m well now, thanks to you!” Kíli beamed at Bilbo. But like the wind blowing out a candle Kíli’s expression shifted quickly from one of joy to one of sorrow. “But Fíli… Fíli is not well. You have to help him, like you helped me.”

“Our Bilbo’s managed to bring both you and Thorin back from the brink o’ death, so I ’magine he will do the same for Fíli,” Bofur voiced his confidence in Bilbo’s abilities.

“I think we all should keep our voices down,” Balin whispered harshly at the group. “We can’t risk-”

“What is going on here?” Thorin asked, cutting Balin off. He sat up in his cot, having been roused by the many voices, and looked around at the scene in front of him. When he saw Bilbo fire came into his eyes. “I have asked you to leave! I could not have been clearer. Do not take the time to explain why this has happened, just be gone with you!”

“No, Thorin,” Kíli spoke up, though his voice was still weak. “Fíli is dying; we need Bilbo’s skills to heal him!”

“Drat the halfling!” Thorin growled.
“That halfling is the only reason you are alive!” Balin challenged. “He has risked a lot for you, and now he is only trying to help.”

“Enough!” Thorin roared as he stood up. He was about to begin another brash attack of words on the hobbit when a terrible ache ripped through his shoulder, stopping him.

Bilbo saw the pained look on Thorin’s face. “Let me help you,” pleaded the hobbit.

“I do not need your help,” Thorin seethed at him.

In the light of the fire, something glittered under Bilbo’s waistcoat. “It cannot be.” Thorin walked over to Bilbo and grabbed him roughly by the shoulders, causing the hobbit to stagger backwards.

In that moment, with the hobbit so close to him and with Thorin breathing in his scent, a hint of familiarity came back to Thorin. But at that point he was too lost in rage to focus on it, but it would not be lost to him. Instead, presently he just continued his verbal assault on the hobbit. “That is Mithril upon you. Its worth is ten times that of gold and surely does not belong to you! How came you by this, thief?”

Bilbo was at a loss for words, but thankfully Dwalin spoke up and saved him, “You gave it to him, Thorin.”

Thorin paused for a moment to look at the fierce warrior dwarf. Dwalin nodded when their eyes met and the dwarf king could not believe it was true. Thorin turned to address the hobbit that was still in his grasp. “What could you have done to deserve this? Nothing!” Thorin shook Bilbo by the shoulders and then released his grasp.

The dwarf was still healing and, as such, was easily winded. He did not wish to reveal his weaknesses to anyone, but especially not to this halfling. He walked purposefully back to his cot and sat heavily on the edge. He was doing his best to hide his pain, but Bilbo was an astute observer. After constantly being around people in pain, the hobbit had a pretty good idea of what it looked like. He could see the small crease in Thorin’s brow, the stopped motion of a hand that longed to cover a healing wound, the slightest downturn in the corners of his mouth, the pushing up of the lower lip. All these things betrayed Thorin’s pain in a way that hardly anyone picked up on, save Bilbo, Balin, and possibly Dwalin.
“I have something that will make the pain go away,” Bilbo offered, stepping closer to where Thorin sat.

“I am not in pain and I do not need your help,” Thorin replied obstinately.

Bilbo kept talking as he moved closer to Thorin. His hope was that if he could be with him just a little bit longer that maybe something he did or said would jog Thorin’s memory. “Okay, okay, maybe you don’t need my help now, but I… I need your help. You see, I have some friends, thirteen of them to be precise, and I would really like to spend some time with them again. It feels like they are very far from me and I miss them. And, and only you can help see us reunited.”

Thorin’s gaze was still smoldering, but it was also a bit quizzical. “Why should I help you?”

“Because I know you are good, Thorin Oakenshield.” By now Bilbo was squarely in front of the dwarf king. “Because it is only you who can help me.”

With the hobbit so close Thorin’s senses were flooded with the sight, sound, and scent of him. Something painfully familiar tugged at Thorin’s heart, but he could not place why or what exactly he was reminded of. Despite being somewhat disheveled, the hobbit smelled quite pleasant, like a kind summer breeze carrying the scent of freshly tilled soil and newly cut hay fields. Memories of the West were pulled to the forefront of Thorin’s mind. He could vaguely make out the land surrounding Ered Luin as his mind’s eye painted him a picture. Then he was taken someplace else. This was a place that he did not know. It had little houses built into the side of a hill and covered in grass. There was a winding path to the top of a hill and there stood a great tree.

Thorin shook his head, trying to clear his mind of the meaningless scenery. “Be gone!” When the hobbit tried to protest, Thorin raised his voice and used a tone that no one with his proper wits about him would argue with, “Now.”

“But Thorin-” Kíli began.

“No, I said now! Balin, show this wretched creature to the door,” Thorin barked his orders.

Balin knew better than to argue with Thorin at the moment, so he came to Bilbo’s side and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. The hobbit took one last look at Thorin before he allowed himself to be led away by his friend. Out of the withdrawing room and down the cold, dark hallway they went. Balin walked all the way to the gates with the hobbit and even followed him a short way down the
Bilbo had said nothing since they had left the withdrawing room. What was there to say? When they got nearly halfway down the mountainside, Bilbo stopped and turned to Balin. “Please treat Fili for me,” his voice quivered as he reached into his pack and drew the two satchels from it. “The powder goes under his tongue. Just a pinch, two times a day,” Bilbo’s voice wavered almost imperceptibly with emotion. “And this one, this is a plant that when chewed is a wondrous pain reliever. That one is for Thorin. I could see how much pain he was in… Only two leaves, and chew for as long as possible.” Bilbo could not keep his thoughts straight and just added whatever he could remember to his string of thoughts.

Bilbo handed off the satchels to Balin and was about to leave, when he addressed the old dwarf once more. “Balin? Promise me you will take care of them.”

“Of course I will, laddie,” Balin replied and clapped Bilbo on the shoulder in a heartfelt show of friendship. “Don’t worry, before long you will be right there with us.”

Bilbo laughed bitterly. “I can only hope you are right. I can only hope…”

Chapter End Notes

With the fall semester in full swing it will probably be a while before I get another chapter up, so apologies in advance. I hope everyone is having a great September! I know I am, despite the extra work load.
I am so super sorry to all you wonderful followers who have been waiting over a month for this chapter! Thanks to everyone who has been supportive and stuck with this story. Life and things and publications and I feel like I’m going to fall over. Anyway, here it is – chapter 8! Hope you enjoy.

Anger, the strength and destructiveness of fire, burned deep in Thorin’s core. If ever there were a reason to feel the passion and ferocity of such a bilious emotion Thorin had it. Be it Bilbo, Bard, the Elvenking, his company, even Kíli for speaking out against him, there would be due recourse for recent actions of such persons. He was Thorin, King under the Mountain, how dare anyone challenge him. How dare anyone insight such anger in the rightful ruler of Erebor. But never would one so proud, so confident, so sure a being admit that who he was most angry with was, in fact, himself. Or perhaps by the virtue of blinding, foolish pride he simply did not recognise that he was angry with himself.

As Thorin sat sneering and brooding in the withdrawing room he began to shake with rage. He became restless within minutes of Balin leaving with the halfling. His gaze traveled quickly around the room, checking for hints of how the company felt. With each new face he saw eyes averted down, heads hung, and brows knitted. Each member of his company was either terrified or subordinate, judging by their posture and expression; though Thorin was hardly concerned with things of this nature at the moment. He was, however, concerned with his kin, and he stopped scanning when his eyes rested on his youngest sister-son.

It was barely noticeable, but Thorin’s expression softened ever so slightly when he looked upon the young, dark haired dwarf. “Kíli, you are tired and should be resting,” he said with a tight voice, though undertones of real concern could be heard.

Kíli could not argue that he was not tired, but he had more words for his uncle. “And Bilbo should be here with us,” he countered.

“That is not a point that is up for debate at the moment,” Thorin retorted. “I have said that he is not welcome among us and I will arrange for any further proceedings. There is to be no argument. Understood?” Thorin raised his voice so his last statement could be heard by all in the room. Thorin made certain that everyone in his company understood that they were not to challenge him on this point.
Too exhausted to be anything but deferential, Kíli said nothing in return and crawled onto the cot with his brother. The young dwarf was doing remarkably well, but he was still healing from the tremendous loss of blood. Standing was a challenge, and he could not do so without leaning against a chair or being supported by another dwarf. His head spun on occasion and he needed to rest frequently, but his strength was returning quickly.

Thorin felt like his most recent exchange was something of a victory, but any trace of a smile he was wearing was wiped away when Dwalin addressed him. “Kíli is right, Thorin; we need the hobbit here.”

“You may be getting older, my friend, but I know that you heard me when I said that there was to be no argument,” Thorin growled low.

Dwalin walked across the room and moved closer to his friend. “You may not remember him, but Bilbo was good, is good. He would be a valuable asset.”

“I cannot believe I am hearing this! And from you of all people,” Thorin looked with slight contempt at the warrior standing close beside him. The dwarf king squared himself and addressed the company with a booming, regal voice: “I will not be discussing this any further.” And with that Thorin picked up a walking stick that was resting near his cot and exited the withdrawing room, leaving the company baffled.

…

Balin returned post-haste to the withdrawing room after leaving Bilbo. He was not worried about Thorin lashing out at his own company - even in his state of impaired judgement – but he was concerned that Thorin’s rage might fester and turn to hurtful words. By the time Balin returned to the rest of the company he was almost out of breath. The old white-haired dwarf took a quick glance around the room to find the company looking distraught and more than a little confused. He also noted that Thorin was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is Thorin?” Balin asked to no one in particular.

What remained of the company shared looks amongst themselves before Dwalin answered, “We don’t know. He just… left.”

Balin sighed and was silent. After a moment of contemplation, he looked up and said, “I think I
might know where he has gone. But first, Bilbo gave me something to help Fíli.”

The white-haired dwarf walked over to where Fíli and Kíli were lying on a cot. The younger dark-haired dwarf was pressed next to his brother with a protective arm slung across his middle. Kíli buried his face into Fíli’s shoulder, getting as close as possible to his unresponsive sibling. Balin brushed Kíli’s fringe off his face and noticed the barest hint of tears forming in the corner of his eyes. Balin frowned in despair at the pair of young Durins. They had always been inseparable, so it pained him to think of what it would do to Kíli if Fíli never woke again.

Balin pushed the thought from his mind, and instead rubbed Kíli’s shoulder comfortingly. The young dwarf slowly opened his eyes and looked up at the familiar face standing over his cot. There was no attempt made by Kíli to hide the anguish in his eyes. He only tightened his hold on Fíli and buried his face deeper into the tunic that clothed his brother.

“Kíli, I have something from Bilbo that might make Fíli better,” Balin said softly.

Kíli lifted his head slightly to look at Balin. The old dwarf could see resilience and strength reflected in his eyes, but it was evident that he was very tired.

“It’s a powder and Bilbo said it would help with infection,” Balin continued after Kíli said nothing.

Again Kíli said nothing, but he removed his arm from its protective position and rested it against Fíli’s other side, wordlessly giving Balin permission to help Fíli. For all the times that Fíli had protected Kíli, it was now Kíli’s turn to protect his older brother. He knew that anything from Bilbo could be trusted and would likely be very helpful. It was difficult to keep his spirits up, especially when Fíli looked so ill and seemed so near death. Kíli nuzzled into the woollen fabric and pushed the thought away. He still dared to hope that something would help wake his brother.

The old white-haired dwarf took Fíli’s face in his hands and gently turned it so he would have easier access to his mouth. The skin felt hot under Balin’s hands and the feverish condition caused Fíli’s face to be covered with sweat. Balin took a pinch of the powder—just as Bilbo had instructed—and placed it under Fíli’s tongue. Balin spied Kíli watching him as he gently returned Fíli’s head to its original resting place. The young dwarf’s eyes met with those of the older dwarf and he nodded his thanks. Balin tied up the satchel that contained the powder, and then tucked the woollen rugs in tightly around Fíli and Kíli.

Balin placed the bag of powder in his pack and began walking to the door. Before he got too far he was stopped at the sound of his brother’s voice. “Balin, I wish to join you. After Thorin, you and I know this mountain better than anyone else. We could find him faster if we both looked.”
“Not to worry, brother, I believe I know where he is,” Balin said. “Besides, I think having even one of us talk to him might be overwhelming, let alone the both of us,” he added with a wink.

Dwalin was not happy, but he knew his brother was right. The warrior dwarf thought about offering a rebuttal, but thought better of it, and kept his mouth shut. He huffed his disapproval, but waved Balin off all the same.

…

Balin bid farewell to no one as he left the withdrawing room. He was too preoccupied by thoughts of Thorin and what he might say to him to think of much else. He was almost certain he knew where to find the dwarf king. He walked away from the company and followed the same path he did when they first returned after the battle. Through winding passages and along paths that were questionably stable at best, Balin made his way through Erebor. He walked hastily through the halls in search of the returned King under the Mountain, but tarried not in the rooms about him.

Finally it was that Balin made it to the throne room. Not many nights ago he had found himself in that very room. It held many memories, both painful and beautiful. The simple state of being in a place made one acutely aware of the most overpowering emotions once felt there.

The doors were slightly ajar, enough for him to fit through without need of pushing them farther. The old dwarf drew himself up and walked with confidence down the long, suspended entry to the throne room proper. This time he did not tarry to look at the marvelous architecture, or to appreciate how well this room had withstood the wrath of Smaug. Balin walked with purpose through the hall, up the stairs, and finally to the landing where the throne was still perfectly in-tact.

As he suspected he found Thorin there. The King under the Mountain was not on his throne, as one might expect. Thorin was leaning against the left side of the throne and looked deep in thought as Balin approached him. His face was entirely void of emotion and his eyes were staring out of focus into the distance, but Balin could tell there was a war of thoughts and feelings being fought just below the surface.

With a great deal of effort, Thorin managed to speak when he saw Balin. “And what… may I ask… brings you… here?” Thorin questioned, without moving his head or changing his expression.

Balin rushed over to his king, seeing plainly that he was injured. The white-haired dwarf pulled the satchel of Acullico from his coat and produced two leaves from it. “Here, chew on these,” he offered,
holding the leaves out to Thorin.

The dwarf king was breathing heavily, but still eyed Balin warily. With each breath his lungs felt like they were filling with a liquid as hot as flames. His shoulder ached as though someone had taken a corkscrew and wound his muscle around and around it. His arms and legs felt as heavy as lead, and his head ached as though someone had clubbed him at the base of his skull. Whatever it was that Balin had, suspicious or not, as long as it promised to make the pain stop, he would try it. But not without getting some answers first.

“Wha-what… is this?” Thorin was beginning to struggle more with speech as his head ache increased in severity.

“It is an ancient plant that will make you feel better, I promise,” Balin said, and placed a reassuring hand on Thorin’s less injured shoulder.

The pain Thorin was feeling was unbearable, so he took the leaves from Balin. Of course he had no reason to distrust one of his oldest and previously most trusted friends, but a great deal of the paranoia associated with the dragon sickness clung to him.

“You have to keep chewing them for as long as you can,” Balin passed on Bilbo’s instructions.

Thorin nodded and balled up the leaves. He stuck them in the pocket of his cheek and began to chew. His face screwed up as he was met with an acrid, astringent taste. The sensation was so unpleasant that he nearly spit them out. His nose curled in disgust as he looked at Balin, who reacted to the look with a sympathetic smile. He turned away from his old friend and continued chewing in hopes that Balin was correct about their ability to block pain.

Blessedly it was not long before Thorin began to feel the pain ebb. It started first with a tingle up his spine that eased his dreadful head ache. Shortly after that the pain in his shoulder abated. His general achiness and discomfort was last to go, but at length he felt himself begin to relax. Thorin let out a small sigh as the last of the pain left him. He closed his eyes and relaxed against the side of throne he was leaning on.

Thorin looked over as Balin settled down next to him. The old dwarf did not look expectantly at Thorin, nor did he appear to be confrontational. He only looked like the friend that Thorin had known through thick and thin, through opulence and despair, from Erebor to Ered Luin and back. This comfort was enough for Thorin to begin speaking without being prompted. “My grandfather Thrór was a great king.”
Balin nodded and smiled when Thorin glanced over at him, but said nothing, waiting for Thorin to continue.

“Thrór son of Dáin I, son of Náin II, Lord of Durin’s Folk and King under the Mountain, mightiest of the Dwarf Lords, and finder of the King’s Jewel. After his realm in Ered Mithrin was destroyed by the Cold-Drakes he recolonized Erebor. Under his rule, Erebor became the greatest dwarf kingdom in Middle-earth. Erebor prospered for over a century. He was respected and revered by all the surrounding kingdoms,” Thorin’s voice conveyed a nostalgic longing and respect for his grandfather and former kingdom, but thinking of the fate that befell his father’s father, his voice grew cold. “We wandered homeless and poor for an age. And then... and then he disappeared. The only one to go with him was Nár, and never were they seen again.”

A silence passed between the two friends. Balin had heard this story on many occasions, but usually when it was told Thrór’s untimely end was skittered over or removed completely. It was not an easy thing for Thorin to talk about, and it was so rare that Thorin talked about it that all Balin could do for the moment was sit in stunned and respectful silence.

“Erebor is his legacy. There is no way that I can give up even a piece of it,” Thorin said resolutely. He looked over at his friend. “My father never had the opportunity to rule Erebor as was his birthright, but I do. I have returned to be King under the Mountain. I will rule this kingdom as my grandfather would have. And I will not entertain threats or thieves or beggars!”

“But Thrór had great trading relations set up with the men from Dale. And he was well respected by the Elvenking,” Balin countered gently. “You remember just as well as I do the comfort of having food and ale at our fingertips thanks to trade with men.”

“Yes, and it would please me greatly to renew our trading agreement when Dale is established again as a city. Still I refuse to give Bard any of my treasure,” Thorin stated stubbornly.

Balin sighed. He was in no mood to argue with Thorin, so instead he focused on convincing him to return to his cot and the warm withdrawing room for rest. “It is getting late, Thorin. Perhaps we should return to the others.”

Thorin said nothing, but idly chewed the clod of Acullico still in his mouth.

“How are you feeling?” Balin asked after a moment of silence.
“Much better,” Thorin replied. “I hardly feel any pain at all. I have not seen this plant before. Pray tell, where did you find this?”

“Actually, Bilbo Baggins brought it. I’ve no idea where he got it,” Balin answered.

Thorin stiffened right away. His face took on a look of disgust and he scowled at Balin. “I said that I did not need his help.”

“Well, yes, but you are glad you have it now, aren’t you?”

Even for the powerfully obstinate King under the Mountain it would be difficult to deny how glad he was for the pain relieving plant. “I would rather it had come from my own healer,” Thorin said through clenched teeth, clearly still unhappy about this latest revelation.

“Why is it that you are all so fond of that halfling?” Thorin asked.

“That halfling was once your friend as much as ours” Balin replied. “He is a kind soul, but very brave. Fiercely loyal and, as Gandalf said, there is more to him than might appear.”

“Hardly seems loyal to me,” sneered Thorin.

“Aye, I could see how it would seem that way from where you sit, but I assure you Master Baggins went out of his way more than once to save us. He went beyond his contract because he cared about us and was loyal to you and the company. Even now, after you banished him, he feels such a strong commitment that he risked his safety to bring you something to make your pain go away. You may question some decisions he has made, but Bilbo Baggins is good people. He saved you from Azog, saved us all from the spiders, freed us from the Woodland Elves’ realm, and-”

“Enough,” Thorin interrupted, stopping his friend mid-speech. Although his mind was free from the shackles of pain, it was beginning to feel sluggish with want for sleep. “No more talk of halflings and their worth tonight. At present I cannot stand to hear you speak so highly of him! I need sleep to clear my mind and I would much prefer a good night’s rest in my cot than on the hard stone in here.”

Balin smiled kind heartedly at Thorin. “Well, it would do to get ourselves back then.”
When Thorin and Balin returned to the withdrawing room they were met by a pleasant blast of heat. Someone had thoughtfully thrown another log or two on the fire before turning in. All of the dwarves in the withdrawing room appeared to be asleep, though Balin could see the glint of an open eye peeking out of the blankets that covered his brother. They shared a look and Balin nodded and smiled to indicate that everything was fine for the moment. Dwalin closed his eyes and Balin settled down to sleep on one of the large chairs.

It was something of a challenge for Thorin to get onto his cot. He was tired and despite the numbed pain his limbs still felt as though they were weighed down by rocks. The walking stick helped propel him onto the cot, and at length Thorin arranged himself comfortably. He felt warm and secure surrounded by blankets. The familiar sound of his snoring companions carried through the room and eased his mind. It was not long before he fell into a deep sleep, one that was wrought with dreams of the not-too-distant past.

The small settlement of men along the Long Lake had been very welcoming to Thorin and his company. Food and ale and all the comforts they could ever ask for were readily provided. They had not had a rest like this since their brief stay with Beorn, and they had not felt so high-spirited since their journey had begun. After a short period of quiet rest, the dwarves become foolhardy and rowdy. They partied in the pubs and with the townspeople and their confidence grew ever stronger. It almost seemed as though they had forgotten entirely about the dragon and the fact that they had yet to recover any treasure.

They had been in Lake-town now for nigh on a fortnight and Thorin knew that the time had come for him and his company to leave. The rowdy sounds of his friends carried through the house they were staying in and met his ears in a burst of jubilance. Tomorrow, Thorin decided, tomorrow I will tell them we leave. Until then, they can have tonight to drink and be merry. Thorin, not half so amused and more than distracted enough to be bothered, left the company to wander the streets of Lake-town alone.

The boards creaked and cracked beneath his heavy boots and Thorin could feel them give more than he was comfortable with on a number of occasions. He soon became consumed by his thoughts and forgot about the creaking under him or the bite of the chilly air. He walked without purpose through the mostly deserted streets as dusk approached.

At length he came to the very edge of Esgaroth. He found himself looking out across the Long Lake.
It was a stunning scene in the early evening light. The water shimmered and danced in the light of the setting sun. It was not all that late, but the early descent of the sun served as another reminder that winter was fast approaching. The sky was clear, but the air was dreadfully cold. Thorin shivered slightly under the many thick layers of mail and furs. He was not cold so much as he was exhausted, and it was taking a toll on him. His fingertips, calloused and hardened by labour, were numb, and his face turned ruddy from cold wind whipping about him.

Somewhere between reaching his current location and being lost in a sea of painful memories, Thorin had sat down on the dock. His shoulders slumped forward ever so slightly as he leaned on his elbows that rested on his thighs. He was close. He could feel it in his bones how close he was to that wretched dragon, that fire-drake who stole his family, his wealth, and his home. Years may have come and gone, but no less brilliantly did the fire burn in his heart. No less vigorously did he will the destruction of the dragon. And no weaker was his desire to reclaim his treasure and avenge those who had been lost.

His family had been ripped apart, some lost forever. His beloved father and grandfather had escaped, but to what end? Thror came to a terrible end. And what of Thráin? Thorin dared not think what had happened to the dwarf he had idolised as a youngster. His mother was lost. His brother was also lost, though his end came later in battle. All the hurts of his past were still fresh in his mind. All the dwarves for whom he had felt so much love and so much anguish at their passing were never far from his mind.

It was at times like this when Thorin became nearly unresponsive to the world. His mind fell away as if dragged down into quicksand, dark and dangerous, slowly dropping ever deeper to the depths of despair. He could see the water gently lapping at the posts around him, but it did not register in his mind. White rose on his knuckles that clenched tighter and tighter in building rage. His short fingernails dug deep into calloused palms, but failed to elicit any pain response. It would not have mattered even if he drew blood from his palms, Thorin was so caught up in his mind and thoughts of gold and dragons and burned dwarves that he likely would not even flinch if he did draw blood.

Thorin was still and distant; he was physically there in Lake-town, but far away in his mind. That was how Bilbo Baggins came to find him; sitting on the edge of a wharf with a look of deep contemplation on his stony features. Thorin was sharp as ever, but Bilbo took care to be silent, and the dwarf did not hear the hobbit approach. Out of courtesy Bilbo cleared his throat slightly to make his presence known. Thorin returned his mind to the present, but did little to acknowledge Bilbo's presence. The sound he heard was familiar and unthreatening, offering no cause for him to react.

Not long after Thorin heard the sound that brought him back, he felt a thick woollen rug being tossed over his shoulders and firm hands to hold it in place. After a moment there came a soothing stroking motion on his shoulders. Thorin closed his eyes and relaxed into the sensation of warmth and comfort. He had been unaware of just how cold he was, but now he realised how much he needed the extra cover and how welcome the touch from another was. Much to Thorin's disappointment the hands stopped moving and the warmth of them disappeared. Thorin opened his eyes just in time to see a small body settling down next to him.
The dwarf looked over at his new companion and was greeted by a pleasant, if not slightly worried expression. Bilbo smiled at Thorin. The sight of the hobbit smiling melted some of the ice in Thorin’s heart. In times when he found himself dwelling on lives since passed he found it difficult to be anything but sullen. But the hobbit seemed to quell all those terrible thoughts, banish them while keeping the memories of his loved ones from fading. Bilbo brought out the light in Thorin’s dark and heavy heart.

The corners of Thorin’s lips turned up in a nearly imperceptible smile. “Thank you,” he said simply.

The evening grew quieter as time passed and not a soul could be seen out in the streets. The moment of clarity passed as the silence stretched on and Thorin was beginning to lose himself again. The lusty pull of gold tugged at his heart, the painful memories surfaced, he felt a familiar rage, and his blood boiled. His muscles tensed and his teeth grinded as he thought more and more of dragon fire and lost gold. His fists clenched and he felt ready to strike at any moment. His rage had been building for an age and longer, and the closer he got to the mountain, the more he felt it rising within him.

Suddenly, a sound broke the stillness of the air. It was Bilbo. The poor hobbit who had suffered terribly from a head cold when they first arrived evidently was not over it, for he let out a little sneeze.

“Pardon me,” Bilbo sniffed as he pulled out a newly acquired handkerchief.

Thorin said nothing, but smiled privately. In one sweeping wave his rage was quelled, or at least pushed down to be dealt with at a later date. He would not admit it, but Thorin was utterly smitten with this strange creature. He wanted to hold him, touch him, kiss him, and chase all his worries away. He wanted to fill every moment of his life with Bilbo Baggins. He wanted to fall asleep to the sound of hobbit snoring, and wake up to that hobbit in his arms. These were foolish desires, but Thorin did not care for they brought him joy even though anguish permeated most of his thoughts.

The mighty dwarf king held out his arm and wrapped the blanket around his sniffling and shivering friend. He pulled the smaller body to his own and relished in the shared warmth. They sat wrapped in each other’s embrace and watched the sun go down. The sky was streaked with red and yellow and orange, then pink and blue and purple, and then it was almost black as coal. The stars came out, one by one to light the night and the moon hung full and pregnant in the air, spilling her bright silver light onto the world below.

Thorin felt something akin to comfort and ease, though half his mind was still preoccupied by thought of Erebor and Smaug. He had not imagined he could feel so peaceful at any time over the
course of their journey and he knew who he had to thank for that.

“Bilbo,” Thorin said softly. The body nestled into his had stopped sniffling, but he could still feel shivering even through all of their clothes.

“Yes, Thorin?” Bilbo said as he pulled back to look sleepily up at Thorin.

Thorin was at a complete loss for words. This small creature -this hobbit- was stunning! The silver moonlight lit Bilbo’s skin making it look as smooth as silk and white as milk. His ashen locks shone like pallid gold and his eyes were like polished agate. Bilbo’s expression was pleasant and loving as his gaze met Thorin’s.

“Thorin?” Bilbo pressed gently after more than a moment had passed with Thorin only looking at him.

Thorin reached a hand up and gently stoked Bilbo’s cheek. He caressed the soft skin and let his hand rest there for a moment. Their faces had become dangerously close and Thorin could feel Bilbo’s breath on his cheek. Thorin inched forward enough so that their noses brushed against one another and he gently nuzzled the hobbit’s cold nose with his own. Simultaneously the pair moved to close the distance between them and their lips met in a rush of heat and emotion. Thorin had not felt like that for any other being in his nearly two-centuries of existence. The feelings of affection, the swell in his chest, the tingle in his lips, and the lightness in his head all agglomerated into a moment of pure pleasure.

The kiss was indescribable and brought him such immense joy that he was not sure how to contain or express it. Wordlessly they shared their thoughts and feelings for one another. To Thorin it was a realm of bliss he had never experienced and never wanted to stop experiencing. At length, and with regret, they pulled apart for some air. They rested forehead against forehead, panting puffs of white breath into the cold night.

“Bilbo, I-”

Thorin woke with a start. He was no longer in Lake-town, but back in Erebor, in the withdrawing room. Only a dream… His heart sank at the realisation that Bilbo was not actually beside him and that he was somewhere warm and comfortable but alone. There was a moment of half-waking groggy confusion before it hit him: he remembered everything: the decision to bring Fíli and Kíli, his meeting with Gandalf, their time at Bag End, and Bilbo. Bilbo. The lovely hobbit who had so
bravely defended him, so loyally followed him, and so honourably fought for him.

He remembered Bilbo, and he remembered that the hobbit was the one who had claimed his heart. He remembered that Bilbo was the one he had hurt the worst.
I’ve Done Things You Don’t Want to Hear

Chapter Notes

My sincerest apologies that I haven’t updated this fic in… over a year. Life happened, as it does, but it’s unimportant. Better late than never, right? As a side note, it is remarkably challenging to alternate between writing academic articles and writing creatively. I must get better at switching between disciplines should I ever hope to achieve anything akin to productive writing! Anyway, here we are: chapter 9 - enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin had decided - almost at once upon meeting him - that he was in love with Bilbo Baggins. Not the kind of conscious, thinking, reasoning type of decided, but the kind of decision that is made with the heart and that no amount of reasoning will detract from. He was, admittedly, rather preoccupied by thoughts of far more pressing issues than fleeting calls of the heart, but he could not help but notice how he was drawn to the small, strange creature in front of him. This feeling was something that he was not all at once aware of, but automatically and subconsciously suppressed nonetheless. All the same, as with any great love, it proved impossible to eliminate entirely.

Thorin remembered everything, yes, but not all at once and not in the proper order. The memory brought by dream was lost almost immediately upon waking, though it would be regained later. His head was all tangled about in a quagmire of mislaid memories and thoughts and forgotten dreams. Foremost in his mind was a nearly complete recollection of the event of Bilbo fiercely defending him from Azog after their escape from the Goblins of the Misty Mountain. All in a whirl came memories after that – Thorin gifting Bilbo the beautiful mithril mail, the great skin-changer Beorn and their stay in his marvelous abode, Bilbo’s slightly preposterous rescue of the dwarves from Thranduil’s dungeons, their misadventures earlier in Mirkwood and the uncomfortable business with the giant spiders, the great battle that had been fought at the foot of the mountain…

He also began to remember the countless occasions for which he privately chided himself for being distracted by tender thoughts - and such thoughts about a Halfling no less. It would never do to take Bilbo as consort, he told himself throughout the journey. He will want to return to his home in the Shire, Thorin had on more than one occasion assured himself. He may not survive. I may not survive. It would simply be impractical. How am I to court him if we do not reclaim the mountain and treasure? These were among the considerations that had crossed Thorin’s mind throughout their long journey. And yet, with each step farther east he found himself more and more enamored by their burglar. Imagined scenes of he and Bilbo crowned king and king’s consort flooded his senses and it pleased him in innumerable ways.

Another memory struck him, one slightly more vivid. He could not recall where they were. It was a hot day and they were bathing in a lake. Bilbo, like all the others, was in naught but his skin. The modest hobbit, far from the raucous dwarves, washed quietly in a more secluded part of the water. Thorin had afforded himself a brief glance toward the naked hobbit. This would be his undoing:
Bilbo was glowing in the warm rays of the westering sun, glazed in water which made his skin shine and darken his ashen curls.

Thorin wanted to stay in that memory, but too soon it was chased away by another. When they had arrived in Lake-town Bilbo had been struck quite ill. While the others had been uncomfortable in their barrels, they at least had barrels – poor Master Baggins had to cling to the sides and hold on for his dear life, getting well and thoroughly soaked along the way. Being wet, cold, and tired leads one to illness, and sure enough, the dwarves’ hobbit had found himself feeling quite under the weather. With the kind hospitality that they were met with (eventually) in Esgaroth, Bilbo found himself on the mend. But still, over a week later he was just beginning to feel back to health. Still, he was tired and wanted more to sleep than to join the others while they took part in the offers of libations that the Master of Lake-town and the villagers offered them. He liked parties as much as the next hobbit, but that night the soft comforts of a bed, a roaring fire, and warm blankets seemed to beckon to him and outweigh the pull of cheer.

Thorin, too, elected to refrain from merry making in Lake-town. He did not often pass up food and drink, but he was becoming restless. The mountain loomed in the distance, albeit the closest “distance” in recent years. The mountain was too near to his heart and the dragon was ever on his mind. Plans he had long been making in his head were forming more firmly. Soon it would be time to go. But for now, he recognised the merit of staying just a little longer. The strength of the company was returning, but it had been a long haul, and it would be longer still before they saw their treasure returned.

Thorin, not half so happy as the rest of the company, lost himself in thought and longing. While his thoughts were deep and his longing sincere, he was not deaf or blind to the world of the present, so when he heard a tiny sneeze in the room next to him, he did not start. He had seen the company depart and had not seen a hobbit in their midst. The hobbit had been a great comfort to him over the long journey and he was glad to have some artifact of his presence that night. Although he had not been at all certain from the beginning that it was useful to have him, he certainly was glad to have him here now, even just as a presence in the room next to him.

In his heart a song rose and memories flooded him from their brief stay at Bag End. Somewhat absentmindedly the dwarf began to hum the song that had filled the little hobbit hole all those months ago in April. He settled himself in a chair facing a window through which he could see the Long Lake and the dark night. He continued humming and thinking of the mountain when he heard what sounded like a kettle whistle.

Sure enough, moments later, came the sound of hobbit feet gently squeaking up the stairs and stopping at the room Thorin occupied. “Thorin,” called a little voice behind him. “I thought perhaps you would care for a cup of tea.”

Thorin turned to see the hobbit standing half-awkwardly just inside the room, tea pot in one hand,
two mugs in the other. “I would like that,” Thorin smiled warmly at Bilbo. He welcomed a
distraction from idle thoughts of ancient wyrms.

A short sofa stretched along one of the walls. Thorin moved to sit on it and tipped his head at Bilbo,
inviting the hobbit to join him. First, Bilbo poured them each a mug full of steaming tea that smelled
of peppermint leaves, juniper berries, and honey. Once he handed a mug to Thorin, Bilbo settled
himself beside the dwarf. It did not go unnoticed by Thorin that, although he had heard him sneeze
earlier, Bilbo looked every bit as well as he did back in the West, albeit slightly leaner. It was dark in
the room, but for a little candle light. The gathering winter seemed to be held at bay by the small
light and comfortable warmth in the room. The pair sat sipping their tea in amiable silence. Thorin
could not know what thoughts passed through the hobbit’s mind, but his own mind was filled with
contented musings of warm summer days and hearty meals and hobbit kisses–

Wait…

Although he had known the comfort of having the hobbit curled him against him, he could not think
of why, in this moment, so close to the mountain, that he would be thinking of having the smaller
being pressed close to him again. He could not think of any reason why he should be fantasizing
about drinking him in and tasting his mouth while he ran his hands through honey-coloured locks…

No, Thorin told himself and shook his head.

“Are you alright?” Bilbo asked, seeing the dwarf’s tightly control expression and shake of his head.

“Yes,” Thorin replied curtly. He turned to look at the hobbit and softened upon seeing his worried
little face gazing up at his own. “Yes, it is just that I have not been sleeping well and I felt as if I were
about to nod off.” It was only half a lie, for Thorin truly had not been graced by a restful night in
eons.

“Would you like for me to comb your hair?” Bilbo asked suddenly, with a small but steady voice. He hurried to explain the rationale behind his offer: “When I was young and could not sleep, my
mother would play with my hair. Much too short, I should say, to braid, but still – it was soothing
and nice. Dare say I haven’t found anything so nice to lull me back to sleep since. Well, not exactly
nothing so nice.” Bilbo offered a sheepish grin to Thorin, doubtless recalling the night at Beorn’s
when he had not slept well for fear of night terrors.

How the hobbit has grown bold, thought Thorin, and he hummed and chuckled light-heartedly. “I
would like that, Master Baggins.”
So, Thorin turn his back to the hobbit who began to deftly comb through his thick black and silver-streaked mane. His hair and beard were already well-groomed, but the feeling of fingers on his scalp was heavenly. Tingles of pleasure ran up his spine as the hobbit raked, pulled, and carded through his hair. A satisfied hum escapes the dwarf’s mouth as Bilbo busied himself about the hair at the base of Thorin’s neck.

At some point, both mugs of tea had been drunk and discarded on the floor. Now, as Bilbo gently pulled on Thorin’s hair to encourage him to lean back further, the hobbit began to hum a tune. It sounded to Thorin a bit like a lullaby, but not one that he had ever heard before. He closed his eyes and what little resistance he felt in being pulled closer to Mr. Baggins’s lap was now completely dissolved. He felt Bilbo’s touch on his crown and Bilbo’s belly at his back. One of the hobbit’s legs dangled off the sofa while the other was bent so that Thorin could rest comfortably between his legs. Bilbo hummed and played with Thorin’s hair as the dwarf sunk deeper into him and thoughts of Smaug left him.

He then fell asleep, feeling safe and feeling loved.

…

Bilbo had less than half a mind to leave presently and return to the Shire, and more than half a mind to march himself upon the mountain and berate a certain dwarf king. Never in his entire long journey had Bag End been as far from his mind as it was in that moment. Fleeting thoughts of taking off to return home were quickly overcome by thoughts of Thorin. As stubborn and infuriating as he could be, Bilbo longed now for the comfort of strong dwarf arms wrapped around him. It seemed rather pleasanter than the comfort of a full belly and warm fire, although he would like to have that too, and preferably all at once.

Warring feelings of love and anger met in his heart. A pang of sorrow struck him deeply and he wanted nothing more than to be alone in that moment. It was still night and a deathly cold one in early December. If you remember, Bilbo had been exhausted when Balin came to fetch him hours ago. Now, feeling threefold tired, he found himself making his way to Ravenhill. It was not the warm tent or soft bed that he ambled toward in the darkness, but cold shadow. He could not think of facing Bard or the Elvenking at the moment, no matter how much warmth and shelter was to be found with them.

He had forgotten how long a march it was to Ravenhill, and when he reached the foot of the guard-post he collapsed all in a heap. His eyes, barely open, stared into the sky brilliantly illuminated by the silver light of the moon and the twinkling of many bright stars. He spotted the stars of the Wain twinkling and thought back to his youth – gazing at the constellations from the warmth and safety provided by a summer’s night in the Shire. He thought of stores of blueberry jam and scones and
clotted cream at his home, Bag End. He thought of the mirthful songs of the elves in Rivendell. He closed his eyes and called to mind Thorin’s deep voice singing of his homeland when first they met so many moons ago. Heedless of the night and what the darkness conceals, Bilbo fell into a restless sleep. Although sleep had taken him almost immediately, he was often roused by his own shivering and by terribly nightmares. He had neither the strength nor the will to move himself, so there he lay, a small spot in the snow-blanketed hill.

…

While most good things were asleep in the night, there still stood a sentry at the top of Ravenhill. Roäc, being of a long-line of ravens that had for eons maintained good relations with the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain, kept sharp-eyed young ravens out to watch for danger. Very few things passed unseen by the keen eyes of the ravens of Ravenhill. Erök, a young raven sentry, spotted what he thought to be an odd creature at the foot of the hill. Though the old raven slept, Erök woke him to tell him of what he saw.

“I am sorry to wake you,” Erök began, “But the strange little being that came out of the West with Thorin’s company has appeared to collapse at the foot of our hill! If the dwarves care for that companion of theirs they should see that he gets warmed soon. I fear he would not make it through this chill night.”

“It is well that you woke me,” Roäc replied. “Fly now to the gate of the Erebor and tell the dwarves who guard it what you have seen.”

And so, Erök bid Roäc farewell and good rest before he flew fleet winged to the gates of the mountain.

“Guards of Erebor, I am Erök, a sentry of Ravenhill,” Erök greeted.

“Good night to you,” the dwarf guards greeted in turn. “What brings you calling so late in the night?”

“I was sent by Roäc, son of Carc, the chief of the great ravens of the Mountain. One of Thorin’s companions has collapsed at the foot of our hill – I saw him fall with my own eyes. It was not a dwarf, I can assure you, but it looked to be the small strange creature that I heard travelled with them from the West. If Thorin has an interest in keeping his companion alive he ought to come collect him.”
“Many thanks, I am sure, Erök sentry of Ravenhill,” the dwarf guards said, bowing to the messenger bird.

Erök tipped his beak in what was a raven’s bow and took wing back to his look-out post.

He had not returned to his watch-post long before he saw two dwarf-sized figures exiting through the front gates. As Erök gazed on - for there was nothing else of much interest to gaze at that night - the dwarves gathered the odd little creature from Ravenhill and return with him to the mountain. When he saw that the last of the trailing hoods disappear back through the gates, Erök ruffled his feathers and steeled himself against the cold night. *Much too cold for gentle folk,* he thought as snow began to fall.

... 

Bilbo felt heat, but his body was not warm. In fact, he was nearly spasmodic with tremors brought by the biting cold. The chill he felt reached from his few bits of exposed skin right down to the marrow in his bones. He opened his eyes and saw Balin, Dwalin, and Dori. He was soothed at first to see his friends, but soon was stricken by panic.

“Balin, I am glad to see you, but what of Thorin?! He will have my head if he sees me here!” Poor Bilbo shrieked in a forceful whisper.

“Never you mind, Mister Baggins. We are in the lower chamber where Dain’s army has taken refuge. Thorin will not see you here,” Balin reassured him.

“Oh, thank heavens,” Bilbo sighed and relaxed a bit. It was not that he feared Thorin, not really, but he desperately wanted to succumb to sleep. He had neither the energy nor the will to face Thorin in that moment. Still shivering, he said, “It was dreadfully cold out there. How did I end up in this forsaken mountain again? Last I remember I was running just as fast as I could to get away from here.”

“A raven look-out saw you,” Balin began.

“And when he delivered word to Dain’s guards, who then delivered word to us, we snuck out to gather you up before the coming snow buried you,” Dwalin finished and clapped a friendly hand on Dori’s shoulder, for it was he who helped Dwalin carry the small hobbit back to Erebor.
“Bless me, I should be grateful indeed! Many thanks to you both. I wouldn’t have liked to freeze to death out there, though I didn’t much want to return to the tents either.” Bilbo yawned, “But I am so dreadfully tired and I would like to sleep now.”

So, Balin, Dwalin, and Dori bid Bilbo goodnight and returned to the withdrawing chambers for their own rest. Dain’s guards had been careful not to wake Thorin when they went in search of members of his company to retrieve their hobbit, but Balin, Dwalin, and Dori did not dare risk being away for long, lest they raise suspicions should Throin waken. As they settled themselves down to finished their sleep that night they took small comfort in the fact that their burglar was back in the mountain and safe. For now.

…

“Bring me Mister Baggins.” Those were the first words uttered by Thorin Oakenshield the following morning.

“Beggin’ your pardon, Thorin?” Balin asked, half-startled. He was still a bit on edge, for he had woken some time earlier and secretly treated Fíli with the powder Bilbo had given him, always anxious that Thorin would wake, be angry, and call for a halt to Fíli’s treatment.

“Pray find Mister Baggins and bring him to me,” Thorin repeated evenly. “I would like to have a word with our burglar.”

There was something queer about Thorin that morning, but not altogether unsettling. A gleam shone in his eyes, but Balin thought there was a sadness behind the glint of his king’s bright blue eyes. Balin was wary as he looked upon his king, but he did not feel ill at ease, so he asked further, “Any preparations to be made before I seek him out?” In part he was stalling for time to gain composure before he sought out their esteemed Mister Baggins. He also hoped to learn more of Thorin’s mind, for it seemed changed, though Balin could not place why it seemed so.

“Tell me, what of the great chamber of Thror?” Thorin asked.

“Charred and battered, Thorin,” Balin replied solemnly. “There are many bodies and bones left with cobwebs upon them.”

“Hmm,” Thorin thought deep for a moment. The great chamber of Thror had been the hall of feasting and council of his grandfather. Thorin had much to amend, and he would have liked to see
them reunited in friendship in that auspicious hall. Wisely, he decided that meeting in that room in its current state would be less than favourable. “Alright, find him and bring him here.” The great King under the Mountain would have liked to be alone with the hobbit, but he supposed all the same that he owed an apology to the company in its entirety – dwarves and hobbit.

All members of the company were fully awake – save Fili, who remained unresponsive, and Nori and Ori who had previously been sent to guard the treasure for the night – and keenly interested in the events that were about to transpire. Given the recent mind of their king, the dwarves of the company of Thorin Oakenshield felt some apprehension about the called-for meeting. It had, after all, not even been a full day since Thorin had all but hurled the poor hobbit out of the mountain with his own hands!

Thorin sat pensively on his cot, nibbling some cram from their store of rations. His head swam and he felt as though he were watching the world from under water. A great ache in his temples accompanied the rushing and whirring sound of blood pumping as he was met by more memories. Minor details, important and otherwise, trickled slowly back as if flowing from a partially obscured decanter. With each returning piece of the puzzle that had been his life for the past year, his resolve to rekindle friendship grew stronger. The opening of a grand apology had been forming in his head and it was imperative that it expressed all the regret and sorrow he felt. He wanted to set everything right and make amends for words and deeds that passed when he was not of sound mind. All that was left to do was wait and ponder the solemn speech to come.

…

Bilbo, who had met with the warmth and softness of his cot mere hours ago, was still neatly tucked away on it when Balin entered the lower chamber. The hobbit had passed a somewhat restful night, if only from sheer exhaustion. He was not at all happy to be back in the mountain without Thorin’s leave, but he was altogether too pleased to be warmed and have a cot made of soft material instead of a bed of cold shale. He slept as well as he could, what with thoughts of Thorin and elves and men and dwarves, and though it was not the most peaceful sleep, he was sad to be roused from it so soon.

“Master Baggins,” Balin called softly as he gently shook the hobbit. “Bilbo, wake up.”

Bilbo lazily rubbed his eyes and groaned, not pleased at all to be awake. “Balin, what brings you calling at such an early hour?”

“Thorin seeks an audience with you,” Balin answered.

Bilbo’s temper began to rise. That blasted dwarf! Now he wants to talk! Now, after he threw me
thrice from the mountain! Now, after I near froze to death on Ravenhill! “I’ve quite nearly had it with Thorin Oakenshield, O! King under the Mountain,” Bilbo nearly spat as his sat himself up. “And what, pray tell, Master Balin, does Thorin want from me on this day? To throw me out again? To see that I am never returned here?”

This rage was long in coming and fueled by a host of other emotions. He had been too far from his home from too long. It was cold and miserable. He had been treated brutishly by the one dwarf he cared for the most. And, if that were not enough, he was tired. He felt the exhaustion of a thousand journeys made in one day. His heart was tired and so was his head, body, and spirit, but in spite of all of that, of all that he had endured, he still felt a pull of hope that maybe, just maybe, Thorin had seen sense. This hope did little to quell his anger in that moment, but it would be of service yet.

“I’m not certain, laddie,” came Balin’s answer. “But he seems of a different mind today. He hasn’t said much to me, but he seems… changed. If he has seen sense he might be interested in learning what you know of the men of the lake and Bard and the Elvenking.”

And then a rage swelled up in the hobbit’s chest, one such that he had never felt before. Hot, like the coming of a summer storm, and just as powerful. Bilbo stood himself up to his full height, shaking slightly as he spoke with a voice full of power, “When I pledged to help Thorin take back his home there was nothing said of re-establishing his position and his political relationships! There was no mention of what he seems to assume is his superiority to the likes of Thranduil or the Lake-men!”

And all at once the anger dropped – as anger motivated by sorrow is wont to do – and Bilbo felt weary, like the rage and the stress had been heavily laden packs that he had dragged and re-dragged all across Arda. He was far from a bilious creature of anger, and it drained him to feel a rage of such intensity. When he spoke again it was with a tired voice. “Going home, in a Baggins sense, in a hobbit’s sense, in my sense does not include re-establishing one’s position and dominion over other folk. Nor does it involve selfishly hoarding treasure and not helping your neighbours who are in desperate need of aid. I will have council with Thorin Oakenshield, but know that if he treats me as he has and he refuses to help Bard and Thranduil, that will be my last meeting with him.”

Balin looked upon him with sadness in his eyes, for he knew the heart of the hobbit. Balin felt that Bilbo was a good person, as good a person as there could be, and he least of all deserved the wrath that Thorin had unleashed upon him.

“Let us hope it doesn’t come to that,” the old dwarf replied. “First, before we go, take breakfast with me.”

Balin brought out what he called ‘breakfast,’ a scant and familiar meal of cram and some dried apple rings. The two sat in tense silence and thoughtlessly munched the waybread and dried fruit. When at last they had eaten their fill, Bilbo and Balin rose and made for the door. Bilbo bid no farewell to the dwarves of the Iron Hills, for he was too occupied with grim thoughts of Thorin and what might
come of their meeting. A small part of his heart remained hopeful, but on the whole his mind was preparing for a drear conversation.

Bilbo and Balin walked in silence up the winding staircase and through the halls. The silence continued unbroken upon entering the withdrawing chambers. They stood for a time, Thorin looking at Bilbo, Bilbo looking at Thorin, and the company looking everywhere but at their king and burglar. The air was hot and dense and an unnamed energy buzzed through it. Thorin stood proud and tall in all his dwarfish finery. He looked every bit the king he was meant to be. But there was something queer about him that day, as Balin had noted – he looked sad and regretful under his veil of disinterested majesty.

“We are met in the halls of my grandfather, Thror, in his kingdom reclaimed, our company of fourteen. Long ago it seems, though not long ago it was, that we started on our arduous journey, a journey from which I was not certain all would return,” Thorin stayed his speech for a moment and swept his eyes around the room, assuring himself that all present, save Fíli, were safe and not too worse for wear. He let his mournful gaze rest upon the oldest of his sister-sons before continuing. “Our journey has been made neither in safety nor in peace, but it seems we are nearly at its end. This mountain is my right and I would see it returned to the great kingdom of old. Would also that I see Dale returned to its glory of vine and vale and hear its merry bells ring out once again! And would that I see friendship restored between the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain and the men of the Lake and the wood elves.”

This last comment caught all in the company by surprise. No, the mind of Thorin, Thrain’s son Oakenshield, does not change with the rising and the setting of a few suns, but perhaps it sees reason with memory returned.

“For those who fought valiantly beside me I should return what is owed. That which yields is not always weak, and it is my honour to repay the debt of gratitude to the men of the Lake and to the wood elves.” Thorin smiled as he said this, and the company beamed at him, for this was their true king returned. “But the greatest debt is owed to our Master Baggins,” Thorin said as he turned to fully face the hobbit. “I am sorry, for all the perils that have befallen you, not least of all how deplorably you were treated by me in recent memory. You are a brave hobbit and a good heart, dear summer child of the kindly West. To you I would offer all the treasure my kingdom has if only it would make you smile and repay my debt, for you have shared in our struggles and I have been made merrier for having met you.”

And with that the dwarves cheered and sang songs of hope and happiness. Heads were bumped lovingly together and there was much back-patting and hooraying about. This seemed victory anew for the dwarves, for their king, their true king, had been returned to them. For all that they had been through nothing would dampen the spirits of the company of dwarves and they would celebrate were celebration was due. Loudly and heartily they cheered and sang. In the fray and ruckus of the company Bilbo stared disbelievingly at Thorin. Joyous tears pricked the corners of his eyes and his face unabashedly reflected the relief and delight his heart felt. Thorin gazed lovingly at Bilbo. The dwarf’s stern features melted to reveal his heart, gleeful and light with the knowledge of forgiveness.
“Balin,” Thorin called, and the throng of gleeful dwarves began to settle. “Carry my message of peace and repayment to the Elvenking and Bard. Pray make arrangements with them, provided they are willing, to join me tonight in discussion of the meeting out of treasure.”

“Aye, Thorin, I will see it done,” Balin bowed low to Thorin and gave Bilbo a wink as he slipped through the doors.

“Dori, find your brothers and relieve them of their duty, for we shall not need guards to watch over hoarded treasure any longer.”

“Aye, Thorin, will do,” Dori said as he bowed low to Thorin, then left in search of his brothers.

“And the rest of you, my loyal company, it would do my heart good to have you explore the lays of the land and the great halls of Erebor. Be off! And enjoy the land that we call home once again.”

A giddy and warm feeling filled the hearts of the company. Off they set - not without a low bow to Thorin and a friendly pat on the back to Bilbo - to explore the lays of the land and the many winding corridors of the once great dwarf kingdom. The only able-bodied dwarf to remain was Kíli, who stood protectively by his brother’s side. The young dwarf’s gaze was cast down at his perpetually slumbering brother. He absently wound and knotted the golden hair, fingers wanting to be kept busy.

“Thorin, I cannot leave him,” Kíli said when he felt his uncle’s hand on his shoulder.

“Fíli is strong and he will walk among us once again,” Thorin started. “And when he does he will want to be shown all the splendors that Erebor has to offer. Who better to help him explore our kingdom restored than his dear brother?”

Kíli smiled sadly at his mother’s oldest brother. Of course he wanted to share all the wonders of the mountain with his brother, only he wished to explore it with him, rather than lead him on a tour later. But, young as he was, he could read his uncle well enough to know that is was his will to be alone with Bilbo. Knowing the answers, but feeling compelled to ask anyway, he queried, “You will stay here? Make sure he is well?”

“Yes, Kíli. And I am not suggesting you leave forever,” Thorin joked. “You have long been holed up in this room, it will do you well to get out. You have my word: I will send for you should he wake.”
Kíli stood, pressed his forehead to Thorin’s and bid him farewell. He then crushed Bilbo against him in a warm embrace. “I am glad to have you welcomed back.”

“And I am glad to be back,” Bilbo replied, wrapping his arms around the young dwarf.

Kíli smiled broadly at his uncle and the hobbit before bowing and disappearing through the door.

That is how Thorin found himself nearly alone – for Fíli still lay unresponsive on his cot – in the withdrawing room with the hobbit. He looked upon the smaller being in front of him and some saccharine emotion gripped his heart. This feeling, warm and tender, rose from his very core and steeped every part of his being in a radiant glow of affection. Bilbo, with sleep bedraggled locks and bags under his eyes, looked every piece the lovely being that had claimed Thorin’s heart many moons ago. The hint of a terrific smile played at the corners of Bilbo’s lips and all at once Thorin wished to hug the hobbit close to him, as he had done not often enough on their long journey. But Thorin was an important dwarf and it was not his style. So, once again, he began what might have been a terribly protracted speech:

“Words cannot begin to express the sorrows that have plagued my heart with the recovery of my memory. I would take back all wrongs that I have done to you if only I could. I dare not ask for your forgiveness or understanding, for neither have I earned. You have been a good friend, indeed, and I have found comfort in your arms and I have been healed by your hand. I am sorry that you have endured all that you have, but I am not sorry to have met your acquaintance. As I have said, my life has been made merrier –”

And in that moment Bilbo could take it no longer. He thrust himself at the dwarf king and wrapped his arms around his fur raiment, staying Thorin tongue. The dwarf in turn wrapped his arms around the hobbit’s small frame and pulled him close. Thorin’s heart thundered in his chest and a lump rose in his throat. Of all the good things in this world none, it seemed, surpassed the kind heart of his hobbit. He could scarcely believe that the moment was truly happening and not just some misremembered past event. Thorin breathed deep the scent of Bilbo’s ashen curls and clung to him as lovers reunited. There was no question in his mind that this was real.

When at length they pulled apart Thorin rested their foreheads together. “Let me not outlive my capacity to love you, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, for I do love you.”

Bilbo reached a hand up to touch the dwarf king’s face. The hobbit stared deep into Thorin’s bright blue eyes and saw love there. He closed the distance between them, gently pressing their lips together. When their lips met Thorin felt a burst of starlight at the back of his head and the pleasantest of all sensations in every ounce of his being. He tangled his fingers in Bilbo’s hair and massaged the
back of his head. They were both desperate to be close, but their kisses did not reflect desperation of a juvenile sort; they were languid, explorative, reassuring kisses. The hobbit’s hand had not left the dwarf’s face and he used it to gently guide Thorin closer to him. When their lips broke apart Bilbo buried his face in the crook of Thorin’s neck, breathing him in before he stepped back to look his king in the face.

“And I love you, O! Thorin Oakenshield, King under the Mountain,” Bilbo smiled almost teasingly at Thorin. His lips were swollen from kissing and his cheeks were bright and ruddy. “I do love you so dearly.”

Chapter End Notes

Well, well, we are almost done indeed! Concluding chapter to follow shortly – really, I promise it won’t be a year before I post the last chapter! Tremendous thanks to all who have stayed with this fic, even after its long hiatus, and many thanks to new readers all the same! Also, friendly reminder that I live on tumblr, too: http://ashmiliutave.tumblr.com/ chock full o’ hobbity Tolkieny goodness!
When the River is Ice

Chapter Notes

Mahal help me I will never finish this fic! I thought that this would be the last chapter, but that appears not to be the case… At least one more chapter will follow this one. I’ve already written most of chapter 11 and all that remains is to edit it. Anyway, here we are, chapter 10 – enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You know, my mother once said, ‘you should try to learn what you are running to, and from, and why,’” Bilbo recounted Belladonna’s aphorism to Thorin as he idly worried the worn fur cuffs of Thorin’s jacket. “And you know, in all my life I never would have thought that I would be running to you.”

Thorin considered this quietly for a moment before asking, “And what are you running from?”

“Well? Oh, nothing I should say now. It was not long ago I was running from a dragon, quite literally!” Bilbo joked, but he knew this was not Thorin’s meaning. “Now I am only running to you, for I love you. And I daresay it’s been an age that I have, or it feels as such, at any rate.” Those words, kept locked up by his tongue for so long, now flowed freely and easily from his lips.

“I am running to you because even after trolls and goblins and orcs and dragons I find that you fill my heart with light and love and all the splendid things that one should run toward. I am running to you because just one look from you starts my heart and just one touch catches my breath. You are an adventure, Thorin Oakenshield.” Bilbo paused to reposition himself in front of Thorin. “I am running to you because I love you and I want to share every last day of my life in an adventure with you.” Bilbo closed the small distance between them with a light kiss to Thorin’s lips.

Thorin - pensive, brooding Thorin - was beginning to soften in the presence of his hobbit. Silence stretched comfortably between the two companions. The fire filled the withdrawing room with a warm glow, and the cracking and popping of wood provided a soothing backdrop more splendid than any music imaginable. How long had Bilbo wanted to say what he had just said to Thorin? How often had Thorin dreamed that he could share a moment like this with Bilbo? It occurred to both of them that those questions mattered not. Time passes as it does and blessedly their time was presently occupied with one another.

At length, the silence was broken. “And what is it that you are running to or from, and why?” The
question sprang from Bilbo’s mouth before he was completely aware of asking it.

A glint came into Thorin’s eyes and a different, almost foolhardy smile played on his lips. “I thought that I was running to my homeland, my birthright, and to the gold and the treasure of my family. I thought I was running to glory and redemption. My father and grandfather would be avenged and I would see our kingdom restored. Erebor has been and always will be my home. And a great kingdom it shall be again.”

Thorin paused before he continued. His smile was replaced by a dark and pensive mien. “In truth, I ran to those things, but also I ran from fear and doubt of myself. Fear that I might meet the same fate as my father and grandfather, descended into madness; doubt that I could lead my people home to safety.”

Thorin stopped to look at Bilbo. The hobbit’s face was creased with worry lines and his eyes conveyed a sense of sympathy. The dwarf king closed his eyes, shook his head, and comforting patted his hobbit’s hand. “Worry not, my beloved hobbit. While my fears were not unfounded, there is no place for them here any longer. I run now to my true fate: King under the Mountain! I run to my home reclaimed, to peace restored, and to a love with an open and forgiving heart. I must stay my tongue, for what I feel for you, words cannot handle.”

“Oh, Thorin,” Bilbo sighed as he pulled the dwarf close to him. Bilbo had an inkling of what Thorin felt for him, spoken words or no, for he was of the same heart. The hobbit could not, however, fathom the depths of the sorrow Thorin felt for his father, grandfather, and fallen kingdom. Nor could he conceive of the pain Thorin carried for the Burned Dwarves of Azanulbizar, his brother Frerin included. Bilbo saw Thorin battle with dragon sickness and almost lose. He saw the dwarf – his dwarf – lead a charge to victory, but only after he had nearly led them to despair. Bilbo could not begin to imagine the guilt, shame, and fear that wracked Thorin. For all that he could not do and for all that he did not understand, Bilbo could offer comfort and a safe place to voice his pain.

With long-practiced expertise, Thorin fought back bitter tears as he clung to Bilbo. For decades upon decades Thorin concealed his pain. He had built a life for his dwarves in Ered Luin and there he had ruled with honour, never allowing himself to falter. His anger, held tightly for over a century, began to seep from him, as porphyrin from a wound. Old hurts do not heal fast and it would be long before Thorin could think of the past without the strain and the pain of darkness. Bilbo pressed himself closer to the dwarf and Thorin could feel his beard become wetted by tears.

Thorin needed to see Bilbo’s face. He needed to look upon the being who had unexpectedly given him hope throughout their long journey. He pulled back and looked upon his hobbit. Thorin gently held Bilbo at his elbows and met with eyes full of uncomprehending sadness. The hobbit’s cheeks were stained with tears and his face was mottled, not unlike Thorin’s.
Thorin brushed a thumb across Bilbo’s cheek, wiping a tear away. “Stay your tears, Bilbo, for we shall know joy and mirth again.”

Bilbo laughed. It sounded like silver bells ringing merrily and it made Thorin’s heart leap with glee to hear. Thorin felt some of the anger and sorrow lift from his chest and he let out a relieved sigh. The hobbit smiled knowingly at the dwarf and he wiped a few stray tears from Thorin’s cheeks. “Would that your tears are likewise stayed, Thorin. I believe you – we shall once again know joy and mirth.”

Bilbo tucked his thumbs into his weskit pockets and rocked back on his heels and it was almost as if he were the same hobbit who had been fussing about a strange gathering of dwarves in his cozy little hobbit hole nearly a year previous. Thorin could not be fooled and he saw the difference that year made. Bilbo’s face was wane and there were many lines that belied constant sadness and worry. His hair, slightly longer, hung limp around his face, though Thorin noted that it still shone like honey and amber in the light of the fire. There was a certain weariness in his eyes that had not been there before, but there was also a bright spark of adventure.

As his fingers rested comfortably, they brushed up against more than just his magic ring. “Ah! What have I got here?” The hobbit mused aloud as he gathered the metal objects in his hand and brought them out into the light. “Oh,” he breathed in sudden remembering.

“How came you by these?” Thorin asked, eyeing the braid clasps in Bilbo’s hands. His face was alight with awed curiosity.

“When I first came upon you, unconscious, gravely wounded, and completely filthy, I took it upon myself to see you healed and clean,” Bilbo began.

“Aye, but what has that got to do with my braid clasps? I thought I had lost them in battle.”

“No, I,” Bilbo paused for a moment, feeling almost bashful. “I wanted to comb your hair. It was so marred and tangled and dirty, I thought I should. The clasps held frayed, bloody, and mucked braids, so I pocketed them, fully intending to return them to you. I’m sorry, I just hadn’t had the chance.”

Thorin’s face softened. “Apologies are hardly necessary. Thank you for saving them, my dear one.”

Thorin’s large hand settled at the base of Bilbo’s neck, fingers buried in curls. He gently pushed their foreheads together. “Amrálimê,” Thorin whispered.

Bilbo wrinkled his nose and with a hint of good-natured exasperation said, “You know, you might
have to teach me that language of yours! Certainly if you intend on speaking it to me.”

Thorin kissed Bilbo’s ashen brow. “Of course, my love, all in good time. For now, it would be a great honour to have you braid my hair and return my clasps.”

Bilbo blanched. He remembered the ornate and intricate braids of the dwarves and how highly they prized them. “Thorin I can only do a simple three-stranded braid, and even then it’s been some time since I’ve done that much!”

He let the dwarf lead him over to sit on the long sofa that once served as Gandalf’s bed. Shakily Bilbo turned the ornately engraved steel clasps over and over in his hands. The coldness of the clasps and their weight could be felt as small pebbles plucked from a stream. The hobbit’s hands gave warmth to the steel as he examined the details. The designs were geometric and very lovely, even to a hobbit who tended toward the flowery and bright.

Thorin’s face softened as his tipped Bilbo’s chin up to look at him. “Worry not, my beloved burglar. I would wear your braids with pride.”

Bilbo offered him an uncertain smile and nodded his head. “Alright, I will try.”

Bilbo passed Thorin the clasps to free his hands. The hobbit’s long, clever fingers reached for the dwarf’s thick mane of silver-streaked obsidian. Bilbo gently gathered a small chunk of hair at Thorin’s temple and tucked it behind the dwarf’s ear. He pushed back the thick mass of hair that was not intended for this braid and began to separate the hair with his fingers. Bilbo was delighted to find that Thorin’s hair felt not as he remembered it in the tent, but how he had imagined it when first they met: like the mane of a pony, but not so coarse. The dark mass of long and tangles tresses were so unlike his own short and curly mop of honey coloured hair, yet no less striking. Bilbo found it meditative to simply run his fingers through and through the dwarf’s hair. Evidently it similarly relaxed Thorin, as he tipped his head slightly back, closed his eyes, and let out a blissful sigh.

Separating the section of hair into thirds, Bilbo began his braid. His unpracticed, fumbling fingers weaved in and out in a motion that he had learned decades earlier. It must have been Belladonna who had taught him to braid. In his childhood he remembered sitting with his mother on the banks of the Brandywine River and giggling as he weaved flowers into her hair. It was a lovely memory and when Bilbo closed his eyes he could almost feel the grass below his feet and the warm summer air. It was a lovely memory, but it made the hobbit’s homesick heart ache with longing for the Shire.

Bilbo gently pushed the memory to the back of his mind. He was here in Erebor now, braiding the hair of someone else that he loved. As he methodically wove the dwarf’s hair it occurred to him...
hobbit that his choice of Thorin Oakenshield as his partner would bring no end of joy to his mother. Bilbo dared not think how his far less adventurous father would react. Not favourably, of that much Bilbo was certain.

“Clasp please,” Bilbo asked as he finished one braid.

Taking the proffered clasp, Bilbo tied off and secured the braid. The hobbit sat back for a moment to examine his handy work. It may not have been impressive, but it was perfectly adequate. All the same, the hobbit felt a small sense of accomplishment at the completion of his tidy braid.

“Well, it will do in a pinch,” Bilbo said with a self-conscious laugh.

Thorin did not speak immediately to reassure Bilbo. Instead, he carefully gathered the hobbit’s smaller hands in his own, brought them to his face, and kissed the soft palms. Bilbo felt a blush creep up his neck and ruddy his cheeks.

“Right, I’ll uh, keep braiding then?” Bilbo asked as Thorin released his hands.

“I would like that,” came Thorin’s reply.

Bilbo prepared to create a braid that would mirror the one he had just completed. Once again, he gathered a small chunk of hair and separated it into three. Already he felt more confident in his braiding ability, even if it was only a sense of mastery of the simply three-stranded braid his mother had taught him. Deep darkness mixed with silver moonlight as he weaved the thrice divided hair into an elegant, if not simple, plait. It was a lovely dance of one strand over another back over the first, and again, until Bilbo had completed the second braid.

“Other clasp, please,” Bilbo asked.

The hobbit secured his second braid and sat back to examine his work. He would not admit it, but he was rather proud of the twin set of interlaced hair he produced. Beyond that, he was elated that Thorin not only allowed him to braid his hair, but had invited him to do so. Hobbits were innately driven to care for those they loved, and this hobbit was no exception. Leaning forward, Bilbo raked his fingers through Thorin’s unbound hair and placed a kiss upon his brow.

It was a simple gesture, but one loaded with feeling. True to his word, Thorin felt proud to wear
braids plaited by his One. As he felt Bilbo’s fingers in his hair and lips upon his brow, a great swell of emotion blossomed in his chest. The expression of such longstanding warmth and affection felt foreign to the dwarf and yet it could not be helped. Hard, well-muscled arms reached around the uncharacteristically slim middle of the hobbit and pulled him close. Thorin buried his face in Bilbo’s chest and breathed in the familiar smell of sunshine on oat grass, now tinged with the wears of war. He could feel Bilbo’s arms wrap around his back and the light press of the hobbit’s cheek against the crown of his head.

Not without regret, Thorin pulled back and said, “Come, we must prepare for our meeting this day. I am confident that Bard and the Elvenking will be interested in my propositions.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Bilbo replied, a hesitant but affirmative smile tugging at his lips. Then suddenly his face grew dark and lines of worry creased his forehead. “I must see to Fíli first.”

Balin was cautiously elated, if one can feel such a heady emotion cautiously. He was tremendously glad to have his king returned and willing to divide the treasure fairly. But at the same time he was aware of the damage that was already done. Thorin was obstinate, pigheaded, proud (by times almost hubristic), and had suffered under the curse that befell his father and grandfather. But Balin knew Thorin. He knew that the dwarf king was fiercely loyal and caring. Beyond that, he knew that the good dwarf, the very heart and soul of Thorin Oakenshield, lived under the witless face of dragon sickness. The Elvenking, however, did not know Thorin, not really. He knew only the rift that grew between their races and the recent betrayal. So, as Balin rolled happily along on his way to the Elvenking’s tent, he carefully schooled back his smile, for the Elvenking and Bard may be less forgiving of Thorin, given the recent retraction of his word.

What other choice have they got, other than to agree to their original offer? Balin thought to himself. Verily they had no other choice. Dain’s fierce army of sturdy dwarves was now hauled up in the mountain, and though they would not go to war, they would defend the mountain if attacked. Thranduil had seen too much elven blood spilled and would likely not willingly orchestrate the deaths of more of his kind. Bard, grim as he was, had a great deal of good sense about him. He would not lead his cold, tired, and ill men to battle once more. At least that is what Balin hoped.

As Balin walked toward Thranduil’s tent he unexpectedly came upon one of the two which he sought. “Master Bard!” Balin called and gave a short wave when the man looked in his direction.

Bard changed course and began walking toward Balin. “Hello, Master dwarf,” he greeted. “What brings you down the mountain? If I am not mistaken, you are one of Thorin Oakenshield’s companions.”
“Aye, you’re not mistaken. Balin, son of Fundin, at your service,” Balin said and bowed to the much taller man who bowed in turn. “I came to seek an audience with you and the Elvenking.”

An odd look crossed Bard’s grim face. “Is that so? Would you care to inform me if this is to be thought ill or well?”

“Well, to be assured,” Balin stated carefully. “But come! I’ll tell you more when we meet the Elvenking.”

Bard gave Balin a skeptical look, but led on without another word. Balin followed the Dragon Shooter through the weaving makeshift streets of the tent village to where the tent of the Elvenking stood. The camp was not as Balin remembered, for there were far fewer men and a greater number of the remnants of pyres. It was eerily silent and a great tension could be felt, like a bowstring drawn taught. The wind blew up Balin’s back and he shivered. Too cold to do much besides huddle in a tent, I suppose, the old dwarf thought grimly.

Balin recalled Thranduil’s tent from the night he sought Bilbo, and he knew it when they arrived. It was unmistakably the Elvenking’s living quarters, for it was guarded by two Mirkwood elves. Still clad in their shining armour, the guards stood tall, proud, and alert. Upon seeing Bard, the sylvan elf-guards stepped aside allowing him and his guest through. Bard strode past them with Balin close behind.

Thranduil looked as elegant as he ever did, with his long hair cascading down his back like a river of white gold and his flowing raiment the colour of dark red wine covering his lithe body. He did little more than raise an eyebrow as his gaze flitted from the dwarf to the man. “Greetings, Master Bard,” he nodded at his ally, “Master dwarf,” he nodded at Balin. “I am inclined to inquire about what brings you down from your accursed mountain this day, only previously when I queried your kin I was shot or shouted at. Tell me, Master dwarf, should I expect the same of you?”

Balin recalled their first encounter with the Elvenking. Thorin and the rest of the company had remained steadfastly tight-lipped about the nature of their quest. Now, not only had Balin purposefully sought out the Elvenking, but he also freely answered the question. “Nay, the same you should not expect of me or my kin, for it is a new day. I am Balin, son of Fundin, at your service. I am one of Thorin Oakenshield’s companions. It is in friendship that I extend an invitation to the Elvenking and Bard the Dragon Slayer, to take audience with Thorin, King under the Mountain.” After a moment’s pause and a pointed look from Thranduil, Balin continued, “He wishes to speak of peace and amiable relations restored among the dwarves, the elves of Mirkwood, and the men of the lake. He wishes also to speak of returning what treasure is owed.”
Astonishment came into the eyes of both Bard and Thranduil. Not only had they been surprised at the polite and diplomatic air of this old dwarf, but they had almost given up hope that the stubborn gold sick King under the Mountain would see sense.

“Very well,” Thranduil replied haughtily, hiding his pleasure. “But what trust should I give to you? How should I know that you speak the truth? Why should we believe that this is the will of a dwarf who – no more than a day ago- was willing to sit upon a heap of gold and starve before he parted with a loaf’s worth? And where has he hidden that Halfling?”

Patiently and with a great deal of tact, Balin answered each of Thranduil’s questions in turn. “Aye, I understand why you would be reluctant to trust in my words, but let me assure you, I speak naught but the truth! You will understand if myself and my kin were tired and hungry and hurt, why we might have met you as we did. But it is now a new day and we would see peace restored.”

“My mind does not change with the rising and the setting of a few suns.’ It was Thorin Oakenshield who said that, if you recall,” countered the Elvenking.

“Oh, aye,” Balin replied. “He is changed not by the passage of time, but by his will. As for our Bilbo, you needn’t worry – he is safe and well. Thorin truly wishes to make amends and you might agree that he owes most to a certain hobbit,” Balin finished with a wink.

“Can you promise us that we will not be met by more war?” Bard asked, his voice steady but tired.

“Yes, I can promise you that,” Balin replied solemnly.

Bard and Thranduil seemed to pass a wordless conversation between them before the Elvenking said, “So be it. We will trust your word and it will be on your conscience should we meet a different fate. Tell Thorin to expect us when the sun reaches the highest point on its journey through the sky.”

Balin nodded in confirmation. “We will welcome you with goodwill.” The old dwarf said, bowing to the Elvenking and Bowman.

Balin turned and slipped quietly out of the grand tent of the Elvenking. The white haired dwarf walked back through the tent village in a dream-like haze, his mind reeling with the events of the days. Before he knew it, the tents were mere specks in the distance and he had begun ascending the slope that lead to Erebor’s front gates. He found himself smiling, despite Bard and Thranduil’s less than warm reception. He really could not deny them their skepticism; as Thranduil said, not even one
A full day had passed since his Thorin was willing to starve for greed and sickness of gold. But things were different now and all would be well. Inspired by his optimism, Balin began to hum a happy walking tune. He continued on his merry way, but stopped when he crested a hill and saw what looked like another dwarf. It was, in fact, the unmistakable silhouette of his brother, Dwalin.

“Morning, brother!” Balin bellowed cheerfully across the distance.

“And to you!” Dwalin called back as he began to walk toward his brother. When they reached each other they amiably bumped their heads together. “How was the meeting with the man and that twice bedamned elf?” Dwalin asked gruffly.

“It went well enough,” Balin replied, still cheerful. “They have agreed to meet with Thorin. They’ll be by around noon, they said. I figure I best hurry along to tell Thorin. There isn’t much time to prepare.”

“Aye,” Dwalin agreed. “I will walk back with you. We should probably gather the others as we find them. If we find them – I can’t be sure where they’ve all gone off to.”

“Beggin’ your pardon, brother, what do you mean ‘gather the others’?” Balin asked, shooting his brother a quizzical look.

“After you left, Thorin sent us out to explore Erebor,” Dwalin explain simply.

Balin quirked an eyebrow at his brother. “Oh?”

Dwalin grunted in affirmation. “He said ‘it would do my heart well to see you explore our home,’ or some such thing.”

“Did Bilbo stay with him?” Balin asked.

“Aye,” came Dwalin’s response.

“Oh,” Balin said, a knowing smile spread across his lips and a mischievous glint came into his eyes.
The two brothers walked in companionable silence as they drew closer to the mountain. Their eyes roamed over the landscape in search of stray dwarves of the company to take back with them. Predictably, when the company had been encouraged to go forth and explore, they formed small groups along family lines. This made Balin and Dwalin’s task easier, for when they found one there was usually another nearby. First they saw the corpulent shape of Bombur, followed closely by Bifur and Bofur. Then they spotted the unmistakable three-pointed hairstyle of their resident mischief-maker, Nori, with Dori and Ori not far. Dwarf by dwarf their small group grew and soon enough they were a fine troop.

Balin played the role of Gandalf as they neared the mountain’s front gates and counted everyone: “Me and Dwalin, Dori, Nori, Oin, Bifur, Bofur, Ori, Bombur, Gloin… that makes ten, then of course Bilbo and Thorin and Fíli in the mountain makes thirteen… where is Kíli?” The other dwarves looked around, scouring the barren lays about the mountain with their eyes, but Thorin’s youngest sister-son could not be found.

…

Kíli wandered aimlessly through the halls of his great grandfather. He had heard so many stories of this place as a child from him mother, Thorin, and Balin. The stories had always brought shouts of glee from him and his brother as they listened with rapt attention as Balin spoke of the strange representatives of nearby kingdoms who came to pay homage to the King under the Mountain, or to Thorin who spoke of gold and honour, or to their mother, Dís, who spoke of the grand halls and many secret places within the mountain that she explored as a dwarfling with her adventuresome brothers. All of these stories had coalesced into a wonderful land positively brimming with untold stories waiting to be discovered by him and his brother.

But now, as he heard his lone footfalls on the scorched stone, he felt no sense of wonder. The strength of his spirit and hope began to diminish, the way sun dissolves the snow’s crust. Kíli absentmindedly dragged his fingers along the side of a great charred stone wall as he walked. The battle had robbed him of his brother and replaced his jovial lightheartedness with a pensive and stern countenance. Verily, his lionhearted brother was not yet lost, but the pang of solitude and emptiness struck Kíli’s heart. His boots stepped unevenly, as he carefully favoured his less injured leg. The scuff and thud of his boots echoed through the long-empty halls, aimlessly carrying Kíli through the mountain.

He could not be sure how much time had passed or how far he had walked, but he found himself now at the end of his trek. He had wandered into a small, mostly vacant room that contained two dilapidated chairs, a half-charred table, and a window. With small curiosity, Kíli walked to the window and looked out on the north-east flank of the mountain. It was cold and he could see short puffs of his breath escaping into the outside air. The sky was the clearest blue he had seen since arriving at the mountain and the untouched snow blanketing the hill glittered like mithril in the brilliant glow of the sun. He and his brother could make short work of ruining the pristine cloak of
white with skidding footprints and thrown snowballs. Kíli ached for his brother to be with him.

Kíli’s brow creased and tore his eyes away from the window. His pupils were pinpricks, thanks to the brightness of the snow, and he could barely see the room before him. Steadying himself against a wall, he blinked a few times before exiting the small room. Back he walked, *scuff, thud*, through the halls to whence he came. It pained him to be parted from his brother for such a stretch of time. No matter his uncle’s will, he would return presently.

At length, the withdrawing room was in sight, and as he drew nearer, Kíli could hear low voices. The young dwarf could not make out what was being said, but he thought the tone to be a pleasant nonetheless. When Kíli walked in he barely glanced at Thorin and Bilbo, as such, he missed the ruddy hue that the hobbit’s face took. Instead, he walked over to his brother and gently stroked the mop of blond hair. In a murmured voice, Kíli recounted his brief foray through the mountain to his brother. He spoke of the adventures they would have and mischief he imagined them getting into when Fíli woke, all the while tenderly weaving his fingers through limp gold locks.

He did not hear his uncle approach, but he felt a strong hand on his shoulder. Thorin silently stood above his two sister-sons with his face twisted in grief. Sorrow weighed heavily on him with the knowledge that his heir-apparent still had not stirred. He dared not look Kíli in the face, for that might break him and he knew it. Instead, Thorin turned his eyes to Kíli’s hands as they weaved through Fíli’s lifeless golden mane. They were tired fingers, bandaged fingers, fingers that were raw and scared and bleeding. Tears welled in Thorin’s eyes and he almost could not bear it any longer, when suddenly there was a stirring.

Bilbo, who had been looking on in anguish, rushed himself to stand by Thorin. If Fíli were to wake he would be in terrible pain and Bilbo hoped he could provide some relief as he had done for Thorin and Kíli. He felt about his pockets, but remembered that he had left the *Acullico leaves* and *tenebrea* with Balin. Still, he looked on with great worry and affection as the once lifeless dwarf stirred more.

Fíli groaned and his eyes opened slowly. He promptly snapped them shut, as if even the faint light of the fire burned too bright. His tongue felt three sizes too large in his dry mouth and everything in his body hurt. He could feel a great throbbing heat in his chest and head, but he thought that he had lost his fingers and toes, for he could not feel them. Fresh sweat pricked his brow as consciousness brought new healing and fresh pain. His face twisted as his agony grew with each passing moment.

“Fíli,” Kíli called, clutching his brother’s cold hand in his own warm one. “Fíli, it’s alright, brother! You are alright and I am here for you.”

Fíli did not respond, but grew more frantic by the moment. He panted, the shallow intake of air barely satisfying his aching lungs. He gripped hard onto his brother’s hand. He pain was overwhelming and he felt it across every inch of his body. A thousand daggers ripped his chest,
lightning struck the back of his neck, his head felt a hundred leagues under the sea, and his muscles burned as if lit by dragon fire. This was not a welcome feeling to which he woke.

Kíli, wild eyed and frightened turned his gaze on Bilbo. “What’s wrong? Can’t you help him?”

“I – I would, Kíli, but Balin has the *Acullico*!” Bilbo sputtered. “I think the last of the poison is leaving him. All we can do is let the *Heilleir* do its job and wait until Balin comes back.”

Kíli whipped back to look at his suffering brother. Fíli’s breath came in staccato spurts and his face was contorted in pain. The younger brother pressed a steadying hand to his older brother’s cheek. It was slick with sweat and his face was hot. Kíli was utterly beside himself. He felt the pain of his brother as if it were his own, and the agony of one who can do nothing to ease the suffering of a loved one. He smoothed Fíli’s damp beard, now unbraided and free from its clasps, against the side of his face in an attempt to soothe him. All the while Kíli murmured assurances of “it will be okay,” and “I’m here for you.”

Bilbo looked upon the scene with barely conceal tears. Thorin was still at Kíli’s side, one hand on the dark-haired dwarf’s shoulder and the other cradling the back of Fíli’s head. Bilbo himself was standing at Thorin’s side, internally oscillating between propriety and longing to comfort Thorin. In the end, his desire to care won out and he placed a comforting hand on Thorin’s back. *If only Balin would return, then we could make this better,* Bilbo thought, thoroughly distraught.

Kíli lowered his head and rested it against his brother’s. “Please sleep, you will find peace in slumber. But for the love of all that you hold dear, please, *please* wake up. I couldn’t bear it if you didn’t…” Kíli whispered as he gently rocked their bodies together. With a sigh Fíli’s breathing finally began to settle and he was overcome by sleep.

“Sleep now if you can, my sister-son. Sleep, but please return to us,” Thorin said softly, echoing Kíli’s plea.

The hobbit and two waking dwarves stood stock-still, on edge and fraught with concerned. When, at length he did not stir, Thorin turned to Bilbo and said, “Earlier when you examined him, you said he looked better. I believe you, for I have seen many return from the frontlines of battle only to continue the fight with their wounds. Fíli is strong and it is well that he has woken, despite the pain.”

Thorin returned his gaze to Fíli, stroking the flaxen mane of his heir-apparent. “I hardly remember the events surrounding my awakening after battle, but I will never forget that pain. It was like none I have felt before. I was not aware and I was not myself. I recall only darkness and blinding agony.” Thorin squeezed his eyes shut as if bracing against remembered agony. “Do you know that he is
returning to health because you saw me through the orc poison and the damage that battle does?"

“"I suppose so, yes,” Bilbo replied simply.

Bilbo had examined Fíli earlier and he spoke the truth when he said that the young dwarf looked better. ‘Better’ was not much, though, for Fíli had been gravely injured. The Heilleir was working as it should, and Fíli was as sturdy and stalwart a dwarf as Bilbo had ever seen. The hobbit had every confidence that Fíli would recover. At least, he would have himself and Thorin believe that were the case.

Bilbo laid a comforting hand on Thorin’s shoulder before continuing. “Lord Elrond got to you quickly. He got to Fíli quickly, too, but there were… er, other complications with Fíli.”

Thorin felt a burning guilt well up in him. His jaw tightened and clenched in response to the memories that swirled in his mind. The ‘complications’ undoubtedly referred to his lapse of judgement that prevented Bilbo from healing Fíli as he had healed Thorin. The dwarf king felt a heaviness settle upon his shoulders and a dizziness seize his head. He reached a hand out to steady himself and Bilbo surreptitiously caught him. An sense of aged fatigue settled in his bones. Grasping the hobbit’s hand offered some strength and assurance to the dwarf, although it did nothing for his growing exhaustion.

“The orc poison stayed in just about the same place in you, Thorin, but it spread through Fíli like wildfire.” Bilbo kindly left out the point that it would not have spread if only he had been allowed to heal him.

Bilbo squeezed Thorin’s hand and offered him a sympathetic smile. He knew it would be no use to scold the dwarf for his earlier actions. He turned to Kíli and asked, “The powder, the tenebrea, has Balin been applying it as I have instructed?”

“What?” Thorin asked.

“Yes,” Kíli responded, ignoring his uncle’s question.

“Good,” Bilbo sighed with relief. Then, turning to Thorin, he explained. “Upon my request, Thranduil gifted me leaves that would relieve pain, the Acullico, and a powder that he said would rid Fíli of his sepsis, the tenebrea.” Thorin stiffened at the mention of the Elvenking, but he stayed silent and let Bilbo continue. “When you had me seen out of the mountain last time,” Bilbo euphemised the
most recent incident of Thorin ejecting him in a rather unpleasant fashion from the mountain, “I gave the Acullico and tenebrea to Balin. He, uh, was secretly treating Fíli.” Bilbo, who had grown rather bold, felt a little awkward explaining the carefully hidden healing that was going on right under Thorin’s nose.

“Very well,” Thorin said, trying to maintain a neutral expression. He felt ashamed of the dwarf he had been in the days after waking. “I am sorry. I – I could have… I should have let you heal him like you healed me. Foolish pride!”

Bilbo gave the dwarf’s hand a light squeeze. “Lingering guilt serves no purpose, Thorin. You have apologized and you are returned to us in sound mind.” Bilbo smiled when Thorin met his gaze. “You are good, Thorin Oakenshield. Yes, you should have let me heal him, but it can’t be helped now. I should think that this all could have ended less pleasantly and yet it didn’t. After all, Balin and Oin continued with Fíli’s treatment after I departed. His wound looks much improved, at least from what I saw this morning. When Balin returns and when Fíli wakes again we can continue to treat him. Like you’ve said before, Thorin, Fíli is a strong dwarf and he will feel the sun on his face and the wind in his hair once again.”

Thorin’s dark expression cleared the slightest upon hearing Bilbo’s pragmatic but optimistic assessment of their current situation. “You are right, Master Baggins.”

Thorin let fall the comforting hand of the hobbit and placed both of his hands on Kíli’s shoulders. “He will be well, my sister-son.”

Kíli turned his head and smiled weakly at Thorin. He opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, but his attention was stolen by the telltale noise made by the rest of the company coming up the hall. Thorin, Kíli, and Bilbo looked expectantly at the withdrawing room door. One by one each dwarf was welcomed by the warmth of the withdrawing room. Balin looked around and sighed with relief when he found Kíli, safe and sound, sat next to his brother. He smiled sadly at the sight of the young dwarf. He was glad to see that Kíli had returned to the withdrawing room, but the lugubrious scene of the young dwarf with his quiescent brother tore at Balin’s heart. The old dwarf walked over to where Fíli and Kíli were.

“How’s he doin’, lad?” Balin asked.

Kíli brightened for a moment, “Better! He woke up!” Then his face turned grim. “He was in so much pain, so he went back to sleep.”

“Goodness!” Balin exclaimed. “Sorry I wasn’t here, laddie. I have those leaves that Bilbo brought.
I’ll give them to you and you can give them to Fíli when he wakes again.”

Balin reached into his breast pocket and pulled out the two pouches that he had kept in secret.

“I’ll let you hang on to the powder, too. A pinch under his tongue once in the morning and once at night.” Balin offered Kíli an encouraging smile as he passed the satchels over to him.

“Thanks, Balin,” Kíli wearily smiled back.

Balin turned to Thorin. “The Elvenking and Bard will speak with you. They said that they would arrive at noon.”

“Very well,” Thorin replied, a neutral mask hid his slight worry about the meeting and contempt he felt toward the Elvenking. “That gives us little more than an hour to prepare, correct?”

“Aye,” Balin affirmed. “Let’s take lunch, shall we?”

The company, fully reunited, began rummaging through packs for food. Each and every dwarf was filled with a sense of joy having their burglar among them again. Bofur and Balin were especially pleased that Bilbo had returned to his rightful place in the company, as they had grown rather fond on their burglar hobbit. It had not taken Bilbo long to dig out a piece of cram and find a comfy place to sit while he nibble on the waybread. Bofur had missed the little hobbit dearly and quickly sat next to Bilbo once he had secured his own piece of cram. Bofur regaled the hobbit and his fellow dwarves with tales of times since passed. Other members of the company would occasionally interject, and soon enough the telling of old stories turned in to reminiscing about their journey not long since passed. Before long, most of the dwarves in the room were howling with laughter as the incident with the trolls or some other such humorous event was recounted.

Thorin sat with Balin at his side, slightly back from the main gathering of dwarves and Bilbo. Thorin felt a gnawing hunger, but was too distracted to eat. He had, however, taken two Acullico leaves from Kíli. Not yet completely hale and hearty, Thorin was grateful for the medicinal plant. His face pinched in distaste as his tongue met with the acrid juice of the leaves, yet he continued to chew knowing that he would regret it if he did not. Next to Thorin, Balin munched on the more palatable cram in companionable silence.

At length the pain eased from Thorin and he smiled distantly as he watched the company laugh and make merry. It warmed his heart to see Bilbo laughing and smiling along with the rest of the
company. The hobbit’s soul, while gentle, was not made of glass. Bilbo was resilient and did not lack courage. As their quick-witted burglar began to recount his version of their barrel adventure, Thorin sighed blithely. His hobbit was a great storyteller and it made him immeasurably happy to hear him spin a yarn. An imagined future of just the two of them in front of a roaring fire cropped up in Thorin’s mind. Then he could hold his hobbit and listen to that sweet voice for as long as they would stay awake.

Balin looked over at his old friend, and feigned a worried expression. “You alright, Thorin?”

“Hmm?” Thorin murmured, pulled away from reveries about his hobbit. “Yes, I am. Just a little sore and tired, that is all.”

Balin smiled knowingly. The change had been gradual, but Balin’s sagely perception could not miss the glint in Thorin’s eyes, or the way Thorin’s gaze rested just a little long on the soft contours of the hobbit’s body. Balin could see Thorin’s eye brows flash with interest each time he looked upon Bilbo. It was nearly imperceptible, but Balin noticed how his king moved altogether too close to their burglar at any chance he got. The old dwarf who had known Thorin for all his life did not doubt that his friend was alright. In fact, Balin might venture to think that Thorin was more than alright. After all, when a dwarf has found their One their step becomes lighter, their bearing more regal, and a song calls to them which fills their heart with light and love.

…

He had seen it once and he did not want to see it again.

Bilbo, being the practical, sensible hobbit that he was, found himself worrying over things that truly ought to be worried over. Namely, how would Thorin act with the Arkenstone returned to his possession? That had been his original plan, the original deal: Bard and Thranduil would forfeit the Arkenstone for his fourteenth share of the treasure. Well, the original-original plan had been to return what was owed to the men of the lake, but with the Arkenstone in the hands of Bard and Thranduil, the precious stone could not be left out of the calculations.

He understood less than the others about the curse of the line of Durin, but he saw plainly with his own eyes the degeneration of one Thorin Oakenshield from majesty to madness. It came on slowly at first, so slowly in fact that Bilbo had nearly forgotten the overheard conversation between Lord Elrond and Gandalf when they had stopped for a rest in Rivendell. A dark and powerful greed set in upon his friend the way that fog settles upon a town, slowly, insidiously, filling empty spaces at first, and then filling everything at once.
He had seen the one that he loved be utterly destroyed by a treasure of useless hoarded things and he did not want to see that obsession claim his friend again.

Thus Bilbo found himself rightfully worrying about how the Arkenstone would affect Thorin now. It would either be returned to the dwarf and he would sink back into madness or Bard and Thranduil would refuse to return it and create an irreparable rift among the three races. Bilbo felt ill at the thought of either of those situations coming to fruition. It would not do for him to council Thorin before the meeting, for he had no alternate suggestion. He would only plead that Thorin did not take the cursed thing, but how could he ask that?

He met Thorin’s eyes across the room and the dwarf’s brow creased in what was a mirrored expression of the hobbit. Bilbo readied himself to cross the room. He felt compelled to say something – anything! – even if he had not thought of what he would say. If nothing else, Bilbo wanted Thorin to know that he was there to support him. But just then, one of Dain’s guards was heard at the door.

“Hail, King Thorin,” the stout soldier from the Iron Hills greeted. “The Elvenking and the Dragon Shooter are at the front gates and requested an audience with you.”

Thorin squared his shoulders, standing tall and proud. “Bring them hither,” his commanding voice rumbled in the suddenly silent room. “I will speak with them presently.”

Chapter End Notes

Sadly, now that winter break is over I have fewer opportunities to work on this fic. I have papers to write, manuscripts to review for publication, conferences to prepare for, and research to finish! Not to mention all the papers and exams I have to grade… In spite of all those academic obligations, I will try to keep up on my Bagginshield writing! All my love and gratitude goes with those who read my stories – you folks are the best!! Seriously, I love you all!!

Khuzdul
Amrâlimê: my love
Major thanks to Darrow Scholar (https://dwarrowscholar.wordpress.com/) for the Khuzdul translation.

*The aphorism at the beginning of the chapter is an echo of James Thurber’s aphorism which goes as follows: “All human beings should try to learn before they die what they are running from, and to, and why.”

**These gifts (one fourteenth share of gold and silver to Bard and the emeralds of Girion to Thranduil) are as they appear in chapter 18 “The Return Journey” of The Hobbit book, only, of course, it was Dain who dealt the treasure. The “White Gems of Lasgalen” are an invention of Peter Jackson and The Hobbit movie team. Also, note that Mirkwood was not referred to as “Eryn Lasgalen” until the end of the Third Age, when
it was cleansed by Galadriel after the fall of Sauron. Since about 85% of this fic was written before the release of the second Hobbit movie, I figured I would hold along the lines of the book for the most part.
Tense moments passed between the departure of Dain’s guard and the arrival of Thranduil and Bard. The Elvenking and the Dragon Shooter wore characteristically guarded and grim expressions. They let their eyes rove over the dwarves and hobbit assembled in the room. Thorin was flanked on his right by Balin and on his left by Bilbo.

“Greetings, Thorin, Thrain’s son, Oakenshield, calling himself ‘King under the Mountain,’” Thranduil said inclining his head in a perfunctory bow. Bard made a similar gesture, matching the greeting of the Elvenking.

“Greetings Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm, and Bard, Dragon Shooter, of the line of Girion,” Thorin said, bowing in a likewise perfunctory manner. “I am returned as King under the Mountain, for the dragon Smaug is dead.”

“At my hand,” Bard spoke evenly.

“Yes, and for that I am grateful,” Thorin said as he bowed lower to Bard. It did not go beyond Bilbo’s notice that Thorin’s teeth were gritted as every effort was made to remain diplomatic. “It is my will that in time, many dwarves will gather to Erebor, to my throne in the ancient halls! Would that I be a fair and righteous king to my people. And would that the same fairness extend to my neighbours – the men of the lake and the elves of the Woodland Realm!”

This caught Thranduil and Bard’s attention, though the Elvenking would not show his surprise.

“Should you be willing, I am of the mind to deal my treasure well.” Thorin looked between the sylvan elf and dark haired man. A nod from Thranduil and Bard prompted Thorin to continue. “Bard, to you I would give what was agreed upon: a fourteenth share of all the silver and gold, wrought and unwrought.”

Bard bowed deeply. “I graciously accept your offer, Thorin, King under the Mountain.”

“And Thranduil, to you I shall give the emeralds of Girion, such jewels as you love most.”

While Thranduil’s host was sadly lessened, it had first come upon Erebor in attack. Verily, Thorin owed him nothing, yet he generously offered a handsome gift. This much, the Elvenking knew.

Thranduil bowed. “I, too, graciously accept your offer, Thorin, King under the Mountain.”

“As for the Arkenstone,” Thorin began. Bilbo held his breath beside him, fearful of what was to come next. “Many have paid dearly with their lives for the Heart of the Mountain. Not only those claimed in battle, but all who have suffered through the long years since first the great wyrm settled within Erebor. It was set once in my grandfather’s throne, for it is the King’s Jewel. Now I would see it buried among the dead, for they gave their hearts defending this once great kingdom.”

Every dwarf, elf, man, and hobbit present looked upon Thorin in astonishment. Bilbo felt a wave of relief so great that he stumbled a bit before steadying himself. He let go of the breath he had been holding and felt the tug of a smile at his lips. Thorin had proved his mettle, for this was the Thorin that Bilbo had met back in Bag End. This was the Thorin who cared for his kinfolk and would do well by his word. This was truly Thorin Oakenshield, King under the Mountain.
“And so it shall be done,” Thranduil said. “Our kin have been favoured by the swift solitude of death. It grieves me deeply to see such blood spilt. For eons this land has been unkind, but no longer will it be so. Such an offering is truly a kingly tribute.”

Some of the tension eased from Thorin’s shoulders and he allowed himself a small but genuine smile. No longer would Thranduil be his enemy, though it would be long before he would call that elf, or any other, a friend. It would be well-advised to have allies in Mirkwood, and Thorin held to that thought. The men of the lake, however, were a different story. Bard had shown his character and he was a good person. Grim as he was, the Bowman cared for his people, and Thorin could feel his ethos. Wiser than having an ally in Thranduil was having a friend in Bard. Soon, with their help, he would see Erebor and Dale returned to their former glory.

…”

The early spring air felt lovely on Bilbo’s face. Despite the bite to the March breeze, the hobbit could feel the promise of a good season for harvest. The winter stores would be running low in the Shire, but the excitement of many hobbits all milling about to prepare their gardens and plant their crops must be palpable away west. The sun was rising and Bilbo closed his eyes, fully feeling its warmth on his face. It was nigh on one year since he left his comfortable hobbit hole, yet he could still picture the sun rise over the Hill just as clear as if he were staring at it that moment.

It had been months since an agreement had been reached among the three kingdoms. With the knowledge that peace was restored and progress was being made, Bilbo was eager for his return journey. Oh, how I miss my hobbit hole! Bilbo thought privately. I sorely need to feel grass between my toes, see the Brandywine River, and breathe the fresh, gentle air of the Shire… This was not the first time he longed for his hobbit hole, nor would it be the last before he returned home. Countless times on their journey he had lamented the fact that he was so far from home. And now, at their journey’s end, he could only sigh and take what small comfort he could in the caress of the wind and the kiss of the sun.

Behind him, Bilbo heard the steady tread of familiar boots. Thorin moved next to his hobbit. Instantly he could sense that Bilbo was not quite himself. The dwarf placed his hand on the hobbit’s shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Bilbo leaned into the half-embrace and closed his eyes. Moments passed soundlessly between the hobbit and dwarf. After some time, Bilbo felt a low vibration throughout his entire body as Thorin began to hum a familiar song. A pang of homesickness struck at his heart when Bilbo recognized the song from the very first time he had met the dwarves. When first he heard it, the chords and lyrics had seduced him to go on a foolhardy adventure. Now, as he felt Thorin’s deep voice reverberate through him, he could only think of hearing Thorin hum that same song from the best bedroom next to his, far to the West. He had gone to sleep with it in his ears that night. Now, he greeted the day with it surging through his body.

“My dear one,” Thorin said as he looked down with a concerned expression, “What ails you?”

Bilbo laughed humorlessly. “I wish to return to my home in the Shire, as I had wished so very often on our journey. Only now there is something that keeps me tethered here. My heart is anchored in the ocean of your heart, and yet I feel the pull of my homeland. I have wanted to go back and still I want to go back. But I do not wish to be parted from you.”

Thorin said nothing, but pulled Bilbo closer to him. There were times when words would not help to heal. There is wisdom in knowing when to be silent and Thorin had some wisdom about him. Bilbo soaked in the warmth that radiated from the solid dwarf. It was lovely and it was just enough to quell the hobbit’s melancholy, if only for a moment. The ache in his heart persisted and naught but the
sight of Hobbiton would quell that feeling.

After several moments, Bilbo turned to Thorin and said, “I should like to go down to Dale to see how the men are faring before the envoy from the Elvenking arrives.”

“As you wish, Bilbo,” Thorin replied, offering a compassionate smile. “I will follow shortly.” Thorin tugged Bilbo closer and placed a light kiss in his curls as he bid the hobbit farewell.

Thorin watched Bilbo carefully as he made for the burgeoning settlement of men. Bilbo was careful to mask his despondence, though many of the company, Thorin included, would have been able to glean the hobbit’s downtrodden mood simply from the heaviness of his step. After spending months on end with a person, it doesn’t take much to pick up on the subtest cues to sadness: The peaked crease that appeared nearly permanently etched in his brow, the lethargy made evident by his gait, the slight slump in his shoulders, all indications that the hobbit was beginning to burn out.

…

As Bilbo drew nearer to Dale his spirits began to rise, if only slightly. The wind tossed his hair and the sounds of happy children could be heard faintly in the distance. Bilbo walked somewhat aimlessly, taking note of the new dwellings that were beginning to sprout up. There was some order to the chaos, but it was, as one would expect, still a bit of a mess. The grass under Bilbo’s bare feet turned to stone and the hobbit found himself in the heart of the encampment. He scanned each face that passed by and greeted most, as he knew nearly everyone in the camp. Soon enough, his eyes rested on an old friend – just the man he was seeking.

“Belemar!” Bilbo’s voice rang out through the streets of Dale. His pace quickened as he made for his friend.

The man turned his head and a bright smile lit his face. “Bilbo! My friend, it is good to see you.” Belemar pulled Bilbo into a hearty embrace. “Good to see you, indeed! Come, I will show you how the rebuilding is getting on.”

Bilbo followed the much taller man along the broken stone pathway. The makeshift shelters that had been built in Dale to withhold the winter were one by one being replaced by proper houses. Many tents that had served in the tent village still stood, but Dale was well on its way to becoming a merry city once more.

“Ah yes, Bilbo,” Belemar mused. “Long ago, long before I was even alive, Dale was a fine city. Its markets were the wonder of the North and anything one’s heart desired could be found here, else it was nowhere to be found! Beautiful houses and campaniles and fountains – all shall be rebuilt in resplendent glory!”

Bilbo’s lips turned up in a small smile as he listened to Belemar wax poetically about the city that was being rebuilt. He had heard the man speak quite nearly those precise words on more than one occasion, yet with each retelling of the old glory that was Dale, Bilbo patiently listened (or at least feigned interest) as if it were the first he heard tell. Belemar’s voice became distant to his ears as the hobbit distractedly gazed at the new infrastructure that had cropped up since he had last visited. Bilbo knew something of the rebuilding process, as some dwarves were occasionally commissioned to aid here or there, but his knowledge was minimal. The hobbit did not travel to the city of men as often as he would have liked, for he was occupied with the rebuilding of Erebor and tending to his beloved dwarf.

“…and the Master of the Lake has gone off somewhere. We have not seen him in nearly a week and none of us are sorry for it!”
"Beg pardon?" Bilbo asked, shaken from his reverie by this news.

"Yes, it seems he took off with as much treasure as he could in a small boat. We don’t think he could have gotten very far. At any rate, Bard is named the King of Dale, as is his birthright." Belemar ended with an affirmative nod; this change in government pleased the man. "The coronation will take place sometime next week, I believe. It has been rather busy here in Dale, but I’m certain an invitation will be sent to you and King Thorin. At any rate, what brings you down on this fair day?" Belemar asked. "It has been nigh on a fortnight since last we met."

"Regrettably much time has passed since my last visit. Erebor is being restored and I’m busy as can be running here and there. Oh! but I suppose I haven’t answered your question. I am here, for today a host out of Mirkwood comes to replenish supplies."

True to his word, Thranduil extended his aid to Dale and Erebor by supplying both kingdoms with extra stores of food throughout the winter.

"Ah! Yes, I do remember Gildis telling me that the Elvenking would return with another load of food and supplies soon." Belemar stopped for a moment to look at his small companion. "I mean no disrespect Bilbo, for you know that I above any count your worth as greater than your weight in gold, but King Thorin would send only one hobbit to receive gifts of the Elvenking?"

Bilbo chuckled. "No, no, of course not, my dear Belemar. And no disrespect taken! I have arrived a fair bit earlier than the dwarves, for I wished to see you and check in with the wounded. Oin has been tending to the hurt dwarves and has shown me some interesting healing techniques that I might employ if needed."

"Of course! Though I doubt you will need to do much here, the men are all healing well. You will be quite pleased with the progress Gildis has made. He is nearly mended! Come, I will take you to him."

Bilbo followed Belemar through the streets to a small house. When they knocked, Bard answered the door.

"Bilbo, Belemar, I am glad to see you," Bard greeted. "Please, come in."

As the hobbit walked through the small structure he noticed countless beds, all with men who appear ill or recovering from some sort of injury. The battle had passed months ago, but there had been many counted among the wounded and men were not as quick to heal as dwarves. As Belemar had said, many of the men looked nearly well and surely would be hale enough to soon leave this building – what Bilbo assumed to be an infirmary. But even as many men look almost well, there were some still who appeared on the verge of death. Bilbo felt a tug at his heart when he remembered Thorin at his worst. He shook his head and reminded himself that Thorin, Fíli, Kíli, and the rest of the company were safe and healed now.

"Belemar! Bilbo!" The hobbit heard a familiar voice greet them.

Bilbo and Belemar turned to the voice and found Gildis standing in front of them, the very picture of strength and wellness. At his side stood Bard, his face lit with a smile.

"Hello, my friends," Bard greeted. "I am glad to see you are well on this fine day."

"Good day to you, Bard!" Returned Bilbo. "Or should I say, King Bard, as I understand."

"Ah, yes. The Master of Laketown finally did something useful and made himself scarce," Bard chuckled. "So, now I am the King. The coronation will be held six days hence. Bilbo, you and King
Thorin, as well as all of your companions are to be invited.”

“Splendid! We shall be honoured to attend. Thorin will be down shortly and I am sure he will be happy of this news.” Bilbo beamed at Bard. “And Gildis, you look well! It is good news all around today!”

“Yes, Master hobbit, I am quite well,” Gildis said with a big smile. “All thanks to you and Belemar.”

The three men and hobbit visited for a short time before they heard hurried footsteps coming through the infirmary.

“Da, the Elvenking is here with more stores!” It was Sigrid, and she was grinning from ear to ear. She loved seeing the elves and a new shipment of food and supplies was always welcome. “The dwarves are approaching, as well. They will be here shortly.”

“Well, let us go out and meet them!” Bard said, hugging Sigrid close.

Bilbo, Bard, Belemar, and Gildis followed Sigrid out of the infirmary and began to make their way to the city centre. Sigrid hurried at first, eager to greet the elves, but she slowed the pace when she saw that Gildis struggled to keep up. He was in very good shape, all things considered, but he was still only beginning to regain his former strength. Bilbo, on the other hand, was more eager and less willing to wait to see Thranduil, as he had some personal business with the Elvenking.

“At the risk of seeming terribly rude,” Bilbo began, “I must hurry myself down. I have some matters of importance to attend to with King Thranduil. It has been lovely to see you all. I’ll meet up with you again a bit later.”

“Not to worry,” Bard said. “We will not be long. But go! If you must, and we will meet you in a while.”

Bilbo waved goodbye to his friends and hastened toward the city centre. As he trotted along he could hear jingling in his coat pocket. To muffle the noise he covered his pocket until he slowed his pace to approach Thranduil.

Slightly winded, Bilbo greeted the Elvenking. “Hullo, King Thranduil.”

“Greetings, Master Baggins,” Thranduil returned. “You must be eager for food if you have come quickly before your dwarves. I do remember your remarkably compliant stomach.”

Bilbo chuckled. “Yes, and while this is true, it is not the reason I have come ahead of my friends. I beg of you,” said Bilbo began, stammering, “to accept this gift!” and he brought out a necklace of silver and pearls that he had found while sorting through Erebor’s treasure.

A bit surprised, Thranduil asked, “In what way have I earned such a gift, O hobbit?”

“Well, I, er, thought that some return should be made for your, er, hospitality,” Bilbo began, somewhat awkwardly. “I mean even a burglar has his feelings. I have drunk much of your wine and eaten much of your bread.”

"I will take your gift, O Bilbo the Magnificent!" said the king gravely. "And I name you elf-friend and blessed. May your shadow never grow less, or stealing would be too easy!"*
Bilbo let out a relieved breath and a hearty laugh. “Yes, indeed. And look! Our friends from Dale and Erebor approach!”

From the north, Bilbo could see Thorin, most of the company, and Dain, accompanied by his dwarves of the Iron Hills. They all wore great smiles and pulled empty wagons to fill with foodstuffs and supplies. Bilbo politely bowed to Thranduil and left to greet the dwarves.

“Thorin,” Bilbo greeted, a large smile plastered on his face.

“Bilbo,” Thorin greeted in return. “I am pleased to see that you are in better spirits than earlier!”

“Yes, yes. I have been given a bit of good news, but I will let you discover it for yourself.” Thorin raised an eyebrow at his hobbit, but chose not to press any further.

“Greetings Thorin, King under the Mountain, and Bard the Dragon Shooter. I come in friendship, as I have before, bearing gifts of food, seeds, blankets, and supplies.”

“You have my deepest thanks, King Thranduil. Your help is greatly appreciated. Were it not for you and the dwarves of Erebor and the Iron Hills, Dale and the people of Laketown would not be as hale and hearty as you see now.”

Thorin took his turn to offer appreciation of the offering. “Thank you, King Thranduil. This is a generous gift, indeed.” He felt some discomfort receiving aid from the Elvenking, but he had learned that, for the moment, it was necessary for his dwarves to survive and for his kingdom to be rebuilt. Soon enough trade between the dwarves, men, and elves would be strong and equitable. Until then, Thorin would have to practice patience and acceptance of their current lot.

“There is much to be grateful for,” Thorin continued. “We will hold a small celebration tonight, for spring is here and there is peace among our kingdoms. You are both more than welcome to join us in Erebor this night.”

“Splendid,” Thranduil offered a small, but genuine smile to Thorin.

“The celebration will be twofold, for it gladdens me to announce that I will be crowned king of Dale,” Bard added.

Thranduil’s smile grew broader at this. “This news is well-received, my friend.”

“There is no other more deserving than you, Bard the Dragon Shooter. It brings me no end of joy to hear this news! Tonight we shall dine and celebrate the unity that has formed among three kings and their three kingdoms!” Thorin decry.
Preparations were made to ensure that it would be every bit the great celebration that was required of the situation. Thorin happily began thinking of what speech he should give, while Bilbo more than happily thought of all the delectable food to be had in mere hours.

Sated and warm, Bilbo leaned back in his chair with a contented smile on his face, his sullen mood from earlier in the day overshadowed by happiness. The celebratory feast had been a success among men, dwarves, elves, and the hobbit alike. He watched as Bifur signed something in Iglishmêk which resulted in hoots of laughter from Bofur and Nori. Balin and Dwalin were both laughing and merrily recounting tales of the glorious days of Erebor to Bard and Thranduil, each of whom offered up their own tales. Kíli and Fíli sang loudly, occasionally joined by Bofur, Dori, and Ori. On the whole, the company was hale and hearty once again. Bilbo marvelled at the strength of dwarves.

As Bilbo watched the company, so too did Thorin, but the dwarf king’s gaze skirted across the raucous dwarves and settled on his quite hobbit. A smile tugged at the corners of his lips as Bilbo chuckled at one thing or another. Warmth bloomed in Thorin’s chest and he gazed at Bilbo as if he were the reason the sun rose in the morning.

As Thorin moved to sit closer to Bilbo, the hobbit tried in vain to stifle a yawn.

“Tired, Master Baggins?” Thorin raised an eyebrow at him.

Bilbo smirked in turn. “Oh, just a bit overwhelmed by so many merry dwarves.” After a pause he added, “And perhaps a bit drowsy.”

Thorin chuckled. “Aye, there are a fair number, and Dain’s lot can be a trifle rambunctious.”

Just then, Kíli sent something – presumably an empty tankard – flying across the room and the company erupted in shouts and laughter.

Bilbo’s eyebrow shot up as he gave Thorin a pointed look. “What was that you were saying about Dain’s lot?”

Thorin chuckled again. “What say we leave these rambunctious dwarves to their devices? I am a bit tired myself, and I don’t believe we shall be missed.”

“I would follow where you lead, my lord,” Bilbo said cheekily.

Not a single dwarf, save perhaps Balin, noticed that the hobbit and dwarf king had left. Thorin led them not back to the withdrawing room, but up stair cases and through winding halls. All the while Bilbo marvelled at the work that had been accomplished in the scant few months since the mountain had been reclaimed. There were still signs that the mountain had been occupied by a great wyrm for some time, but they were few and becoming fewer. Rubble and dust had been neatly disposed of and cleaned away, leaving magnificent stone work and carvings to be seen throughout the halls. Despite the passing of untold years, Thorin knew his way around the mountain as if he had never left. Bilbo, confident with Thorin’s navigation skills (at least around Erebor) contentedly followed next to his love. The hobbit was unsure of where they were going, but he cared not. He was pleased to be alone and quiet with his dwarf.

Uncounted time passed and at last they arrived in a grand room that looked recently touched by dwarven hands. The floor was clean and the dust wiped from what little furniture remained. The room was lit by skylight and a breeze drifted in through an open door. Thorin made for the door and Bilbo followed him out onto a small balcony. Bilbo’s breath caught in his throat when he looked...
upon the outside world. The sun was just beginning to set, spilling warm pink, red, purple, and yellow hues across the sky. The air was fresh, but held the promise of spring. Bilbo hoped that the last true cold snap had passed and this mild weather would hold.

Their breath made small puffs of white air appear with every exhale. Despite the coming of spring, the air was still chill. Chill enough, in fact, that large snowflakes drifted lazily down from the sky above. At this pace, much time would pass before a blanket of snow would cover the ground. As Thorin wrapped his arm around Bilbo, the pair were equally content in watching the snow cover the lays about Erebor.

“I am glad that you are here, my love,” Thorin whispered, and pulling Bilbo closer to his chest, he bent his head to bury his nose in Bilbo’s curly hair.

Thorin’s voice sent a pleasant shiver up Bilbo’s spine. He closed his eyes and allowed himself to be pulled closer. “And I am glad to be here, my dear.”

A great pale moon overtook the sky and threw silver light on the freshly fallen snow. The loveliness of the moon was unmatched, even in the continuing snow.

Bilbo looked at the Thorin as though he heralded the coming of spring itself. “Thorin –”

“Hey not fair!” A voice called out from below, interrupting Bilbo.

“Fair is fair, and I hit you square in the face!” Another voice answered.

“Oh, you will pay!”

It was the voices of Fíli and Kíli. From their perch high above the North flank of the mountain, Bilbo and Thorin watched as Fíli and Kíli rounded a corner hurling snowballs at one another.

“But brother, I’m infirm,” Fíli mock-wailed and exaggerated a limp. Verily, Fíli had made a nearly complete recovery by this point, and felt comfortable enough to jest with his brother about his previous near-death condition.

“You are not!” Kíli laughed as he tackled his brother into a heap of fresh snow.

Thorin’s arms had come to rest around Bilbo once again and he pulled his hobbit close. “It does my heart well to see them so.”

Bilbo hummed happily and snuggled deeper into Thorin’s hold. He reached a hand up and gently stroked Thorin’s impressive beard. “I love you more than all else in this fair world.”

“Even more than food?” Thorin teased.

Bilbo pulled back and gave Thorin a funny look. “Of course more than food, my dear. I wouldn’t have tramped all over Eriador after you were that not true!”

“Peace, Bilbo. I only tease,” Thorin said and then kissed Bilbo’s forehead. “I love you more than all the wealth that this world has to offer. Your love I value above all else and I shall cherish it until the end of days. I love you, Bilbo Baggins.”

“And I love you, Thorin Oakenshield.”

…
So many have spoken of love. And why should they not? No being, mortal or otherwise, is so lofty as to be above the transcendence of such a feeling. Sublime in every sense of the word, the greatest of earthly pleasures is impossible to adequately describe. It blooms even in the coldest of winters and in the darkest of nights. It fills everything it touches with light and warmth. In the earliest moments of the universe’s waking all that could be found was love and life. And all that will be found again between lovers and friends and all peoples of the world is a soft whispered remembrance of that time.

Chapter End Notes

Well, friends, here we are at the end of all things, so to speak. I began this fic shortly after the first Hobbit film had been released. Now, all three have been released, I have finished one degree, fell in love, and started another degree. It has been a great pleasure to write this fic, and I am eternally grateful to all who have taken time to read and review.

*re-contextualized from Tolkien’s Hobbit. I just really love this scene in the book and I think it’s important, so I wanted to keep it in my fic.

End Notes

And thus begins my second multichapter fic! It is slow-build, but eventually it will be fluffy/angsty/adorable Thilbo.

Translation: Anor valthen, togo laugas lín nestad enin gûr hen (Golden Sun, may your warmth bring healing to this heart). Thanks to Tara’s Sindarin Phrasebook for the translation (http://tara.istad.org/sind-phrases.htm#healing).

Disclaimer: this is a work of fanfiction and all original characters, settings, etc. belong to Tolkien.

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