An Unexpected Proposal

by Eareniel

Summary

As Bilbo sat smoking in his empty hobbit hole, he couldn’t help but wonder – when did his life become so boring? Or better yet – when did his old life stop being enough?

He suspected the answer to that question lay somewhere around the time when he had refused Thorin Oakenshield’s offer of marriage.

Notes

This fic follows (most of) the cannon events of the book, especially regarding Bilbo’s relationship with Thorin (= no hug on Carrock). I’m writing the dwarves with the movie characters in mind, because most of them aren’t very developed in the book.

This will be a very slow, Austen-type romance. There are a lot of issues for them both to work through and I wanted the relationship to be believable. If slow burn is not your thing and you’d prefer to read something smutty, look somewhere else. There are plenty of excellent works on this archive.

Beta by my lovely friend Claire.

Disclaimer: None of this belongs to me. I’m just having some fun borrowing the characters.
Bilbo’s adventures in boredom

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“And he lived happily ever after.”

Bilbo tipped the quill into the ink and brought the tip down to write the final sentence of his book. His hand stopped right above the page, however, hesitating. Somehow, it didn’t feel quite right to write that down.

The quill hovered above the paper in a moment of uncertainty, the ink slowly sliding down the shaft to form a drop at the tip. Bilbo watched the ink accumulate with a strange, dreamlike sort of detachment.

At the last moment before the drop could fall and smear across the page he pulled his hand away, letting the ink spill back into the inkwell. He sat back and ran a hand over his face.

So much for finishing the book.

He stood up and went to the window, stretching his arms above his head until his back made a satisfying pop. A light breeze blew through the open window, carrying the scent of lilacs and violets.

Had it really been three years since the day Gandalf the Grey came to his door with an offer of adventure? To Bilbo, that morning seemed a lifetime ago.

Sometimes Bilbo awoke in the morning almost convinced that the whole quest to Erebor had just been a long dream. On those days Bilbo visited the locked chest in his study, where he kept all the keepsakes from their journey, and spent long moments holding the Sting in his hands to remind himself that he - Bilbo Baggins, hobbit of the Shire – had indeed seen trolls and battled orcs and talked to a dragon.

Bilbo hadn’t kept much from the journey – just his little sword, the mithril mail and a few trinkets from the dragon hoard. Since he had given his share of the treasure to Bard (and even if he hadn’t, he wouldn’t have been able to take it all home, anyway), there hadn’t been much for him to take. On the way back he had been briefly tempted to dig out the chest in the troll hoard, but in the end decided against it. What would he do with so much gold, anyway? He had little use for treasure, rich as he already was.

His morning writing finished, Bilbo cooked himself lunch, dusted the sitting room and took a stroll around the garden. He left the house an hour before the afternoon teatime and went down to the Hobbiton market to buy some bread and cheese for breakfast. Noting that he was running low on milk, he bought that as well and also two quarts of flour, since he planned to bake some cookies the next afternoon.

The matron behind the stall watched him with eager, curious eyes.

“Preparing for company, Mr Baggins?”

“No, Mrs Hardbottle, this is just for me.” He gave her a polite, if a little strained smile. “I ran out of flour yesterday and need to restock.” He counted the change and started to turn away, but her voice forced him to turn back.
“What will you be baking?” She leaned forward over the counter. “I made the most wonderful meat pies yesterday. You should try making them too, they are so filling, ideal for lunch. I’ll give you a recipe if you like. The secret is in the spices, you see...”

She went on about her achievements in baking and Bilbo found himself unwittingly drawn into a conversation about cakes and custard. When he finally managed to untangle himself from her grasp, he discovered that his favourite cheese was already gone and the butcher had sold out his best stock.

Bilbo’s mood matched the grey rainclouds overhead when he started his long journey up the hill with a heavy basket in hand, having refused Ludo Boffin’s offer to carry the groceries for him.

Later that evening, as Bilbo sat smoking in front of the fireplace in his empty hobbit hole with nothing to do, he couldn’t help but wonder – when did his life become so boring? Or better yet – when did his old life stop being enough?

He suspected the answer to that question lay somewhere around the time when he had refused Thorin Oakenshield’s offer of marriage.

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Bilbo made it a point not to think about that day very often, since the memory made him angry and embarrassed at the same time. This night, however, with May just around the corner and the smell of smoke hanging in the air, it was impossible not to remember.

With a grimace, Bilbo extinguished his pipe, his appetite for pipe-weed now entirely gone. He walked to his bedroom, deliberately avoiding looking at the kitchen and dining room, and laid down on the bed, staring at the ceiling.

It was a long time before he fell asleep that night but when he finally did, he found himself in a now painfully familiar dream:

Bilbo limped toward the tent, the freshly stitched wound in his side throbbing with every breath. Balin had come to find him in the healing tent, his face pale and serious.

“Thorin has requested your presence. He’s not well.”

And so Bilbo went, his imagination providing him with vivid images of Thorin on his death bed, drawing his last breath. He had to stop a few feet from Thorin’s tent and lean on a nearby post, waiting for a minute until the flickering lights in front of his eyes disappeared.

Óin sat in front of the tent with a wooden bowl in his lap, mixing some kind of foul-smelling green concoction. Bilbo gave him a friendly nod.

“How is Thorin?”

“He’ll be fine.” The dwarf assured him. “For a moment there, I was worried he won’t make it, but the elves gave him something and it worked like a charm. Give him a few weeks and he will be back out there, hunting orcs.”

Bilbo closed his eyes as he felt relief like a wave fill his chest, flooding away some of the worry and unease he had felt since the moment he had left the company at the wall. Thorin will be fine, thank Valar.

Óin continued. “I told him to sleep, but he’s stubborn. Said he had to talk to you. Probably wants to
apologize for the scene on the wall.” He leaned closer. “To be honest, I’m surprised that you are willing to see him at all.”

Bilbo just shrugged, not willing to go into an explanation of his motives. Óin seemed to accept that, gesturing for Bilbo to enter the tent.

Thorin’s eyes opened when Bilbo came in, focusing on him in a flash of blue.

“Marry me,” Thorin said, his voice raspy.

Bilbo’s mouth fell open. He had been called away from the infirmary, battered and bloody and barely able to walk, for this?

“What?” He was sure he had misheard. Thorin couldn’t have said what Bilbo thought he had just said. “You want me to marry you?” he said slowly, tasting each word as it left his mouth. It still sounded ridiculous.

“Yes,” Thorin nodded. He had some difficulty making the movement, because his head was wrapped with what looked like a mountain of bandages.

Bilbo took an unsteady step back. Óin had apparently forgotten to mention that Thorin had taken a hard hit on the head and was now talking utter nonsense as a result.

“No.” Since it sounded rather weak and unconvincing, he decided to repeat it. “Thank you for the offer, but no.” He shook his head for good measure to make his opinion on the matter eminently clear.

Thorin frowned.

“You refuse, then?”

Bilbo gave him an incredulous look.

“Of course I do. How did you even get such an idea in the first place?”

“I thought-“ Thorin paused, reconsidering. “I see now that I was wrong to assume that such a persuasion existed on your side.” He tilted his head in consideration. “May I at least know the reasons for your refusal of my offer?”

“My reasons,” Bilbo shook his head, incredulous. “Well, I suppose it’s only fair.” He took a deep breath, part of his mind still feeling disbelief that this situation was really happening.

“Thorin,” he began, “the last time we saw each other, you threatened to kill me. You held me above an abyss with the full intention of throwing me off a wall.” He enunciated each word carefully to remind Thorin of his actions in case he had forgotten about it, and felt a small thrill of satisfaction when the dwarf flinched at the description.

Now that he was forced to remember the whole ordeal, Bilbo’s anger started to rise. He didn’t bother to try to suppress it, as he felt his ire was righteous. He took a step closer to the bed without even realising it.

“I may forgive you for that eventually, but certainly not today. I do not take kindly to threats.” His face hardened. “And I do not care that you were under the thrall of gold-fever at the time. It may have passed for now, but who is to say it will not come back eventually? I do not fancy being dropped from one of those high pathways in Erebor just because you’re cross with me some day.”
Thorin looked horrified at the idea. “I would never-“

“Can you guarantee that you will not again abandon reason at the sight of a pile of gold?” Bilbo didn’t wait for Thorin’s answer, knowing it already. “You can hardly blame me for not having the slightest inclination to accept your offer after what you have done to me.”

He turned to leave, but Thorin’s voice stopped him in his tracks.

“Is this what you think of me?” His voice was quiet, but there was a darker undertone in it. Bilbo couldn’t quite pinpoint it. Anger? Resentment?

Bilbo turned back. “Well, yes.” He shrugged. Thorin apparently still wasn’t satisfied with his reasoning. If he wanted honesty, he would have it.

“To be quite honest, you did not make a very favourable first impression and since then you have done little to improve on that. From the start, you have been nothing but rude and arrogant, treating me with scorn and condescension. You only started to treat me more kindly after I helped you escape from the elvish prison, and that was still only a few steps above civility. The moment something didn’t go your way, you went back to treating me with disdain. I am sorry if I find it a little hard to believe that you have held some kind of ardent regard for me all this time, disguised under the contempt.”

Under normal circumstances, Bilbo would never be so blunt, but he was achy and tired and angry at Thorin for reminding him of the horror he had felt when he had dangled from a wall.

Thorin scowled at him from his position on the bed, visibly displeased with both Bilbo and his own forced passivity.

“So this is the answer I get,” he said, each word like a shard of ice, “after all I have done for you, all I have given you.” Before Bilbo could make the protest that he didn’t recall Thorin giving him much besides the mithril coat, Thorin continued. “I suppose I should not be surprised. After all, my decision to ask you goes entirely against tradition, propriety and my own better judgement.”

“Propriety? Better judgement?” Bilbo’s voice rose an octave. “Why did you ask me at all, then?”

“I am beginning to wonder that myself.” Thorin frowned. “I see that you are determined in your decision to refuse my offer.”

Bilbo nodded. “I am.”

“Then we have nothing further to discuss,” Thorin said. “I believe it will be preferable if you leave Erebor at your earliest convenience. You are no longer welcome here.”

Bilbo felt the finality of those words settle around him like a heavy cloak. He couldn’t say he was sorry to be leaving the stench of dragon waste and piles of corpses behind, but he had hoped to spend more time with his friends.

“As you wish. Farewell then, Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain. I am no longer at your service.” With a small bow he left the tent and never looked back.

In his haste he almost ran into Balin, who was standing right outside the tent, shaking his head.

“Well, laddie, you sure gave him a piece of you mind.”

Bilbo suddenly felt embarrassed by the whole scene. He hoped nobody else had listened in on their
conversation.

“How much did you hear?”

“Enough.” The old dwarf sighed. “Not one of his better moments, I’m afraid. It is too bad you have to leave. Everyone was secretly hoping that you would decide to stay in Erebor permanently.”

Bilbo gave a small, humourless laugh.

“You know, I think I might have enjoyed living in Erebor. I wasn’t planning on it, but the idea did cross my mind once or twice before. I guess we will never find out now.” He looked around. “Have you seen Gandalf? I was hoping he would help me get home.”

After that the memory stopped and dissolved into dreamy confusion where Bilbo spent days searching for Gandalf in the camp, which eventually transformed into Mirkwood, where the trees kept talking to him in elvish, telling him that he couldn’t go home because the squirrels had forbidden it and then a giant bear appeared out of nowhere and started chasing him.

Just as he was about to be eaten by the beast, the gigantic maw closing around him in endless lines of teeth, he woke up, heart racing, hair plastered to his forehead with sweat.

It was a long time before he fell asleep again.

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Bilbo got up that morning in a cranky mood, which didn’t improve when he saw the rain outside his window. The day passed at a snail’s pace. All of a sudden his spacious hobbit hole felt small and cramped and the walls of the tunnels seemed to close down on him when he walked through them.

He tried to read, but quickly lost interest in the familiar stories. He decided to bake wafers instead of cookies and gave half of the batch to the Gamgees. Since his book was already finished, there wasn’t much for him to do.

By the time the sun started to descend behind the horizon he gave up and went to fish out his old travelling pack. He had everything put together in less than an hour. His hand hesitated over the hilt of the sword, but in the end he decided to take only his walking stick.

The next day Bilbo set out at the crack of dawn, leaving a note on the door. He soon fell into a comfortable pace, enjoying the way his lungs filled with fresh air and the slight burn in muscles that hadn’t seen exercise for a while.

He arrived in Tuckborough at nightfall, tired to the bone but happier than he had been in a long time. He had almost forgotten how good it felt to be out on the road, with endless sky over his head and fresh grass under his feet.

He spent a few days with the Tooks, visiting relatives and entertaining children with tales of his exploits. When he set out again two weeks later, it was with a promise of adventure that he no longer scoffed at.

Two of his younger Took cousins, Isembold and Fortinbras, stopped by Bag-End at the beginning of June, talking excitedly about the old watchtower on Weathertop. Since Bilbo had already seen it twice and knew the way, he graciously offered to serve as their guide.

They enjoyed a pleasant fortnight on the road, travelling east without any disruptions. They made a camp at the foot of the hill, tied their ponies to a nearby tree and started the long climb up the hill,
because both young hobbits insisted on seeing the ancient ruins.

After much exclaiming and running around, Bilbo finally managed to convince the boys to climb down from the rocks and head back to the camp. They planned to spend the night under the hill and start their return journey the next morning.

As they descended the last slope of the hill, their camp came into view and Bilbo saw their ponies rearing in fright, trying to escape from the huge wolf-like creature that was advancing on them. If someone asked Bilbo why he had done what he did, he wouldn’t have been able to answer.

Feeling as if someone else was controlling his limbs, Bilbo stepped forward, drawing his little sword.

“Oi, that’s my pony, you ugly beast!” With his other hand he picked up a rock and threw it at the wolf’s head, drawing its attention away from the horses.

The warg turned, his enormous jaw falling open a little in anticipation at the sight of new prey. Bilbo braced his feet and raised his sword, shoving the younger hobbits behind his back without thinking. He vainly tried to remember Dwalin’s lessons in sword-fighting, but the roar of blood in his head was wiping away everything except anger and fear.

The beast started running towards them, its hind legs bending in preparation for a jump. Time seemed to slow down around Bilbo as he watched the warg take off the ground, its huge head coming closer. Bilbo was vaguely reminded of the bear dream he’d had a few weeks ago, the two images overlapping in his head to form one gigantic line of sharp teeth. He had been powerless then, but he wasn’t now. Now he had Sting.

Bilbo stood his ground as the warg landed almost on him, the force that had powered his jump now bearing him down onto the hobbit’s sword, driving it deeper into the roof of its open mouth. The warg gave one last angry growl before it shuddered and stilled, inertia propelling its body forward until it landed on Bilbo, who was still holding onto his sword and hadn’t been fast enough to jump aside.

The force of the impact knocked his breath out of him and he lay on his back, half buried under the warg’s head and stared at the clouds above, his mind spinning with adrenaline and disbelief as the events of the last half minute finally caught up with him. Had he really deliberately provoked a warg? And killed it?

Twin cries of concern roused him from his reverie and soon two heads appeared over him, the hobbits staring at him in agitation.

“Are you all right, Bilbo?”

“I think so.”

Bilbo raised his head and tried to move his arms. Both appeared to be functional. Good. One of them was still buried in the warg’s muzzle, but luckily wasn’t broken. With some help from his friends, he managed to wiggle from underneath the carcass, noting with some displeasure that his clothes were torn and sprayed with the beast’s blood. He was otherwise unharmed, thanks to the mithril coat hidden under his clothes, which had managed to withstand the pressure of warg teeth.

The full impact of what he had done didn’t quite drive home for him until he was standing next to the corpse, looking down at the slain beast. This close, he could finally take in the sheer size of the creature.

“Did I really kill that?”
The hobbits were staring at him with wide eyes, their gaze sliding between Bilbo and the warg in a mixture of awe and disbelief.

“I think you did, Bilbo,” said Isembold. “I’ve never seen anything like it. What is this?”

“It’s a warg. A huge wolf from the northern mountains,” he added in explanation. “I’ve seen them before.”

He finally gathered his wits enough go looking for his sword. Sting was lodged deep in the wolf’s skull and it took him several minutes of wrenching before he could pull it out, scratching his hand on one of the warg’s canines in the process. He wiped the sword on the grass and sheathed it.

“I think it would be better if we headed home straight away. These creatures like to hunt in packs. There could be others around.” The two hobbits looked around in alarm, scrambling to gather their things.

Packing the camp gave them plenty time to recover from their shock, so when they were all ready to go, Fortinbras insisted on taking a souvenir from the warg to have a proof of their adventure that they could show at home. Reluctantly, Bilbo lent them Sting and the boys scampered off to cut off the wolf’s largest tooth and claw.

Now that the worst of their fear had passed, their Took blood prevailed and they appeared very excited about Bilbo’s feat of bravery. They came back a few minutes later, each of them holding a few fangs as long as their arm. At Bilbo’s urging they stuffed them in their backpacks and mounted their ponies, which had finally calmed down from their earlier fright.

Later, when they had left Weathertop far behind and the setting sun was bathing the countryside fiery red, Isembold turned to him, his head cocked in curiosity.

“Is this what all your adventures are like?”

Bilbo sighed.

“I would love to say no, but I’m afraid that would be mere wishful thinking on my part.”

“So all that stuff with the trolls and spiders is true?” asked Fortinbras.

Bilbo nodded.

“Wow.”

Seeing the identical looks of hero worship start to form on their faces, Bilbo decided to put a stop to any fool ideas they might conceive in their heads.

“And before you ask – no, I am not taking you to see the stone trolls. One stray warg was plenty for me to handle, thank you very much.”

They both deflated a bit but recovered quickly, their excitement over the death of the warg lasting all the way to Shire.

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Their trip had some unexpected consequences for Bilbo’s standing among the hobbits. While before they had dismissed his tales about trolls and dragons as fanciful nonsense and products of an addled mind, now they had to admit that he maybe wasn’t a liar after all.
The young Took hadn’t wasted any time upon their arrival before they headed for the nearest pub to tell everyone about their exploits. Despite Bilbo’s numerous protests, they took to calling him “Bilbo Wolfslayer” and showing the fangs to anyone who displayed a hint of interest in their story. The Took part of the family, especially, was very impressed by the tale of their trip and soon enough, Bilbo found his hobbit-hole full of curious youngsters, begging for a story.

His newfound popularity didn’t sit well with everyone. Some of his neighbours kept shooting him mistrustful glances and a few of the older hobbits even started to close their doors when he passed. Mrs Hardbottle outright refused to sell him groceries. Funnily enough, Bilbo didn’t find the last one much of a hardship.

“Tell us about the dragon, Uncle Bilbo!”

The youngsters were once again camped in his front garden, their curly little heads turned in his direction expectantly.

“Did you really kill it by yourself?” asked one of the children sitting at his feet.

“Aye, Bilbo, tell them how you slew a dragon,” said a familiar voice by the gate.

“Bofur!” Bilbo jumped to his feet. Bofur grinned at the assembled hobbitlings, who were staring at him in awe.

“Bofur the Dwarf at your service.” He made a deep bow before them, sweeping his hat in a wide arc.

“Are you really a dwarf, mister?” asked one of the little girls.

“Of course I am a dwarf,” Bofur sounded affronted. “Don’t you see the beard?” He tugged at his chin. Several of the children giggled.

“Children,” Bilbo said, “could you leave us alone for a while? I haven’t seen my friend in a long time and I would like to talk to him.” He leaned closer to them. “I promise mister Bofur will be more than happy to tell you plenty of stories tomorrow.”

The children pouted but left eventually, throwing curious glances over their shoulder. Bilbo would bet his mithril coat that some of them would soon come to spy beneath the kitchen window.

He gestured for Bofur to come inside, closing the door behind them. The moment the door shut Bofur stepped forward and gave him a brief hug, which Bilbo happily returned.

“It’s nice to see you again, Bilbo.”

“You too, Bofur.” He led the way into the kitchen. “How much food should I prepare?”

“Bombur is right around the corner,” Bofur said, grinning.

“Then it is a good thing that I have replenished all my cheese.”

They both laughed, the easy camaraderie settling down between them like it had never left. Bilbo started setting the table for lunch with Bofur’s help and they chatted about the dwarf’s journey from Erebor. Bombur came in a few minutes later, still puffing from the climb up the hill.

“Should I expect anyone else?” Bilbo asked him.

Bombur shook his head.
“No, it’s just the two of us. We’re going to the Blue Mountains to help our mother with moving to Erebor and to get our stuff. Some of the others may pass this way eventually, but we’re the first to go back. Everyone else is busy with the rebuilding of Erebor.”

“And how is that going?” Bilbo poured them each a mug of ale.

“Dragon did a lot of damage,” Bofur’s normally cheerful demeanour dimmed a little. “We spent weeks just cleaning out all the corpses, both from the battlefield and the inside of the mountain. Not the most pleasant of jobs. Do you have any idea how much orcs stink when they’re dead?”

“Even more than they do when they are alive?” Bilbo chanced. Bofur gave an amused laugh.

“You guessed that right. It was disgusting. We couldn’t burn the corpses because we needed the wood for the winter, so we just dug out huge pits and threw them in there. Some of them were already rotting.”

Bilbo cleared his throat pointedly, waving his piece of roast in the air.

“So, the rebuilding of Erebor?”

“Oh, right,” Bofur had the grace to look a bit embarrassed about his choice of table talk. “We started with the living quarters, since those were mostly intact and worked from there...”

He spent the next few hours telling Bilbo about all that had happened in Erebor since his departure. In return Bilbo told them about his own (largely uninteresting) life in the Shire. Now that they had light, both dwarves showed a great interest in Bilbo’s dwelling, persuading him to give them a tour of the place.

Bombur paused by the mantelpiece, picking something up.

“Is this a warg tooth?”

“Yes.”

“Where did you get it?”

“Well, that’s quite a long story,” Bilbo started, but before he could say anything more, there was a brief knock and the door opened, two hobbit lads stumbling in.

“You’ll never guess what we discovered, Bilbo!” One announced loudly.

The dwarfs exchanged a glance before looking at Bilbo. The hobbit shrugged in apology.

“I’m sorry. I completely forgot they were supposed to come for a visit today.” He called into the hall: “Boys, come here. I have some visitors that may interest you.”

The lads came at once, peering curiously at Bilbo’s companions.

“Are these the dwarves that travelled with you?”

“Some of them, yes,” Bilbo nodded. “This is Bofur and Bombur.” He pointed respectively.

“At your service.” The two dwarves made perfectly synchronized bows.

“And these two rascals are my younger Took cousins, Fortinbras and Isembold,” Bilbo introduced. “I made the mistake of taking them on one of my trips once and they have been pestering me ever
“Oi!” Fortinbras protested. “You like our company.”

“Did you know that Bilbo killed a huge warg all by himself?” Isembold chimed in, eager to impress the dwarves. “We saw it.”

“We really did,” Fortinbras nodded vigorously. “He’s got the teeth to prove it.”

“Is that what these are?” Bombur picked up one of the fangs.

“Well, if you wanted to hear the warg story, you couldn’t ask for more enthusiastic storytellers,” Bilbo said with a smile. The two lads beamed at him and scampered to the kitchen to get some extra chairs.

The dwarves watched with amusement as the lads made them all sit down so that they could “tell the story properly”. It was clear that they were taking special care with the narration, occasionally getting up to act out the more dramatic moments. Bilbo watched from the doorway, entertained by the whole scene.

The rest of the day passed pleasantly, with plenty of food and laughter. The young hobbits decided to spend the night at Bag-End and they all drank long into the night.

Since it seemed the next day that the hobbits were determined to stay for a while, Bilbo decided to do something about it. He liked their company well enough, but he wanted to spend some time just with the dwarves, knowing they would leave for Blue Mountains in a few days’ time.

“Have you ever been to the Old Forest on the borders of Buckland?” he asked them at breakfast. They both shook their heads. Bilbo leaned closer over the table to give his whisper the right conspiratorial tone.

“The folks say that the trees there can talk and even move. Paths change at random and when you walk far enough, you can hear whispers around you.”

“Is that true?”

“Well, the elves seem to think so,” Bilbo didn’t feel the slightest bit guilty for invoking that magic word.

“Really?” They were looking at each other with growing excitement. Bilbo congratulated himself on a job well done.

“Really,” Bilbo said. “I have never been brave enough to go very deep into the Old Forest, but I can tell you that it’s almost scarier than Mirkwood.”

“Brilliant.” They jumped up from the dinner table, cleaning up their plates. “We’ll get going, then.” They started towards the door.

“One more thing,” Bilbo called after them. “Go during daytime. The forest isn’t safe at night. I would hate to have to go rescue you because you got caught by an evil tree.”

“Bye then!” they called and they were gone, the door shutting behind them.

Bofur gave him an amused grin.
“That wasn’t very nice of you, Bilbo, lying to them like that.”

“I wasn’t lying,” Bilbo said, buttering his bread. “All of it is true, to an extent. The forest really is creepy. I wouldn’t set a foot there, especially not after Mirkwood.” They all grimaced. “I think I have been cured of my love for forests for a good while.”

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It wasn’t until evening the next day that Bilbo finally found the courage to breach a subject that had been weighing on his mind since he had left Erebor.

“You’re not angry with me? For leaving like I did?” he asked them quietly as they sat by the fire smoking, the sky behind the window an inky black. Bofur looked up from the small statuette he was whittling.

“Should we be?” Before Bilbo could answer, the dwarf continued in a gentle tone. “Bilbo, we understand. The battle was hard on everyone, but it must have been terrifying for a peace-loving creature like you. We were all disappointed when you left, but understood why you felt you had to get away.”

He walked over to the hobbit and laid a hand on his shoulder.

“We don’t blame you.”

Bilbo closed his eyes in relief for a second, before giving Bofur a grateful smile.

“Thank you, Bofur. Knowing that means a lot to me. I was worried that I had lost my friends when I left Erebor like that. It is nice to know that I was wrong.”

“You never lost us,” Bofur assured him. “Thorin may have treated you horribly because of the Arkenstone, but the rest of us have always been on your side.”

Bilbo gave the hand on his shoulder a grateful pat.

“I’m glad to hear that.” He stood up and put his pipe on the mantelpiece. “I think I’ll turn in for the night. I was planning to make some pies tomorrow. Do you like blueberry pies?”

Bofur smiled. “I love them.”

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They ended up staying for another three days. Bofur quickly became a favourite of the local children, because he was able to do the troll voices much more convincingly than Bilbo. Bombur won the hearts of the local matrons with his fruit tarts. Bilbo wasn’t the only one who was sorry to see them leave.

“Mind if we stop by again?” Bofur asked. “We’re leaving the Blue Mountains with the caravan in spring. There is plenty of time to come for a visit in the meantime.”

“I will be happy to let you stay for as long as you wish,” Bilbo assured them. “Come by anytime.”

They gave him one last round of farewells and left, their figures getting smaller as they walked down the hill.

Bilbo watched them go with a smile. It was good to have his friends back.
Chapter End Notes

This is a WIP. The final work will be around 80 000 words long. I will be posting chapters three times a week. 12 chapters are already written, so I am fairly confident that I will be able to keep to my intended posting schedule.

I admit that the initial idea for this was shamelessly inspired by Pride and Prejudice, especially the proposal scene. This story is however not an adaptation (!) and the rest of the fic stands on its own. I only borrowed the idea that two people must first confront their own pride and admit their mistakes before any meaningful romance can take place.

Next chapter will be up on September 12.
It wasn’t until after the dwarves had left and Bilbo was washing the dishes after them that he realised just how much he had missed his friends.

Thinking about Bofur and Bombur inevitably brought on thoughts of the others as well. He wondered: how was old Balin? Was Ori happy in Erebor’s majestic library? Were Fíli and Kíli still as carefree as they used to be, or had the burden of ruling a kingdom forced them to finally mature a bit? Had the dwarves of Erebor managed to get rid of the dragon smell Óin had complained so much about?

Did Glóin’s wife come to Erebor yet, or was he still waiting for her and his son? Did Dwalin command as much respect among the dwarves from the Iron Hills as he had within the company? Was Dori able to eat all of his favourite foods, or was Erebor still operating on a rationing system? Had Bifur finally built the fishing cottage he had always dreamt about? Was Nori still as sneaky and mysterious as he’d ever been?

He would have to ask Bofur when he next came over for a visit. The merry dwarf had promised to come at Midwinter, much to the delight of the local hobbitlings and the chagrin of their mothers, who were afraid that the dwarf would corrupt their children into adventuring.

In the few days that Bofur and Bombur had spent at Bilbo’s home they had talked plenty, but there was still so much that Bilbo wanted to know about everyone. The three years of separation had been a long time and plenty of things had happened. One visit hardly gave him enough time to hear about all the things that he had missed.

But most of all (even though it cost him no small amount of pride to admit it), Bilbo wondered about Thorin.

Had the king really meant his offer, or had it been (as Bilbo was starting to believe) a by-product of his fever? Was he still angry at Bilbo for rejecting him? Bilbo reckoned that he probably was, if only to satisfy his injured pride. Dwarves could hold grudges for an awfully long time and Thorin had already demonstrated with the dragon that in the discipline of grudge-holding he was Erebor’s ruling champion.

Winter passed slowly.

Bilbo translated two books of elvish poetry into the Common Tongue, embroidered four cushions and a winter cloak and taught himself to play the flute with some help from Bofur, who came for a visit a few days before midwinter.

The dwarf stayed for full two weeks this time, regaling Bilbo and the young Tooks with the tales of Fíli and Kíli’s adventures in mischief. He was happy to answer Bilbo’s plentiful questions about Erebor, but looked a bit taken aback when Bilbo refused his invitation to go to Erebor with him.

Bilbo was now convinced that the dwarves had no idea about what had happened between him and Thorin back then, which made it all the more difficult to come up with a plausible explanation for why he didn’t want to go to Erebor.
He would be grateful to Thorin for keeping their unseemly scene a secret if it wasn’t for the fact that the dwarves also lived under the assumption that Thorin had called Bilbo into his tent to apologize for his actions. Bilbo had no idea what Thorin had told them, but the dwarves obviously thought that the two of them had settled their differences and parted on friendly terms.

Thorin’s action put Bilbo in an awkward position – either make increasingly implausible excuses to his friends for why he wasn’t able to visit them, or admit that he had been banished from Erebor and therefore accuse their king of being a liar. Bilbo felt his old anger rise at the thought. Not only had Thorin cut him off from his friends, but he was complicating his life even now, forcing Bilbo to lie to people who trusted him. Bilbo thought that it was a good thing that Thorin was hundreds of miles away, because at that moment Bilbo felt a strong urge to punch him, king or not.

He managed to make his excuses to Bofur sound convincing enough, but inwardly cursed Thorin for each of the disappointed looks Bofur gave him for the rest of his stay. When the dwarf finally left, Bag-End felt even emptier than before.

*****

Bilbo was out of the door at the first sign of spring, going for a cross-country walk around the South-Farthing. He came back just in time to say his goodbyes to Bofur and Bombur, who were helping guard the caravan headed for Erebor. They tried to convince him once more to join them and it took all of his willpower not to give in and go with them. He watched them ride away with a great deal of regret.

Midsummer brought Gandalf, who invited himself into Bilbo’s home without so much as “by your leave” and then sat gazing at Bilbo with those all-knowing eyes while Bilbo waited for the tea to boil.

“I have stopped by Erebor this spring,” Gandalf began. “I bring letters from your friends. They were quite adamant that I should deliver them at once and kept asking me why you haven’t come to visit them.”

“I can’t go to Erebor, Gandalf. You know very well why,” Bilbo shook his head, pouring the hot water over the tea leaves.

“My dear Bilbo, I am sure Thorin has forgiven you already.”

“Forgiven-“

Bilbo took a moment to fully appreciate the irony that even Gandalf, who had been the one to help him leave Erebor back then, apparently thought that he needed Thorin’s forgiveness. He bit back a stream of slightly hysterical laughter that wanted to bubble out of his throat.

To this day, Thorin hadn’t apologised to him for threatening to kill him. Bilbo thought that the few insults he himself had thrown at the dwarf after the ridiculous proposal paled next to the gravity of Thorin’s actions, but everyone else seemed to be convinced otherwise.

Either Gandalf had very selective memory of events, or Thorin himself was a wizard, capable of manipulating people’s thoughts according to his wishes. Since both of those options seemed equally ridiculous, it was more likely that Gandalf was planning something, once again trying to manoeuvre Bilbo into something he probably wouldn’t like. For the sake of appeasing the wizard, Bilbo suppressed his irritation and decided to play along.

“Let go of a grudge? Thorin? Gandalf, I humiliated him. I may not have done it publicly, but I
insulted him nonetheless. He will never forgive me.”

Gandalf didn’t say anything to that. Instead he reached for his pipe and started to create all sorts of fantastic beasts out of smoke. Bilbo let him be. The less they had to talk about Thorin, the better.

Bilbo offered the wizard lodgings for the night, since he needed to read and reply to all the letters from his friends and hoped that Gandalf would deliver his letters for him. He felt a little ridiculous for using the mighty wizard like a common postal pigeon, but since there was no other way to get his letters across the Misty Mountains, he was very relieved when Gandalf agreed, albeit grudgingly.

In July Bilbo finally succumbed to the never-ending pleas of his younger Took relatives and they set out on a grand journey to the Sea. Bofur had assured him back in December that the road west from Shire was completely safe, so Bilbo was willing to take a few of the tween-aged hobbits that hadn’t been allowed to travel with him previously.

Travelling with a group of hobbits wasn’t quite the same as travelling with dwarves had been (for one, there were much more frequent stops for food), but it was nonetheless pleasant to have some company for the journey. The young hobbits were good-natured and curious, asking plenty of questions about elves and dwarves and the Sea that Bilbo tried to answer to the best of his ability.

Gazing at the waves, Bilbo thought that he finally understood a bit why all the elves in those stories were always so eager to go sailing to Valinor. Despite his usual dislike of rivers and lakes of all kinds, he had to admit that the Sea had its own kind of beauty.

He grew to dislike the Sea soon enough, after he was forced to pull a few of the unruly hobbits from the waves, and was more than happy to turn his back on it and leave it far behind.

*****

Autumn came, painting the trees in the Shire with a beautiful hue of colours. Harvest was particularly good and plentiful that year and Bilbo was pleased to restock his cellar with some quality wine. He took a few more trips while weather still allowed and wasn’t too pleased when the October rains finally forced him to stop his travelling and stay inside.

On one such evening, when the rain was whipping against the window and the trees outside growled under the force of wind, there was a knock on his door. Bilbo dismissed it the first time as a product of his imagination, but then the knock sounded again, making Bilbo jump from his chair and hurry to the door. Who could be outside in such dreadful weather?

“Nori,” he breathed in surprise when he opened the door.

“At your service,” the dwarf said, his carefully maintained hair plastered to his head.

Bilbo quickly stepped aside to let him pass. Nori was so soaked that when he stepped into Bilbo’s hallway, there were rivulets of water dripping from his clothes and hair, forming a small puddle beneath his feet.

“Stay here,” Bilbo told him, “I’ll be back in a minute.” Carefully sidestepping the water, he hurried to the bathroom to draw a hot bath for his visitor and put a kettle on the flames. He belatedly realised that he still had one of Bofur’s cloaks that the dwarf had forgotten here on his last visit and took it out, hanging it next to the bath.

He was back in the hall in a matter of minutes and found that Nori had already taken off his shoes and was in the process of peeling wet socks off his feet.
“Come, Nori, I have drawn you a bath. If you don’t get out of those sodden clothes, you will catch a cold. What were you thinking, travelling in this weather?”

“I was on my way to the Blue Mountains,” Nori said. “The rain caught me off guard. Luckily, I wasn’t far from Hobbiton, so I decided to pay you a visit.”

“My hallway can always do with more dwarves,” Bilbo assured him with a small smile. “We can clean the mud later. For now, you need to warm up.”

He left Nori in the bathroom and went to prepare the tea and some supper. He had already had dinner, but as his father had used to say, there was never a bad time for a meal.

Nori came in half an hour later, wearing Bofur’s cloak as a bath robe. Bilbo was a little taken aback when he saw that the dwarf had unbraided all of his hair, letting it hang down his back. He had never seen Nori look so informal before. It warmed Bilbo to realise that this was the dwarf’s way of showing that he trusted Bilbo to keep him safe in his home.

Bilbo ladled him a big bowl of soup that he had just made, putting a whole loaf of bread on the table. After his experience with Bombur he knew that there was no point of slicing it. While Nori ate, Bilbo went to the bathroom and gathered the dwarf’s clothes, hanging them around the fireplace to dry.

“Thank you,” Nori told him when he sat back down at the table.

“It was the least I could do,” Bilbo replied, reaching for a scone. Now that he didn’t have anything to busy himself with, he felt strangely self-conscious in Nori’s presence. In all those months they had spent on the journey, the two of them had never talked much. Bilbo had always been closer to Balin and Bofur and Ori, while Nori had kept to himself, rarely speaking to anyone beside his brothers.

“How are things in Erebor?” Bilbo asked, keen to fill the silence. “I had last heard from everyone in the letters Gandalf brought me, but that was almost six months ago.”

“Erebor is doing well. Bofur’s caravan arrived a few weeks before I set out. Everyone was eager to hear about you. Fíli and Kíli especially, were very interested in your wolf-hunting adventures.” He gave Bilbo an amused look.

“That was an accident,” Bilbo muttered, pouring himself more tea. “My cousins have blown the story out of proportion.”

“I wonder about that,” Nori said quietly. Bilbo used the lull in conversation as an opportunity to clean up the plates and bring a few bottles of wine from the cellar.

“Have you been travelling again this year?” Nori asked when Bilbo sat down again, handing the dwarf a goblet.

“ Mostly short trips around the Shire, to stretch my legs, but in summer I took a few of the hobbits to see the Grey Havens,” he smiled at the memory. “It’s a beautiful sight, even for someone who hates boats of all kinds.”

Nori chuckled indulgently.

“I know what you mean. It’s all a bit too elvish for me, but very pretty nonetheless. The Havens aren’t far from the dwarven city where we used to live. When Ori was little, me and Dori had to take him there every year for his birthday, to look at the ships. Our little brother has always been fond of elves. I have no idea why.”
"How is he? Still camped in the library?"

"Pretty much," Nori nodded, smiling. "After a few weeks we managed to convince him to sleep in his quarters, but he spends the rest of the time buried in his books, happy as a squirrel."

"I can imagine." Bilbo poured himself another glass. "And Dori? What does he do?"

"Thorin named him an overseer over the trade with Dale. He gets to inspect all the produce and merchandise that they send our way and approve it. Just before I left, he was haggling with some elves over a bunch of fabrics. He was right in his element."

Bilbo chuckled at the image.

"That sounds like him. What about you? Have you been named an ambassador or something like that?"

"Something like that, yes." Nori didn’t meet his eyes. Bilbo let him be. If the dwarf didn’t want to tell him, it was none of his business to pry.

After that the talk turned back to Bilbo and he soon found himself sharing stories of his exploits, drawing a few laughs from Nori. Bilbo became more self-aware when he realised that he was sharing even the stories he had sworn never to tell, because he found them too embarrassing. He cut back on the wine after that, switching to tea. He realised that Nori probably wasn’t doing it on purpose, as the dwarf was clearly making a great effort to be sociable for Bilbo’s sake, but it still made him a bit uncomfortable.

When they finally reached the topic of Bilbo’s refusal to return to Erebor, Bilbo’s head was clear enough to allow him to tiptoe around the truth with careful deliberation. He had no idea how much Nori knew about the whole fiasco with Thorin (which was probably a lot, considering that Nori was awfully sharp and perceptive, for a dwarf), but he had no intention of confessing the whole unfortunate history to Nori, of all people.

As Bilbo watched Nori’s retreating back the next morning, the dwarf’s plentiful hair once again braided into that ridiculous triangle shape, he couldn’t help but wonder - what had been the purpose of Nori’s visit?

Had it really been just a random stop from a friend in need who just happened to pass by, or had he been sent to Shire to find out, how Bilbo was? One could never tell with Nori.

Closing the door behind him, Bilbo told himself to stop being ridiculous. Thorin wouldn’t care how he was doing.

*****

That winter seemed to pass even slower than the previous ones had. The snow fell for days, burying Hobbiton several feet deep in a snowdrift, effectively imprisoning the hobbits in their homes. Bilbo wasn’t overly worried, since his pantry had enough food for months, but he grew increasingly antsy in the enclosed space with nothing interesting to keep him occupied.

In the end, for want of anything better to do, he dug his mother’s old weaving loom out of the storage closet and assembled it in his living room. He had to clear out the chairs and several of his flower pots to make room for the bulky wooden frame, but felt very pleased with himself when he inspected his finished work.

It took him a few days to remember his mother’s half-forgotten lessons on weaving, but when he
finally figured out the technique, making two doilies for practice, he decided on making a tapestry. The dragon seemed like as good a motive as any and if it turned out looking horrible, well, no one needed to know.

The project kept him busy for the next several months. Bilbo made countless drawings and spent hours on end just choosing the right shade of red for the dragon’s scales. He found the weaving strangely soothing – it kept his hands busy, but forced him to concentrate on the pattern as well, preventing him from spacing out and thinking about impossible things (like how nice it would be if he could go back to Erebor).

As more days passed in his seclusion, he eventually admitted to himself that he did indeed miss his friends terribly. Several times, when the bottom of the wine glass became especially inviting, he nearly packed and left for Erebor, snow be damned.

He always stopped himself though, the memory of contemptuous blue eyes and the echo of “You are not welcome here” keeping him in place. Those nights always ended with him staring out of the window with a bottle of wine in hand, cursing Thorin’s name with all the swear words he had learnt while travelling with dwarves, but had always been too much of a gentleman to use.

Spring couldn’t come fast enough.

*****

Once the snow all melted, Bilbo went wandering again, paying no heed to the disapproving frowns of his neighbours. He was used to them by now. They had been whispering about him ever since he got back from Erebor and never stopped. He used to think that they would tire of it eventually, when the novelty of his arrival wore off, but since nothing interesting ever happened in the Shire, he remained the local curiosity – the Mad Baggins who liked wandering in the woods and kept all kinds of strange company.

To take his mind off his overly-curious neighbours, Bilbo started thinking about Rivendell, its bubbling brooks and lofty architecture, and wondered if the elves there would be willing to help him with some of the more difficult translations. He almost set out to see the elves, but something held him back.

As the fifth anniversary of Gandalf’s unexpected party came nearer, Bilbo’s heart grew restless and he started spending his days sitting on the porch like he had in his old days, back when life in the Shire used to be enough.

Even as he sat there, he kept telling himself to stop being ridiculous - no party of dwarves would come knocking at his door, surely - but a part of him refused to listen to reason, still keeping up hope. And so he spent his days sitting in his flower garden, waiting for an adventure to come to him.

When it finally did, it nearly stumbled over him.

Because he soon got bored with sitting on a bench all day, he decided to use his time for something more useful and started gardening. He was just replanting some pansies when a shadow fell on him, making him look up.

“Honestly, Bilbo,” the shadow’s owner said, “it’s a good thing your clothes are so bright. I almost stepped on you.”

“Kíli!” Bilbo exclaimed with a wide grin, standing up. “I see your eyes are as sharp as ever.”

The young dwarf laughed merrily and swept Bilbo into a hug, lifting him off the ground.
“I missed you so much,” he mumbled into Bilbo’s curls.

“I missed you, too.” Bilbo decided to ignore the shocked looks of his neighbours, patting the dwarf’s back happily. It was broader than he remembered.

“You’ve grown,” Bilbo told him when Kíli finally decided to release him. Kíli gave him a sheepish grin.

“Yes, a bit. Fíli did, too, but I’m still taller than him.”

“Where is he?” Bilbo shot a look behind Kíli’s back, but the road was empty. Kíli’s smile dimmed a bit.

“He had to stay behind and help Thorin with the governance stuff. I was sent to the Blue Mountains to make some trade agreements with the local dwarves. Thorin really means the whole heir business seriously. He has us learning etiquette and diplomacy and laws. I think I can understand now why he’s always so humourless. We barely have time for anything fun. He must have it even worse.”

By mutual agreement they headed indoors, out of sight of the nosy onlookers. Bilbo breathed a small sigh of relief when the door closed behind them.

“Honestly,” he said, peering out of the hallway window, “one cannot have a private conversation around here without twenty people listening on it.

“Well,” he continued in a much more cheerful tone, turning away from the window to look at Kíli, “now my neighbours think that I am having an affair with a dwarf, of all things. That should keep them entertained for months.”


“I am glad you find the topic of my ruined reputation as amusing as I do.”

Kíli appeared taken aback for a moment, before he unravelled Bilbo’s words and started giggling again.

“Do not worry about it too much,” Bilbo assured him before Kíli could say anything. “My reputation of respectability has been beyond redemption ever since I ran away with you lot. Nothing I do now could trump that.”

“And I know that you’ve been trying,” Kíli said, once he got his laughter under control. “We heard about the warg from Bofur. That must have been something.”

“My young cousins seem to think it was. They spent a year telling that story to anyone willing to listen. If you spend a few days here, they are bound to come for a visit and entertain you until your ears are ringing.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it yourself?”

“What’s there to tell?” Bilbo shrugged. “We came across a warg. I foolishly provoked it and managed not to get killed. I have been doing a very good job avoiding dangerous beasts since then. I only had to run away from a bear once, and that was more than a year ago.”

“Very well,” Kíli said, pretending disappointment, “it’s clear that I will have to wait for your relatives
to tell the story properly. I had planned to spend a few days here, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course. I will be happy to have you here. Come, make yourself at home. Take whichever bedroom you wish. I will put together some lunch.” Bilbo made a beeline for the kitchen, leaving the dwarf in the hallway to explore at his leisure.

He had just finished chopping the vegetables when he heard Kíli’s exclamation from the living room. Laying the knife carefully on the chopping board, he decided to go investigate the source of Kíli’s excitement. Of course, Kíli was gazing at his tapestry. Bilbo had almost forgotten about it, since it was nearly finished and he had preferred to spend most of his time outdoors these last few weeks.

Kíli stood in front of his weaving loom, examining the work. Bilbo privately thought that the tapestry wasn’t good enough to deserve the look of wonder on Kíli’s face, but it pleased him nonetheless.

“That’s my winter project,” Bilbo explained.

“It’s beautiful,” Kíli said. “You’re really talented, Bilbo.”

“Thank you.” Bilbo felt himself blush under the compliment. To alleviate his awkwardness, he decided to change the topic. “Lunch will be ready soon. Are you fine with roast and potatoes?”

Kíli laughed.

“After months on the road, I’m fine with anything that’s not a rabbit.”

“It’s pork,” Bilbo reassured him.

“Thank Mahal.”

*****

Since the living room was occupied by the loom, they had to settle for sitting in the smaller drawing room in the evening. Bilbo spent a moment just studying his friend’s face.

Over the nearly five years since Bilbo had last seen him, Kíli had finally managed to grow a beard, which made the familial resemblance between him and Thorin even stronger than it had been before. Bilbo wondered if this was what Thorin had looked like when he was young. Kíli gave him a questioning look, but Bilbo just shook his head, not wanting to talk about it.

“That tapestry must have taken an awful lot of time to finish,” Kíli said after a while, nodding toward the living room.

“A few months,” Bilbo nodded. “We got snowed in over the winter so I had plenty of time to work on it.” He hesitated a bit, but decided to finish his thought. “The winters are long in the Shire when one lives alone.”

Kíli gave him a look that was far too understanding.

“Why don’t you come to Erebor, then?” he asked softly. “You would have so much company that you would be sick of it.”

Here it was, the moment of truth. Bilbo figured he would have to talk about that day eventually. To his astonishment, he realised that he didn’t mind telling Kíli about the debacle with Thorin. His friend had always been willing to support him and Bilbo hoped that this was one of those times.

“I am not sure if I would be welcome in Erebor,” he confessed.
“Why?” Kíli looked torn between hurt and disbelief. “We all like you, Bilbo. Surely you know that.”

Bilbo decided to go with the full truth.

“Thorin and I did not part on the best of terms.” He looked at Kíli. “Surely, you must have wondered why I had left so soon after the battle, without saying goodbyes to anyone.”

Kíli frowned.

“We were a bit hurt about that, yes, but Gandalf left a note saying that you needed to go back to Shire on urgent family business.”

Bilbo took a deep breath.

“I was banished from Erebor. For good.”

“What?!” Kíli jumped up from his chair. “How?”

Bilbo decided that he was far too sober to have this conversation, so he went and brought two bottles of wine. He found Kíli pacing in the drawing room when he came back.

“Tell me,” the dwarf said simply.

Bilbo took a sip and began.

“I was called to Thorin’s tent right after battle. I was injured and barely able to walk, but Balin insisted that it was urgent, so I went. I came in expecting to see Thorin on his deathbed, or worse - one of you two. You may think me stupid for it, but I thought he was calling me to apologise for the whole debacle with the Arkenstone.”

“He didn’t apologise?” Kíli asked, incredulous.

“No,” Bilbo confirmed. “Instead, he said a bunch of nonsense that made me angry and I told him in a very scathing manner just what I thought of him. He didn’t take it well and banished me from the mountain. I then spent several weeks with the elves before I was able to return home.”

Kíli blew a breath and sat back in his chair, digesting the words.

“May I ask what it was that he told you that was so horrible?” he asked finally.

Bilbo sighed.

“It wasn’t horrible, just very unexpected. The thing that offended me wasn’t what he said, but how he said it and how he acted afterwards.”

Kíli raised his eyebrows expectantly. Bilbo drank another mouthful.

“Thorin asked me to marry him.” Now that the sordid truth was out, Bilbo found himself rather entertained by Kíli’s reactions to his tale. (“He did WHAT?”)

Bilbo continued.

“He did it in his typical imperious manner, where he expects everyone to do everything he says. He was terribly surprised when I refused him and then got offended.”

“Oh, Bilbo.” Kíli had his face buried in his hands and was shaking with laughter. “That sounds just
like him. Mahal, my uncle is an idiot.”

“Was there some hidden gesture in this whole situation that I failed to understand?” Bilbo asked carefully.

With some effort, Kíli finally got his mirth under control.

“You can say that,” he told Bilbo once he finally stopped laughing. “I think there were good intentions behind the gesture, but the execution couldn’t have been worse.”

Bilbo waited for him to continue.

“When he made that scene at the wall, he committed a terrible insult against you,” Kíli explained. “He might have been out of his mind when he did it, but the insult had happened nonetheless and the correct way to make amends would be to publicly apologise to you for it. I think his fevered mind used some sort of twisted logic to come up with the idea that the best way to make up for his actions would be to elevate your social status by marrying you.”

“That’s completely mad,” Bilbo shook his head in disbelief.

“I know,” Kíli chuckled, “but I think it made some sort of weird sense to him at that moment. Mahal knows what he was thinking.”

Bilbo tried to make some sense of it.

“Are you telling me that in his own strange way, he did try to apologise and I took it the wrong way and threw it in his face?”

“Pretty much,” Kíli confirmed. “Basically, you are both idiots and you probably owe him an apology of your own.”

“Lovely,” Bilbo said in a deadpan. Something occurred to him. “I am not required to marry him, am I?” He asked in alarm.

“Mahal, no,” Kíli laughed. “You were perfectly justified in refusing his offer.”

“That’s good to know.” Bilbo breathed a small sigh of relief.

They fell silent for a while, sipping wine and smoking, both deep in thought. Bilbo wasn’t too pleased to discover that his righteous anger at Thorin hadn’t been so righteous after all. The anger had been a constant in his life for nearly five years, giving him the strength to get through the days when he missed his friends and Shire started to feel like a foreign place. It had been his shield against the loneliness and sadness that had occasionally threatened to overwhelm him during the long winters when he rarely spoke to anyone for months. The knowledge that he had been wrong, at least partially, made some of that anger disappear. Bilbo didn’t know if he liked that.

Kíli spoke after a while, his voice quiet.

“It’s no wonder you didn’t want to come to Erebor. Bofur and Nori both mentioned that you were strangely reluctant to come for a visit, but neither was able to say why. You didn’t tell them anything, did you?” He looked Bilbo in the eye. “Why are you telling me now?”

“Because I trust you,” said Bilbo simply, “and because you know Thorin well. If there’s someone who should be able to make sense of him, it’s you.”
“You should try Balin for that,” Kíli said. “He knows Thorin better than anyone.”

“Balin knows already,” Bilbo admitted, “he witnessed the whole scene.”

“The sly old fox!” Kíli exclaimed, warring between disbelief and admiration. “He never mentioned a word of it.”

“And for a good reason,” Bilbo said. “None of you would leave Thorin alone if he did.”

“That’s true.” Kíli paused, cocking his head to the side. “Did you just defend Thorin?”

Bilbo paused.

“I don’t know. I admit that I am rather confused at the moment.” He looked in his goblet, swirling the wine around. “I spent the last five years alone, feeling angry. Now I find that I’ve been in the wrong as well. It is a lot to take in.”

“I bet,” Kíli stood up. “I will leave you alone to think, if you wish, but before I go, I should give you this.” He drew an envelope from his jacket.

“What is it?”

“A letter,” Kíli said. “I have been tasked with giving this to you. Take some time to think about the reply. I’m willing to answer any questions you may have.”

He handed the letter to Bilbo and walked out of the room. Bilbo heard one of the bedroom doors close softly a moment later.

He turned the letter in his hands, noting the rich, creamy parchment and an official-looking seal. The other side had only his name on it. Bilbo’s heart jolted a bit when he saw the familiar spiky writing. Thorin had written him a letter.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

AN: I really dislike doormat characters and stories where Bilbo has no purpose other than being a +1 for Thorin. I wanted to write a story where Bilbo isn’t pining his life away in the Shire because he thinks Thorin doesn’t love him. I am always a little sad when I read a story where Bilbo goes to live in Erebor just to appease Thorin, but isn’t really happy there on his own. I wanted to make his decision to go live in Erebor believable.

As you may have already guessed, this fic will focus a lot on Bilbo’s friendships with the other dwarves. I really like the company and I enjoy playing with the different characters. Thorin will be there a lot, but he and Bilbo have a mountain of issues between them that they have to work through first. I now understand why most authors go with the movie version of events – it’s kinda hard to believe that Bilbo would be madly in love with someone who threatened to murder him :/

The next chapter will be posted on September 15.
Coming home

Chapter Notes

I would like to thank everyone who has left kudos and comments on this story. I am completely floored by the all the feedback I got. Thank you so much for reading this story.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo put off the opening of the letter until morning. His nerves were still jittery from the conversation with Kíli and he wasn’t feeling brave enough to find out what Thorin wanted from him. He put the envelope on the night table and spent the next several hours lying in the dark, staring at it.

He had no idea why it should be so important, but for some reason it felt like a turning point. No matter the contents of the letter, something would change after he read it. Thorin had disrupted the status quo by reaching out to him and Bilbo owed it to him to at least read the letter before he tossed it into the flames.

He didn’t sleep much that night. The envelope weighted on his mind and his dreams were a jumbled mess. He woke up at the crack of dawn, feeling tired and restless. Giving up on sleep as a lost cause, he put on his dressing gown and padded to his study, which was slowly filling with the light of the rising sun. He sat down at his writing table with the envelope in hands, and gathered the courage to crack open the seal.

As it turned out, the letter wasn’t a letter after all, but an invitation. Bilbo didn’t know whether he should be relieved or disappointed. The envelope contained a fancy card made out of high quality paper decorated with gold. There was a beautifully drawn emblem of the Line of Durin at the top. Bilbo spent some time staring at it with a vague sense of disbelief.

“Thorin II. Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain”, the card said under the coat of arms,

“hereby cordially invites Mr Bilbo Baggins of the Shire to attend the 5th Annual Celebration of the Reclaiming of Erebor, which will take place on November the first in the Great Hall of Erebor; as well as the subsequent Battle of Five Armies Memorial in honour of the fallen, which will be held at sunset on the battlefield on November the twenty-third.

Lodgings and sustenance will be provided. Your reply is required by the first day of October.”

It was written in the king’s own hand, which Bilbo supposed was Thorin’s way of apologising without actually having to apologise. There was a less formal note on the other side, probably written as an afterthought:

“It has been brought to my attention that I might have not treated you with the respect you deserve.” Bilbo snorted loudly at that. “By way of apology, please accept this invitation to Erebor. There are many who wish to see you.

Sincerely,
Thorin Oakenshield”
Bilbo re-read the letter twice, torn between amusement and irritation. How typical of Thorin, to make an apology sound like an order. He decided to deal with the matter later and went to make some breakfast.

Kíli walked into the kitchen a few hours later, his eyes lighting up when he saw the table full of food. Bilbo greeted him from the oven, where he was in the process of pulling out a tray of freshly baked scones.

“Help yourself to anything you like,” he told the dwarf, turning his attention back to the scones. He swept them onto a large plate a put it on the table, sitting down for his second breakfast.

“I knew I visited you for a reason,” Kíli said when he bit into the hot scone, his eyes closing in bliss. “So that’s how this is,” Bilbo pretended to be offended. “You only like me for my cooking. I should have known.” He shook his head ruefully.

“You got that right,” Kíli nodded in perfect seriousness. He didn’t manage to hold the face for long and soon started giggling. “Oh, Bilbo” he said fondly, “life in Erebor has been so dull without you. I wish you could come back with me.”

“I may come with you yet,” Bilbo said quietly. He pulled the card from his vest pocket and handed it to Kíli. “What do you make of this?”

Kíli’s eyes skimmed the lines of text, his smile growing bigger with every word.

“So that’s what this was,” he said finally. “You have no idea how many times I almost opened the envelope and peeked inside when I had it on me all this time.”

Bilbo laughed. “I can imagine.”

“I think Thorin did it to punish me,” Kíli said. “He knew I would be dying of curiosity for months. You know, I was half prepared to give you one of these myself if he didn’t, propriety be damned.”

“What is this Celebration?” Bilbo asked.

“It’s an event we hold every year on the anniversary of the dragon’s death,” Kíli explained. “We have a big feast in the Great Hall and we invite the people from Dale and Lake-town. The celebrations usually go on for days and there are tournaments and plenty of dancing. Sometime we even have a few elves attending, because they want to show off their archery.

“The memorial will be a much more sombre affair. We only had it once, the first year after the battle, so I suppose this year will be a special event of sorts. The last time we all gathered outside on the battlefield and there were lots of speeches and plaintive ballads.”

“Am I supposed to respond to this?” Bilbo picked up the card.

“The best response you could give would be to come in person,” Kíli said, looking hopeful.

“I would need to pack my things and make some arrangements with my relatives,” Bilbo said, “but I suppose I could be ready to go within a fortnight.”

“Yes!” Kíli jumped up from the bench and did a little victory dance. He stopped before Bilbo, eyes shining in excitement. “You will really come to Erebor, then?”

Bilbo nodded, smiling.
“Yes. I am going back to Erebor.”

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“When are we leaving?” Bilbo asked later when they sat together on a bench in his back garden, smoking.

“In a few weeks,” said Kíli, “I still need to go to the Blue Mountains and take care of the business there. It takes about a month to travel there and back from here, so you should have plenty of time to find all your handkerchiefs and travelling cloaks.” He gave Bilbo a side eye.

“I will never live that down, will I?” Bilbo sighed in exasperation.

“No,” Kíli said resolutely.

“And just for that, I won’t bake those fruit pies I was planning to make for tomorrow’s breakfast.” Bilbo stood up from the bench and started walking away with a great feeling of satisfaction.

“You wouldn’t!” Kíli cried behind him, scrambling to keep up.

“Oh, I would,” Bilbo assured him. They started heading down the hill towards the water. Bilbo decided it was as good a time as any to give Kíli a tour around Hobbiton. They passed a few curious hobbits as they went and Bilbo felt amusement when he saw more curly heads pop behind bushes and hedges, pretending nonchalance.

Kíli seemed to notice them, too, because he stepped closer to Bilbo, whispering: “They really are awfully nosy. I think we should give them something to think about.” And with that, he wrapped an arm around Bilbo’s shoulders, drawing him closer.

The whispers behind them started like wildfire. Bilbo fought down a smile.

“I see we are having that affair after all.”

Kíli snickered.

“Oh, yes. It was too good to pass up. Besides, can you imagine Fíli’s face when I tell him about it?” Something suddenly occurred to him. “Mahal, I’m going to get so much gold,” he said with wonder. “Everybody kept betting on when you will come back to Erebor, but almost no one believed that I would be able to convince you, when Bofur couldn’t do it. Shows what they know.”

He was still wearing a very satisfied smile when they came across two familiar hobbits, who were fishing at a nearby pond. The Tooks abruptly abandoned the fishing rods and jumped to their feet when they saw them.

“Bilbo!” they yelled, running to greet them. Bilbo suppressed a sigh.

“Hello, boys.”

“You got a new dwarf!” Isembold exclaimed when he spotted Kíli.

“He’s much handsomer than the last one,” Fortinbras noted, which made Kíli chuckle.

“Are these your cousins, Bilbo?”

“In the flesh,” Fortinbras nodded. “You must be one of Bilbo’s dwarves. Which one are you?”
“Kíli.”

“The archer?” Isembold asked eagerly.

“The very same.” Kíli looked pleased. “I heard about your adventure with the warg.”

“Did you?” They looked like a pair of overeager puppies.

“Though I don’t think Bofur told it quite right,” Kíli said, “I believe I will need to hear it again, to see if he left anything out.”

“You can come for dinner tonight,” chimed in Bilbo, “and chat with Kíli to your heart’s content. I believe you were fishing before we came.” He gave them a pointed look.

They looked between the pond and Bilbo and then at Kíli’s arm around Bilbo’s shoulders. Isembold, who had always been a little faster on the uptake, made a little “oh”.

“Now that you mention it, I believe we were. We’ll come for dinner, then. Bye!” And he dragged away his cousin, who was still looking a bit confused.

Kíli watched them go with great amusement.

“That was downright diabolic of you, Bilbo.”

Bilbo shrugged.

“They can see you at dinner. I haven’t seen you for five years, which makes me far more entitled to your time. If I know them at all, they will be at Bag-End all the time now that they discovered that you are here. When Bofur was here, I had to send them on a made-up adventure to make them leave us alone.”

They started walking back, taking the long way around the hill.

“Can you do me a favour?” Bilbo asked quietly when they reached Bag-End’s back garden.

“Of course,” Kíli said. “What is it?”

“Don’t mention to them that I’m going away. I had no problem coming with you the last time, because I wasn’t leaving anyone behind. But these two have latched onto me since I came back and I will have a hard enough time leaving them behind as it is. If they knew I was going to Erebor, they would find a way to disguise themselves in my backpack, or follow a few steps behind.”

Kíli chuckled at that. Bilbo gave him a small smile.

“They are good lads, and mean well, but I refuse to be responsible for them on such a long and dangerous journey. If something happened to them, I could never look their parents in the eye.” He looked at Kíli. “Please don’t mention anything in front of them. The less they know, the better.”

“I won’t,” Kíli assured him.

“Thank you.”

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There was so much to do. While Kíli stayed at Bag-End, Bilbo kept any preparations to a minimum, but once the dwarf left, he threw himself into packing. Bilbo tried to tell himself that it was just a
small trip, hardly worth all the excitement, but deep down he knew (hoped) that he probably wouldn’t be returning to Bag-End for a long time, if ever.

He went through his rooms one by one, sorting out his things. He packed all of his favourite clothes and books, telling himself that it didn’t matter if he ended up with several bags, because he could always buy an extra pony to carry them. In the breaks between inventoring and packing he finished the tapestry and decided to take it with him as well.

Bilbo decided to leave most of his pans at home, but packed away all his embroidery to have something that would help him pass the time on the road. He made a trip to the cellar and emerged with several bottles of his father’s old vintage. It would be a pity to leave the wine in the hands of some ignorant relatives, he though, especially since he knew several people who would be delighted to have it.

He left all of the furniture in its place, taking only his mother’s small treasure chest with a few family heirlooms and his own writing kit. When he finally finished, he had four decent-sized bags and a rolled up tapestry. All that remained was to write instructions for his relatives and wait for Kíli.

The worst part turned out to be the goodbyes. The young Tooks weren’t pleased then they finally found out about his oncoming departure.

“Are you really going to Erebor?” Fortinbras asked when they tore into his kitchen like a whirlwind, the front door slamming after them in their hurry.

“I am,” Bilbo confirmed, calmly sipping his tea.

“Why didn’t you tell us? We want to come with you.”

“You cannot,” Bilbo said, putting down his teacup. “The road is long and dangerous and I refuse to be responsible for your well being. I will be lucky if I manage to arrive to Erebor in one piece.”

They complained and pouted for a while, but in the end seemed to come to terms with it.

“Are you planning to stay in Erebor for good?” Isembold asked quietly a few hours later.

Bilbo threw him a startled look. Sometimes the young hobbit was more perceptive than he gave him credit for.

“I may,” Bilbo admitted. “I think I would like to, if I’m allowed, but it all depends on the king. If Thorin decides I should leave, there will not be much I can do about it.” He paused, his forehead furrowed in thought. “Though I suppose I could always move to Dale...”

“You’re really not coming back, are you?” Isembold asked with a small sad smile. “Shire hasn’t been your home for a while.”

“No, it hasn’t,” Bilbo said softly, gazing out of the window at the green fields beyond.

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Kíli came back at Midsummer, bubbling with excitement.

“You’re really coming with me,” he breathed in wonder when he saw Bilbo’s bags in the entrance hall. “I think a part of me still couldn’t quite believe it.”

They went inside to have some lunch.
“I sent a word that I’m coming back, but I made no mention of you,” Kíli said between bites of ham. “Boy, are they in for a surprise.” Bilbo found his grin very contagious.

They left Bag-End on a sunny morning at the beginning of July with two ponies in tow, waving cheerfully to anyone who happened to see them. The Gamgees had gathered in Bilbo’s front garden to wish Bilbo a safe journey and the young Tooks stopped by, each one hugging Bilbo several times before they were able to let him go.

“Do you have all your handkerchiefs?” Kíli asked cheekily when the small houses of Hobbiton shrunk into the distance behind them.

Bilbo made a show of rummaging in his bags, drawing out a small armful of perfectly folded squares of cloth.

“Do you think this is enough?” he asked with a perfectly straight face.

Kíli burst out laughing, clutching the seat of his saddle to keep his balance.

“Oh, Bilbo, never change,” he said, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes.

The journey to Misty Mountains was a lot more pleasant than the first one had been. The weather was warm and sunny and there were no trolls or wargs to surprise them. Kíli’s small security detail joined them in Bree – they had travelled with him from Erebor and had been instructed to wait at the Prancing Pony while Kíli visited Bilbo. Judging by their enthusiastic descriptions of Bree’s famous ale, they hadn’t found it much of a hardship.

At Bilbo’s request they spent a few days in Rivendell, where the welcome was a lot warmer now that they didn’t have Thorin with them to glare mistrustfully at any elf in vicinity. Kíli had sent the dwarves ahead to scout the mountain pass and used the opportunity to enjoy the hospitality of Elrond’s house. Without anyone there to watch his every move, Kíli got on remarkably well with the elves. Bilbo was glad to see that Thorin’s irrational prejudice hadn’t rubbed off on the younger generation.

They crossed the Misty Mountains without any major incidents and emerged on the other side in mid-August to find Beorn’s house, open and welcoming, waiting for them. The bear-man was more than happy to let them stay for a few days in exchange for new tales of Bilbo’s adventures. They decided to take the main forest road, since the secret path still kept bringing up unpleasant memories for the both of them.

“Will you go for a walk with me?” Bilbo asked Kíli on their last day at Beorn’s house. The dwarf looked a bit surprised, but stood up nonetheless. Shooting a glance over his shoulder to make sure no one from their escort was in vicinity, Bilbo led Kíli toward the wooden fence where Beorn kept his ponies.

“What’s on your mind, Bilbo?” Kíli asked once they were out of earshot.

“I wanted to ask for a favour,” Bilbo began. “Could you please keep my real reason for not wanting to go back to Erebor a secret? It is a very personal matter for me and I doubt that Thorin would appreciate it much, either, to have his private business discussed all over Erebor. I know it will not stay a secret forever, but I would prefer to keep the peace for as long as I can.” He gave Kíli a pleading gaze. “Will you keep it to yourself?”

“I will, but I’m not terribly happy about it,” Kíli said. “You really should talk to Thorin.”

Bilbo blew a breath. “As if I could avoid it. That will be one conversation I am definitely not looking
forward to. I will be lucky if he doesn’t throw me out again.”

“Uncle wouldn’t do that!” Kíli argued. “He would have a riot on his hands if he banished you again.”

“He had no problem throwing me out the last time,” Bilbo pointed out. “If it helps, I can promise that I will try not to needlessly provoke Thorin’s temper.”

“That’s not terribly reassuring,” Kíli mumbled, “but very well, I will try to keep it a secret. Can I at least tell Fíli? I would feel horrible if I kept something from him.”

“You can tell Fíli,” Bilbo said with a fond smile. “Just make sure he won’t go storming off to give Thorin a piece of his mind the moment he hears about it.”

“I will try,” Kíli promised. They started walking back to the house. “That reminds me – Thorin and I are going to have some serious words when we come back. What he did to you was completely unacceptable.”

“Just try not to hit him too much when you do it.” Bilbo gave Kíli’s forearm a good-natured pat and went back inside the house, Kíli’s startled laughter echoing behind him.

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Dwalin was waiting for them at the edge of Mirkwood, scowling into the sun.

“It was about time you showed up,” he told Bilbo as a way of greeting. “I had to listen to them whine for weeks when Bofur came back empty handed.” He turned to Kíli, throwing him a small money pouch. “There. I guess I owe you this.”

“It’s good to see you too, Dwalin,” Bilbo said, grinning.

They entered the forest in mid-afternoon. The trees at the border stood far enough apart to let in a slight breeze. As he looked at the green branches bathing in sunlight around him, Bilbo was almost able to believe that the forest might have been a beautiful place once.

“Those tree-shaggers have finally started tending to the forest path again. Can you believe it?” Dwalin said as they rode deeper into the forest. “They have even deigned to clear out the eastern end to make this road passable.”

“Have they done anything about the spiders?” Bilbo asked, looking around uneasily. The memory of those enormous spider-webs was still vivid in his mind.

Dwalin snorted.

“They refused at first. Said it’s not their problem. They finally gave in when Thorin threatened to take an army of dwarves into the forest and kill all the spiders himself. And even after that it still took them ages before they actually got to it, the lazy sods.”

The rest of their journey through the forest was mercifully spider-free. They managed to avoid prisons of all sorts this time around (which quickened their journey considerably) and arrived to Lake-town at sunset on the seventh of October.

Bilbo watched the mountain grow on the horizon with a mixture of hope and trepidation. On the one hand, he was looking forward to seeing all his friends. On the other hand, he had no idea what his reception would be like.
Will they welcome him with open arms like one of their own? Or will Thorin only suffer his presence for the bare minimum of time before he forces him to leave again?

As their raft sailed closer to the mountain, a horrible thought occurred to Bilbo – what if Thorin had sent the card only out of politeness, hoping that Bilbo would refuse to come, as he had before? What if Thorin hadn’t meant to invite him at all and did it only to get his nephews off his back? How will he react when he finds out that Bilbo had taken the invitation seriously?

Well, it was too late to have second thoughts now, Bilbo thought as the walls of Dale came into view, the mountain standing tall and imposing behind it. They had come to Erebor at last.

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They made the last ascent in silence, their eyes glued to the enormous gate above them. As they came closer, Bilbo realised that the whole Company was assembled at the top of the stairs, waiting for them. It appeared that their arrival wouldn’t be as big a surprise as they had hoped.

Bilbo felt a jolt when he saw Thorin standing in the middle of the company, his figure as imposing as the giant statues at the sides of the mountain. In his position at the centre of the door, he looked almost like a guardian of the gate – a master of his dominion who won’t let anyone pass unless he himself wishes it. Bilbo fought down the nervousness that had sat in his stomach since Lake-town and climbed the last few steps, Kíli and Dwalin flanking him on either side.

He stopped before the king, making only the briefest eye contact.

“Bilbo Baggins at your service.” Bilbo made a small bow.

“You do not have to bow to me.” Thorin looked a little pained at the display. He made a visible effort to smooth out his expression. “Welcome to Erebor, Master Baggins.”

“It is good to be back,” Bilbo said, meaning every word

The others took that as a signal that the formalities were over and pounced on him, talking all at once. They formed a large, very loud group around him and started escorting him inside the mountain, leaving Thorin at the gate with Dwalin.

“We’ll get you settled first and then you can have dinner with us,” Balin told him.

Bilbo shot Kíli a look, raising an eyebrow in question. Kíli stepped closer to his side, taking Bilbo’s bags from Dori.

“I’ll take him to his quarters.” He turned to Balin. “Are the market overseer’s quarters still empty?”

“Well, yes.” Balin looked a little taken aback by the question. “But surely wouldn’t it be better-“

“I’ll take him to his quarters,” Kíli repeated firmly in a tone that bore no argument. He nodded at Bilbo. “Come on, I’ll show you the way.” Over his shoulder, he addressed the rest of the dwarves: “We’ll see you at dinner,” and walked away, Bilbo’s luggage in both hands.

They went up several floors, passing many dwarves along the way. Bilbo barely had time to properly look at all the improvements that had happened to Erebor since he had left, because they were walking fast and his head still felt a little dizzy from passing over the high walkways.

Finally they came to a simple-looking wooden door. Kíli gestured for him to open it, standing back with a small smile. Bilbo turned the knob and pushed the door open to reveal a nice spacious area
with a fireplace, a low table and several armchairs. Kíli walked in behind him, slamming the door shut with his foot.

“I know Balin wanted to put you somewhere more luxurious, but I thought you might appreciate this more,” Kíli said, putting down the bags. “It’s fairly close to the entrance and there’s a balcony overlooking Dale outside the bedroom. Bofur and Dori have rooms right around the corner from here, and Bombur lives two floors below you. The royal quarters are at the opposite part of this floor.” He gave Bilbo a look. “I know you said you wanted to be far away from Thorin, if possible.”

“I think this is perfect.” Bilbo gave him a grateful smile. “Thank you, Kíli. I’m glad that you remembered. Won’t you get into any trouble for deciding this all by yourself, though?”

“Oh.” Kíli sat into one of the armchairs, looking like he just had a revelation of some sort. “Did I just talk back to Balin?” He looked at Bilbo for confirmation.

“I think you may have,” Bilbo nodded. Kíli looked torn between horror and wonder at his own bravery.

“Do you mind if I hide in your quarters for a while? I’m not sure that I am ready to face the music yet.” He gave Bilbo a sheepish grin.

“Of course,” Bilbo assured him. “Stay for as long as you need. I’m going to look around a bit. When are we supposed to be at the dinner?”

“In about an hour.”

Bilbo nodded his thanks and went to explore his new rooms. The door on his right led to the bedroom, where he found a bed big enough to comfortably hold a grown Man. He spent several minutes standing on the balcony, feasting his eyes on the view. Dale lay almost directly in his line of sight, the roofs of the houses painted vivid red by the afternoon sun. He decided to visit the city at the earliest opportunity.

There was an en suite bathroom next to the bedroom with a nice spacious tub. The other doors leading from the sitting room revealed a kitchen, a smaller bedroom and an empty room which could be easily turned into a study. All in all, it was nice and comfortable and he couldn’t be happier with the arrangement. He told Kíli as much.

He left the bags in the sitting room and went to refresh a bit, taking with him a change of clean clothes. When he came back, he found Fíli sitting next to his brother with a wide grin on his face.

“I can’t believe you talked to Balin like that!” he was just telling Kíli. “You are so much braver than I am.”

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” Kíli protested, laughing. “It just came out.” He sobered a bit. “Is he angry with me?”

“He was wearing his ‘I-am-displeased’ face when I left,” Fíli said. “But wait until uncle hears about it. Balin’s lectures have nothing on him.”

Kíli’s face darkened. “That reminds me. There’s something you should probably know.” He looked at Bilbo questioningly.

Bilbo gave him a small nod.

“You can tell him. But do it later, somewhere in private. I’d like to have my dinner in peace.”
Fíli looked between them in curiosity, but wisely decided not to pry.

“I think we should get going, if we want to be on time.” He stood up. “You know how uncle gets when we’re late to the dinner table.”

“Don’t remind me.”

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“They wanted to throw a feast to celebrate your arrival, but me and Bofur managed to convince them that you wouldn’t like it,” Fíli told Bilbo as they walked to dinner. “So we’re just eating in our regular hall where we take all our meals. Hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Bilbo assured him. “It would feel strange to have a feast held in my honour. This is much better.”

The company was already waiting for them when they arrived. Balin’s face promised Kíli a sound scolding later. When he saw Bilbo, however, the old dwarf’s face smoothed out and he stepped forward to welcome him.

“Come, Bilbo. Join us for dinner and tell us how you’ve been these past years. Everyone is dying with curiosity.”

“Where’s Bifur?” Bilbo asked as he looked around, counting only twelve companions.

“He built himself a small cottage on the bank of River Running a few miles from here,” Bofur told him. “He’ll come for dinner tomorrow.”

“We only heard that you were coming when you were less than twenty miles from here,” Balin looked apologetic. “You took us by surprise.”

“That was the plan.” Bilbo smiled at him. “I hope it didn’t inconvenience you too badly.”

“Since we were all hoping that you would show up eventually, it was hardly a hardship,” Balin told him. He gave him a pat on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, laddie. We’re all happy that you’re here.” Bilbo noticed that he didn’t look at Thorin when he said that.

The king himself hadn’t said a word since Bilbo came into the room. Bilbo had no idea if that was a good sign or a bad one. He decided to deal with the situation by looking at Thorin as little as possible, turning to chat with the others instead.

They got seated eventually, putting Bilbo in the middle of the long table, with Kíli on one side and Bofur on the other. The table was overflowing with food – an entire roasted pig, several stuffed chickens, hams, mashed potatoes and meat pies of all kinds. There was even a bowl with some vegetables, which Bilbo guessed had been prepared for him, since none of the dwarves showed much interest in it. He made it a point to serve himself a heap of carrots, feeling something warm in his chest when Bombur smiled at him in approval.

“Do you find the rooms to your liking, Master Baggins?” Thorin asked, causing the entire table to fall silent. “Balin has informed me that Kíli put you in the market overseer’s quarters.” There was a subtle question mark at the end of the sentence, as if he was asking Bilbo whether he should punish Kíli for his misconduct. It made Bilbo highly uncomfortable.

“The rooms are perfectly comfortable, thank you,” he told Thorin, trying not to squirm under the king’s gaze.
“I am pleased to hear that.” Bilbo breathed a small sigh of relief when Thorin turned his attention to his younger nephew. “How was your journey, Kíli?”

“Mostly uneventful. We had a little skirmish with some orcs near Misty Mountains on our way back, but other than that, there were no problems.”

“Good. You have conducted yourself well, Kíli.”

The mood in the room eased considerably after that and the talking resumed, as if Thorin had given them tacit permission to enjoy themselves. Ori, who was sitting right opposite Bilbo, leaned over the table, eyes shining with interest.

“Was it hard to leave the Shire again?” he asked Bilbo, ignoring the food flying over his head.

“It was easier than I had expected,” Bilbo admitted. “I thought I would miss the Shire terribly, but I found the departure surprisingly easy. Of course, the fact that half the Shire thinks I have gone mad probably helped a lot.”

“Why would they think that?” Dori asked.

“Us hobbits put a great deal of importance on our good reputation and respectability,” Bilbo explained. “I am afraid I entirely lost mine when I left on the quest with you lot. Some of my relatives were even convinced that I had died and the me who came back was an impostor, who came to claim my possessions. It took weeks to convince them that I was really back.”

He laughed. “I do not have the faintest idea what they think about me now, but it probably isn’t anything favourable. In fact, I bet half of Hobbiton is now convinced that I eloped with a dwarf.”

Kíli started snickering on his right, nearly choking on his roast in the process.

“Oh, I almost forgot about that.”

He addressed the general table with a devilish grin: “Bilbo’s neighbours think we’re having a passionate love affair.”

Most of the dwarves roared with laughter, pounding their goblets on the table. Bilbo smacked Kíli’s forearm in retaliation.

“It’s all your fault. You were the one who had to hug me in my front garden.”

Bilbo’s pretence of sternness soon crumbled under the force of his grin. “I think you managed to scandalise at least half the local matrons,” he told Kíli, laughing.

“Oh, the looks on their faces.” Kíli had tears of laughter running down his face. “I will never forget that.”

“Even I had the good sense to wait till I was inside the house before I hugged him,” chimed in Bofur. “What?” He said to the questioning looks sent his way. “I was happy to see him.”

“How come I didn’t get any hugs?” Fíli asked him, looking affronted. “I may start to think you like Kíli more than me.”

“I’ll be happy to hug you later, Fíli.” Bilbo told him with an amused smile.

“I want a hug, too!” Ori exclaimed, which made the dwarves start laughing again. Bofur pulled his flute from somewhere and several of the dwarves joined in, playing and singing. Balin sat at the end
of the table with an indulgent smile on his face, and even Dwalin joined in the merrymaking, pounding his fist to the beat on the table. Only Thorin sat still, watching the hi-jinks with a pensive look on his face.

Much later Bilbo walked to his quarters with Bofur, who lived right next to him. They walked through the torch-lit hallways, the echo of distant laughter still occasionally carrying to them.

“I am so glad you finally came to Erebor,” Bofur told him when they stopped in front of Bilbo’s door. “It didn’t feel right that you should do so much to help us reclaim our home, only to go back to yours, without being able to enjoy the victory properly with us.”

“Well, I am here now to enjoy it. The mountain looks very impressive.”

“It is.” Bofur smiled proudly. “We’ve done a lot of work. I can give you a tour tomorrow, if Fíli doesn’t beat me to it.”

“I am looking forward to it.” Bilbo smiled at him. “I believe it is time for me to go to bed. The road has been long and I couldn’t sleep properly on the boat.”

“Oh, of course. I won’t keep you any longer then.” Bofur backed away. “Good night.”

“Good night, Bofur.”

Bilbo opened the door to his new quarters and walked in with a torch in hand. As he felt his way around his bag for his nightshirt, he thought idly that he should buy some candles soon. He washed his face and came back to the bedroom where he belatedly noticed that several pieces of furniture seemed to have found their way into his quarters since the first time he had seen them and that the bed had new pillows and blankets.

Thorin must have sent some servants to bring him fresh linens and more furniture while they were at the dinner. Bilbo didn’t know whether to be irritated or amused by that. In the end, he settled for a vague feeling of gratefulness, because he was incredibly tired and the bed was calling him like a siren song.

He crawled in and burrowed into the pillows, pulling the blankets all the way up to his chin. After so many months of sleeping on the ground, the bed felt like a piece of heaven. As his limbs started to feel heavy, he dreamily remembered the dinner he’d just had. It had felt so nice to be back in Erebor, among his friends. A piece of his heart settled back into place with a feeling of rightness.

He was home at last.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to write something where Bilbo decides to move to Erebor on his own volition, not because someone orders him to or guilts him into it. I hope the sentiment was believable enough.

I like to think that Bilbo is not as staid and serious as he would like to present himself. I bet that with enough corrupting influence, he could show a more playful/mischievous side.
Also, Kfli is growing up, but doesn’t quite know what to do about it :)

The next chapter will be posted on September 17.
“So, what part of Erebor would you like to see first?” Fíli asked him at breakfast the next morning.  

“The library,” Bilbo replied without missing a beat, causing Ori to grin widely. “But I would prefer to unpack my things first before I go carousing around the mountain. Ori, can you stop by my quarters after breakfast? I have something that might interest you.”

The others looked curious, but nobody asked. They were sitting in the same hall where they had had their dinner the previous evening. Bilbo started calling it the Company Hall in his head. Thorin was conspicuously absent at breakfast, which Bilbo didn’t mind in the slightest. The less he saw of the king, the better.

Bilbo spent the morning in his quarters, sorting through his bags. He put away his clothes into his new wardrobe, admiring the nicely carved wood. Now that he had proper light in his rooms, he was able to explore his new dwelling in more detail. The new furniture that had been brought the evening before was all made of beautiful polished wood that gleamed in the morning sun.

The empty room had remained empty, but a look into the small bedroom revealed a new table standing by the far wall. Bilbo was just trying to move the table from the bedroom to the study when there was a knock at the door.

“Come in!” Bilbo called, putting the table down with a thud.

“Bilbo? Are you there?” Ori’s voice came from the sitting room.

“In here,” Bilbo informed him. The brown haired dwarf peeked into the room.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to move this table to the study,” Bilbo said, glaring at said piece of furniture. “It’s proving to be most uncooperative.”

“Here, let me help.” Ori lifted the table with ease and carried it back to the sitting room. “Where do you want it?”

“Put it in here, please.” Bilbo led the way, pointing at the desired spot. “Thank you for doing this.”

“I was happy to help,” Ori said. “You mentioned at breakfast that you wanted to talk to me.”

“Ah, yes,” Bilbo remembered. “Come, I have something for you.” He led the dwarf back to the sitting room where his book bag still sat unpacked. He dug into the bag, pulling out several volumes.

“Here, you can borrow these. I translated some of the old elvish tales and poems into the Common tongue and was loath to leave them behind.”

Ori took them with a reverent expression, running a careful hand over the cover of the topmost book.

“These must have taken ages to write,” he said.

Bilbo shrugged.
“I had plenty of free time over the years and I enjoy the work. If you come by some other time, I can show you the maps I have drawn. They are still somewhere in my bag, but I should have them unpacked by tomorrow.”

“I would love to see them,” Ori told him. “Would you like to see the library now? Or do you still need to unpack?”

“We can go to the library after lunch. I would hate to leave the things just lying around haphazardly. You can stay here and read, if you wish.”

“May I?” Ori was already on his way to the nearest armchair, books in hand.

Bilbo gave the bookish dwarf a fond look and went to put away the rest of the books.

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“I think I’m in love,” Ori announced when he wandered into the dining hall with a dreamy expression, clutching a stack of books to his chest.

“What happened?” Dori asked, instantly suspicious.

“Bilbo gave me books,” Ori said with the same far-away expression.

“You’re in love with Bilbo?” Fíli asked loudly. Everyone’s heads turned in their direction.

“Oh no,” Ori looked highly embarrassed, “I meant with the books. Oh bother, that came out all wrong. No offence,” he added in Bilbo’s direction.

“None taken,” Bilbo assured him. “Though if I were you, I would put the books away before I went to eat. I would hate to see them smeared with gravy.”

“Right,” Ori hugged the books protectively.

“Did you write all that, Bilbo?” Balin asked him, eyeing the books.

“Yes.” Bilbo saw no reason for false modesty. “Most of it are translations of elvish, or stories of local Shire lore. I though Ori might like to read them.”

He watched the young dwarf shuffle into a corner to store the books away. Remembering the bag he had in his hand, he took a few steps forward. Kíli immediately took notice of his duffel.

“What’s that?”

Bilbo smiled.

“That’s a present. Since I couldn’t bring gifts for each of you separately, I decided to bring something all of you can enjoy.” He placed the bag on the table. “Shire sends its greetings.”

Glóin was the first one to grab the bag, untying the strings.

“It’s pipe weed!” He announced loudly, causing the others to huddle around him.

“Longbottom Leaf, if I’m not mistaken,” said Balin, looking at Bilbo for confirmation. Bilbo nodded.

“We had an exceptionally good harvest last year, so I decided to invest a bit. It would be a shame to just leave it lying around at Bag-End.”
“Shame indeed,” Bofur agreed, stuffing his pouch.

“There he is!” called a new voice from the opposite doorway. All heads turned to watch as a buxom dwarf lady strode into the room, heading straight for Bilbo. Her fiery red hair streaked with grey was arranged carefully into a thick braid around her head and she moved in a very purposeful manner. She stopped before Bilbo, eyeing him with surprisingly sharp eyes.

“So, this is him.”

Bilbo did his best not to take a step back from her. Even in her bright yellow dress, she looked rather intimidating.

Bofur stepped forward to stand at Bilbo’s side.

“Bilbo, allow me to introduce our mother. Mother, this is Bilbo Baggins.”

“At your service, ma’m.” Bilbo bowed, fervently hoping he wasn’t breaking some dwarvish etiquette. She gave him a nod in return.

“Bombur told me that you’re the halfling who took care of my boys when they went to visit you. Thank you for that.”

“It was my pleasure, Mrs...?”

“Call me Bona,” she said briskly. “Everyone around here does.” She gave him a once-over. “But his won’t do,” she declared suddenly, making Bilbo jump. “You’re skin and bones! The travelling didn’t do you any good. We’ll have to fatten you up.” She quelled Bilbo’s protests with a look. “It’s the least I can do for you in repayment for putting up with my sons. I know how much it takes to feed them, trust me. I’ve been doing it for the last hundred and thirty years.”

The rest of the company watched with amusement as she stepped forward and took Bilbo’s arm in an iron grip, steering him in the direction of the kitchen. Since she was twice his size, there was no way Bilbo could escape from her clutches. Kíli even had the audacity to laugh at his predicament, the traitor. Bilbo shot him one last dirty look before the door closed behind them, revealing an enormous kitchen.

Bona led him to a chair, ordering him to sit. Guessing rightly that any resistance would be futile with this lady, Bilbo did as he was told. He used his state of temporary imprisonment to study his surroundings. The kitchen didn’t look much different from the one he had at home, except for the size. There were copper pans on the pegs around the walls and herbs and vegetables hanging in bundles from the ceiling.

While he was looking around, Bombur appeared in one of the doors, looking apologetic.

“I’m sorry, Bilbo. I tried to stop her, but she was determined to feed you.”

Bilbo shook his head with a smile.

“Do not worry about it, Bombur. I was a bit taken aback at first, but now I am finding this to be an interesting experience.” Something occurred to him. “Could I come to the kitchen sometimes and help you cook? I haven’t had an apple pie in ages and I bet the others would enjoy some, too.”

“You can come here anytime you wish,” Bombur said. “This is the royal kitchen, which only serves the king and his family, so it’s mostly just me and my mother working here. I bet mother would love to trade some recipes with you.”
“Did you say recipes?” Bona came into the room, carrying an enormous plate filled with little meat pasties. “There you go, dear,” she told Bilbo, placing the plate in front of him, “eat as much as you like.” And with that she strode away, leaving Bilbo to gape at the pile of food before him.

“What she means is ‘eat it all, or else’,” Bombur told Bilbo in a conspiratorial whisper.

“I heard that!” she yelled from the other room, making Bombur shrink to half his size.

“I think I’d better go,” the rotund dwarf informed Bilbo, making a tactical retreat to the door.

Bilbo reached for the first pasty, finding the meat filling pleasantly spicy. He managed to eat six more before Bona reappeared, coming to sit down on the bench opposite him.

“So, Bombur mentioned you can cook...”

When Bilbo finally managed to escape from the kitchen the lunch time was long over and the dining room was empty. To his surprise, he found Ori waiting for him in the hallway.

“Good, you’re alone,” Ori said as a greeting, rising up from his position on the floor. “I thought she would hold you there forever.”

“She almost did. Bombur’s mother is truly a force to behold.” Bilbo lowered his voice. “I’m surprised she doesn’t rule Erebor instead of Thorin.”

Ori started giggling.

“I wouldn’t be surprised in the slightest if she did. Even Dwalin is cowed by her.”

“I can believe that.”

They walked to the library in a cheerful mood, chatting about Bilbo’s translations.

“Thorin named me Head Librarian,” Ori said as they passed through the enormous doors of Erebor’s library, “but to tell the truth, I’m the only librarian here. Since the rebuilding is still going on, everyone else preferred to focus on other things.”

Bilbo stood for several minutes, just taking in the sheer size of the place. The bookshelves were at least fifteen feet tall and seemed to go on forever. Looking up at the ceiling, Bilbo realized that there was another floor above them with balconies running along the edge of the walls. When he squinted into the gloom, he thought that he could see a staircase leading to the upper floor.

The entire room had a slightly dreamlike quality, the light coming through the skylights above muted and distorted. There were piles of dust lying on the shelves and more of it could be seen dancing in the rays of light coming from above.

Ori followed his gaze.

“I have been trying to clean away all the dust, but this place is enormous and it has stood empty for over hundred and fifty years. The stone-workers still haven’t found time to clear out the rubble from the skylights, so the light is pretty crappy for most of the day. But dust or not, I still love it here.”

“I think this will be my favourite place in all of Erebor,” Bilbo told him.

“But you haven’t even seen the rest!” Ori protested.
“I don’t need to,” Bilbo said confidently, which made Ori grin. “I could come and help you with the library, if you wish.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be a guest here?” Ori asked. “We shouldn’t be using you as cheap labour.”

“Ori,” Bilbo looked at him seriously, “I may be a guest here, but if I just sat on a couch in my quarters eating sweetmeats all day, I would be bored to tears within a week. True, I will use my first days here to look around and admire the place, but I would like to have something to keep myself busy after that. Bombur has already allowed me to putter around in his kitchen, so I thought I might come and help you here when I’m not busy cooking.”

Ori fidgeted a bit.

“I could use the help, but it still feels like I’m taking advantage of your kindness. You already gave me the books and now you’re doing this.”

“Oh for Valar’s sake, you can pay me for the work, if it bothers you so much,” Bilbo burst, feeling at the end of his wit. Ori’s eyes lit up.

“I could do that. I still have most of my dragon gold, because I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Bilbo fought the urge to run a hand over his face in exasperation.

“Very well, you can pay me. May I help you in the library, then?”

“I would be happy to have your help,” Ori told him brightly. “Come, I’ll show you around.”

The dinner was a merry affair, with plenty of food and laughter. Bilbo got wildly praised for his gift of pipe weed. Thorin was still conspicuously absent.

Bilbo shot the empty chair at the head of the table a look, leaning closer to Kíli to be able to talk with him privately.

“I hope Thorin is not staying away because I am here.”

“What? No, no. His absence has nothing to do with you,” Kíli assured him. “He eats most of his meals alone. He sat with us yesterday to welcome us, but he rarely comes here otherwise.”

“Is that so?” Bilbo felt relief. Uncomfortable though he may feel in Thorin’s presence, it wouldn’t be fair to the king if he was separated from his friends just because Bilbo was in Erebor.

After dinner the dwarves showed Bilbo their common room, where they tended to spend most of their evenings. It was a comfortable room not far from the kitchens, bathed in light from a large fireplace and furnished with more than a dozen armchairs and piles of pillows. As Fíli explained to him, they had all fallen into the habit of gathering there after dinner and spending the evenings together if they had nothing better to do.

Bilbo watched them disperse around the room, taking their usual spots. Fíli and Kíli sat on the floor in front of the fireplace, playing some game with square runic stones. Ori had gone to hide in the corner with one of Bilbo’s books, oblivious to the world. Dori sat in a large armchair, arguing with Óin. The rest sat down in various places, chatting and smoking. Only Glóin had left them right after dinner, going back to his wife.
As Bilbo stood near the door, deciding what he should do, he was approached by Balin. The old dwarf scanned the room before discreetly leading him into a corner to make sure their conversation wouldn’t be overheard.

“Thorin wants to see you.”

Bilbo felt his good mood vanish.

“Tell him I’ll talk to him tomorrow. I would like to visit Dale first.” At Balin’s questioning gaze, he elaborated. “I would prefer to have somewhere to stay in case things don’t go well with Thorin. I am sure Bard wouldn’t deny me accommodations.”

Balin opened his mouth to oppose his statement, but in the end just frowned and shook his head, letting the matter be.

“Bard would be a fool to turn you away. After all, Dale was rebuilt almost entirely with your money.”

“I didn’t mind giving it away,” Bilbo said. “What would I do with so much gold anyway? It served a much better purpose in Bard’s hands.”

“I have to admit that he is proving himself to be a very capable leader,” Balin said. “He managed to divide the gold wisely among the people and the newly rebuilt Dale is prospering better than I would have expected.”

Balin gave him a speculative look.

“I must say that you are dealing with this whole situation remarkably well, considering.”

Bilbo shrugged.

“I had five years to come to terms with everything that happened. I must say that the urge to punch Thorin in the face has lessened considerably with time.”

That made Balin chuckle. “I can imagine.” His gaze flew to the fireplace, landing on the brothers.

“Fíli and Kíli had a rather loud discussion with Thorin this afternoon. You wouldn’t happen to know anything about that?”

“Ah, that.” Bilbo felt comprehension dawn on him. “Back in the Shire, I confessed the whole business with Thorin to Kíli. It appears that he has informed his brother and they went to tell Thorin what they think about it. I won’t apologise for telling Kíli.” He straightened up, gazing Balin in the eyes. “I have kept the whole business secret for five years and it made me feel miserable.”

“You don’t have to explain yourself to me,” Balin said mildly. “I can only imagine how you felt after you left here. I simply felt it prudent to warn you that Thorin may not be in the best of moods after today.”

“When is he ever?” Bilbo muttered. Slightly louder, he said: “I am willing to talk to him in a civilised manner and meet him halfway if need be. My stay in Erebor will be so much more pleasant for everyone if we have peace.”

“Good luck with that.” Balin patted his shoulder.

“Thank you. I think I will need it.”
Bilbo walked back into the room, joining Fíli and Kíli on the floor.

“What did Balin want with you?” Fíli asked as soon as he sat down.

“Thorin wants to talk to me.”

“That might not be a great idea right now,” said Kíli. “We had our chat with him this afternoon. He didn’t take it very well.”

“Did you get in trouble?” Bilbo asked them, worried.

“I don’t think so,” Fíli looked a bit confused. “It was hard to tell. I thought he would yell at us for sticking our noses in his business, but he only shouted a bit and then just became sort of gloomy and thoughtful. I don’t trust this silence on his. He is probably saving his temper for you.”

“Lovely,” Bilbo said. “I told Balin that I would see Thorin tomorrow. I would like to enjoy a bit more time in peace before the storm comes. I was thinking of going to Dale.”

“I can take you there,” Fíli offered. “I would prefer to avoid Uncle completely tomorrow, if possible. He might decide he is angry with me after all and I would rather not be present for that. Will you come with us, Kíli?”

“I can’t.” Kíli grimaced. “I have guard duty with Dwalin.”

“Too bad. I’ll just bring you something pretty when I come back,” Fíli said with no small amount of gloating. Kíli punched him.

“Would you like to play with us, Bilbo?” Fíli asked, rubbing his shoulder. “I remember you mentioning that you’re good at conkers.”

“Not bad, by hobbit standards,” Bilbo replied. “I’ll be happy to join you.” And then he spent the next two hours trouncing them at the game, improving his mood considerably.

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They left for Dale after breakfast the next morning. Bilbo stopped at the main gate of Erebor and spent several moments just taking in the sight before him. What a contrast could five years make! The last time he had stood at this very spot, the ground had been gray with ashes from the dragon’s rampage and the fields around the ruins of Dale had been swarming with soldiers preparing for battle.

Now the valley was green with grass and the mountain slopes were covered with small trees that were trying their best to reach the sunlight. Bilbo had no idea if the seedlings had been there all along, or if some enterprising elves had planted them, but it was clear that the dragon’s death had released the lands around the mountain from their century-long slumber.

Far below them, down in the bend of River Running, stood the newly rebuilt Dale. Most of the newly-built houses were made of wood, but a few stone buildings stood in the centre of the town, their pale yellow walls shining in the distance. Even from so far away, Bilbo could see the shapes of men who were hard at work rebuilding the city walls.

Beyond the city of Dale, Bilbo could see the river flowing far into distance. The Lake-town was too far to see from the gates of Erebor, but the edges of Mirkwood were visible at the east, standing green and forbidding on the horizon.
“When the weather is good you can even see the Iron Hills from the top of the mountain,” Fíli told him after they started their descent down the many stairs from Erebor.

“How is Dáin?”

“He helped organize things here while Thorin was recovering, but once the mountain was back in our hands, he was more than happy to go back to his own Hills. Some of his dwarves have decided to stay here and help with the rebuilding, but most of them went back home with Dáin.” He turned to Bilbo. “You can see him at the Celebration. He has been invited along with his whole family, so he should probably arrive within a week or so.”

“That should be an interesting conversation, considering that the last time I saw him, Gandalf and I spent the better part of an hour trying to convince him not to slaughter the elves.” Bilbo made a face.

“Ah, yes, that. I almost forgot about it,” Fíli grimaced. “It’s true that Dáin’s approach to diplomacy can be rather...heavy-handed, but his heart is in the right place. If he tries to give you a hard time, it will be out of loyalty to Thorin.”

“That is not terribly reassuring.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Fíli said. “If anyone tries something, Kíli and I will protect you.”

Bilbo would have liked to say something joking to that, but Fíli’s face was painfully earnest when he said it, so Bilbo just settled for giving him a warm smile.

They arrived at Dale a few moments later, passing through the open gate without a problem.

“Would you like to go to the market first, or do you want to see Bard?” Fíli asked him as they walked through the busy streets.

“Let’s pay a visit to Bard and then we can explore to our heart’s content. You did promise Kíli that bauble.” He gave Fíli a look. The dwarf laughed.

“I did indeed. You can help me pick something appropriate. A dress, perhaps. Do you think he would look good in red?”

“Are you implying that Kíli is a girl?” Bilbo asked incredulously. Fíli grinned.

“It has never failed to get a raise from him. It’s almost embarrassing how easy it is to provoke him.”

“As the older brother, shouldn’t you be the sensible one?”

That made Fíli burst out laughing, causing people to turn their heads.

“Oh, no. I’m having far too much fun ruffling his feathers to give it up for sensibility, of all things. I am willing to be appropriately sober and boring when I ascend to the throne in about fifty years, but until then, I intend to have all the fun I can get.” He sobered up a bit, sighing. “I refuse to end up like Uncle, spending all my time bowing under responsibilities, so focused on duty that I forget how to enjoy myself.”

“Thorin isn’t happy?” That surprised him. Bilbo had always thought that the dwarf would be over the moon when he got his kingdom back, his life’s mission fulfilled. It seemed that this was not the case.

“I don’t know if he’s ever been,” Fíli told him quietly. “He has always been rather grim and
reserved, but I thought that was only because he was unhappy about the dragon. We’ve had Erebor
back for several years now and he still doesn’t smile much. He attends all the celebrations, but never
seems to enjoy himself. I feel a bit sorry for him, to be honest,” he confessed, leaning close.
“Everyone else is happy to have our old home back, only he walks around like a ghost. I’d love to
do something about it, but I’m out of ideas.”

“Maybe I could help you think of something,” Bilbo found himself saying.

“You’d do that for him?” Fíli raised an eyebrow.

“Not for him, but for you, if it makes you happy.”

Fíli gave him a wide smile and put an arm around his shoulders, pressing Bilbo briefly against his
side in a one-armed hug.

“I’m so glad you’re back. Don’t you dare leave again.”

“I would like to stay for as long as possible,” admitted Bilbo. “But if things go badly with your
Uncle, I still need an alternative for accommodations.”

“That’s why you’re going to see Bard, right? I was wondering what that was about.” Fíli released
him and they made their way to the City Hall.

“Bard rules from the Hall,” Fíli told him as the building came into view. “The people wanted to
rebuild the old royal castle for him, but he refused. Said that he wouldn’t live in luxury while his
people barely had a roof over their heads.”

“Balin told me that Bard used the gold wisely.”

“Oh yes, definitely.” They stopped in the shadow of the stone steps leading to the main door, the two
guards at the sides of the door paying them no attention.

“You know, despite what Thorin might say, I think you did the right thing with the Arkenstone,” Fíli
told him with a serious expression on his face. “If you hadn’t stopped Dáin and the elves from
fighting, it would have been a complete disaster and none of us would probably be here today. I
know none of us talk about that day because Thorin doesn’t like to be reminded, but it still feels
wrong that your role in the battle wasn’t acknowledged.”

He took a deep breath.

“What I am trying to say by all this is – thank you. Thank you for having the courage to do the right
thing. I think I speak for all the companions when I say it.”

Bilbo felt something warm spread in his chest at the words. He smiled at Fíli, putting a hand on his
shoulder.

“You are going to be a good king one day, Fíli,” Bilbo told him earnestly. Fíli looked a little taken
aback, but quickly recovered, a pleased smile spreading on his face.

“I’m glad you think so.” They climbed the flight of steps to the Hall, pausing before the heavy
wooden door.

“Who are you and what business do you have with Lord Bard?” asked one of the guards, a tall
bearded man.
“Tell him Bilbo Baggins has come for a visit. He should know who I am.” The guard left, looking puzzled. The other guard started inspecting Bilbo with interest, probably realizing that Bilbo was neither a child nor a dwarf. After a minute or so, he shuffled nervously.

“Excuse me,” he said finally, “aren’t you the halfling who fought with us in the battle?”

“The very same,” Bilbo nodded.

“I heard stories about you.”

They didn’t manage to find out what those stories were because the door opened, revealing the bearded guard.

“Lord Bard says I’m to let you through. Come in, he’s waiting for you.” He closed the door behind them, returning to his post outside.

The hall was airy and full of light, the lofty wooden ceiling supported by two rows of pillars. The walls were covered with tapestries and behind the throne hung two banners, one with a sign of a dragon and the other with a bow and arrow. Bard sat on a carved wooden throne at the opposite side of the hall, watching their entrance.

“Hail, Bard, King of Dale,” Bilbo said when he arrived to the throne, bowing deeply.

“Bilbo Baggins!” Bard looked pleasantly surprised. “I thought I would never see you again.” He stood up from the throne. “Welcome to Dale.” His eyes slid to Fíli. “Is this official Erebor business?”

“No,” Fíli said, raising hands in disclaimer, “I am only here as Bilbo’s escort. Bilbo wanted to visit you, so I offered to be his guide. You are only dealing with him today. As far as I am concerned, I’m not here at all.”

“An heir from the line of Durin as a guard,” Bard muttered, shaking his head. Louder, he said: “I am pleased to see you, Master Hobbit. Your gift to this city was most generous and much appreciated.”

“You needed the gold more than I ever would,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “I’m happy to see that you used it well.”

“As well as we could,” Bard said. “And the least I can offer you in repayment is to ask you to have lunch with me today. I was just about to end the morning audiences, so I would be honoured if the both of you joined me for a meal.”

Bilbo gave Fíli a questioning look.

“We won’t be missed in Erebor,” Fíli assured him.

“Then I accept your invitation for the both of us,” Bilbo told Bard.

The food on the table was just as plentiful as it tended to be in Erebor, only here they served more fruits and vegetables.

“See, Fíli?” Bilbo pointed out as he was loading his plate. “Even they have vegetables.”

Fíli snickered around his piece of pork.

“What brings you to Dale?” asked Bard. “Surely this isn’t just a social call, pleasant though it may be.”
“Why do you think so?” Bilbo asked, curious.

“According to my information, you arrived to Erebor two days ago,” Bard said. “I would hazard a guess that you haven’t even seen the mountain properly yet. If this were just a friendly visit, you would have come here a week from now, after you have seen all that Erebor can offer. Since that is not the case, there must be something here that interests you.”

“You are not far from the mark,” Bilbo admitted slowly. “It’s all a rather delicate business. I would hate to cause you any trouble with Erebor because you helped me.”

“What happened?” Bard asked calmly.

“King Thorin and I did not part on the best of terms five years ago. I have been invited back for the celebrations, but things between us are still rather...precarious.”

“And you would like to have a place to stay in case Thorin gets a fit of temper and evicts you from Erebor?” Bard guessed with scary accuracy.

Bilbo sighed.

“Pretty much. It feels terribly embarrassing to barely come somewhere and already ask for a favour—”

“Then I will save you from the burden of asking me for a favour and offer it freely myself,” Bard told him. “You will always be welcome in Dale. You did more for this city than anyone else. We didn’t forget that. If you ever have the need, you can stay here for as long as you like. Men of Dale honour their debts.”

Bilbo smiled, more relieved than he could put into words.

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

The talk turned to much lighter topics after that and they spent a pleasant hour discussing the Shire and Bilbo’s journey to Erebor. Bilbo left Bard’s hall with a smile on his face, feeling more hopeful than he had in weeks.

“Let’s buy something pretty for Kili before we go back,” he told Fili, following his lead to the marketplace.

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They returned back to Erebor in the late afternoon, feeling tired but happy. Fili had bought his brother a nice pair of leather fingerless gloves for archery and Bilbo himself was carrying a bag with new embroidery threads. Kili was waiting for them in the entrance hall, vibrating with impatience.

“There you are!” he exclaimed when he spotted them. “You’ve been gone for ages. Do you have any idea how bored I was? My watch ended two hours ago.”

“We are here now,” Fili told him, “and if you don’t stop whining, I won’t give you these nice gloves I bought you.”

“You brought me a present!” Kili grabbed the bag eagerly, peeking inside. “Oh, these are beautiful.” He hung an arm around Fili’s neck. “You really are my favourite brother.”

“I am your only brother,” Fili pointed out, but looked very pleased with the reception of his gift nonetheless.
“He wanted to buy you a butterfly hair clip,” Bilbo informed him helpfully, “but I was able to convince him to get you something better.” Kíli retracted his arm.

“You wouldn’t!” he turned an accusing gaze on Fíli.

“Oh, I would” the blond dwarf said. “You would make such a pretty princess.” He danced away from the punch Kíli threw after him.

“Take it back!”

“Make me.” Fíli threw him a cheeky grin and started running away, Kíli hot on his heels.

Bilbo remained behind, utterly forgotten. He shook his head in fond exasperation, watching the young dwarves disappear around a corner. He picked up Fíli’s forgotten shopping bag, deciding to return it later. He was just trying to figure out which one of the ways led back to his quarters when a familiar voice sounded behind him, making him freeze on the spot.

“Master Baggins.”

Bilbo turned around slowly. Thorin stood ten feet away from him, his face unreadable.

“If you are not otherwise occupied, could you come to my quarters after dinner? I believe there are some matters we should discuss.”

“Yes, I believe there are,” Bilbo said slowly. “I don’t have any engagements scheduled after dinner.”

“Then it is settled,” Thorin said. He didn’t wait for Bilbo’s answer, instead he spun on his heal and strode away.

Bilbo watched his retreating figure with a growing sense of unease. He had no idea what to expect from Thorin. With the exception of the evening of Bilbo’s arrival, the dwarf had made himself scarce, avoiding Bilbo completely. Bilbo didn’t know if that was a good sign or not. If nothing else, Thorin didn’t seem angry with his presence in Erebor, but that could be just a facade. Only Valar knew what the dwarf was really thinking.

Gathering his courage, Bilbo sighed. There was only one way to find that out.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for reading and for the support you’re giving me. I’m happy that so many people like the story.

It looks like there will be 16 chapters after all - chapter 13 has unexpectedly grown in size and had to be divided into two shorter ones. I hope nobody will mind that much :)

The next chapter will be posted on September 19.
Bilbo knocked on the door of Thorin’s chamber, nervousness squirming in his stomach like a cluster of snakes. Thorin opened the door almost immediately, as if he had been waiting by the door. A quick look revealed that Thorin was the only person in the room - a fact that Bilbo had mixed feelings about. On the one hand, it was good that their conversation would stay private. On the other hand, there would be nobody to stop them from coming to blows if their argument got out of hand.

Since Thorin was holding the door open to him, Bilbo had no other choice but to enter. Running away now would be the height of cowardice. He might feel many things in Thorin’s presence, but fear wasn’t one of them. Squaring his shoulders, Bilbo crossed the threshold. The dwarf stepped back to let Bilbo through, shutting the door behind him. Bilbo spent a moment just looking around the room, using it as an excuse to avoid talking for as long as possible.

The room was spacious and richly furnished, with thick carpets on the floor and a large fireplace that crackled merrily. There was a tall bookcase full of volumes standing by the opposite wall, several armchairs and a massive desk in the corner. The walls were bare, since the old mouldy tapestries had been torn down and Thorin hadn’t managed to replace them yet.

Finally, when it became obvious that he couldn’t delay the conversation anymore, Bilbo turned back towards Thorin, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“You wanted to talk to me. So. Talk.”

Thorin looked a bit taken aback, but recovered quickly.

“It has been brought to my attention,” he began, “that I might not have treated you with the respect you deserved.”

“You said that already in the card you sent me,” Bilbo couldn’t help but point out. A shadow of frustration ran over Thorin’s face, but he smoothed it out again with some effort.

“You must understand,” he said slowly, “that it is not easy for someone in my position to admit to my faults.”

He took a deep breath, visibly bracing himself.

“I apologise for my actions regarding the Arkenstone. I was not in my right state of mind at the time and took your attempt at peacekeeping as a personal offense. I understand now that you were merely trying to prevent bloodshed between my kin and the elves, but at that time my mind was clouded by gold fever and my reaction to your methods was highly excessive.”

Bilbo realised he was gaping at the dwarf and quickly shut his mouth. That had been certainly unexpected. He had thought that getting an apology from the king would be like drawing blood from a stone – long, arduous and near impossible – but Thorin had taken all his expectations and turned them upside down.

If Bilbo were a more petty-minded hobbit, he would have been irritated that the dwarf had prevented him from exercising his position of righteous anger as the injured party, but as it was, he was just immensely relieved.
He’d had a lot of time to think during his journey to Erebor and those long months had done much to calm down his ire at the king. It had been many weeks since he had last felt anything like the burning anger that had eaten away at his heart in the Shire. Thorin’s behaviour indicated that the dwarf was willing to cooperate with him and reach a truce. It gave him hope that maybe reconciliation with Thorin wouldn’t be as hard as he had feared.

The apology had been a good start, but Bilbo still wasn’t quite satisfied. He decided to let the dwarf stew a little longer before he forgave him.

“Is this your way of saying sorry for trying to kill me at the wall?”

A flash of shame briefly appeared on Thorin’s face.

“Yes,” he said, looking Bilbo straight in the eyes. “I am sorry for threatening to kill you. That was completely unacceptable behaviour, fever or not. I should never have done that.”

Bilbo deflated a bit, letting his face relax from the stern mask he had worn ever since he’d stepped into Thorin’s quarters.

“Thank you,” he told the dwarf. “I spent five years waiting for that apology. It is nice to finally get it.”

“It was long overdue,” Thorin admitted. Before Bilbo could point out the other issue, Thorin mentioned it himself: “I also apologise for banishing you from Erebor. That was not one of my finer moments. It may help to know that I kept your reason for leaving to myself because I had assumed that it would be easier for you to return to Erebor if you did not have the sentence hanging publicly over your head.”

Bilbo’s tongue was burning with the urge to tell Thorin that he knew the dwarf had only done it to prevent having to explain to the others why he had thrown Bilbo out (and that keeping silent about the banishment was the equivalent of not kicking Bilbo in the rear when he had already shoved him out and opened the door for him), but since Thorin was making an awful lot of effort and appeared sincere in his apologies, Bilbo settled for:

“I appreciate that.”

He belatedly realized that he looked rather discourteous. It must have cost Thorin a lot of pride to admit to being wrong. Bilbo decided that he might as well return the favour.

“In light of your apology I think it’s only fair that I respond in kind and apologise for the words I said to you in the tent. I was angry and hurt and a lot of what I said was extremely rude.” He ignored Thorin’s surprise and continued. “I won’t apologise for refusing your offer, though. I still think I was perfectly within my rights to turn down your proposal, but the hurtful things I said afterwards weren’t necessary and I’m sorry for that.”

Thorin gave him a gracious nod.

“Your apology is accepted.”

Bilbo raised his chin.

“There is one thing I absolutely refuse to apologise for, and that’s my stealing of the Arkenstone. The stone wasn’t mine to take, true, but I still think it was the best solution I could have used at the time.” He looked at Thorin in challenge. The dwarf didn’t seem angry with his words.
“I did not expect you to apologise for that.”

“Good,” Bilbo said. “Does this mean we have a truce, then? It would be unfair to the others if we refused to spend time in the same room because we’re both holding a grudge.”

“As you wish,” Thorin made a small bow. “Thorin Oakenshield at your service.”

Bilbo bowed to him as well, inwardly marveling at the king’s show of humility. He had never seen Thorin bow to anyone.

“Bilbo Baggins at yours.” He straightened. “Here, let me show you how we resolve arguments in the Shire.” He stuck out his hand. “Truce?”

Thorin clasped it in a firm hold. “Truce.”

“Then it’s settled.” Bilbo smiled at him, withdrawing his hand. “I suppose that I can tell Bard that I won’t need sanctuary after all.”

“You went to Bard...” Thorin looked rather pained by Bilbo’s revelation. “Please feel free to stay in Erebor for however long you wish. The mountain will be always open to you.”

“Thank you. That means a lot to me.”

Bilbo turned to leave, but a thought occurred to him, making him look back at Thorin.

“How long did Balin have to lecture you before you were willing to talk to me at all?”

“A long time,” Thorin admitted.

“That must have been quite the lecture,” Bilbo smiled at the thought.

“Do not remind me,” Thorin actually shuddered a bit.

“You do know that I have kept the whole incident a secret all this time, right?” Bilbo asked. “The only ones who know what happened are Fíli, Kíli and Balin.”

“My nephews came to see me yesterday. They defended you most fiercely.” Thorin gave him a look.

“They are good boys,” Bilbo said with fondness. “I am sure they would defend you just as readily, if someone wronged you.”

Before either of them could say anything else, one of the side doors opened and the two young dwarves fell into the room.

“Have you two made up yet?” Kíli asked. They kept looking between Bilbo and their uncle with expectant expressions on their faces.

Bilbo sighed. Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Yes, we have reconciled our differences,” Thorin said finally. “As you no doubt know, since you have spent the last half an hour spying on my business behind that door.”

“We had to make sure you did it properly,” Fíli said.

“And to prevent you from killing each other,” Kíli muttered.
“I heard that!” Bilbo gave him a weak glare. Kíli didn’t even have the grace to look ashamed.

“You two have always been a volatile mix together. Who knows what could happen if we left you in a room alone.”

“I have fulfilled your demands,” Thorin told them. “Are you satisfied now?”

“Almost,” Fíli said. “We have one more request to make: eat more meals with the Company. Everyone would like to see you more often.”

Thorin appeared hesitant.

“I am not sure if that is a good idea…”

“You travelled with us for a year, sleeping on the ground and starving in the forest, but suddenly we’re not good enough for company?” Kíli’s voice started to rise dangerously.

“That is not what I-” Thorin began, but seemed to re-think his answer when he saw the dangerous gleam in Kíli’s eyes. “Very well,” he conceded in the end, “I will spend more time with the Company, if you wish so.”

“We do.” Fíli confirmed. He gave them both a happy smile. “I’m glad you two have made peace. See you at breakfast, Uncle, Bilbo.”

With that they turned around and marched out of Thorin’s chambers, both looking very pleased with themselves.

Bilbo watched them go with a mix of exasperation and amusement.

“Oh, those two,” he said, shaking his head. “When they join forces, it’s impossible to argue with them.”

“So now you see that I have been outnumbered.” Thorin said with a hint of humour in his voice.

“You never stood a chance,” Bilbo agreed.

“Indeed.” There was something warm in Thorin’s eyes when he looked at Bilbo now that hadn’t been there when he’d first come into the room.

“You should come to the common room more often,” Bilbo said when he reached the door, turning back to look at Thorin. “I’m sure the others would enjoy your company.”

Thorin hesitated for a moment before he answered. When he did, the words were slow and hesitant, like he was confessing something private and embarrassing.

“I am not certain if my presence would be welcome.”

Oh, Bilbo thought, a light turning on in his head. So that was the problem. He almost laughed with relief, but managed to keep his face perfectly neutral, because he knew that Thorin would take his laughter the wrong way. It seemed that the solution to Fíli’s problem would be easier than either of them had expected.

“Thorin,” he said gently, “I am sure they will welcome your presence.” Before the dwarf could say anything in protest, he continued in a firmer voice. “You may be a king now, but they still consider you their friend and they are sad when you keep avoiding them.” He made his voice softer again, pleading. “Come to the common room tomorrow evening. Everyone will be happy to see you.”
Thorin still looked a bit unsure, but no longer tried to protest. Bilbo considered that a victory. He turned to the door, reaching for the handle, when Thorin spoke behind his back, his voice suddenly much closer than before.

“Do you need any assistance getting back to your rooms?”

“No, thank you.” Bilbo gave him a small smile. “I am almost certain that I will be ambushed by your nephews the very moment I step out of here, so I have no need for additional escort.”

“As you wish,” Thorin said. “Good night then, Master Baggins.”

“Good night.”

He barely shut the door behind him when the two descended upon him, just as he had predicted.

“How did it go?” They started their way back to Bilbo’s quarters. Bilbo looked around at the empty corridor to make sure they weren’t being overheard.

“A lot better than I had expected. You must have given your uncle quite the earful yesterday.” He gave them a look.

“We simply wanted to make sure he won’t throw you out again,” Kíli said. Bilbo promptly shushed him.

“Not so loud! It wouldn’t do for me and Thorin to have kept this whole business a secret for five years only to have people find out about it now, when we have already made peace with it.”

“I think I managed to convince him to come to the common room tomorrow night,” Bilbo told them quietly when they arrived to his door.

“That should be an interesting experience,” Fíli said. “I could count on my fingers the number of times he has joined us in the evenings since we got back the mountain.” He gave Bilbo a searching gaze. “How did you manage that?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“I simply asked. We will see if it really worked tomorrow evening. Maybe he just agreed to get me off his back.”

“Maybe not.” Fíli gave him an indecipherable look. “See you at breakfast.”

They walked away, whispering together. Bilbo walked into his rooms to prepare for bed. It was only when he was putting on his nightshirt that he fully realized what had just happened. He and Thorin had really reconciled. He didn’t have to spend his days in Erebor waiting nervously for the king to throw him out. He was finally able to live in the mountain, just like he had dreamt about for years.

Something light and happy bubbled out of his chest, making him laugh in sheer joy. He could really stay in Erebor. He spent several moments just standing in his quarters, savouring the thought. Oh, the possibilities!

It took a long time before he fell asleep that night, his head full of ideas and excitement, but when he finally did, he slept better than he had in years.

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There was a knock on his door the next morning, not long after he got up. Bilbo put on his dressing
gown and went to answer the door. A tall, dark haired dwarf lady dressed in light mail and riding breeches stood behind the door.

“I hear that you have talked to my idiot brother at last.”

Bilbo blinked.

“I beg you pardon?”

“Mother! Don’t go around scaring Bilbo like that!” Fíli and Kíli appeared behind her, looking strangely apologetic. Without as much as “by your leave”, all three invited themselves into Bilbo’s quarters. Bilbo watched them enter with resignation. He had long proved himself to be incapable of keeping out determined visitors.

“Can I offer you some tea?” he asked in an attempt to hold onto some manners.

“That won’t be necessary,” the lady said. She gave Fíli a pointed look. “Will you introduce us?”

“Right.” Fíli stepped forward. “Mother, allow me to introduce our good friend Bilbo Baggins. Bilbo, this is our mother, Dís.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you at last, my lady.” Bilbo bowed deeply.

“He’s got good manners, I have to give you that,” she remarked to Fíli. Bilbo suddenly realized that he was only wearing a nightshirt and a dressing gown. He had never been bothered by his casual clothes in the company of the other dwarves, but in the presence of Thorin’s sister he felt woefully underdressed. He tried not to squirm under her searching gaze.

He remembered her first sentence.

“As for your inquiry, yes, I spoke to Thorin yesterday. We have reconciled our...differences.”

“Finally. He has been insufferable ever since he sent you that invitation.”

Bilbo had no idea what to say to that, so he stayed silent. Dís didn’t seem to expect an answer.

“I hope you will be staying here for the winter,” she said after a while. “Thorin’s two-hundredth birthday will be a week after Midwinter. It would be a shame if you missed the celebration.”

Bilbo felt himself wither under her gaze. He thought it was a good thing he had planned to stay in Erebor anyway, or he wouldn’t stand a chance leaving. This way he was able to give her an honest smile.

“Yes, Ma’m. I’m planning to stay in Erebor at least until spring, possibly longer. I would be happy to help with the preparations for the celebration.”

“My sons mentioned that you are a good cook.”

“Quite good by hobbit standards, yes.” Bilbo had already learned that dwarves didn’t understand the hobbitish habit of downplaying one’s skills for the sake of modesty. As he looked at the formidable woman before him, he thought that she probably didn’t appreciate meekness.

His guess was confirmed when she gave him an approving nod.

“I may learn to like you yet,” she told him, turning to leave. “I will see you at breakfast.”
Without waiting for a reply, she walked out. Fíli and Kíli remained standing in Bilbo’s living room, looking sheepish.

“We’re sorry for ambushing you this early in the morning,” Fíli said. “Mother has wanted to meet you ever since you came back to Erebor, but we didn’t want to frighten you into leaving again.” A hint of humour appeared on his face. “We managed to hold her off until yesterday, but once she heard that Uncle isn’t going to throw you out again, she got her way.”

“I was just a little surprised, is all,” Bilbo told them. “I have been also looking forward to meeting your mother. She is quite the woman,” he said with admiration.

“She is,” Fíli nodded. “She helps uncle rule Erebor and she sat on the throne in Blue Mountains while we went away on our quest. She truly is a queen in all but title.”

“Uncle has wanted to name her a queen for years now, but she was still hopeful that he would marry some day,” Kíli divulged. “I think she has finally given up.”

They left him alone after that to finish his morning routine in peace. Bilbo spent a while looking at the tapestry that stood rolled up in the corner of his bedroom. Maybe he would be able to find a use for it, after all. He chose his clothes with a little more care than usual, because he wanted to make a good impression on Dís. Since he was going to be staying in Erebor for a while, he thought it was only reasonable that he maintain good relations with all members of the royal family.

When he arrived to the dining room, most of the Company was already there, chatting. Thorin hadn’t arrived yet and his nephews were nowhere to be seen, either, so Bilbo made a beeline for Ori. The young librarian was standing in a corner with Nori and waved at Bilbo when he saw the hobbit approach.

“Good morning!” Ori told him with enthusiasm when Bilbo joined them.

“Good morning to you as well.”

Nori just nodded at him with a small smile, his hands busy with a pipe.

“I was just telling Nori about the new vest I’m knitting for him,” the young dwarf told him. “I was trying to get him to tell me which colour he prefers, but he’s being as tight lipped as ever.” He gave his brother an accusatory look.

“I would make it brown,” Bilbo said. “That’s what most of his clothes are, anyway.”

Ori opened his mouth to say something, looked between Bilbo and his brother and closed it again.

“I won’t ask how you came by that knowledge.”

Nori just kept standing there, smiling mysteriously.

“I have a question for you in return,” Bilbo leaned closer to them to avoid being overheard. “Please excuse my ignorance in this matter, as I am aware that I will probably insult someone just by asking.”

“What is it?” Ori asked, just as Thorin and Dís walked into the room with Fíli and Kíli in tow.

“Are all dwarf women so...bossy?”

Nori burst out laughing, causing most of the room’s inhabitants to look their way in bewilderment. Ori looked torn between mortification and amusement, his eyes flickering in the direction of Thorin’s
“Ah, so you’ve met the Lady Dís, I presume,” Nori said knowingly when he finally got his mirth under control.

“And Bombur’s mother.”

It didn’t escape his notice that both dwarves shot the kitchen door a nervous glance at his words.

“In that case I cannot blame you for thinking that,” Nori said. “Both of those ladies are well known for their... assertive manner. But to answer your question – no, dwarf women aren’t all bossy. Their tempers and characters are generally as varied as those among male dwarfs or any other species.”

“Our mother was quite sweet and mild-tempered,” Ori said, joining the conversation. “I can tell you about her some time, if you wish.”

“I would be happy to hear about her,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “Thank you for taking my question seriously,” he said to Nori. “I thought it would be wiser to ask someone discreet before I commit a social blunder through my ignorance of your customs.”

“You did well,” Nori said. “If you want to meet more dwarf women to see for yourself, you can have a family dinner with us some day. Dori’s fiancée is a lovely lady. You can also ask Glóin to introduce you to his wife. I’m sure he would be more than happy to.”

“Dori is getting married?” Bilbo asked. That was news to him.

“Yes, he is planning to have a ceremony in spring,” Ori said. “They’ve been courting for over three years now, so it’s high time they finally tied the knot.”

Before they could discuss anything more, they were called to the table to join the rest of the company. Even with Dís present, the mood was still a lot more pleasant than the tense atmosphere that had filled the room on Bilbo’s first day there. Bilbo had never given much weight to the saying “clear the air between them”, but in the case of him and Thorin, it seemed to have worked.

The king appeared a lot more relaxed than Bilbo had ever seen him. Maybe it was because he was finally home, in his own domain, among people he trusted, but the lines around his eyes were no longer so tense and he even smiled several times during the course of the meal.

Bilbo had originally planned to ask Bombur after breakfast whether he could come to the kitchen to bake some apple pies, but before he could speak with the large dwarf, he was approached by Thorin.

“Have you seen the rest of Erebor yet, Master Baggins?”

“No, not as such. I have only been to the kitchens and the library.”

“Shall I give you a tour, then?” The dwarf appeared to be in a strangely good mood. “Who else should be qualified in showing you around the mountain than its king?”

Bilbo was a bit taken aback.

“I would hate to keep you from your duties...”

“Dís can take care of those.” Thorin shot his sister a glance. She gave him a small nod. “I have been remiss in welcoming you to Erebor properly. It is the least I can do to compensate for that.”

“Well,” Bilbo couldn’t find any argument against that. “In that case, lead on. I would be happy to see
how the restored kingdom compares to the one I saw the last time I was here.”

They left the rest of the company in the dining hall and started heading towards the entrance hall.

“How much do you know about the restoration of Erebor?” Thorin asked him as they walked through the long stone corridors.

“I think I have a pretty good idea in theory,” Bilbo said. “I questioned Bofur and Kíli quite extensively when they came for a visit, but even with their descriptions, I wasn’t quite able to imagine what the mountain looks like now. I would like to see the changes with my own eyes.”

“So you shall,” Thorin said, leading him through the entrance hall. “I am aware that you have already seen the entrance hall, so I shall take you to the throne room. Did you know it took two years to make the replacement for the main gate?” he asked Bilbo as they passed a small unit of guards that were headed for the gate. The guards all stopped and saluted Thorin before they resumed their activity.

“That must have taken an awful lot of work,” Bilbo said, looking up at the giant gate. “I still remember the doors hanging from the hinges from the dragon’s passage.”

“We could not afford to leave Erebor unprotected for long,” Thorin said as they walked deeper into the mountain. “The gate was one of the first things that got replaced.” He gave a small sigh. “The mountain may be habitable now, but the work is still far from finished. There are still entire districts in the floors below that remain empty and many of the workers live in conditions that are far from ideal. I am not blind to the fates of my people,” he said, as if he wanted to prevent criticism from Bilbo.

“I know you are not,” Bilbo told him mildly. “You never had a problem taking care about those under your command.”

“Only those not under my direct command,” Thorin finished the thought for him. To Bilbo’s relief, he didn’t appear angry at the subtle insinuation. They fell silent for a while and Bilbo used the opportunity to look around to his heart’s content.

Now that the enormous halls were restored and properly lit, the view was breathtaking. The lofty architecture was a complete opposite from the tiny, cosy hobbit-holes he was used to at home, but he found the sight awe-inspiring and strangely soothing at the same time.

The angular pillars and decorations had a different kind of beauty than the airy arcs of the elven homes, but he found them compelling nonetheless. While the elven architecture had been almost ethereal in its beauty, the dwarven palace was hewn from the very bones of the earth, the halls as much a part of the mountain as the dwarves that lived in them.

He told Thorin as much and watched the dwarf’s eyes light up with something like delight.

“You approve of Erebor, then?” Thorin asked him as they entered the mostly empty throne room.

“Approve...” Bilbo’s breath left him in a little chuckle of disbelief. He shook his head and looked at the dwarf who was watching his reaction. “Are you seriously asking me, hobbit from a hole in the Shire, if I like one of the most magnificent places I have ever set my eyes on?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then.” Bilbo took a breath. “I can tell you that it’s very grand and much improved from the last time I have seen it. The presence of light certainly helps a lot. Some of the walkways still make
me a little dizzy, but the view more than makes up for that. I think I could spend months just exploring all the corridors and hidden rooms.”

“Are you planning to stay here, then?” Thorin’s eyes had a strange intensity when he asked that.

“For as long as I can,” Bilbo replied honestly. “Until spring at the very least. I just learned this morning that Dori is planning to get married next spring and I don’t want to miss it. I may make a prolonged trip to see the elves and maybe even Beorn after that, but I doubt I will be returning to the Shire for a long time.”

“Are your relatives aware of that?”

“Yes,” Bilbo admitted. “Even when I left home, unsure of my reception here, I wasn’t planning to return. I thought that I could always go live in Dale or Rivendell if you turned me away.”

“You would not miss the Shire?” Thorin asked with genuine curiosity. “I distinctly remember you mentioning your homesickness for Shire several times during our journey.”

“People change.” Bilbo shrugged. “I thought that I would be happy going back home, but I wasn’t. The Shire I came to stayed the same as when I had left it, but I was different. I don’t belong there anymore.” He realized suddenly that the thought didn’t even make him sad.

“You can find your place here,” Thorin told him. Bilbo found that he wanted to believe him.

“I think I would like that,” he smiled at Thorin. “But I cannot guarantee that I will stay here permanently.” He felt it was only fair to warn the dwarf to prevent future quarrels. “It is possible that my wanderlust hasn’t been sated yet and I will go travelling again in spring, but for now, I am content to stay here.”

Thorin nodded, accepting that.

“What would you like to see next? The treasury or the marketplace?” Thorin changed topics, leading him away from the throne room. From the doorway, Bilbo saw that Dís had taken her place on the marble throne and began the morning audiences.

“I have already seen the treasure room,” Bilbo told Thorin. “I think I saw enough gold to last me a lifetime the last time I was here. Show me the marketplace instead, please. I would like to see what they have to offer.”

“As you wish.”

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When they came back in time for a late lunch, the dining hall was nearly empty. Only Bofur and Bombur sat at one end of the table, talking in hushed voices. Both greeted Bilbo warmly when they saw him and gave a polite nod to Thorin.

“Can I come to the kitchen this afternoon, Bombur?” Bilbo asked the rotund dwarf as he started piling what remained of the food on his plate.

“Of course,” Bombur said. “Did you have anything particular in mind?”

“I thought about making a batch of apple pies. I haven’t had a good apple pie for ages and today saw some nice apples in the market, so I thought I could make enough for everyone. Fíli has already ordered four of them.”
“You’ll have to make plenty, then.” Bofur told him. “You know how much the lot of us can eat.”

“Don’t remind me,” Bilbo said with a grin. “I think that with Bombur’s help I should be able to make enough pies for everyone. I can help with the dinner in return.”

“Sure,” said Bombur. “I’ll have some apples delivered, so that you don’t have to waste time running to the market and back.” He got up from the table and went to the kitchen, his brother trailing after him.

“You do a lot for them,” Thorin remarked in between bites of pork.

Bilbo shrugged.

“They are my friends, I like doing things for them that make them happy. I know that Fíli will be over the moon when I save him a few of those pies. I’ll have to make a batch of scones next so that Kíli doesn’t feel left out.” He smiled. “I suppose that before long, I will be flooded in requests from everyone.” He gave Thorin a look. “You wouldn’t happen to know what Dwalin likes? I’m pretty sure his pride won’t allow him to ask me for anything openly.”

“He is fond of pumpkin pasties and meat pies,” Thorin said. “He eats most food, but those are his favourites.”

“And what about you? What do you like?” It seemed only logical to finish that line of questioning. Thorin looked a little taken aback by the question, but a pleased nonetheless.

“I am partial to poppy seed cakes,” he admitted with a small smile. “Nobody ever makes them, however, because Dís cannot stand them.”

“Well, that won’t do,” Bilbo declared. “It wouldn’t be fair if everyone got their favourite baked goods and you were forced to sit in a corner, nibbling at a leftover scone. I will make you some poppy seed cakes, if you agree to protect me from your sister.” He could hardly believe his bravery in saying that, but Thorin didn’t look insulted. If anything, he seemed rather amused.

“You have met Dís already, then?”

“Oh yes,” Bilbo said. “She introduced herself to me in a manner that much resembled your first entrance to Bag-End. Coincidentally, I was also in my dressing gown.”

Thorin looked like he desperately wanted to run a hand over his face, but refrained at the last second.

“I think her plan was to frighten you into compliance.”

“I have no idea if it worked,” Bilbo said. “I was mostly confused when she left and she hasn’t spoken to me since.”

“She is just bidding her time. She will spend some time observing you before she comes to talk to you again.”

“Why are you doing this?” At Thorin’s questioning look, he elaborated. “Warning me against her, I mean. Isn’t she your sister?”

“She is, therefore I know her very well. You have become a close friend of her sons, which is why she has taken a personal interest in you. She will never leave you alone now.”

Bilbo shrugged.
“I don’t mind. In the Shire, there was always someone trying to pry into my personal business.” He stabbed a potato with his fork, inspecting it thoughtfully. “With time, I may even welcome the challenge. Everyone here seems scared of her to some degree. I wonder if I could get her to like me, for a change.”

Thorin actually laughed at that, a short deep laugh that lit up his whole face.

“That would indeed be a sight to behold,” he said finally. “I suppose I should not be so surprised. After all, you were bold enough to challenge a dragon twice. Winning my sister’s affection should be nothing compared to that.”

Only later Bilbo realized that this was the most he had ever talked to Thorin in all the time he had known him. Even more surprising was the realization that he had enjoyed the time they had spent together. Indeed, once the king had removed the gigantic steel rod from his backside and relaxed a bit, Bilbo had found his company quite pleasant.

Bilbo had come to Erebor prepared to treat Thorin with cold politeness, but the king’s cordial manner had made it impossible to keep that up for long. It was clear that Thorin was making a lot of effort to be friendly towards him, so Bilbo found it only fair that he respond in kind.

He had no idea if the shift in Thorin’s mood had been caused by the reminder that the dwarf still had friends, or if the reconciliation with Bilbo had removed some of the pressure the others had been putting on him (Bilbo wasn’t so self-centred that he would think his presence was the sole reason for Thorin’s more relaxed manner), but he seemed a lot happier than he had been when Bilbo had first seen him upon his return to Erebor.

Maybe Bilbo’s return to Erebor wasn’t just for his benefit alone, he thought at dinner as he watched Thorin admonish Kili for stealing food from his brother while Fili munched happily at his apple pie.

Maybe he wasn’t the only one who had been lonely.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

AN: I won’t lie – the reconciliation scene was the hardest to write in the entire fic and even after countless rewrites, I’m still not quite happy with it. I hope the talk wasn’t too anticlimactic for those who expected a huge scene with lots of shouting. In my mind, Bilbo is simply not vindictive by nature. He can be angry and hurt and feel slighted, but when he sees a gesture of good will made with honest intentions in mind, I think he wouldn’t continue to hold his ground just for the sake of having a grudge.

They may have called a truce, but their issues are far from resolved. Don’t worry, I won’t throw away several chapters of character building to the wind just to have a romance. The problems will be addressed and dealt with eventually.

Also, I imagine Thorin as someone who is a natural leader, confident in his ability to command others, but utterly hopeless when it comes to more personal everyday interaction.

Next chapter will be posted on September 22.
Trouble arrives

The preparations for the big annual celebration in honour of the restoration of Erebor began. With only two weeks left until the start of the festivities the inhabitants of the mountain switched into a state of highly organized frenzy. Every inch of every visible surface got polished into gleaming shine and various garlands and decorations started appearing around the interiors.

Even Bilbo soon found himself up to his elbows in dough, helping Bombur with the baking of cakes and pastries for the festivities. He had precious little time left for reading or his embroidery, but found that he didn’t mind in the slightest. The rush of work and the demanding schedule that the celebration put them on were a welcome change to the stagnation and slow decay of his last years in the Shire. Surrounded by friends and feeling useful by helping with the preparations, he felt happier than he had in years.

He should have known that the peace wouldn’t hold forever.

The change came three days before the festivities were scheduled to begin. Bilbo was just having a lunch with the few members of the company who had been able to tear themselves away from their duties when one of the guards walked into the room, looking rather bewildered.

“Master Baggins,” he addressed Bilbo, “could you come with me, please?”

“What is it?” Bilbo rose from the chair, trying to come up with a reason why he was being called. Did Thorin want something from him? Was there a war? Another dragon attack?

“There are some hobbits at the gate, asking for you,” the guard said.

“Hobbits?” Bilbo’s companions exchanged curious glances. Despite the command being only for Bilbo, they all got up to follow him. As he walked, Bilbo felt a strong feeling of foreboding that only grew with every step.

“Bilbo!” Two joyful voices greeted him when he walked out of the gate.

“Boys,” he sighed. Then he noticed the tall figure that accompanied them. “Gandalf. I should have known.” He closed his eyes and prayed for patience, while his friends chuckled at his exasperation.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“We wanted to see Erebor,” said Fortinbrás simply, “and since you refused to take us with you, we persuaded the wizard to be our guide.”

“I came to your house to find that I had missed your departure by less than a fortnight,” Gandalf said. “The boys were quite distressed by your absence, so I decided to help them out a bit.”

“I bet you did,” muttered Bilbo. Aloud he said: “I see that your propensity for taking young hobbits where they have no business to be is as strong as ever.”

Gandalf coughed a bit, but managed to keep his expression of befuddled innocence. Balin came to stand next to Bilbo, eyes twinkling with merriment. Unlike the rest of the dwarves, who were now snickering openly in the background, he had managed to keep his composure, even though his lips
twitched now and then.

“Will you introduce us, Bilbo?”

“Oh, of course. I am forgetting my manners. You dwarves are a terrible influence on me.” Bilbo shot them a disgruntled look, which made them laugh even harder.

“These are Fortinbras and Isembold, my younger cousins from my mother’s side of the family.” The hobbits made a passable attempt at a dwarven bow. Bilbo thought they must have practiced on the road.

“And these are my friends, the dwarves.” He waved a careless hand in the general direction of his companions. “I will let you figure out which one is which.”

“Oi!” Fíli made an attempt to protest, but it wasn’t very convincing, because he soon started laughing again. Without another word, Bilbo turned on his heel and marched back into the mountain, the unruly group following a few steps behind.

“Where are your manners, Bilbo?” Kíli called behind him.

“I think I left them in the Shire, along with any sense of shame or propriety I might have once possessed,” Bilbo told him, marching to the throne room. He was feeling a strong urge to go the nearest wall and bang his head on it repeatedly until this nightmare disappeared.

They arrived to the throne room without any further incidents, though the dwarves behind him still kept chuckling in a most irritating fashion. Just for that, Bilbo decided not to bake them those nice tarts he had planned to make for dinner. The throne room was busy with dwarves running back and forth, but Thorin appeared to be currently unoccupied, so Bilbo made a beeline for him.

He made a small bow to Thorin to show that he was on an official business.

“Yes?” Thorin asked, looking between Bilbo and the group behind his back with a raised eyebrow.

“I am sorry to bother you, Your Majesty,” Bilbo said for the sake of the dwarves around who were pretending their best that they were not eavesdropping on their conversation, “but some unexpected guests have arrived and I thought you should be made aware of their presence.”

He motioned for the hobbits to come closer.

“Thorin, these are my relatives, the Tooks. They have decided to invite themselves into the mountain, despite the fact that I expressly forbade them from coming here. They appear to be determined to stay for the festivities.” He gave them a look that made them both wilt a bit.

Before they could say anything, Gandalf stepped forward, drawing himself to his full height.

“The hobbits are here as my guests,” Gandalf said, daring Bilbo to say anything to oppose that. Bilbo folded his arms on his chest and returned the glare, not intimidated in the slightest.

“Well, if that is the case, I can hardly deny them welcome,” Thorin said. Bilbo thought that he looked unseemly amused with the whole affair. Gandalf’s expression turned unbearably smug.

“See, Bilbo? You do not have to worry anymore about their reception here.”

Bilbo opened and closed his mouth several times, but couldn’t come with anything that would sufficiently express his exasperation with the wizard’s meddling. In the end he just hung his head,
shaking it in defeat. He took a deep breath, turning to the pair of rascals.

“Welcome to Erebor,” he told them brightly. “Try not to cause too much trouble while you’re here.” He turned back to Thorin. “Please, do not bother with assigning them any accommodations. They can stay in my quarters. I have an empty bedroom that I don’t use, which should be big enough for them and will allow me to keep a better eye on their mischief.”

Thorin gave him a searching look and seemed to realize that arguing with Bilbo on this would not be a productive use of his time.

“Very well, your relatives can stay in your rooms if they wish. I am quite busy at the moment, but I will be happy to make their acquaintance at dinner.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo told him. He made another small bow and went to collect his unruly relatives.

“You two will come with me now and I will show you where you will be staying.” He shot a look at the wizard. “We will talk later.”

“Of course.” The wizard was all obligingness, the meddling old coot.

Since the show was over, most of the company dispersed to return back to their jobs. Only Fíli and Kíli remained behind, latching onto the young hobbits the moment Bilbo turned his back on them. As they walked to his quarters, he heard their excited whispers behind him and tried not to sigh too loudly. Of course these four would get on like a house on fire.

Bilbo got them settled in his quarters and was immensely relieved when Kíli offered to give them a tour of Erebor, taking the youngsters off Bilbo’s hands. Bilbo didn’t know if he should feel relieved or be horrified in advance at all the pranks they could do with Kíli’s help. In the end, he was glad when the door closed behind them and he could enjoy a few blessedly hobbit-free hours.

It wasn’t that he was displeased to see them again, Bilbo thought as he rolled the dough, just that his worry and exasperation over their tenacity had temporarily overruled any fondness he might have felt when he had found them at Erebor’s doorstep. He imagined the journey they must have taken from the Shire and thanked the Valar that they had had the wizard to look after them. If they had been hurt at any point during the journey, their blood would have fallen on Bilbo’s head, because it had been him that they had decided to follow.

Now he would have to plead with Gandalf to escort them back again after the celebrations were over. He wasn’t looking forward to that talk.

Kíli and his two new best friends came back just in time for dinner and Bilbo listened to their endless chatter as he helped Bombur put the bowls with food on the table. Since Gandalf and the hobbits had joined their ranks for meals, Bofur had moved in another smaller table and joined it with the current one, creating a long L-shape.

While Bilbo was busy making the finishing touches to their dinner, the young Tooks took the opportunity to meet the rest of the company. Bilbo tried not to cringe as he watched them attempt the dwarvish bows, but the dwarves didn’t seem to mind, finding the entire scene highly amusing.

They sat down with Thorin and Gandalf on the ends of the table, Dís having given up her usual seat to the wizard.

“Is this what Gandalf meant when he said that you’re a Took?” Balin asked Bilbo after he had spent a good ten minutes observing the hobbits’ antics.
“Unfortunately, yes.” Bilbo gave him a wry smile. The dwarves started laughing.

“You’re one to talk!” Fortinbras said accusingly, pointing at Bilbo with his fork. “You caused quite the uproar when you left. Half the Shire thinks that you ran away to marry a dwarf and the other half that you have finally gone completely mad and decided to become a wizard.”

“Become a wizard...” Bilbo got a laughing fit, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. “Oh, that is delightful. My countrymen are getting more creative every year. The last time I came back, they were convinced that I had brought a great treasure with me and kept trying to sneak into my cellar to dig holes there.” He shook his head. “I wonder what they will say about me in twenty years.”

Something occurred to him that made him turn a searching gaze on them.

“Do your mothers know that you went to Erebor? You didn’t just run away, did you?”

“No!” Isembold hastened to reassure him. “Both our mothers know that we went travelling. They weren’t terribly happy about it, but since we’re both of age, they couldn’t stop us.”

At the end of the table, Bilbo faintly heard Balin tell Thorin: “Does that remind you of anyone we know?”

“Did you give my instructions to the Tháin?” he asked Isembold.

“Oh yes,” the young hobbit said. “Uncle was more than happy to carry them out.”

“If only you could see the commotion those caused,” Fortinbras cut in. “The Sackville-Bagginss nearly threw a fit when they found out that you had left your fields and wine yard to us and they got nothing.”

“Thank you for that, by the way,” Isembold said.

“The Bagginsses have no right to complain,” Bilbo told them. “I gave Bag-End to young Drogo Baggins. That should satisfy them.”

“Did you really leave your wine yard to me, Bilbo?” Fortinbras asked. “It’s an awful lot of work to maintain.”

“Fortinbras Took,” Bilbo said in his best authority voice. Both young hobbits straightened in their chairs. “Did I just hear you complain about getting one of the best wine yards in the Shire? Just a moment ago, you two made it a point to remind me that you are both of age. You are an adult now, so act like it, or I will change my mind and transfer all my lands to Lobelia Sackville-Baggins!”

“You wouldn’t!” Fortinbras squeaked, looking horrified at the very idea.

Bilbo paused for a moment to let him stew.

“No, you are right,” he said finally, leaning back against his chair. “I wouldn’t. But the matter still stands that I left you something valuable and you dared complain about it.”

Fortinbras seemed to belatedly realize that the dwarves had witnessed the entire scene. He seemed to shrink in his chair under their gazes.

“I’m sorry, Bilbo,” he said, looking at his plate. “I guess I didn’t quite realize the value of what I got.” He raised his head to look at Bilbo. “Thank you for the gift.”

“You’re welcome,” Bilbo gave him a smile. “And if you continue to behave yourselves, I may even
let you eat the cake that I made this afternoon."

The young hobbits’ eyes lit up at once.

“Do we get a cake, too?” asked Kíli eagerly. “We’ve been on our best behaviour for days.” He gave Bilbo his best puppy dog eyes.

“That’s why I made four of those cakes,” Bilbo told him, turning his attention back to his dinner and pretended not to notice the whoops of joy his announcement caused.

After the dinner was done and each of the two hobbits had eaten enough food for three dwarves, they all moved to the common room for their usual evening sit-down. Ever since Thorin had started joining them two weeks prior, there had been a desk added into the corner and several more chairs to give everyone a place to sit. Fíli and Kíli still preferred to sit on the floor by the fireplace, but everyone else had their favourite armchair that they normally occupied.

The young hobbits decided to join the brothers on the floor near Bilbo’s feet, leaning back against Bilbo’s armchair on either side of his legs. Bilbo reached out his hands and laid them on their heads, ruffling their curls.

“What were you two thinking, travelling hundreds of miles through wilderness completely unarmed?”

“Isn’t that what you did?” Fortinbras gave him an accusing look. “We wouldn’t be the first ones to go travelling like that.

“Besides, we had a wizard. He would protect us,” Isembold said with utter certainty. “And I took with me grandpa Took’s old sword. We weren’t completely unarmed.”

Bilbo raised his head to see the dwarves watching their exchange with a great deal of amusement. Only Gandalf was absent from the room, so he wasn’t able to comment on his ability to conjure walls of fire and slay scores of wild beasts.

“Right,” Bilbo told them with a perfectly straight face, “how could I forget about the wizard?” Something suspiciously resembling a snicker sounded behind him.

“So you see, we were perfectly safe the whole time,” Fortinbras finished brightly and Bilbo fought the urge to run a hand over his face.

“Of course,” Bilbo agreed. “Now I have to figure out how to bribe Gandalf to take you all the way back to the Shire in the same perfectly safe way.” Something occurred to him. “Is Beorn coming to the celebrations?” he asked the assembled dwarves.

“He has been invited,” Balin said, “but we have no idea if he will really come. His visits tend to be rather unpredictable.”

Bilbo nodded his thanks, the wheels in his head turning with plans and calculations.

“You’re not getting rid of us already, are you?” Fortinbras asked, sounding hurt.

“No, of course not,” Bilbo reassured him. “You can stay here for as long as you like. I was just trying to come up with alternative ways to get you back home in case Gandalf gets into one of his moods and decides to mysteriously disappear without a word.”

“That would be just like him,” Dwalin remarked. Bilbo started a bit at that. He’d had no idea that
Dwalin had been paying any attention to his conversation.

“Of course, if everything else fails, I can always bribe the elves into granting you safe passage through the forest,” Bilbo told the hobbits, no longer worried about their return journey.

“How would you do that?” Fíli asked, curious.

“I have powers you know not,” Bilbo told him mysteriously. The dwarf started giggling.

“No, you don’t. We’ve seen all your tricks already.”

“This is a special trick,” Bilbo said. “I am pretty sure it will work on Thranduil.”

“What is it?” Kíli asked, wide-eyed.

“Wait and see for yourself,” Bilbo told him.

“We’ll find out about it soon enough,” Fíli said. “The delegation from Mirkwood will be coming here the day after tomorrow.”

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It was a merry company that met the next night. The hobbits had spent the whole day with Kíli on a trip to Dale and came back excited with bags full of gifts for half the Shire.

“Everyone back home is going to be so jealous of our adventure when we show them what we brought back,” Fortinbras said with satisfaction, running his fingers over the new buttons on his jacket.

“What are you doing, Bilbo?” Ori came over to Bilbo’s chair to peek over his shoulder. “This is not knitting.”

“No,” Bilbo said, patting the arm of his chair. Ori sat down, eyes full of curiosity. “This is embroidery. I’m putting some finishing touches to my fancy vest. I’d like to look appropriately festive for the celebrations.” He raised the vest in the air to show the dwarves the nice golden pattern he had trimmed the cloth with.

“It’s very pretty,” Fíli told him, coming closer. “Is that some elvish craft?”

“I don’t think so,” Bilbo said. “Hobbits have been able to do it for generations, thought we usually choose simple patterns to sew, like flowers. This here is an elvish knot, but you could use the same technique to adorn the clothes with dwarvish symbols if you wished.”

“Really?” Ori asked.

“Yes,” Bilbo nodded. Ori’s eyes lit up.

“Can I learn it?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“I don’t see why you couldn’t. You are good at knitting, so embroidery should pose no problem for you. There won’t be much time for crafts while the celebrations take place, but you can come to my rooms afterwards and I’ll be happy to show you how to do this.”

“That would be wonderful,” Ori said, smiling. Bilbo gave him a smile of his own and went back to
his needle and thread. Ori remained sitting at his side, watching Bilbo’s technique.

The Took family sat by the fire with Fili and Kili and were doing a magnificent job at beating the dwarfs at their own game, much to Kili’s puzzlement. When they defeated the dwarfs for the third time, Kili called for a break, staring at the board with a frown. Fili seemed more amused than angry at the defeat, watching his brother’s frustration with a smile.

Fili got up after a while and wandered over to Bilbo’s chair, looking at his work.

“Would you be willing to make something for me, if I properly compensated you for the work?” he asked Bilbo. “I am skilled enough with metal and gems, but I would never have enough patience for such detailed work.”

“Of course,” Bilbo told him. “I would be happy to make something for you, and you don’t need to pay me anything. It would be a favour for a friend. If you come tomorrow, I can show the fancy cloak I made last winter. It should give you a pretty good idea of what I can do. If you bring me a pattern and some instructions, I can sew it your clothes.”

“It wouldn’t be fair to just ask for a gift and give nothing in return,” Fili insisted.

“Very well,” Bilbo gave in, “You can create something for me, if you insist.”

“I do.”

“Then it’s settled,” Bilbo smiled. “Come for a visit anytime.”

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The small elvish delegation arrived with great deal of pomp and elegance. As Bilbo stood next to the throne with the rest of the company and watched Thranduil glide down the length of the hall, he couldn’t help but wonder if the elves had been born with such grace or if they dedicated years of their immortal lives just to the practice of the right way of walking. Bilbo was suddenly very glad that he had decided to wear his best clothes for the occasion. It wouldn’t feel right to greet the elves with his sleeves stained from apple sauce.

Thranduil came to stand several feet before the throne and gave Thorin a small nod of his head.

“Greetings, Thorin son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain.”

Thorin nodded back.

“Welcome, Thranduil, King of Mirkwood.”

Bilbo wondered how much effort it must have cost Thorin to say it without a trace of hostility.

Thranduil’s eyes ran over the assembled dwarves and paused on Bilbo, lingering.

“Greetings, Elf-friend,” he said pleasantly, drawing curious gazes of the assembled dwarves. “It is gratifying to see you again in good health.”

Bilbo made a step forward, bowing deeply before the elf.

“The pleasure is entirely mine, my Lord.”

Behind him, he heard Kili’s incredulous “Elf-Friend? When did that happen?”
Thranduil turned his gaze to the young dwarf.

“Mr Baggins stayed in my halls for recovery after he was banished from here,” he said in a perfectly casual tone.

“BANISHED?” There were several voices that had caught onto that word.

“Is that true? Did you really banish Bilbo?” Dori demanded.

“Yes,” Thorin said, carefully not looking at any of them.


“He was injured in the battle, like so many others,” Thranduil told them in the same disinterested tone. “Though his injuries weren’t life threatening, they still required several days of bed rest to heal properly. I was more than happy to provide accommodations for him and was rewarded for my hospitality most generously. And now I believe Master Baggins should take me to my own accommodations.”

He gave Thorin a small nod of his head and started gliding away, as if he hadn’t just dropped a bomb on the room. Bilbo had to run a bit to keep up with him. Behind him, Bilbo heard Glóin growl:

“We are going to have so many words.”

Thranduil led the way out of the throne room, but once they were out in the hall, he allowed Bilbo to walk by his side and show him the way to his rooms.

“I see that your companions were unaware of this development,” he said when they had put two floors between them and Thorin.

“Yes,” Bilbo said, “I have managed to successfully keep it a secret for five years. Until just now, in fact.”

Thranduil didn’t seem fazed by the subtle jab.

“They would have found out about it sooner or later,” he said. “Though I must say that I am quite surprised to see you back in Erebor. I would not have thought that Thorin Oakenshield would ever admit you back into his kingdom.”

Bilbo shrugged.

“He had five years to rethink his decision and I believe that his advisors were starting to get quite frustrated by my refusal to return back to the mountain.”

“Interesting. And you were willing to swallow your pride and come back to the mountain to beg him for forgiveness?” Thranduil shot him a look.

Bilbo fought down his irritation at the elven king’s presumptions, reminding himself that the elf did not know the whole truth.

“As a matter of fact, it was he who had invited me here,” Bilbo said, his polite smile vanishing. “Which I think was only right, since my banishment was as much his fault as it was mine.”

“So you have made peace?” Thranduil raised an eyebrow. “Did he of all people really admit that he had made an error?”
“That is between him and me,” Bilbo said, a little sharper than he had meant to, “but yes, we made peace and I was able to move back into the mountain. My return was that much easier because nobody knew that I had been banished in the first place.” He sighed. “I have no idea what my standing will be, now that the knowledge of my exile has spread all over Erebor.”

They arrived to the quarters that had been assigned to the elven king. Bilbo opened the door for him and then went to show the elves that had been following them where their quarters were. When he came back to Thranduil, the king was deep in thought.

“I saw no reason why the knowledge of Oakenshield’s lapse of judgement should be kept secret,” the elf began, “but I failed to consider the consequences my remark may have for you. If I have caused you dishonour by my thoughtlessness, I sincerely apologise.”

Bilbo was floored.

“I...thank you for that, my Lord.”

“My aim had been to disconcert the dwarf a bit, but instead I managed to damage your standing among your companions,” Thranduil continued. “Would it help if I offered you a public apology?”

“You do not have to inconvenience yourself on my account,” Bilbo protested.

“You are an Elf-Friend,” Thranduil gave him an intent look. “I named you one myself. It would not do to have one of such standing suffer disgrace at my hand. You seem to value your relationships with these dwarves.”

“Yes,” Bilbo admitted. “They are my friends. I care about them.”

“Then the matter is settled. I hope you will keep me company at lunch?”

“Yes.” There was nothing else Bilbo could say to that.

“Excellent.” He turned his back on Bilbo, letting him know that he was dismissed.

Bilbo walked back to his quarters with a heavy heart. He had originally planned to help Bombur with lunch, but he did not have the courage to face his friends at the moment. He found his quarters blessedly empty upon his arrival. Closing the door behind him, he went to his bedroom and sat down on the bed, hanging his head into his hands.

He knew that by the time evening came the news about his past banishment would be all over Erebor. Since nobody knew the full truth, everyone would think that he had deserved his banishment. He had never had much contact with the other dwarves outside Thorin’s company, but the few he had met had always treated him with respect. How will they act now when they will think that Thorin was only suffering Bilbo’s presence in Erebor out of a favour for his companions?

He wasn’t looking forward to finding out.

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To say that the lunch was uncomfortable would be the understatement of the century. The atmosphere in the hall was freezing when Bilbo walked in and it took all of his courage not to turn on his heel and walk out again. They were taking their lunch in the Great Hall of Erebor because of all the guests and neither Thranduil nor Thorin looked happy about sharing a table with the other. Bard hadn’t arrived yet, so there was nobody to mediate the arguments that would inevitably arise.
To make matters worse, the dwarves of Thorin’s Company were shooting the king looks of varying degree of betrayal. Only Fíli, Kíli, Balin and Dwalin sat by his side, maintaining the appearance that nothing extraordinary had happened. Several of the dwarves started to rise at Bilbo’s entrance, but sat back down again when Bilbo gave them a small shake of his head. This was not the time or place to vent their outrage.

Thranduil had saved him a seat on his left and Bilbo headed for it, feeling very ill at ease with the whole affair. How they thought they were going to get through the lunch without an incident was a mystery to him. When Bilbo came within reach of Thranduil, the elf rose from his seat, drawing everyone’s eyes to him.

“I would like to make a public apology,” he began, causing the eyes of the present dwarves to bulge in a most unattractive manner. “Today upon my arrival I made a remark which, true though it was, may have inadvertently damaged Master Baggins’ standing here in Erebor. Master Baggins is held in high esteem among my kin and it would be disrespectful of me not to allow him to hold such a position here in Erebor as well.” He turned to address Bilbo directly. “You have my apologies for any hurt I may have caused you, Master Baggins.”

“Apology accepted,” Bilbo said, trying not to gape at the elf.

Thranduil sat back down in his seat and reached for a bowl of vegetables with a nonchalance that bordered on art form. The dwarves at the table were still gaping at the elf like he had grown a second head. Bilbo sat down quickly and focused on filling his plate to avoid the gazes of their table companions.

“Did I just see that?” he heard Glóin ask in disbelief.

“I think you did,” Balin told him.

The rest of the table was uncharacteristically silent. Normally during the meals there would be a great deal of racket and food flying in all direction, but today there was deafening silence, everyone staring intently at their plates. The elves didn’t seem to mind that at all, talking among themselves in quiet voices. Bilbo had never been so grateful to escape from a table in his life.

As soon as he was able, he made a few half-hearted excuses and fled back to his chambers to hide. For want of nothing better to do, he sat down with his vest to finish the last of the embroidery, but his heart was no longer in the work. Why should he take the effort to look festive when everyone would still think his presence was a concession from Thorin?

There was a knock on his door, but he didn’t pay it much attention, busy as he was with his brooding. Only when the knock sounded for a second time did he get up and go to open the door.

“Thorin,” he said in surprise. The king was standing in the hallway, looking rather uncomfortable.

“May I come in?”

Bilbo wordlessly opened the door wider and stepped back, letting him through. Thorin took a brief moment to look around, his eyes lingering on Bilbo’s unfinished embroidery before they landed on the hobbit.

“I just had a very long conversation with my advisors,” he said. “They called me a variety of unflattering names. Some of them even threatened to riot should I ever decide to banish you from the mountain again.”

“I’m glad to hear that they are not angry at me,” Bilbo felt a little relieved at the news, but his mood
was still too glum to appreciate it properly.

“Sometimes I think they like you more than me,” Thorin told him in a tone that was only half joking. He quickly grew serious again. “I would apologise for the situation, but I think that in this instance, we are both equally to blame since we were both interested in keeping the incident a secret.”

“Yes, we are,” Bilbo said, looking at him in resignation. “I suppose it was naive of me to expect that something like this could be kept a secret.”

Thorin took a few steps closer to him, his eyes intent.

“Why did you not tell me that you had been injured at the time?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“Would it have made any difference in the outcome of our quarrel? I doubt that. After that, it didn’t matter anymore. I thought we could make peace a lot easier if I didn’t bring up every perceived slight you had ever caused me.”

Thorin looked deeply unhappy.

“It is not heartening to learn that not only had I banished someone who had performed a valuable service for me, but that in doing so I had also effectively denied them the medical attention they had needed. And now to see that my foolishness may have caused you dishonour among the dwarves here...” He shook his head. “You can understand why I am not very pleased with my choices at the moment.”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say to that. Neither one of their positions was enviable. Thranduil had managed to make them both look equally bad in the eyes of the local dwarves – with a few words he had painted Bilbo as a disgraced thief in exile and Thorin as a heartless tyrant.

Bilbo sighed.

If only there was a way to restore both their positions without both of them having to humiliate themselves by making the circumstances of the banishment public... His eyes strayed to the bedroom as an idea started to form in his head. He left the dwarf in his sitting room and went to the bedroom. The tapestry was still there, standing in the corner where he had put it on his first night in Erebor.

He came back into the room with the tapestry in his arms, feeling a little foolish but determined nonetheless.

“I may have found a way to save both our reputations, but I need your agreement first before I can do anything publicly.” He came closer, offering the roll of cloth to Thorin. “This is for you. I had planned to give it to you eventually, but it may be of better use if I do it now.”

Thorin took the offered gift, handling the folded cloth with careful hands.

“I need you to tell me if you are willing to accept this in public,” Bilbo told him. “I can make it a gift for allowing me to return to Erebor. If you don’t like it, you can just hang it somewhere out of sight. I hope you don’t find it offensive,” he added.

“Why would I?”

“Just unwrap it.”
Thorin unfolded the cloth slowly and spent a long time gazing at the tapestry. It showed a large red dragon attacking the mountain from the sky while the city of Dale burned below.

“It was supposed to be the first one in a series of three,” Bilbo explained hurriedly, eager to fill the silence. “I know you don’t like to be reminded of that day, but it is still part of your history.”

“What would be the other two?” Thorin finally tore his eyes from the tapestry, focusing his gaze on Bilbo instead.

“I thought I could make one depicting the dragon sleeping on his pile of gold and a final one that would show his defeat at Lake-town. They could be hung in one room and tell the story of the rise and fall of the dragon,” Bilbo said, trying his best not to fidget under that gaze.

“You made me a tapestry.” Thorin had a tone of wonder in his voice.

“I thought about Erebor a lot while I was in the Shire,” Bilbo admitted. He didn’t feel it necessary to point out that he hadn’t made it for Thorin specifically. “Kíli has seen it already, but none of the others have any idea that it exists.”

“I would be honoured to receive it in public,” Thorin told him. “You can give it to me during the morning audiences tomorrow. The gesture should be enough to silence any potential critics.”

Bilbo took the tapestry back from him, folding it carefully into a roll.

“I’m glad you like it,” he told the dwarf after he had put it on the nearby table.

“I would be a fool not to recognize the skill behind it,” Thorin said.

Bilbo fought down a blush.

“How long would it take to create the other two tapestries if I commissioned them from you?” Thorin asked.

Bilbo made a quick mental calculation.

“Well, this one took me all winter to make, but I spent entire days working on it. Since I’m here in Erebor, I would need about half a year for each of them. If I had a weaving loom, which I don’t.”

“I can provide it for you,” Thorin told him.

“That’s not necessary,” Bilbo started to protest, “I have enough-“

“It is the least I can do,” Thorin said firmly. His expression softened a bit. “Please, allow me to do this for you.”

Bilbo was ready to protest again, but the look in Thorin’s eyes stopped him. They held shame and remorse and determination. He sighed.

“Very well. You can get me a weaving loom, but please do not dare complain that the tapestry takes too long to finish. It’s a work of art, not a simple piece of cloth and I have other things to do beside sit all day and weave.”

“You will not hear a word from me,” Thorin promised with a small smile.

“I’ll hold you to that.” To his surprise Bilbo found that most of his bad mood was gone. “I think you’d better go back before they start a search for you.”
Thorin nodded and started heading for the door.

“Would it be terribly impolite if I hid in my quarters for the rest of the day?” Bilbo asked him before he could open the door. “I do not think I’m brave enough to face the world right now.”

“You may stay here for however long you wish,” Thorin told him. “I will inform our guests that you are indisposed for the day.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo told him honestly.

“You are welcome.” With one last nod, Thorin walked out, closing the door behind him softly.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Oh, Thranduil, why do you have to ruin everything?

I hope nobody hates the Tooks too much. I made them up on a whim when I started writing this and later realized that I need them for the plot. I am normally not a big fan of OCs, so I have no idea what possessed me to write them.

The next chapter will be posted on September 24.
By the morning of the next day the rumours of Bilbo’s banishment had spread all over Erebor like wildfire. Whispers followed him everywhere when he walked to the kitchens to have his breakfast early in the morning. Luck stood on his side for once and he found only Bombur there, putting together a feast for the elves. The ginger-haired dwarf gave him a look when Bilbo came in, but continued working. Bilbo made himself a pot of tea and went to sit down at his favourite place.

“We still like you, you know,” Bombur said, putting a plate of fruit cakes on the table in front of Bilbo.

“I know you do,” Bilbo told him, sounding more confident than he felt. “I’m not so sure about the rest of Erebor.”

“They’ll come around.”

“Thank you for standing up for me,” Bilbo told him with a smile.

Bombur sat down on the opposite bench.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen my brother so angry.”

“What happened after I had left?” Bilbo asked.

Bombur grimaced.

“Thorin had to interrupt his audiences, because there was a serious risk that he would get publicly punched by his advisors. We all went to a nearby chamber and then spent good two hours yelling at him. Glóin almost hit him.” Bombur gave him a look. “Why didn’t you tell us about the banishment?”

“I don’t like to be reminded of it,” Bilbo dropped his eyes to the table. “Neither I nor Thorin are very proud of what we said that day. After I came back here, we had both agreed that it would be easier for everyone if we kept the whole incident a secret. I didn’t count on the elven king making it public knowledge to make himself look better in comparison.”

“What are you going to do now?” Bombur asked. “As much as I hate to see it, half the kitchen is already gossiping about you.”

“I’m going to ask for an audience with Thorin,” Bilbo told him. “I believe an official show of good will on both our sides should cause the gossips to back off a little.”

“Good luck with that,” Bombur told him earnestly. He stood up from the table. “Will you have time to help me with the cake? I have already baked the base, but I still need you to decorate it.”

“Of course,” Bilbo assured him. “I didn’t forget about it. I’ll come by after lunch, if that’s all right with you. That should give me plenty of time to finish the decorations before the evening presentation.”

Bombur gave him a satisfied nod and went back to his cooking. Bilbo ate his breakfast slowly, every
mouthful feeling like he was preparing for a battle. Maybe he was, in a way, he thought as he walked back to his quarters. There were all kinds of battles after all and not all of them required swords and axes.

Bilbo took a lot more care with his appearance than he usually did. He carefully combed his hair and changed into his best pair of trousers, picking up the gold-trimmed vest from the living room armchair. He briefly thought about wearing the mithril mail over his shirt, but in the end decided not to provoke the onlookers too much.

After he had checked his appearance one last time in the mirror, he picked up the tapestry and walked to the door. Before he opened them, he took a breath and squared his shoulders, praying to the Valar for luck.

The journey to the throne hall seemed shorter than usual. He peeked into the hall through the doorway and found it full with dwarves not only from Erebor, but from the Iron Hills as well. It appeared that Dáin had arrived at last. Bilbo almost turned around and fled at that discovery, but his stubbornness kept him in place.

“I am here to request an audience with the King Under the Mountain,” Bilbo told the guard at the door.

“Come to crawl, have you?” the dwarf said with a smirk. Bilbo raised his chin haughtily, staring the dwarf down. The guard dropped his gaze after a moment and shuffled away to tell Thorin of his request.

Bilbo took the tapestry in both hands to hold it like an offering and went to stand in the great doors of the throne room. He could feel the precise moment when the assembled dwarves noticed him, whispers starting around the hall. Thorin sat on his marble throne on the other side of the hall, his expression unreadable from the distance. Bilbo waited for the herald to announce him and started his long trek to the throne.

The eyes on him were almost like a physical weight, daring him to trip or look ashamed of his situation. Bilbo decided not to give them the satisfaction and held his head high, his eyes holding Thorin’s the whole time he walked towards the throne. He might look like a supplicant, but his pride forbade him from becoming one. Despite what the dwarves might expect, he would not crawl.

He stopped in the same spot where Thranduil had stood the previous day and gave Thorin a bow.

“Hail, Thorin son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain!” he said in a strong voice. “I bring you a gift as a token of my gratitude for welcoming me back to Erebor. Your invitation did not specify whether we should bring anything, but I thought it only appropriate, given the occasion.”

He offered the rolled cloth to Thorin, who rose from his throne to take it from him.

“I made a tapestry for the anniversary of dragon’s death,” Bilbo continued, addressing the hall, but keeping his eyes firmly on Thorin. “We are here today to celebrate the dragon’s fall, but it is my opinion that while we may celebrate the worm’s end, we should not forget how the whole history started in the first place. I hope my work does the terrible event some justice.”

He stepped back to allow Thorin to do the rest. The king unrolled the tapestry slowly, looking at it for a long time. Even though he had seen it already, he managed to make his surprise convincing enough. After a moment, Thorin beckoned his nephews to come closer and show the tapestry to the crowd.
There were many gasps and murmurs when the dwarfs in the hall saw it. A few of them were frowning at Bilbo, probably shocked at his audacity, but most of them looked impressed.

Thorin silenced the whispers voices with a hand.

“You skill does you credit, Master Baggins,” Thorin said, his voice resonating around the hall. “I am very pleased to have you back in Erebor as a guest of honour for the celebrations.” He gave Bilbo a genuine smile. Bilbo smiled back. Thorin continued.

“I will have the tapestry displayed in my audience chamber where it can be appreciated properly. I am looking forward to any other works of art you may create in the future.”

“It would be a pleasure, my Lord,” Bilbo said with a small bow.

“You may go now,” Thorin said. “I believe my royal advisors are most anxious for your company.”

Bilbo nodded and went over to his friends, who immediately formed a protective cocoon around him. They all seemed to be determined to talk to him, so Bilbo let himself be dragged away. Only Dwalin remained behind, standing behind Thorin’s throne like a silent watchdog.

“What was that scene you just played in the hall?” Dori asked once the doors were shut behind them. “If Thorin put you up to it—” his voice started to rise dangerously.

“He didn’t force me to do anything,” Bilbo cut in before the dwarf could work himself into a state. “It was my own decision to do this.”

“But why?” Bofur said. “Thorin was the one who banished you. He should be the one to apologise to you.”

“He can’t do that in public without losing his authority as a king,” Bilbo said. “Am I right in that, Balin?”

“You got that right, laddie,” the old dwarf sighed. “As far as the people of Erebor know, you were banished by the king and now you’re back because he allows it.”

“But that’s not fair,” Kíli protested. “Thorin was terrible to you. It’s not right that you should be the one to publicly ask for forgiveness when he was in the wrong.”

“It’s politics,” Balin explained gently. “You have yet much to learn before you can play the game yourself.” He turned to Bilbo. “I have to say, you handled the situation with a surprising amount of grace.”

Bilbo ducked his head.

“Thank you. Thorin and I spoke about it yesterday afternoon and we both agreed that a public audience would be the best course of action.”

“How can you even talk to him after the way he has treated you?” Ori asked. “You should have punched him.”

Bilbo chuckled at his fervour.

“I nearly did at first. But Thorin has already apologised to me for the banishment. He did it almost right after I arrived here.”

“And that makes everything all right?” Bofur asked with a surprising amount of scepticism.
Bilbo sighed.

“No. We still have a long way to go, but we had peace until yesterday. Now we will both have to do a lot of careful political dances to let us keep our positions intact.”

“That tapestry is really pretty,” Ori said, changing the subject. “Did you really make it all by yourself?”

“Yes,” Bilbo gave him a smile. “We had a very long winter in the Shire last year. I drew the scene entirely by heart from what I remembered about the dragon’s arrival from your stories, Balin. Did I get anything wrong?”

Balin shook his head.

“No, it’s almost frighteningly accurate. I felt a shiver down my spine when I looked at it the first time. Are you planning to make any more?”

“I have ideas for two more tapestries and I think there will be no shortage of further inspiration for me here,” Bilbo said. “As soon as I get a loom, I will start working on the next piece.”

“That could keep you here in Erebor for a long time,” Ori said slowly.

Bilbo nodded.

“Maybe even permanently.” He saw the precise moment his meaning registered with the dwarves, their faces lighting up.

“You’re really staying here?” Kíli asked with wonder.

“For as long as I can,” Bilbo replied and quickly found himself with an armful of overjoyed dwarf.

“Oh, this is wonderful,” Kíli exclaimed, lifting Bilbo from the ground in his excitement. Fíli and Ori took their turns hugging him as well while the others watched with wide smiles.

“There’s a lot I am willing to do to be able to stay here in Erebor,” Bilbo said when Ori finally released him.

“Even make a public apology for something that wasn’t your fault?” Fíli asked with new understanding in his voice.

“Even that,” Bilbo nodded. “Please stop harassing Thorin about it. I find dealing with him so much easier when he’s not in a permanent state of temper.

“Very well,” Fíli said, silencing his brother’s protests with a look, “we’ll let you deal with him on your own. Mahal knows I’m not too eager to deal with His Grouchiness all the time, either.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo told him. “Would you all mind terribly if I went back to my quarters for a while? This morning has been a little too exciting for me and I need to recover a bit before I am able to face the crowds at lunch.”

“Not at all,” Balin patted his shoulder. “Take as much time as you need.”

“I’ll come with you,” Fíli offered. “Kíli can take the tapestry to Thorin’s chambers.” The others dispersed, most of them going back to the throne room. Ori offered to stay with Kíli and help him hang the tapestry.
“You mentioned the other day that you have a fancy cloak, right?” Fíli asked him as they walked back to Bilbo’s rooms.

“Yes,” Bilbo said. “I made it a while ago, but I have never worn it, because it looked ridiculous in Shire. I think it might be appropriate for the ceremonies here.”

“Show me,” Fíli told him when they arrived to the sitting room.

Bilbo went to the bedroom and dug out the heavy cloak from the bottom of his wardrobe. It was made of rich dark green fabric and had intricate golden symbols wrought along the edges. He brought it back to the sitting room and showed it to Fíli. The dwarf took it from him, running his finger along the intricate patterns.

“What are these?”

“I have a great fondness for old stories,” Bilbo said. “I got inspired when I read about the great deeds of ages past.” He lifted the bottom parts of the cloak, pointing out the symbols. “These are the two trees of Valinor. The weaving patterns along the edges are their branches and roots. Above each of the trees is a Star of Fëanor and I think you could find the hammer and anvil of the dwarves somewhere in the pattern as well.”

“It’s beautiful,” Fíli said, admiring the work. He looked up. “Would be possible to add a little more to this?”

“I suppose so...” Bilbo shrugged, not sure where the question was headed.

“Can you have these added to your cloak by dinnertime?” Fíli took a small piece of parchment from his pocket, handing it to Bilbo.

“Aren’t these Durin’s symbols?” Bilbo looked at him in bewilderment.

“Yes,” Fíli nodded. “All the members of the family and the royal advisors wear them somewhere on their clothes. It would raise your standing considerably if you wore them, too.”

“Does Thorin know about this?” Bilbo asked.

“He’s the one who suggested it,” Fíli said. “He came to me this morning and asked me to relay his request to you. It is his wish that you wear these as a symbol of your position here in Erebor.”

Bilbo was floored.

“I...yes, I can have these sewn on my cloak by dinnertime. There’s a free spot near the neck where the stars will look particularly good.”

Fíli gave him a smile.

“I’m so glad you have decided to stay in Erebor.” He reached into his pocket for a second time and pulled out a beautiful golden clasp. It was shaped like an eagle and had two tiny emeralds in the place of eyes. “This is from me,” he told Bilbo and pressed the small brooch into his palm. “Since you got so little from the dragon’s treasure, I thought it’s only fair that you get this.”

“It’s too much,” Bilbo protested.

“You can consider it a payment for looking after my brother, if you wish.” Fíli quelled his protests with a look. “Please, keep it. It will go well with the cloak.”
“Thank you,” Bilbo said, giving in to the plea. He spent a moment admiring the delicate work. “It’s beautiful.”

“I’ll see you at lunch,” Fíli said, heading to the door. “Bard should be here already to help keep the peace between Uncle and the elven-king, so the meal should be a lot more pleasant than the dinner yesterday was.”

“Let us hope so.”

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The Great Hall was decorated in a grand fashion when Bilbo walked in at lunchtime. There were garlands weaving around the pillars and from the ceiling hang dozens of beautiful wrought lanterns that lit up the hall, their light reflecting on the silver plates and goblets. The final effect made the room gleam with a thousand golden lights and Bilbo thought that he had never seen so much beauty in one place.

All the guests had already arrived and were filling the hall, taking their places at the tables. There were three tables placed in a loose U-shape – the King’s High table that stood along the wall and two longer ones placed a little further down the hall that ran parallel with each other. Thorin sat right in the middle of his table, surrounded with his kin and friends.

Bard and Thranduil had each been given a seat at one end of the High table and Gandalf got seated on Bard’s right. To his surprise, Bilbo found that he was supposed to sit at Thranduil’s left hand, while the chair on the right was reserved for the Elven-King’s son. The two young Tooks had been delegated to sit at one of the side tables with Glóin’s son, with whom they had been spending the past two days. Looking in their direction, Bilbo found them huddled close together, leading an animated conversation with the young dwarf.

There was no speech at lunchtime, because the official start of the ceremonies was scheduled for the evening. The lack of formality made the atmosphere relaxed and joyful, leaving the entertainment to the guests’ own discretion. The hall soon filled with chatter and laughter and the clinking of goblets, but most of the attendants were too busy with their food to pay much attention to their neighbours. Bilbo was pleased to find that Bombur had used some of his recipes for the feast and even more when the servants brought the tarts that he had made himself as dessert.

“How did you like my halls, Master Baggins?” Thranduil asked him, effectively drawing the attention of half the table. “Since you stayed for more than a week the last time you were there, you had plenty of time to form an opinion.”

“They are very pretty,” Bilbo said with a smile. “I must say that I found my stay in your palace much more enjoyable when I didn’t have to spend it all lurking around a prison.”
There were a few choking noises from the direction of the dwarves and a hastily muffled giggle that sounded suspiciously like Kíli. Bilbo didn’t look over to check. He was gazing at the elven king, waiting for his reaction. Thranduil looked a bit pained at the reminder, but his son appeared very amused.

“How you had managed to spend two weeks under our noses, unnoticed by our guards, I have never understood,” Legolas said, shaking his head.

“I used a secret hobbit craft that allows me to pass unseen by most,” Bilbo told him. “It was the same skill, in fact, that had allowed me to sneak into the dragon’s lair twice while he was asleep and steal from his hoard.”

“Did you really talk to the dragon?” asked one of the dwarves from Iron Hills, leaning over the table in curiosity. Bilbo thought it might be Dáin’s son, since the family resemblance was strong.

“Yes, I talked to the dragon,” Bilbo said. “He fancied himself to be very clever and cunning, but it only took a little flattering for him to eagerly show me his weak spot. It’s a shame I wasn’t fast enough to warn the Lake-town of his approach, but I was at least able to send them a message about the dragon’s weakness.”

“That was you?” Bard’s voice rose from the other end of the table. “You told the bird where I should shoot?”

“Yes,” Bilbo said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t do more to help you.”

“What you did was enough. You found the dragon’s weak spot. Without it, we could have shot our entire arsenal of arrows at him and wouldn’t have harmed him in the slightest. I suppose I should thank you for that.” He raised his goblet in Bilbo’s direction.

“No!” Bilbo protested before the others could follow the example. “Please don’t toast me. It was you who killed the dragon, not me. In fact,” he said, standing up, “since we are here to celebrate the dragon’s death, I propose a toast to Bard Dragonslayer, hero of Lake-town. None of us would be here today if it wasn’t for his sharp aim.”

“To Bard!” Most of the High table raised their glasses and the rest of the hall quickly followed the example, drinking to the man’s health. Bilbo sat down, content that they had forgotten about the toast for him. He caught Bard’s eye at the other side of the table. The man didn’t appear very appreciative of Bilbo’s successful attempt to redirect the attention elsewhere. For a hero, he was rather reluctant to revel in his glory. Gandalf next to him appeared highly amused with the whole spectacle, his eyes twinkling with mirth as he watched the antics at the table.

“Can you sing, Master Baggins?” Bilbo’s attention was drawn away from the wizard by Thranduil.

“Yes, but I haven’t sung properly for years.”

“Don’t you sell yourself short!” Kíli called from his place. “I heard you sing some elvish stuff the last time we were in Rivendell. I didn’t understand a word, but it was very pretty.”

“Well, if your singing was good enough for Elrond’s house, surely you should have no trouble here,” Thranduil said, the subtle jab completely flying over the dwarves’ heads. “Would you be willing to sing for me after dinner tonight?”

“I suppose so,” Bilbo said. “I would have to go over my notes first, but I should be able to put together one or two songs in elvish. And if you don’t mind translations, I could sing one of the ballads from the Old Days.”
“You know those tales?” Thranduil looked genuinely surprised.

“I know most of them, though very few by heart,” Bilbo said. “I have translated several volumes of the old poems into the Common Tongue, so I would dare say that I am quite familiar with those works.”

“Indeed?” the elven-king looked impressed despite himself.

“Could you sing for us too, after you’re done with the elvish ballads?” Fíli asked him.

“I don’t see a reason why I couldn’t,” Bilbo said.

As soon as he was able, he took his leave from the table under the pretence of needing to refresh his memory of the songs. In reality, he ran to his quarters for a quick change of clothes and then went to the kitchen to check on the cake he and Bombur had been secretly putting together for days. It was shaped like a huge dragon, lying on his side after he was slain by an arrow. It had taken Bilbo several days before he was able to create the right shade of red for the dragon’s scales and he was very proud of his invention.

From what Bombur had told him, dwarves sometimes created cakes like these to commemorate important events, but rarely had the patience to put much work into them. As a race of smiths and jewellers, they preferred to create things that would endure and the thought that the cake wouldn’t survive more than a few hours tended to discourage them from baking those.

Bombur had thought it a marvellous idea when the hobbit first suggested it and was more than happy to help Bilbo with the creation of the details. Bilbo had even been able to convince Isembold to help him steal one of Kíli’s arrows so that they could make the dragon’s death more convincing. Now he found the cake in one of the cold storage closets, with all the tools necessary to turn the faceless pile of sponge-like dough into a dragon.

The red-haired dwarf arrived shortly after and together they worked for several hours, sculpting the dragon’s body and covering it with icing. They had decided to use red icing for the dragon’s scales, but used small real gems for the belly, making the cake sparkle in candlelight. Bilbo used chocolate to draw the dragon’s features and details and was very pleased when the final result had a passable resemblance to the original.

As a final step he took the stolen arrow and pushed it carefully into the dragon’s chest, so that the feathery end was visible from all angles. Tired but happy, they closed the door to the storage room and left the cake to sit and wait for its big moment at dinner. After a heartfelt thanks to the hobbit Bombur left to go check on the cooks that were preparing the feast. Bilbo made his way back to his quarters, where the cloak with the unfinished Durin embroidery laid waiting for him. He had been able to sew the anvil and hammer before lunch and now only needed to add the crown and seven stars. Since there was plenty of time until dinner and nobody would miss him, he could take his time with the pattern.

Bilbo managed to finish with half an hour to spare before dinner was supposed to start, so he went back to the kitchen, where he found Bombur pacing nervously, the cake already waiting on its huge silver platter.

“There you are,” Bombur exclaimed when he saw Bilbo. “I was beginning to fear you would leave me to present the cake all by myself.”

“I thought about it,” Bilbo admitted, “but it didn’t seem fair to you. If it was up to me, I would gladly let you take all the glory.”
“I know,” Bombur gave him a smile, “but I would feel like a fraud, passing someone else’s work as my own.” He gave Bilbo’s attire an appreciative once-over. “That’s quite the cloak you have there.”

“I hope it’s appropriately festive for the celebrations,” Bilbo said, adjusting the clasp at his neck.

“I think you will fit right in with all the fancy elves,” Bombur assured him with a hint of humour.

They spent the next twenty minutes peeking into the great hall and waiting for everyone to take their place. Once the guests were seated, Thorin rose up from his chair and gave a grand speech about the restoration of Erebor and the importance of having good relations with one’s neighbours, which Bilbo found highly ironic, given the dwarf’s history.

When the king finally sat down to a thunderous applause and the loud sound of goblets banging on the table, Bilbo and Bombur left their hiding place and made their way before the High table. Bilbo gave the nervous dwarf next to him an encouraging smile.

“Your Majesty, dear guests,” Bombur started the speech he had spent several days practicing. “As the High Chef of Erebor’ kitchens I have taken the liberty to prepare a special surprise for this evening in honour of the event that brought us all here today. With the help of my friend Bilbo Baggins, we have managed to create a special cake to commemorate the occasion. I hope you enjoy it.” He made a small bow and stepped to the side, gesturing for the cooks to bring the platter in. The cake was so big that four dwarves had to carry it to avoid dropping it.

Bilbo took a small amount of satisfaction from watching everyone’s eyes grow in size when they realized what the cake was. Two of the cooks brought a small wooden table into the middle of the room and the cake-carriers deposited the dragon cake on it, so that everyone had a good view from their seat. Bilbo stepped closer to the High table, bowing to Bard.

“King Bard, since you were the one who had slain the dragon, would you do the honours?”

Bard stood up slowly and walked over to Bilbo, taking the long knife from him with an expression of disbelief. Bilbo gave him one more bow and backed away to go sit in his place at the high table.

“Is that my arrow?” Kili hissed at him when he sat down.

“Yes. Do you mind?” Bilbo mouthed back. Kili shook his head. He didn’t appear to be angry with Bilbo for using his arrow, so Bilbo let him be and turned his attention to the food in front of him. He hadn’t had anything to eat since lunchtime, busy as he had been and he was pleased to find all his favourite foods at the table.

His fellow diners left him alone while he ate, but once he reached for a dessert, they took it as a sign that he was open to conversation. Bilbo spent the rest of the feast answering questions about baking, embroidery and hobbit customs. He was quite relieved when the music started and he had an excuse to hide himself in a corner of the hall under the pretence that he was checking his music notes before he went to sing for the elves.

A shadow fell on him and he turned to find himself face to face with Thorin.

“That’s quite an interesting skill you have there, Master Baggins,” Thorin told him. Bilbo wasn’t sure whether he meant the baking or the embroidery, because the dwarf was giving his cloak an appreciative look.

“It’s not of much use in the wild, but for occasions such as these, it comes in handy,” Bilbo said, managing to cover both topics at once.
“Why did you do all this?” Thorin gestured towards the cake. “Nobody forced you to create the tapestry, or to bake the cake. Why would you go to all this trouble?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“I like doing these things,” he said simply. “You invited me here, but didn’t give me anything to do, so I found my own ways to fill the time. This just happens to be one of them.”

“It’s a peculiar kind of craft,” Thorin said.

“Not all craftsmanship lies in weapons and jewellery,” Bilbo told him mildly. Thorin gave his cloak one more glance.

“I am beginning to see that.”

Before he could say anything else, Kíli made his way over to them, bouncing in excitement.

“That cake is brilliant. I think I can even forgive you for stealing one of my arrows.”

“It was for a good cause,” Bilbo told him with a playful smile.

“Food is always a good cause,” Kíli said. He gave Bilbo a disarming grin and reached out to take Bilbo’s hand. “Come, dance with me.”

Bilbo took a step back, raising his hands before him like a shield.

“No, thank you. I’m not planning to dance tonight.”

Kíli’s face clouded with disappointment.

“Why not?”

“I don’t know any of these dances.” Bilbo lowered his voice. “I won’t make a fool of myself on the dance floor by tripping over my cloak because I did not know which direction I’m supposed to turn.”

“I could lead you,” Kíli extended his hand in invitation.

“I’d rather not risk it,” Bilbo said. “And even if I did want to dance, I do not have the time to learn right now. Thranduil is waiting for me. The elves had already requested three different ballads, so I will have my hands full for the evening. If you’ll excuse me?” He gave them a polite bow and left to search for the wood elves.

Bilbo spent the next two hours with the elves, singing and listening to their tales and songs. The elves had created their own little enclave in one of the side chambers, away from the dwarves, and appeared to be quite content with their form of entertainment. Bilbo himself was a little surprised when he saw a few members of the company come into the chamber to hear him sing, but didn’t pay much attention to them because he was concentrating hard on remembering all the words.

It was nearing midnight when Bilbo returned back to the great hall, where the entertainment appeared to be growing in volume with every consumed goblet of mead. He spied Bard sitting by himself at one of the tables and made his way over to him.

“You do not dance?” he asked the man.

“Not if I can help it,” Bard replied. “I saw the tapestry you made for Thorin this afternoon. Impressive work.” He turned in his chair towards Bilbo. “Would you be willing to make a tapestry
for my hall? I would pay you well. It doesn’t have to be anything overly complicated, I would just like to have something nice on my walls.”

“I noticed that you turned the dragon into your personal emblem.”

“Yes, the people insisted.” Bard said. “I had to choose a symbol to represent the newly formed Kingdom of Dale and the dragon seemed like as good a symbol as any.”

“I think you chose well,” Bilbo told him. “I suppose I could make a dragon for you, but the earliest it can be finished is a year from now. Thorin has already put in a commission for two other tapestries, so I will have my hands full.”

Bard gave him a searching look.

“You are going to stay in Erebor, then?”

“So it would seem,” Bilbo said with a smile.

“Even with everything that has happened lately?” It seemed that Bard had heard about the latest scandal already.

“Yes.”

“In that case I wish you good luck and a great deal of patience.” There was a sparkle of humour in Bard’s normally sombre eyes when he said that.

“Thank you,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “I think I will need both.”

“Bilbo!” Kíli appeared behind his back and wrapped an arm around his shoulders with a wide grin. “I think I solved your dancing problem.”

He was swaying a little, leaning into Bilbo with most of his body weight. Since Bilbo was nearly a head shorter, it was rather difficult to keep the dwarf on his feet. He finally solved the problem by propping Kíli’s back against the table while he put his hands on the dwarf’s arms, holding him upright.

“I solved your dancing problem,” Kíli repeated, his head falling forward to rest on Bilbo’s shoulder. “I am going to teach you to dance,” he muttered into the fabric of Bilbo’s vest, and reached out to wrap his arms around Bilbo’s waist for balance.

The arms were hidden by the cloak, but Bilbo still looked up in alarm, hoping that nobody could see it. After a minute of frantic searching, he finally found Fíli in the crowd and managed to catch his eye, gesturing to Kíli’s slumped form with a look of despair. The blond dwarf luckily appeared to be mostly sober and started making his way over to them almost at once.

“What has he done now?” Fíli asked in resignation when he arrived.

“I think he’s just drunk,” Bilbo told him, sighing in relief when Fíli removed Kíli’s weight from him. “He came over here and started to talk about dancing and then just decided to use me as a pillow.”

At the mention of dancing Kíli raised his head, focusing his eyes on Bilbo with some difficulty.

“I’m going to give you dancing lessons tomorrow. Will you dance with me at the feast if I teach you?”

“Yes, I will dance with you, if you wish,” Bilbo told him to calm down Kíli’s drunken agitation.
“I think I should take him to bed before he goes and propositions half the guests,” Fíli said and started dragging his brother away.

Bilbo sat down at the table and absentmindedly reached for a goblet of wine. Surely, Kíli had been jesting when he offered the dancing lessons. Or had he?

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

AN: I am pleased to announce that this story is almost finished. There will be 17 chapters after all, because I adore these characters and want to give them a proper ending (and spend a bit more time with them). There is less than 4000 words left for me to write and a bunch of editing, but other than that, I’m done. Therefore, I will be posting 2 chapters this weekend, one each day so you don’t have to wait for so long.

Thank you so much to everyone who left comments and kudos on this story :) Your support means a lot to me, especially as this is the first novel-length fic I have been able to finish and I was really nervous about the reception.

Next chapter will be posted on September 26.
As it turned out, Kíli hadn’t been joking when he had offered Bilbo dancing lessons in his drunken stupor.

The dark-haired dwarf showed up at Bilbo’s door the next morning, looking surprisingly cheerful and sober, considering how much he had had to drink the previous night.

“I’m here to teach you how to dance,” Kíli informed the bewildered hobbit, inviting himself into Bilbo’s sitting room.

“You remember telling me that?” Bilbo asked in disbelief.

“I remember everything from yesterday,” Kíli said. “I always remember everything I do when I’m drunk, no matter how much I had to drink. It’s both a blessing and a curse.” He stopped, noticing Bilbo’s fancy attire. “Were you planning to go somewhere?”

“I thought I might visit the elves,” Bilbo said, “I do not have any fixed plans for today.”

“Excellent,” Kíli rubbed his hands. “Then you have plenty of time for dancing. Bofur promised to come later and play some music for us, but for the beginner steps you don’t need any music. You do not need so many clothes, either,” he added and stared at Bilbo until the hobbit sighed and unbuttoned his vest, draping it over the back of an armchair.

“Very well,” Kíli said, coming to stand in the middle of the room. “Our dances are not overly complicated. Most of them are performed when everyone is half-drunk anyway, so there is not much need for formality.”

“Is there any rule about who leads the dance?” Bilbo asked. “The more formal hobbit dances are usually danced in pairs with one male and one female, so the male leads by default.”

“Since there are so few dwarf women, our dances have no assigned roles for genders,” Kíli said. “You can dance with whomever you wish. The general rule is that the one who asks for the dance leads the dance but other than that, you can do pretty much anything you wish.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Bilbo said.

“It’s a pretty good arrangement,” Kíli agreed. “And it works in your favour when you don’t feel sure about your dancing steps. You just need to wait for someone to ask you for a dance and let them do all the work.”

Bilbo sighed.

“I wasn’t planning to dance at all, if you must know, but since you lot seem determined to drag me to the dance floor, I suppose it’s only reasonable if I learn at least the basics.”

“Since you’re going to be living here from now on, we’ll need to give you lessons on proper dwarven etiquette, but there’s plenty of time for that after the celebrations. For now you will have to make do with dancing.”
“I suppose that’s only fair,” Bilbo said, taking the offered hand. “Go on, then. I place myself in your capable hands.”

They spent the morning on the basic steps. To his relief Bilbo found that the dwarvish dances weren’t that different from the ones he knew from the Shire, though Kíli’s heavy iron boots still made him a bit nervous whenever they came a little too close to one of his feet. To his credit, Kíli managed to avoid stepping on Bilbo’s toes entirely.

They paused for lunch and Bilbo made himself presentable enough to be able to go to the Great Hall. Kíli didn’t bother much with his appearance and only borrowed Bilbo’s comb to tame his hair a little.

“Where have you been?” Bilbo heard Fíli ask when they sat down at the table.

“Dancing,” Kíli said, piling his plate full of food. Bilbo saw Fíli’s gaze slide from his brother’s mussed hair and sweaty appearance to Bilbo who knew he was still a little red in the face from exertion. Fíli raised his eyebrows in question, looking between Bilbo and Kíli. Bilbo shook his head resolutely. Fíli smiled, satisfied, and turned back to his food.

If only everyone else was as quick to accept Kíli’s explanation as Fíli had been, Bilbo thought as he watched several others at the table shoot contemplative glances between him and Kíli. He had been able to get rid of one rumour with great difficulty only to have it replaced with another one due to his carelessness. He would have to warn Kíli before he heard it from a foreign source and they would have to decide what to do about it. Bilbo doubted that Kíli would appreciate having the whole Erebor think that he was having an affair with a hobbit.

It had been an amusing concept in the Shire - something to provoke the local matrons with, free of any real consequences - but here in Erebor, where Kíli had a place as the second in line for the throne, something like this could have far-reaching consequences for his reputation.

Bofur went with them after lunch and was more than happy to play a few of the popular melodies for them while they tried to match the rhythm with their feet. It was well past teatime when Kíli finally proclaimed his satisfaction with Bilbo’s dancing skills. Bilbo himself was tired and his head felt all jumbled from all the dance-steps, but Kíli looked incredibly proud of himself, so Bilbo just thanked him for his time and sent him on his way.

For want of anything better to do, he went in search of his intrepid cousins. He hadn’t seen the boys for two days, busy as he had been with the cake and embroidery and the unfortunate banishment business, and he was half afraid of what he’d discover when he finally found them. He knew all too well what those two were capable of when one let them off the leash.

He didn’t have to search long. Both hobbits were in the Company common room with Fíli, Óin and another unfamiliar dwarf with fiery red hair. They both jumped up in excitement when they saw him and started babbling about their latest adventure. Bilbo took the time to look at the new dwarf, noting that he bore a strong resemblance to Glóin. He appeared to be a little younger than Fíli and Kíli, though not by much.

When Fortinbras finally paused for breath, Fíli came forward with the young dwarf.

“Bilbo, allow me to introduce our cousin, Gimli.”

The redhead dwarf gave Bilbo a bow.

“Gimli son of Glóin at your service.”

“Bilbo Baggins at yours.” Bilbo returned the bow. “So you are Glóin’s son,” he said with a smile. “I
thought you looked familiar. Glóin has been promising me to meet you for days, but never got around to it.”

“I wanted to go on the quest with you,” Gimli grumbled, “but father forbade it. Said that I’m too young. I can swing an axe better than half the King’s Guard, you know.”

“I can believe that,” Bilbo told him, smiling at the lad’s fervour.

The youngsters went back to the fireplace where they had been sitting before he had come. Bilbo nodded a greeting to Óin, who was sitting in one of the armchairs in the corner, alternatively dozing and supervising the younger dwarves. Bilbo took a seat in one of the armchairs by the fire, reaching for the book he had put on the nearby low table a few days before. He had intended to read, but the conversation between the young hobbits and dwarves drew his attention instead.

“Do all hobbits have those hairy legs?” Gimli asked, eyeing the hobbit feet curiously.

“Yes,” Isembold said. “It’s our way to compensate for the lack of beard.”

The dwarves started laughing, a new voice joining in from the doorway.

“I have always wondered what those were for,” Kíli said, coming to sit down beside his brother.

“So you don’t have beards at all?” Gimli was incredulous.

“Not as a rule, no,” Isembold said.

“Now that you ask, I think there was a bearded hobbit once,” Fortinbras told them.

“Really?”

“Ah, yes,” Isembold’s face lit up in recognition, “the mysterious case of aunt Dorabella.”

“Aunt Dorabella was a cousin of our grandfather, the Old Took,” Fortinbras explained. “She had a son who grew a rather spectacular beard when he turned twenty. She never quite managed to explain how he came by it.”

Bilbo frowned.

“How come I never heard about that?”

“It’s a family secret,” Fortinbras told them with a grin that showed that he was quite pleased to divulge such a juicy piece of information to the dwarves. “The Tooks decided to keep quiet about it, because if the other hobbits learned that we had a dwarf in the family, nobody would speak to any of us again. The Took family already has an interesting reputation in the Shire. I guess they decided that there was no need to add to it any further.”

“Is it so bad that you have a dwarf in the family?” Fíli asked, frowning.

“Well, I think the dwarf part wouldn’t be so bad by itself, if it also wasn’t for the fact that our dear aunt never married,” Isembold said. “If the dwarf had married her, she would have been considered odd, but most of the family wouldn’t care.” He gave the dwarves a contemplative look. “I think the son went to live in the Blue Mountains soon after he came of age. I never met him personally, but an uncle who did says that he has curly chestnut hair and beard. Have any of you ever met him? I think he would be around a hundred years old now.”

Fíli and Kíli both shook their heads, but Gimli looked thoughtful.
“I think I might have seen him,” he said after a while. “There’s a baker in the Craftsmen’s District in the Blue Mountains who has curly hair. He makes great meat pies.”

“That might be him,” Fortinbras nodded. He exchanged a look with his cousin. “We should go and say hello to him when we come back to the Shire.”

“How far are the dwarven halls from the Grey Havens?” Isembold asked Fíli.

“Around two days on ponies. We usually avoid the Havens and just go straight to the eastern road to make the journey shorter.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem for us,” Fortinbras looked at his fellow Took. “We know the way to the Havens and time is not an issue. I think the dwarven halls in the Blue Mountains could be an interesting visit for us.”

Bilbo managed to read another four pages before the Tooks interrupted him again, sitting down at his feet with identical expressions of curiosity.

“There’s something we’d like to know,” Isembold said. “Is it true that aunt Belladonna used to travel in her youth? We never heard a word about it until the Shirefolk started gossiping after you left. They said that it’s no wonder that you would go away chasing after dwarves and elves when you mother was the same.”

“Yes, my mother was quite the traveller,” Bilbo said, putting away the book. “She used to tell me stories about her adventures when I was a little boy. Did you know that when she came of age, she packed a bag and travelled all the way to Rivendell by herself?”

The hobbits shook their heads, enraptured. The three dwarves sat a few feet behind them, listening to the story with interest. Bilbo continued.

“Nobody heard about her for a year. When she came back from her wandering, she brought with her various maps and books of elvish lore and poetry. Nobody wanted to marry her for years, because the men thought she was too headstrong and independent. I don’t think she minded it that much, to be honest. She never cared much what the other hobbits thought about her.” He ran a hand over the elvish tome on his lap. “Most of my knowledge of elvish comes from her.”

“She sounds like an admirable woman,” Fíli said. Bilbo nodded with a wistful smile.

“She was. If she had been born a man, she would have become a Tháin. As it was, the title passed to her brother Isengrim and she married my father and moved to Hobbiton.” He gave Isembold a look. “You know, I think you may be the next one in line for the title of Tháin.”

Isembold’s eyes widened.

“I believe you may be right. None of my older cousins want to be the Tháin and Uncle Isengar is getting on in years. Still, I hope he lasts at least for another decade before he steps down. I think I’d like to travel a bit more before I’m forced to settle down in Tuckborough.”

“Did you know they considered you for the title, Bilbo?” Fortinbras asked with a grin. Bilbo shook his head, taken aback. “When they were choosing a new Tháin fifteen years ago, your name was mentioned, but everyone decided that you cannot be a Tháin, because you were too upright and boring,” He started laughing. “Oh, if they could see you now, they would eat their words.”

“I wouldn’t want the title anyway,” Bilbo said. “It’s too much responsibility and I wouldn’t have any time for my hobbies. I am much more content in the kitchen or with my books.” He looked at Fíli. “I
hope your uncle doesn’t get an idea to give me some fancy title like he did for the rest of the company.”

“It is highly likely,” Fíli warned him. “Since you’re planning to live here, you can count on getting a title of some sort. My guess would be “Royal Weaver” of “Cake Artist”.”

“That is utterly ridiculous,” said Bilbo. “Why do I have to have a title at all?”

“So that you can fit in better with the rest of us titled lot,” Kíli told him. “We didn’t ask for the titles either, but got them nonetheless. You’ll just have to grin and bear it.”

“Will you sing for us tonight?” asked Fíli. “You spent all evening with the elves yesterday. It’s only fair that we get to hear you, too.”

“I can sing for you, if you wish,” Bilbo nodded. “I suppose you’re not interested in the fancy elvish stuff?”

“Do you have anything simpler? Shire songs of some kind?”

“We have plenty of songs in the Shire,” Fortinbras answered in Bilbo’s stead. “We can help you with those. We both know all the songs there are. If someone lends me a violin, I can even play.”

“I can lend you my violin,” Kíli offered. “It should be small enough for you.”

“I have a flute you can borrow,” Bilbo told Isembold.

“Since when do you play flute?” Fíli asked.

“Bofur taught me,” Bilbo said. “I don’t play it very often, or very well, but I still took it with me here.”

“We can put the songs together on the spot,” Fortinbras told Bilbo. “The two of us play in the pub all the time, so we can play anything you wish, as long as it’s a song from the Shire.”

“I will think about it,” Bilbo promised. “I also know a few songs from the Rangers that you may like. If you wish, we can go to my quarters and I can teach you how to play them.”

“That would be great,” Fortinbras jumped to his feet. “I’ll just go with Kíli to borrow the violin and come to your rooms right after.”

“You can come listen, if you wish,” Bilbo told the dwarves. “There’s nothing secret about our practice.”

“Of course we’ll come,” Kíli said. “You can’t be the only ones to have all the fun.”

“Bilbo promised me that he will sing for us today,” Kíli told the company at the dinner table. “You elves have monopolized him for the whole evening yesterday, so it’s only fair that we get to hear him as well.”

“Aye,” several of the dwarves nodded.

“Sing something from the Shire,” Glóin said. “We’re not interested in that weepy elvish nonsense.”

“I will do my best,” Bilbo told him solemnly and managed to keep his face straight with a great deal
of willpower. Legolas, who sat opposite him, started sputtering at Glón’s words. Before the two could start arguing, Bilbo stood up, addressing the dwarves.

“Very well, if you would just clear some space for me by the wall over there, I can begin at once. My cousins have their instruments ready, so I can entertain you until you get sick of my singing.”

Most of the elves glided away to go back to their chamber from the previous evening, but the dwarves stood up eagerly, moving their chairs to the spot where Bilbo pointed. The rest of the guests went back to their own entertainment, drinking and dancing at the other side of the hall.

“What should I sing?” Bilbo asked the Tooks.

“How about the “Star of Hobbiton?” Fortinbras suggested. “It’s pretty and tame enough for a start.”

“Very well.” Bilbo turned to address the audience. “This song was originally a courting song that my grandfather Took wrote for my grandmother, but it quickly became very popular and has been sung as a folk song in the Shire for the last hundred years. The folks have changed the words a bit, but the gist of it has stayed the same.”

The Tooks began to play a merry tune and Bilbo started singing, telling the tale of two people meeting by the Brandywine River. The dwarves soon joined in for the catchy refrain, nodding to the beat.

His first song was met by a round of applause, so Bilbo sung a few other Shire songs, keeping the mood light and merry. When he ran out of the more popular songs, he switched to the ones he had learnt on his travels from the Dúnedain Rangers.

“You met the Rangers?” Nori asked him.

“A few times,” Bilbo nodded. “They guard the Shire borders; protect it from wild beasts and unsavoury folk. I camped with them a few times when I travelled in the lands around Fornost. The Rangers are all that remains of the old Northern Kingdom. I suppose you dwarves don’t deal with them much.”

The dwarves shook their heads.

“They are wise folk who travel a lot,” Bilbo said. “They seem a bit grim at the first sight, but are always willing to help other folk and know lots of songs from all over Middle-Earth. I learned a few songs from Rohan from them, if you want to hear them.”

He sang for another hour before he bowed to a loud applause, going to sit with Ori. His throat was dry and he wanted to rest for a bit, so he was more than happy to clear the stage for his cousins, who began singing a round of popular drinking songs.

“Do you have any sad songs in the Shire?” Ori asked him as they watched the two hobbits prance around on a table.

“We do, but they are not very popular,” Bilbo said. “Hobbits are not very fond of tales of woe and hardship, so everyone prefers the lighter stuff.”

The Tooks sang for a good while, ending their performance with the third repeat of the Green Dragon song that had quickly become a favourite of the dwarves. Fortinbras then managed to get into an argument about the quality of Shire ale with Dori, who kept insisting that the ale from Erebor was far superior.
When the hobbit started boasting and dared declare that he was able to drink more than all the dwarves combined, Gimli challenged him to a drinking contest. That kept the company busy for a long time and they cheered on both contestants as they made their way through what looked like half of Erebor’s entire supply of ale.

Bilbo wandered away in search of food and left them to their entertainment. All the singing had left him feeling famished, so he piled a plate full of food and sat down at the end of a table to eat. He was just winning the battle with his third meat pie when the chair next to his moved and Thorin sat down with two goblets of ale in his hands. He put one before Bilbo, who took it with a grateful nod.

“Why did you never sing for us before?” the dwarf asked him. Bilbo finished chewing his pie and washed it down with ale.

“I never felt like singing when I travelled with you,” Bilbo said, opting for honesty. “All the danger and excitement wasn’t good for my nerves and none of you ever bothered to ask if I can sing. I thought it better to just keep to myself. You lot could entertain yourselves just fine without me.”

“Did you dislike travelling with us?” Thorin gave him a searching look.

“I wouldn’t be here if I did,” Bilbo said. “No, I liked the travelling just fine, once I got used to it. It was the dragon and spiders and orcs that I could have done without.”

“I think we all would have preferred to avoid those, if possible,” Thorin grimaced. “Especially the dragon.”

“Speaking of dragons - Bard has commissioned a tapestry from me,” Bilbo told him. “Since he has chosen the dragon as his personal emblem, he wants me to make him a tapestry for his hall.”

“I suppose you will be flooded with requests soon,” Thorin said. “Nearly all the old tapestries that used to adorn the mountain have rotted and had to be torn down. It would be pleasing to have the mountain decorated with skill once more.”

“I will do my best,” Bilbo promised. “If nothing else, it will give me something to do here. There are only so many dragon cakes I can bake before the novelty wears off.”

Before either of them could say anything more, Kíli walked over, giving Bilbo a theatrical bow.

“You promised me a dance yesterday,” the young dwarf said. “I already taught you to dance, so you should fulfil your end of the bargain.”

Bilbo stood up, unclasping his cloak and draping it over the back of his chair, and took Kíli’s offered hand with a small sigh of resignation.

“I believe I did promise you a dance. Do your worst, then.”

Kíli led him to the dance floor, where a small band of dwarves played a merry tune. They joined the crowd of dancers and Bilbo tried his best to remember all the steps. Luckily for him, the young dwarf remembered his promise to help him and held Bilbo’s hands firmly, leading him through the steps. Two songs later Bilbo finally allowed himself to relax a little and enjoy the music, chuckling at Kíli’s jokes.

Bofur tapped Kíli’s shoulder after that and danced the next two numbers with Bilbo, keeping up a steady stream of amusing commentary about the other dancers. Fíli came over when the song ended and asked for a switch. Bofur stepped back with a grin and went to ask Ori for a dance, causing the young librarian to blush to the roots of his hair. Bilbo watched them in amusement before he turned
his attention back to his dancing partner.

Fíli moved with a confident grace, weaving them through the crowd with ease. They danced two dances together and then a group circle dance which Bilbo didn’t know, so he just relaxed and let the other dancers pull him the right direction, enjoying the music.

He had just decided that he would excuse himself and go sit down for a bit, when the dancers around them paused, staring somewhere behind his back.

Bilbo turned slowly to find Thorin standing there, a circle of space cleared around him as the other dancers stepped back. Fíli took a step back as well, leaving Bilbo on his own. Thorin extended his hand to Bilbo, palm up.

“May I have this dance?”

Bilbo reminded himself not to gawk. The dwarves around them started whispering, the hall quieting down as the ones in the back tried to find out what was going on. Bilbo looked from Thorin’s offered hand to the dwarf’s face, which was carefully blank. He realized that they were now the centre of attention - a good hundred dwarves stood around and gawked at them.

There was no way he could refuse Thorin’s request without making them both look bad.

He slowly reached with his hand and laid it on Thorin’s own. The dwarf’s larger hand wrapped around his, squeezing his palm gently and Bilbo had to suppress a gasp when a small shock ran through his arm. This was the first time they had touched in public in any way since the incident at the wall. The weight of the moment hung in the air between them, the significance of the gesture not lost on either of them.

To his surprise, Bilbo realized that he didn’t want to refuse Thorin’s offer this time. The anger he had felt for so long was now gone, replaced with a vague feeling of hope and relief at the reconciliation. They stood like that for a moment, holding the gaze, until someone behind them cleared their throat. That broke them from their reverie.

“I think we will need some music, if we are to dance,” Bilbo said loudly.

“Play the waltz,” Thorin told the musicians who hurried to comply.

He pulled Bilbo closer by the hand he held and put his other hand on the hobbit’s waist, keeping some distance between their bodies. Bilbo felt the warmth of the hand even through his clothes, burning like an iron brand. They started to move slowly to the music, turning in wide circles. Bilbo noticed that everyone had moved back, leaving a wide space in the middle of the floor. The dwarves all stood at the side lines, watching their dance with curious eyes.

“Why are they all staring at us like that?” Bilbo asked Thorin in a whisper.

“I rarely dance.” Thorin told him.

“You danced with your sister yesterday,” Bilbo pointed out.

“It is unusual for them to see me dance with someone who is not my family.” Thorin lowered his voice. “I believe this should be enough to disperse any remaining rumours about your banishment and subsequent return.”

Oh, Bilbo thought, of course. That was why Thorin had asked him for a dance. He wanted to make a public statement about Bilbo’s standing in Erebor. He wondered why that thought made him feel
strangely disappointed.

“You are unhappy. Does my presence bother you that much?” Thorin asked with a frown, watching Bilbo’s face closely.

“What? No, no, it’s nothing like that,” Bilbo hurried to reassure him. “I was just lost in thought for a bit.”

They finished the rest of the dance in uncomfortable silence. Bilbo felt the stares of the guests follow his every move and turned all his attention to his steps to make sure he didn’t trip and embarrass himself in front of the whole hall. He gave Thorin a polite smile and a bow when the dance ended and tried to make a dignified exit that wouldn’t look like he was running away.

He managed to find his cousins in the crowd and made his way over to them, sitting down on the first available chair.

“How is the competition going?” he asked Isembold, eager to take his mind off the dance he had just run away from.

“It’s a tie so far,” Isembold said, following Bilbo’s gaze to watch the contestants. “They’re on their tenth tankard already and neither of them looks ready to give up. These dwarves sure can drink,” he said in admiration, causing the nearby dwarves to raise their goblets in a cheer.

“Right you are, laddie,” Glóin told him. “I won’t have my son beaten by some curly haired pipsqueak from the Shire.”

Isembold didn’t say anything to that, just raised his own goblet to his mouth to hide his amused smile.

“Oh look,” Fortinbras exclaimed suddenly, “the goblets are dancing!”

“What did I tell you,” Gimli slurred, “you little folk can’t hold your liquor.” He then promptly collapsed face first on the table.

Fortinbras leaned over to check on him, bracing himself on the table to keep his balance.

“Hey, I think I won,” he told the astonished dwarves. “I guess this needs another round.”

The dwarves recovered from their shock quickly enough and started to thump him on the back in congratulations, pouring him another round.

“We may have forgotten to mention that Fortinbras is the local drinking champion,” Isembold said with a sheepish grin.

“Gimli would have taken that as a challenge,” Kíli told them. “He’s stubborn like that.”

“Well, that will teach him not to underestimate hobbits,” Isembold said with satisfaction.

“What about you, Bilbo?” Bofur asked. “Can you drink like that?”

“Certainly not,” Bilbo shook his head with a wry smile. “I have never been good at holding my liquor.”

“Should I tell them about the time you got drunk at the pub and tried to take off your clothes on the table?” Isembold asked him with a mischievous grin.
“Please don’t,” Bilbo buried his face in his hands. The dwarves started snickering.

“Oh do tell,” Bofur said.

Bilbo raised his head to glare at him.

“It was one time. And I only took off my shirt. Hardly scandalous.”

“You would have taken off your trousers too, if we hadn’t stopped you,” Isembold told him.

“I was extremely drunk,” Bilbo protested. “I tried to bake a new recipe with some elvish herbs that day and they didn’t react well with the ale. I think that should be excuse enough for my behaviour.”

“This is some quality blackmail material right here,” Kíli rubbed his hands in glee. “The next time you refuse to dance with me or accept a well intentioned gift, I can just remind you of that one time you got drunk...”

“You do that and I will tell them about the day when you put on our mum’s dress and pretended you were a princess,” Fíli said from behind Bilbo. Kíli turned bright red.

“I never did that! You’re making it up!” His denial didn’t sound very convincing.

“Oh yes, you did,” Fíli said with a wide grin. “You even put ribbons in your hair.”

“I’m going to kill you for this.” Kíli lunged at his brother, intent on wrestling him down to the floor. Bilbo stepped between them, putting his hand on Kíli’s chest. That made the dark haired dwarf stop mid-lunge and stare at him in confusion.

“There will be no killing,” Bilbo said firmly, drawing himself to his full height. He turned and pointed his other hand at Fíli. “And no blackmail, either. I won’t have you making a spectacle of yourselves in front of all these guests. You are the heirs to the throne, so try to act like it. Your fighting like children won’t make the best of impressions on the dwarfs from the Iron Hills, or the elves.”

They both deflated in shame, staring at the ground. Bilbo thought they looked like a pair of kicked puppies.

“I forbid you to fight in front of the guests. Is that clear?”

“Yes, Bilbo,” they said in unison. Bilbo thought they would start shuffling their feet any minute now.

“Good,” Bilbo said. “Now make up and leave the quarrels for your private chambers. There you can fight as much as you wish, for all I care.”

They both nodded and shuffled away to sit down at opposite sides of the table. Bilbo just sighed and went to get himself another drink.

“Well,” a voice said next to him while he was pouring himself a goblet, making him jump a foot in the air, “I was all geared up to go and give my sons a lecture after they had made a spectacle of themselves in front of all the guests, but you have handled the situation surprisingly well.” Bilbo turned to face Dís, who was looking at him with a mysterious half-smile. “Who would have guessed that my sons listen to you like that?”

“To be honest, I had no idea, either,” Bilbo admitted. “I have never tried to speak to them like that before. I consider them my friends; I have never thought about ordering them.”
“And yet when you did, they listened to you,” Dís said with something like wonder in her voice. “They are rarely willing to listen to anyone once they get involved in one of their quarrels.”

Bilbo shrugged.

“It didn’t feel right to leave them to embarrass themselves in front of all those guests, especially since the quarrel started because of me in the first place.” When Dís raised an eyebrow, he elaborated. “The dwarves were joking about a bit and Kíli said something to me, then Fíli jumped to my defence, putting his foot in his mouth in the process. You saw the result.”

“I did,” Dís said quietly, lost in thought. Her eyes focused back on Bilbo, sharp as razors. “There’s more to you than I thought. I had doubted my sons’ wisdom in associating with you at first, but now I see that they chose their friend well. Continue keeping them out of trouble and I may even start to like you.”

She threw her hair over her shoulder and strode away, her splendid royal-blue dress swishing with every step. Bilbo stayed standing by the barrel, looking after her with an expression of bewilderment.

“What did mother want with you?” Fíli appeared at his elbow, following Bilbo’s gaze. Bilbo tore his eyes from her retreating figure and turned to face the blond dwarf.

“She wanted to know what sort of spell I used on you to make you two stop fighting.”

“Oh,” Fíli looked at the floor, embarrassed.

“I have no idea what happened, but I think she might have told me that she approves of me,” Bilbo told him.

“Mother? Approve of someone?” Fíli said in disbelief. “I think that would be a first. Just wait until uncle hears about it.”

Bilbo looked at him in puzzlement.

“Thorin? What does he have to do with it?”

Fíli gave him a long, searching look.

“You really have no idea, do you?” He gave a short laugh of astonishment. “Well, if you don’t know, I’m certainly not going to tell you.”

He started walking away, ignoring Bilbo’s question of “Tell me what?”

Before he disappeared in the crowd, Bilbo heard him mutter: “Oh, this will be so much fun to watch.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I got my inspiration for the drinking contest from the extended edition of the Return of the King movie. In that scene Gimli just bypassed the hobbits entirely and tried to compete with Legolas instead. I wondered what would happen if he drank with Merry
or Pippin instead :)

The song that Bilbo sings is a hobbit version of The Star of the County Down. I discovered that song a few months ago and thought that it sounded like something they would sing in the Shire. You can listen to it here: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TzN2g60BMA0 (simply remove the empty spaces).

If anyone is curious about the Tooks and wants to know where they fit in the Took family tree – these two are not on the family tree, but they are not completely made up, either. In the Took family tree there are two children of the Old Took who have “many descendants” – Isembold and Mirabella. This story’s Isembold is a younger son of that Isembold and Fortinbras is the son of Mirabella and brother of Primula, who later becomes Frodo’s mother. I simply took an advantage of this lack of information to create a few extra Tooks :)

The next chapter will be posted on September 28.
His dance with Thorin was still fresh on Bilbo’s mind when he walked to the library the next morning. For some reason his brain insisted on replaying the scene for him over and over again until he fled his quarters to seek refuge with the books, hoping that the monotony of dusting and cataloguing would help him clear his mind of unwanted thoughts.

Since it was still quite early, the library was completely empty when he arrived. There were no notes from Ori left for him, so he decided to just go work on the section of elvish literature that he had been sorting through a few days prior.

Ori arrived less than an hour later, looking lost in thought. Bilbo didn’t pay him much attention besides a friendly nod, engrossed as he was in an ancient tome on the history of the First Age, but he looked up when the young dwarf wandered over and sat down on the floor next to him.

“Can I ask you something?” Ori appeared strangely nervous.

“Of course.” Bilbo nodded.

There was a small pause, a fortifying breath and then Ori blurted: “Have you ever been in love?” The dwarf then promptly turned a bright shade of red and started fiddling with a loose thread on his sleeve.

Bilbo blinked. That had certainly been unexpected.

“No,” he said after a moment, “I can’t say that I ever have.”

“Oh,” Ori looked disappointed. “I was hoping you might help me.”

“Well, I can try to help you anyway, but don’t expect much,” Bilbo said. “If you are looking for expert advice on love, I’m really the last person you should be asking. Glóin or Dori would be a better choice, since they have both managed to persuade someone to marry them, but I suppose you came to me because you know I won’t laugh at you.”

Ori nodded.

“My brother would have a fit if he found out that I like someone and Glóin has an unfortunate tendency to babble when he gets drunk. I know you wouldn’t say anything if I came to you.”

“So, who’s the lucky dwarf?” Bilbo prodded him gently when the librarian stayed silent.

Ori bit his lip and looked around them nervously a few times.

“I think I might fancy Bofur,” he confessed in a whisper, “but I don’t know if he likes me back.”

Bilbo took a moment to appreciate the irony of the situation that he of all people should be asked to play a matchmaker. It seemed to him that the Valar sometimes had a very strange sense of humour.

“Well,” he said finally, keeping his voice soft to avoid spooking the shy librarian, “Bofur is a very fine dwarf. I think you have chosen well. However, I have no idea if he likes you like that.” He paused for a moment, remembering something. “Didn’t he ask you for a dance yesterday?”
“He did,” Ori nodded. “But that doesn’t have to mean anything. He danced with you, too.”

“I danced with plenty of dwarves yesterday,” Bilbo said. “I think everyone wanted to dance with me because they liked the novelty. I accepted the offers because it’s the polite thing to do. That doesn’t mean I like any of them.”

“Not even Kíli?” Ori asked curiously.

“Kíli? Why on earth would you think that?”

Ori shrugged.

“You two spend a lot of time together and he likes to flirt with you.”

Bilbo chuckled, shaking his head.

“Kíli flirts with half of Erebor,” he told Ori. “He and I are just good friends, nothing more.”

“If you say so,” Ori didn’t look convinced, but let the matter be. “Anyway, would you be willing to subtly ask Bofur about me the next time you talk to him?”

“Why don’t you ask him yourself?”

“I can’t. Dori would get suspicious.” Ori made face.

“That’s rich, coming from Mr-I’m-getting-married-in-spring,” Bilbo said. “Aren’t you an adult by dwarven standards? He should let you live your life however you wish.”

“Our parents died when I was very little,” Ori said quietly. “Dori basically brought me up by himself with some help from Nori. He’s always been overly protective of me. I didn’t mind it much before, but it’s a little stifling now.”

“You can show him that you are an adult by standing by your choices, starting with your relationships,” Bilbo told him. “I will talk to Bofur and see what I can do about it, but don’t expect much.”

“I’m glad that you’re even willing to try,” Ori gave him a smile. “If you do get us together, I will knit you a nice sweater for the winter.”

“Well, if that’s the case, then I will do my best,” Bilbo said, making Ori laugh.

“Thank you,” Ori said and got to his feet, disappearing between the shelves with a smile.

Bilbo turned back to his book, but couldn’t muster up enough concentration to read the arcane elvish script. His head was distracted by his conversation with Ori. Why had the dwarf come for advice to him, of all people? Despite the few trysts he’d had in his youth, he had never been in love. It had been many years since he’d even felt drawn to someone, for Valar’s sake.

But that last part wasn’t entirely true, was it? a small voice in the back of his head gleefully pointed out. He had been attracted to Thorin, back when he had first opened his door and found the dwarf standing on his porch, looking at him with those piercing blue eyes. Said attraction had promptly vanished, however, when Thorin opened his mouth and put his foot in it with his unflattering assessment of Bilbo’s character.

It had never been in Bilbo’s nature to blindly like people who treated him badly and he didn’t make any exception for Thorin. After the first few days, when the dwarf kept treating him like a
particularly bothersome dog whose presence he had to suffer as a favour for the wizard, any fond feelings Bilbo might have once had had disappeared entirely. Thorin’s subsequent promises of gold and glory that he started to give Bilbo after he had helped to free them from the elvish prison hadn’t moved Bilbo’s heart in the slightest.

Thorin’s death threats at the wall had turned Bilbo’s previous feelings of mild dislike and reluctant admiration into pure anger and the subsequent proposal had been one of the most illogical, ridiculous things Bilbo had ever seen. Since then, he had had five years to ponder his choices and he still stood firmly by what he had said back then. With the benefit of hindsight, Bilbo realized that even if Thorin hadn’t banished him from the mountain, he would have probably left on his own anyway, because he wouldn’t have been able to stand the king’s presence.

Over the years he had been able to get to know the dwarven nature a little better and was now able to understand why some of the dwarves behaved the way they did. Thorin, however, was still a complete mystery to him. What had possessed him to make the offer to Bilbo in the first place? Bilbo had no idea and no intention to ever ask about it.

As far as he was concerned, it was all water under the bridge between them, and he was more than happy to turn a page and start anew with the king. Thorin was obviously making a lot of effort to help establish Bilbo’s standing in Erebor and Bilbo wouldn’t spoil the newly mended relations between them by reminding them both of the mistakes the king had made while he’d been half delirious...

...or by acknowledging the budding attraction that had been trying to worm its way back into his heart from the first time he had seen the king stand at the top of the stairs on his return to Erebor.

If there had ever been the most inopportune time to start noticing Thorin’s attractiveness, it was now.

Much like his brain’s new desire to replay the memory of yesterday’s dance for him, the re-emerging attraction was highly inconvenient and Bilbo wished that it would just disappear altogether. It made staying in the king’s presence uncomfortable and their interactions even more awkward than they already were.

It also tended to make him read more into Thorin’s actions than there was. The king had been nothing but polite and co-operative since Bilbo had come to Erebor, but for some reason Bilbo’s heart had jumped on the politeness and started to interpret it as something more.

Shutting the book and standing up, Bilbo told himself firmly to stop this nonsense at once. Thorin wouldn’t be interested in a hobbit – and especially not a hobbit who had already refused his advances once before.

Bilbo spent the rest of the morning in the library, determined to avoid thinking about a certain dwarf. The solitude and the repetitive nature of the work helped him clear his mind at last, so when he emerged from the room for lunch, he was covered with dust from head to toe but calmer than he had been for days. He stopped by his quarters for a quick wash and a change of clothes and by the time he stepped into the dining hall half an hour later, he felt ready to face the world.

The tables were still in the U-shape configuration, since the celebrations were barely in their middle. Today’s afternoon was supposed to be full of games and tournaments and Bilbo was looking forward to cheering on his friends. Tomorrow would be the last day that the elves spent in Erebor, as they were planning to visit Dale and spend the rest of their stay there. Bilbo doubted that any of the dwarves would be sorry to see them go.

“You are an elusive creature, Master Baggins,” Thranduil told him when he sat down at the table.
“You never seem to be around. Have you been hiding from us?” There was a small smile on his face when he looked at Bilbo.

“Oh no, I’m not hiding,” Bilbo hastened to deny, “I just spend a lot of time in the library. There are so many fascinating volumes there.” He gave the Elvenking a look. “In fact, I think I just read about you today. You used to live in Doriath, haven’t you? Back before the land fell into the Sea.”

A shadow ran over Thranduil’s face and his eyes turned distant.

“Yes, I used to live in the west, many ages ago.” He looked back at Bilbo. “It has been a long time since someone asked me about that.”

“Could I ask you about it some time? Or should I not ask at all?” Bilbo said, watching the elf’s face closely.

“You may ask me anytime,” Thranduil said finally, his expression softening. “I would be happy to welcome you as a guest to my halls at any time and tell you about the ages past. It has been years since I last had an interested listener.”

“I think I would like that,” Bilbo gave him a smile. “I wonder if some of your elves would be willing to help me with my translations. There are so many books in the library here and only a fraction of them has been translated from elvish. Many of those stories deserve to have a wider audience.”

“I am glad to see that I have chosen right when I named you an Elf-friend,” Thranduil told him with a genuine smile. From the corner of his eye, Bilbo could see several of the dwarves gaping at them. Had they never seen the elf smile? Bilbo wondered.

“I have something for you,” Bilbo said, reaching under the table. He put the bottle on the table before the Elvenking. “Well, a part of something, because I have a few more of these in my quarters. It’s Shire wine, one of the best vintages of the last century,” he explained. “I know you are fond of wine, so I thought I might bring you something.”

Thranduil took the bottle and popped the cork, pouring the wine into his glass. He then took the glass and sniffed the wine, closing his eyes.

“This wine is old,” he said.

“Around eighty years,” Bilbo nodded. “I think it was made by my grandfather. It’s one of the best varieties in the Shire. I was loath to leave such good wine behind for my relatives, so I took it with me.”

Thranduil took a sip and a pleased expression spread on his face.

“This is excellent wine. Did you say you have more of it?”

“There are another nine bottles in my quarters,” Bilbo said. “They are yours, if you want them. Just be careful with how much you drink,” he warned the elves. “The Big Folk tend to underestimate the strength of our wine. It would not do to have elves falling under the table because they didn’t know their measure.”

The elves laughed.

“You are most generous, Master Baggins,” Thranduil said.

“I like giving gifts to those who can appreciate them properly,” Bilbo replied. Thranduil nodded in
acknowledgement. “If you send one of your elves with me after lunch, you can have the rest of the 
wine straight away,” Bilbo told him. “I know you are leaving for Dale the day after tomorrow, so I 
wanted to give it to you before your departure.”

“I thank you for your gift,” Thranduil said in elvish, putting his hand over his heart.

“You’re welcome,” Bilbo replied with a smile. He switched back to the Common Tongue. “If you 
ever wanted more Shire wine, I can tell you that one of my cousins, who just happens to be present 
in this hall, has recently become the owner of the very same wine yard that produced the wine before 
you. If you talked to him, I’m sure he would be more than happy to sell another few dozen bottles of 
last year’s vintage to you.”

Thranduil turned a thoughtful gaze towards the two curly heads sitting at one of the side tables. Bilbo hid 
his pleased grin in his own wine goblet. Even without Beorn or Gandalf, the two Tooks would 
now be the best protected travellers between Erebor and the Misty Mountains.

He caught Gandalf’s amused look from the other side of the table and raised his goblet to him. The 
wizard responded in kind, his eyes twinkling. For someone who looked so old, he had awfully sharp 
ears.

“And that, my dear Kili, is how you do politics,” he heard Balin say. Bilbo didn’t have time to see 
how the rest of the dwarves had reacted, because Legolas drew him into a conversation about the 
Shire and its customs.

The elven Prince decided to come with him after lunch, to help him carry the bottles to Thranduil’s 
quar ters.

“I saw the tapestry you made for the dwarves,” Legolas said as they walked towards Bilbo’s rooms. 
“You must like them a lot to be willing to put so much work into the piece.

Bilbo shrugged.

“They are my friends. Of course I like them.”

“I simply cannot understand how you can be friends with elves and dwarves at the same time,” the 
elf said, shaking his head. “We have such different natures.”

“Maybe you should try befriending a dwarf, too,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “You might find that 
you like it after all.”

Legolas visibly shuddered.

“No, thank you. I would prefer to avoid that completely, if possible.”

Bilbo laughed at his obvious distaste.

“Your loss, then. They can be very loyal friends when you get to know them better.”

He returned to his quarters half an hour later to find Gandalf sitting in one of his armchairs, waiting 
for him.

“Hello, Gandalf,” Bilbo greeted him. “What brings you to my quarters?”

“Can I not pay a visit to an old friend of mine?” the wizard raised an eyebrow.
Bilbo gave a small sigh, sitting into the armchair opposite the wizard.

“Your visits are rarely social calls,” he said, reaching for his pipe. “We both know it. What do you want from me this time?”

“Where is the ring you found in the goblin caves on your first journey here?” Gandalf asked, looking at him intently.

Bilbo did a half-hearted search of his pockets, but already knew he wouldn’t find anything there.

“I left it in the Shire,” Bilbo told him. “I noticed that it was making me feel miserable when I carried it in my pocket for long stretches of time, so I locked it away in one of my night-tables.”

The wizard’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline.

“You did not bring it with you?”

“Why would I?” Bilbo asked. “I admit that the ring was very useful when I needed to sneak around a sleeping dragon, but what would I do with it here? If I ever feel a need to hide from my friends I can just lock my doors or go for a long walk to Dale. I don’t need a magic ring for that.”

“And you did not feel compelled to keep the ring?” Gandalf looked incredulous.

“Well, when you put it like that...” Bilbo gave it a thought. “Yes, I believe I could feel it calling me sometimes, like it was trying to convince me to put it on.” He looked up at the wizard. “Does that make any sense?”

Gandalf was frowning.

“I am not sure what to make of it. I think I will need to take another look at the ring. You are sure that you left it the Shire?” He gave Bilbo a piercing look that made the hobbit feel like he was trying to see into his soul. Bilbo squirmed a bit, but didn’t drop his gaze.

“Yes,” Bilbo said. “I spent several days trying to decide whether to take it with me to Erebor or not, but it just didn’t feel right to bring it here.” He sighed. “There has already been so much grief caused by gold. It wouldn’t feel right to have the dwarves start arguing again over a magic ring.” He shook his head. “No, it’s better where I left it. I think it passed to my cousin Drogo Baggins along with the estate of Bag-End. You can ask him to find it for you, if you wish to see it again.”

“I think I will,” Gandalf said quietly. He sat silently for a moment before his frown cleared up, his current problem resolved. He gave Bilbo a small smile. “Well, now that this matter is out of the way, come and tell me how you find Erebor so far...”

Bilbo launched into a lengthy tale about his life in the mountain, happy that the strange topic of the magic ring was dealt with. Gandalf was very curious about his relationships with the other dwarves, especially Thorin. Bilbo managed to skirt around the issue of his dealings with Thorin well enough, but something must have slipped through, because the wizard got that knowing look that he always had when he thought he knew something other people didn’t.

They would have probably talked the whole afternoon, if the sound of distant trumpets didn’t interrupt their conversation. They both looked up at the sound and Bilbo jumped up to go look from his balcony.

There, far below on the green field in front of the mountain were dozens of little figures mingling among rows of colourful tents and stalls, their weapons gleaming in the sunlight.
“The tournaments!” Bilbo exclaimed. “I nearly forgot about them!” He hurried to his wardrobe to take out his winter jacket.

“You should probably go down to join the festivities,” Gandalf told him. “Your friends will be wondering where you are.”

“I can just tell them that it’s your fault,” Bilbo said with a grin. “They would understand.”

The wizard watched him with a pleased smile.

“Life in Erebor seems to suit you better than I would have thought.”

“It is a little unexpected to realize that, even for me,” Bilbo admitted. “But I think I’m really happy here. Happier than I ever was in the Shire.”

“I am glad to hear that,” Gandalf said. “Now run along before the dwarves accuse me of kidnapping you.”

Bilbo threw him one last grin and hurried out of the door, towards the entrance gates.

“Where have you been?” Kíli said in agitation when Bilbo finally arrived at the field before the mountain. “We nearly started without you.”

“Gandalf stopped by for a chat,” Bilbo said in explanation. The dwarves’ expressions turned understanding.

“What did he want?” Dori asked.

“He wanted to ask me how I like Erebor. I’m afraid I got rather carried away,” Bilbo told them, watching the pleased smiles appear on their faces. “So, what is this tournament about?”

He turned to survey the field before them.

“We thought we might have a bit of friendly competition with the elves and the Men of Dale,” Balin said. “It was Bard’s idea at first and we decided to join in. It promotes good relations between our realms.”

Bilbo looked at the nearby groups of dwarves, all geared up and ready for the competition.

“I bet it does.”

Balin gave him a knowing look, but didn’t say anything else.

“Bilbo!” a voice called to his left. He turned to see two familiar curly heads heading in his direction.

“Have you seen this place? It’s brilliant,” Fortinbras said when they arrived. “I’ve never seen so many different folk together. Our country fairs in the Shire have nothing on this.”

“Are you going to compete, too?” Bilbo asked them.

“Maybe,” Isembold said. “We can’t do any of the fighting stuff, but I noticed that there is a knife-throwing competition. That might be something for us.”

“You can throw knives?” Gimli asked, looking sceptical.

“Well, no, but we’re both pretty good at darts. It’s almost the same thing.” Isembold made a careless wave with his hand and turned back to Bilbo. “You’re not going to compete, Bilbo?”
“No, I don’t think so,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “To this day, I still have no idea how to hold a sword properly and I have never touched a bow in my life. I think I’ll just find a nice comfortable spot and watch you all do your best.”

“I think there was a stone-throwing competition over there,” Fortinbras said. “You should try it.”

Bilbo sighed. It seemed that everyone was determined to have him compete at least once.

“Very well, I will have a look at it later. I think you should run along now, before they start without you.”

They turned on their heels and disappeared into the crowd, Gimli trailing after them. Bilbo turned to the rest of the dwarves.

“Are you all competing?”

They all nodded.

“I’m going to win the archery contest,” Kíli announced proudly, stroking a hand over his bow. “All the elves have signed up. They are going to be so surprised when I win.”

“You are awfully sure of yourself,” Bilbo told him. “Those elves can shoot.”

“Then give me something for luck that will improve my chances of winning?” Kíli asked with a smile, taking a step closer. “A token, perhaps?”

Bilbo ignored the whispers from the dwarves around them.

“Do I look like a maiden to you?” He asked Kíli in mock-annoyance, but was already untying his necktie.

“No, but you blush prettily enough for one,” Kíli said with a roguish grin.

Bilbo’s eyes narrowed.

“Keep that up and I will strangle you with this, I swear.”

“You wouldn’t.” Kíli raised his left hand for Bilbo to tie the piece of cloth around his wrist.

“Oh, I would.” Bilbo gave him a glare. “Do you want to risk it? I’ve killed orcs for much less.” He tied the cloth a little tighter than he should have and enjoyed the dwarf’s wince. “If you want that adjusted, go ask your brother,” Bilbo told him with a sweet smile. “I’m sure he will be happy to help you.”

Kíli took a step back, rubbing his wrist.

“Will you wish me luck?”

“Good luck,” Bilbo said. “You will need it. I heard that Legolas is the best archer this side of the Misty Mountains. If you annoy me, I will root for him instead. Now shoo.”

Kíli strode away to join his brother. Just before they walked out of earshot, Bilbo heard Fíli hiss: “Do you have a death wish? You won’t be able to enjoy your share of the bet if Thorin kills you in the process.”

Bilbo sighed a bit at their antics and turned back to find that the remaining group of dwarfs had
mysteriously dispersed in the meantime, leaving only Thorin behind. The king was looking at him with a frown. Bilbo wondered what he had done now to offend the dwarf.

“You and Kíli seem...close,” Thorin said.

Bilbo shrugged.

“He’s one of my closest friends. We spent together a few months when we travelled back to Erebor, which allowed me to learn a lot about him. I think he got a bit homesick over the time he was separated from his brother and he latched onto me as the next best person around.” Bilbo smiled. “He has such cheerful nature; it’s impossible not to like him.”

“Indeed.” Thorin appeared deep in thought. “Not all of us can make friends with such ease.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Bilbo told him. “I never noticed Dwalin having a problem finding company despite him being a dwarf of few words.”

“Are you going to court Kíli?” Thorin asked suddenly, forming the words with some difficulty.

“What?” Bilbo asked, taken aback. “No, no. Certainly not. I know he can be a bit flirty at times, but there is definitely nothing romantic between us.” He lowered his voice a bit. “I will freely admit that he is attractive, but he is like a brother to me, or a younger cousin. It would feel incredibly wrong to start something with him.”

“Oh.” Thorin visibly relaxed. Bilbo thought that he was probably relieved that Bilbo wasn’t trying to marry into the family. It would be terribly awkward if he had refused the king only to go after his young nephew. The family dinners alone would be unbearable. He decided to change the topic.

“Are you going to compete in the tournament as well?” Bilbo asked him.

“Yes, I think I might after all,” Thorin said. “It wouldn’t do for a king to sit idly while his men take all the glory. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go and prepare.” He gave Bilbo a nod and walked off. Bilbo stared after him, puzzled. What on earth had that been about? He decided not to dwell on it too much and instead went to explore the tournament field.

The tournaments took place on the flat terrain between Dale and the raising slopes of Erebor. There was a large arena in the middle of the field, with newly built wooden stands on both sides. Around the arena stood dozens of smaller stalls and stations where one could compete in a chosen skill or try their luck at a game of chance.

The tournaments were supposed to start that day after lunch and end in the late afternoon the next day, with a large feast for the winners planned for the final evening. There were several main competitions that were held in the arena for the entertainment of the guests - archery, wrestling, sword-fighting, knife-throwing and fist-fighting. Each of those competitions would have a winner who would get a crown made of flowers, an attractive prize and a seat of honour at the feast.

To qualify for the main event, one first had to succeed at the preliminaries held at the stalls next to the arena. Besides the main competitions, there were also plenty of other, smaller ones where anyone could compete with others for smaller prizes. The skills those tested ranged from useful (timed fire kindling) to completely obscure (horseshoe throwing).

As the turned a corner, Bilbo spotted a huge board that had the names of the contestants in the archery competition. That one had drawn a lot of the elves and Dale-folk, who had come to pit their skills against each other. Kíli was the only dwarf in the competition. A little further stood the boards for later competitions, each of them attracting a crowd of people - both those eager to compete and
curious onlookers.

Bilbo finally managed to find the rock-throwing competition that Fortinbras had mentioned and made his way over to it. The owner was a kind older woman who was more than happy to let him throw as many rocks as he wanted. Bilbo only missed one target out of twenty, so he won a beautiful crimson scarf as a price. It was made out of a nice light fabric and very warm (Bilbo thought it had been probably made by elves). He didn’t waste any time before he wrapped it around his neck and went to search for a place from which he could watch the main games.

As he was weaving his way through the throng of people in search for a place to sit, Dís fell into step with him, subtly steering them away from the crowd.

“What have you done to my brother?” she asked.

Bilbo looked at her in bewilderment.

“I beg you pardon?”

“I said: what have you done to my brother?” she repeated. “Just this morning, he was determined not to join the games. He said that it would look bad if he got humiliated in front of the elves and that pastimes like this were for the young. Now he has signed himself up for two disciplines and looks awfully determined. Since you were the last one who spoke to him, it must have been you who convinced him to participate.”

“I didn’t convince him of anything,” Bilbo shook his head. “I am as surprised by this as you are. We spoke a bit about Kíli and then he suddenly decided that his men shouldn’t be the only ones to show off their skills and walked off. I have no idea what made him change his mind.”

“Do you.” Dís gave him an assessing look. “For someone so smart, you can be surprisingly slow on the uptake sometimes.” She gave him a small ironic nod and disappeared back into the crowd.

Feeling even more confused than before, Bilbo breathed a sigh of relief when he spotted Balin standing near the side of the main arena. He made his way over to him and leaned on the wooden rail next to the white-haired dwarf.

“Everyone is determined to make no sense today,” Bilbo complained.

“You have talked to Dís, I presume?” Balin said with a knowing smile.

“Among others,” Bilbo nodded. “Apparently, Thorin has taken it into his head that he will compete in the tournament and somehow it’s my fault. I have absolutely no idea what’s going on anymore. Can you enlighten me a bit?”

“I would love to, but I cannot,” Balin said. “It would be against the rules.”

“Ugh,” said Bilbo, running his hands through his hair. “Not you, too. Has everyone gone mad today?” He sighed in frustration. “I cannot play the game if I don’t know what the rules are.”

“Realizing that there is a game at all is the first step,” Balin told him.

“You are worse than Gandalf sometimes, do you know that?” he told Balin. “I thought that only wizards built their living on being cryptic and mysterious.”

“At my age, I am allowed to be as cryptic as I wish.” Balin looked rather amused by Bilbo’s puzzlement.
Bilbo shook his head, an involuntary smile making its way on his face.

“Very well, keep your secrets if it makes you happy. I’ll find out sooner or later anyway what is going on.” By silent agreement, they started walking towards the stands. “I assume you are not competing in the tournament.”

Balin chuckled.

“I find it much more entertaining just to watch. My days of needing to prove anything to the world are long over and I am glad for the peace. My brother, on the other hand, has been looking forward to this event for weeks. He is determined to become the resident fist-fighting champion.”

“I have no doubt that he will succeed,” Bilbo said. “He has never lacked determination.”

They managed to find seats in one of the front rows, so that even Bilbo had a good view of the arena and got settled down comfortably, their warm clothes protecting them from the November chill. The stands were filling slowly with people from Erebor and Dale alike, everybody looking excited to watch the games. The organizers put the last finishing touches to the archery course prepared for the first discipline and the crowd tittered in anticipation when the appointed Master of Games walked into the arena to give the opening speech.

The tournaments were about to begin.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Despite this being technically an AU, I wanted to preserve as much of the LOTR cannon as I could. The ring has stayed in Shire, where it will pass to Frodo eventually. Frodo may not grow up with Bilbo, but he will have two Took uncles who will be more than happy to tell him tales about Uncle Bilbo, who went to live with the dwarves.

Next chapter will be posted tomorrow, on September 29.
"There you go, you can have this back," Kíli said, dropping the necktie into Bilbo’s lap. Bilbo threw it back at him.

"I’m not your mother to wash your dirty clothes. Wash it yourself and then you can return it to me. What has you in such a cranky mood?"

"He came third in the archery contest," Fíli informed him. "Legolas won the whole thing and Bard was second, so my brother is sulking."

"I think it’s an amazing success, considering the competition you had," Bilbo said. "I guess if you had a few thousand years to practice, you would shoot like that as well."

"Bard is half my age," Kíli grumbled, plopping himself into the seat next to Bilbo while Fíli sat down on Kíli’s other side. "He made me look like an idiot."

"Well, he did shoot down the dragon," Bilbo pointed out. "He had to defend his status as the resident master archer."

Legolas chose that moment to stop by, towering over their sitting forms.

"You did well in the competition," he told Kíli. "I have never seen a dwarf shoot like that."

"Well, now you have," Kíli said, sulking. Bilbo nudged him with his elbow.

"Be nice."

Kíli straightened and put a smile on his face with great effort.

"Congratulations on your victory." He looked like he had just been force fed a whole basket of lemons. Legolas gave him a smile, which made him scowl even harder.

"It was well deserved," Bilbo said, drawing the elf’s attention away from Kíli. "Would you like to sit with us?"

"No, thank you," Legolas said, obviously amused by the dwarves’ disgust at the thought. "I think I’d better go find my father, before he manages to exchange our entire treasury for Shire wine." He and Bilbo shared a knowing grin and the elf departed, weaving through the crowd with enviable ease.

"What about you, Fíli?" Bilbo asked the blond dwarf. "Have you won anything yet?"

"I applied for the knife-throwing competition and passed the qualification rounds. Since I’m the heir to the throne, it would look strange if I didn’t compete in anything. I think I may sign up for the
sword-fighting as well,” he said, looking towards the stands.

“What about my cousins? How did they do?”

“Surprisingly well,” Kili seemed to have recovered from his slump. “Fortinbras missed a few targets, because he was scowling at the sun, but Isembold has passed into the finals with flying colours.” He gave Bilbo a look. “Can you throw like that?”

“I suppose I could, with some practice,” Bilbo admitted. “I did win this, after all.” He pointed to the scarf around his neck. “But I have never thrown knives, only rocks. I guess I could apply the next time a tournament like this is held and see what happens.”

An hour passed with leisurely chatter and the occasional applause. Fili left after a while to participate in his tournament and they watched him destroy his opposition with deadly precision. The biggest surprise of the tournament however turned out to be Isembold, who quickly shut down the whispers and snickers that had started in the audience at his entrance and managed to secure himself a second place.

Fili and the Isembold came over some time later and joined their slowly growing group at the stands.

“Excellent work, both of you,” Balin told them. They both grinned, faces flushed with happiness at their success.

“Too bad Fortinbras didn’t pass the first round,” Isembold said as he sat down. “He’s normally as good as me, but I think he’s still hung-over from yesterday.”

“That’s what he gets for trying to out-drink dwarves,” Glóin said from behind Bilbo.

“He did out-drink a dwarf,” Isembold pointed out gleefully. Before Glóin could reply, the hobbit in question wandered over to them, looking utterly bewildered.

“I think I just sold a hundred bottles of Shire wine to the Elvenking,” he said. “What did you do, Bilbo?”

Bilbo gave him an innocent look.

“Why do you think I had anything to do with it?”

“You are thick as thieves with those elves, always plotting something at the Head Table,” Fortinbras said. “Of course it was your work.”

“I may have mentioned to Thranduil that you have recently become the owner of a certain wine yard,” Bilbo admitted.

Fortinbras shook his head in disbelief.

“I think he would have offered me a part of his kingdom if Legolas hadn’t stopped him. As it is, I might just be the richest hobbit in the Shire.” He reached in his pocket and drew out a long golden chain set with a line of small finely cut diamonds. “Here, take this. It’s the least I can give you in return for the wine-yard.”

Bilbo took the chain with some reluctance, folding it carefully into his pocket.

“Do you have any idea how much that thing is worth?” Fili asked Fortinbras in a strained voice. The hobbit shrugged.
“I guess a lot. To be honest, I don’t really care. It’s pretty, but much too ostentatious for the Shire. Bilbo can use it much better here.”

The dwarves looked rather pained at his statement.

“Honestly, you hobbits,” Balin shook his head with a fond smile. “One gives you a jewel that is worth more than half the Lake-town combined and you just throw it away because you have no use for it. I could live for a thousand years and still not understand you.”

“So, Fortinbras is now richer than all the Shire combined. What about me?” Isembold asked with a mock-pout.

“Unless I am much mistaken, you have just won a great deal of glory for both yourself and the Shire,” Bilbo told him. He leaned closer with a confidential smile. “But if that is not enough for you, I will let you know that dwarves are very fond of pipe-weed.”

“Aah.” Isembold’s eyes lit up in recognition. Bilbo gave him a nod. “I wonder if I could find some dwarves in the Blue Mountains who would be willing to transport a few barrels of Old Toby to Erebor,” Isembold said.

“Remember the bag of pipe-weed I brought you when I came here?” Bilbo asked the dwarves. Their heads turned to the young hobbit with renewed interest. Bilbo just smiled and turned his attention back to the arena.

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The dinner was rather low key that evening, as everyone was tired from all the fresh air and exercise they had had in the afternoon. Bombur had prepared huge cauldrons of hot mulled wine that felt like blessing after so many hours spent in chilly November air. There was a small feast held in honour of the winners of that day’s competitions, but the main feast where all the champions would be celebrated was planned for the next day.

Everyone was looking forward to the second day of the tournaments, where the best of the best would meet in the arena for sword-fighting and wrestling. The dwarves especially were excited about the discipline of fist fighting. Dwalin could be seen walking around, cracking his knuckles in anticipation.

The next day dawned cool and bright and when Bilbo came out to his balcony before breakfast to enjoy the view of the colourful field below, the clouds of mist coming out of his mouth made him look like the world’s smallest dragon.

“I have finished the drawing of the tapestry,” Bilbo told Thorin after breakfast. “Would you like to see it now, or should I bring it to you after the tournaments are over?”

“Bring it to the audience chamber, so we can all take a look at it,” Thorin said. All the dwarves nodded in agreement, their faces full of curiosity.

“King Bard,” Bilbo addressed the man, “if you are not otherwise occupied, would you be willing to come as well? I would like to know if the drawing is accurate, so that I can make changes, if need be.”

He made a quick detour to his quarters and came back to the audience chamber with a tall roll of paper.

“I wanted to make the drawing big, so that any mistakes could be pointed out more easily.”
Bilbo handed the roll to Thorin, who took it and spread it out on the table. A few gasps could be heard as the dwarves all huddled around the desk, looking at the picture of a dragon sleeping on his treasure hoard.

“Is this what the dragon really looked like?” Ori asked in awe. “We never got to see it properly.”

Bilbo nodded.

“This is how I remember him, though I still think that no picture can do a creature like that full justice.” His thoughts turned inwards, his eyes going a little unfocused as he concentrated on the memories of his encounter with Smaug. “I think magnificent would be the best word to describe the dragon. He was huge and terrible and very, very deadly, but beautiful at the same time. When I first entered, there were mountains of gold in that enormous hall and yet the sleeping dragon still managed to be the most impressive thing in the room.”

He noticed their frowns at his flowery description and smiled. “I think a dragon can be both beautiful and terrible at the same time. You can admire something for its beauty without forgetting how dangerous it is. Do you remember the storm in the mountains? Or the eagles? It’s the same thing.”

“You are the only living being who stole from a sleeping dragon and lived to tell the tale,” Bard said. “I think that gives you the right to use whatever words you wish to describe the encounter.” He leaned over the table to study the drawing with sharp eyes. “I would say this is as accurate as you can get. I only saw the dragon flying in the sky and then a corpse in the lake, but he looks as I remember him.” He turned his gaze to Bilbo. “If I might recommend a small change – draw the dragon with his eyes open; it will make him look much more menacing.”

“Like this?” Bilbo reached for a nearby inkwell and quill and copied the dragon’s head into an empty bottom corner of the paper, drawing him with his eye half-open, watchful and waiting for his prey to come back.

“That is terrifying,” Kíli said behind him. Bilbo shrugged.

“That’s what he looked like when he talked to me.” He turned to Thorin, who hadn’t said a word the whole time. “Is this good enough? Should I make any further changes or can I start working on the tapestry?”

“The work is yours,” Thorin told him. “You may decide to portray the dragon any way you wish. If you turn this into a tapestry, it will be displayed in this room for everyone to see. Take as much time as you need to create this.”

Bilbo noticed that Ori was fidgeting a bit next to him, obviously wanting to say something, but feeling too shy to speak up. Bilbo gave him an encouraging smile.

“Is there something you would like to add, Ori? I know you can draw better than me, so any advice is welcome.”

Ori blushed a bit, but reached for the quill nonetheless.

“It’s just an idea,” he muttered. “You have forgotten something important in the picture.”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow, intrigued.

“Did I? Go ahead, then, draw it.”

Ori gave the dwarves around them a shy glance, obviously feeling nervous about having to draw in
front of so many people, but bent over the paper nonetheless, drawing a small curly headed figure on the bottom of the paper.

“You have forgotten the brave burglar,” Ori told him with a small smile. Bilbo shook his head.

“It didn’t even occur to me to include myself in the picture.” He looked around at the other dwarves. “Which version of the tapestry should I make?”

“The burglar is part of the dragon’s story, too,” Balin said, the rest of the dwarves nodding in agreement. Bilbo gave a questioning look to Thorin, who nodded as well. Bilbo sighed.

“Very well, I will make this version, if you like it better. It still feels a bit self-serving, mind you.”

“If you still have the drawing after you are finished with the tapestry, could I have it?” Balin said. “Or any other drawings or maps you may have? I think they would look nice hanging framed on the walls in my quarters. I am willing to pay you for them.”

Bilbo gave him a smile.

“I have plenty of drawings. Ori has seen some of them - he can tell you what they are.” He rolled up the drawing and picked it up. “I plan to start working on the tapestry as soon as possible,” he told Thorin. “I still need to re-draw the dragon to make a few changes to his expression, but that won’t take long. Should I put in a commission for a loom when I go to Dale tomorrow?”

“That will not be necessary,” Thorin said. “I already ordered a loom for you. It should arrive within two days.”

“Excellent,” Bilbo said. “It will give me something to do when the tournaments are over.” He cocked his head. “I suppose the loom is part of the payment for the tapestry?”

A shadow of frustration ran over Thorin’s face before it smoothed out again.

“Consider it a gift to welcome you back in Erebor. I believe you will be able to use it to its fullest.”

“I will do my best,” Bilbo promised. “I think I should leave you all so you can prepare for the afternoon tournaments. If you’ll excuse me?” He gave the assembled dwarves a small bow and walked out, a pleased smile on his face.

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“I don’t think I’m going to apply for the sword-fighting after all,” Fíli said as they were walking down towards the tournament field after lunch. He looked over his shoulder to check, lowering his voice. “Mum has signed up for it. There’s no chance of winning against her.”

“Is she really that good?” Bilbo asked, bewildered. One could never be sure if those two weren’t just playing a prank on him.

“Oh yes,” Kíli nodded. “She’s lethal with a sword. Even uncle backs off when she draws a weapon.” A pleased smile appeared on his face. “Boy, are those elves in for a surprise. No dwarf would dare go against her, but they have no idea. Oh, this will be so much fun to watch.”

And it was. Even Bilbo had to admit that there was something amusing about watching a pint-sized dwarf woman take down one hardy warrior after the other. At first most of her opponents had looked amused or irritated that they had to compete against a woman. After she had managed to take down one of Dale’s resident champions, their eyes filled with reluctant respect for her skills and eventually
dread when they had to come up against her themselves.

Dís was small and lithe compared to most of her opponents, which allowed her to avoid their blows with ease. Since the rules prohibited killing, there were no serious injuries, but more than few men walked away with bloody noses and concussions. In the final round she met with Thorin, who conceded to her with a bow after she had managed to knock Orcrist straight out of his hand.

“I think he could hand over the kingdom to her right now and nobody would complain,” Bilbo told Fíli, sitting in awe at the dwarf woman’s skill.

“I think a few are wondering why he hasn’t done so already,” Fíli said. “Good thing there is still wrestling for Uncle to win.”

“Do you want to bet how many suitors will mother have to fend off at dinner?” Kíli asked his brother. “I say ten.”

“Make it fifteen.”

“You’re on.”

They watched Dwalin demolish his opponents in the fist-fighting competition, looking like he was having the time of his life.

“Does he miss the orcs that much?” Bilbo asked after Dwalin had knocked out his sixth opponent. “He seems a little...too enthusiastic.”

“He’s always been like that,” Balin said on his right, unperturbed. “If there had been a way to slay the dragon by hand, he would have done it himself, just for the thrill. This is just something he does for entertainment.”

“And just when I thought he couldn’t get any more intimidating,” Bilbo mumbled. Balin gave his forearm a comforting pat, his eyes not leaving his brother for a moment.

“He likes you, even though it may not seem like it,” he told Bilbo. “You should have heard how he ripped into Thorin after he had thrown you out. I have never seen Thorin look so small.”

“Dwalin defended me? He knew about it?” Bilbo asked, baffled.

“Of course he knew about it. He’s Thorin’s closest friend.” Balin leaned closer, lowering his voice. “Don’t tell him that I told you this, but he was very impressed by the way you went to face the dragon. He holds you in pretty high esteem, but will probably never say it to your face.”

“That is...unexpected to discover,” Bilbo said, floored. “Thank you for telling me this. I was half convinced that he would carry me out of the mountain with his bare hands if I as much as looked at Thorin the wrong way.”

Balin shook his head in amusement.

“I think he would sooner threaten Thorin than harm you. You have completely won him over to your side with those pumpkin pies you made the other day.”

Bilbo smiled.

“I’m glad to hear it. Thorin did say that they were Dwalin’s favourites, but I wasn’t sure if I had the right recipe.”
“Did he?” Balin’s eyebrows climbed up. “You and Thorin get on surprisingly well, considering.”

Bilbo shrugged.

“We are both trying hard to put the past behind us so that life in Erebor can be pleasant for everyone. If he is willing to be civil, then I would be a fool not to reply in kind.”

Balin looked like he was fighting down a smile.

“I am glad you two have found a common ground after all.”

Dwalin joined them a few moments later, looking battered and bruised but incredibly pleased with his first place.

“It’s too bad none of the tree-shaggers signed up,” he said as he sat down besides Balin. “I would have loved to rearrange those pretty faces of theirs.”

They all turned to watch the wrestling matches that had just started.

“Look, Dáin has signed up for this one as well,” Fíli pointed out when the brown-haired dwarf walked into the arena. “I wonder how his match with Uncle will go. They have a long-standing rivalry going on.”

“Thorin is really trying,” Kíli remarked a few matches later. “I think he is likely to win this competition. He looks awfully determined.”

Bilbo felt a small flutter in his chest when Thorin walked into the arena dressed just in a simple shirt and trousers. Even without all his finery, he still looked kingly and imposing, and seemed to tower over his competitors, even the ones who were taller than him. He held himself proudly, his normally carefully braided hair now tied into a ponytail for convenience. Bilbo remembered Kíli’s remark about Dís getting hoards of suitors and wondered how many admirers Thorin would have after the tournament was over. Probably a lot.

He wondered if anyone will be brave enough to try and court Thorin, or proposition him at the feast. Seeing the adoring faces of the dwarves around him as they watched Thorin compete, he wondered if Thorin ever took them up on that offer. He quickly realized that he preferred not to know.

For the first time since Bilbo had met him, he was able to see Thorin the way the rest of the dwarfs saw him – a majestic king, proud and undefeated. They must admire him for his bravery and honour and decisiveness.

Bilbo snorted.

He wondered if any of Thorin’s admirers knew about the epic sulks the dwarf would go into when something didn’t go his way. Or his fear of snakes. Or his love for books and poppy seed cakes.

There was something very bittersweet about realizing that you want something long after you had already rejected it. They might have patched the relations between them for the sake of peace, but after the way Bilbo had rejected the dwarf’s proposal the first time, there was no way Thorin would ever repeat his offer.

Besides, it had been five years, Bilbo told himself as he watched Thorin advance all the way into the final round - there was no way Thorin would feel that way still after so long. All the dwarfs had confirmed that Thorin had been mad at him for years after he had banished Bilbo. Thorin’s pride wouldn’t allow him to like someone who had humiliated him like that.
Thorin won the tournament by knocking the wind out of Dáin in the final round. All the dwarves flocked to the arena to congratulate their king on the victory, but Bilbo remained sitting, seeing no point in trying to intrude somewhere where he wasn’t wanted.

Bilbo reminded himself not to be disappointed when Thorin didn’t ask him for a dance that night.

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Bilbo spent the morning in Thranduil’s chambers, showing the elves all the translations of the Old Tales that he had done over the years. They all looked genuinely impressed with his work and he was more than happy to let him borrow some of his books and give him some feedback on his work. Thranduil gave him a beautiful emerald pendant on a chain that Bilbo didn’t have the heart to refuse.

He walked to the dining hall with a smile on his face, wearing the new pendant around his neck to show the Elvenking that he appreciated his gift. Normally he wouldn’t wear jewellery like that, but since the elves were scheduled to leave the next morning, he thought it wouldn’t hurt to wear the gold for a few hours.

During the lunch he noticed Thorin looking at the pendant with a frown, but since the king never said a word, Bilbo decided not to ponder it too much, turning his attention to the elves instead. Before the dwarves could all scatter after the lunch, he managed to catch Bofur, greeting the dwarf with a smile.

“I thought about going shopping to Dale this afternoon. Would you be willing to come with me? I need to buy the materials for the tapestry, but I don’t know where to find the right shop. I’ve only been to the Dale once, so I’m not familiar with the local markets yet.”

Bofur looked a little taken aback by the request, but grinned nonetheless.

“I am certainly no expert on fabrics, but I know where to buy them. I don’t have anything pressing to do this afternoon, so I will be happy to go with you. Besides, you will probably need someone to carry your shopping bags for you.”

Bilbo felt his cheeks heat a bit.

“Yes, that too. I didn’t know any polite way to ask.”

Bofur laughed, giving him a good natured slap on his arm.

“I can carry your bags for you. See you at the gate in half an hour?”

Bilbo nodded and watched Bofur’s ridiculous hat bob up and down as the dwarf walked away. He was so focused on his mental list of things he needed to buy that he almost missed Thorin’s approach. The king walked over to him, still frowning at the jewel on Bilbo’s chest.

“You spend a lot of time with the elves,” Thorin remarked quietly.

“I talk to them so you don’t have to,” Bilbo told him. Thorin looked a little taken aback, so Bilbo softened his voice a bit. “The fact that I actually like their company helps a lot with that. And before you ask - yes, I can be friends with both elves and dwarves at the same time. I already had this conversation once with Legolas, and I’m not eager to repeat it.”

“I...appreciate your willingness to spare me unnecessary interactions with Thranduil,” Thorin said. “I never expressed my thanks properly, but I am glad for your presence here at the celebrations. If it were not for your interference, our two races would have almost inevitably come to blows already.
Despite what some of my people might think, I do not wish to have a war with them.”

“I know you don’t,” Bilbo reassured him. “Erebor has barely gotten back on her feet. It would be sheer madness to destroy the newly found peace by fighting with your allies. The celebrations were a good idea to promote unity.”

“It was Bard who suggested it,” Thorin said. “I offered to host them in Erebor, since Dale is still in a process of restoration and does not have the funds.”

“To be honest, I’m rather surprised that there have been no fights between the elves and the dwarves,” Bilbo said, looking around the hall. “The elves love to show off their superiority and you dwarves are a short-tempered lot. It is practically a recipe for disaster.”

Thorin gave him a small smile.

“And yet you appear rather amused by the situation. Is it possible that you do not like the elves as much as you pretend to?”

Bilbo laughed a bit, shaking his head.

“Oh no, I like them fine. They are a pleasant lot when they want to be. I have admired elves my entire life, but recently realized that liking them doesn’t have to prevent me from seeing their flaws at the same time.” He checked their surroundings for eavesdroppers and lowered his voice to a whisper, leaning closer to the dwarf. “I am well aware that Thranduil is a self-important, pompous arse that loves to hear himself talk, but he can be a pleasant companion when he puts his mind to it.”

Thorin choked on laughter, drawing several curious gazes to them.

“I never thought I would hear you of all people talk about an elf like that.”

Bilbo gave him a level gaze.

“No matter what people might think of me, I am not blind, or stupid, or naive.”

“I never thought you were,” Thorin said.

“Of course you did,” Bilbo told him. “When you met me in the Shire, you thought I was a bumbling simpleton who couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag. I am well aware of what you thought about me.” He took a moment to enjoy that fact that he had managed to drive Thorin speechless. “But you know what? You were at least partially right. I was pretty clueless back then. No one would be able to convince me today to go fight a dragon for them.”

“I am beginning to see that.”

“I don’t think this is a suitable place for a conversation like this,” Bilbo said, noticing the curious gazes sent their way. “It would not do for me to take so much effort to get on well with the elves only to have someone hear me badmouthing them.”

“Did Thranduil give you that?” Thorin nodded towards Bilbo’s pendant. “I thought you did not care much for jewellery.”

“I don’t,” Bilbo confirmed. “I am willing to wear this while the Elvenking is here, to show my appreciation of his gift, but the moment he leaves, I am taking it off. I feel utterly ridiculous wearing so much gold.”
Thorin seemed to relax a bit at that, the corners of his mouth twitching upwards in amusement.

“I noticed that you have made some plans with Bofur for the afternoon. Do you need any funds for the tapestry materials?” He reached his hand towards his right side, where he had a decent-sized money purse tied to his belt. Bilbo shook his head.

“That will not be necessary.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out the chain Fortinbras had given him at the tournaments. “Thranduil is financing my shopping.”

“Where did you get this?” Thorin said, reaching for the chain. Bilbo let him take it and examine it.

“Thranduil gave it to Fortinbras as a part of payment for the Shire wine he bought from him yesterday,” Bilbo said. “I was planning to exchange it for the threads for tapestry.”

“This is far too valuable to use as a payment for few bits of cloth,” Thorin said, raising the chain to his eyes to see it more closely. “These diamonds alone are each worth a fortune.”

“You can keep it, if you wish,” Bilbo told him with a shrug. “I have no use for it. Just give me a bit of gold in exchange, so I can pay for the tapestry materials.”

Thorin tried to hand it back.

“It is not right for me to take this.”

Bilbo pushed the hand back, feeling a small thrill at the short contact.

“Keep it. You are able to appreciate its value more that I would ever be.”

They had a brief staring contest, trying to silently force the other to concede. Thorin finally lowered his eyes with a sigh, tucking the chain into his pocket with great care.

“Very well, I will keep this. Here, take this gold.” He untied the money bag from his belt and handed it to Bilbo, whose hand dropped a bit under its weight. “It is nowhere near the value of what you have given me, but it should be more than enough to cover any expenses you might have.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo said, weighing the bag. “I think I should go. Bofur will be waiting for me.”

“I will not keep you any longer, then,” Thorin said. “Enjoy your trip to Dale.”

“I will,” Bilbo told him with a smile. He felt a little foolish for saying it, but he couldn’t help but add: “I enjoyed talking to you like this.” Before he could say anything else to embarrass himself, he gave the king a small nod and a shy smile and walked away swiftly, still reeling a bit from the conversation.

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Bofur was already waiting for him when he arrived at the gate ten minutes later.

“Am I late?” Bilbo asked the dwarf. Bofur straightened from where he had been leaning against the wall and fell into step with him.

“Not at all. I just arrived myself, because I stopped by my quarters to pick up some money. I figured that I might as well buy a few things if I’m going to Dale.” He gave Bilbo a sideways glance. “So, why did you want me to go shopping with you? Not that I’m complaining, but I know that Fili and Kili will be both awfully disappointed that you didn’t ask them.”
Bilbo decided that there was no point in tiptoeing around the issue.

“I wanted to talk to you in private without being too obvious about it.”

“Oh?” Bofur’s eyebrows shot up. “This should be interesting.”

Bilbo took a deep breath for courage.

“Are you interested in anyone?” He looked Bofur straight in the eye. The dwarf let out a slow whistle.

“Mahal’s beard, you really don’t beat around the bush, do you? Are you asking for yourself...?” He trailed off, looking a bit embarrassed.

“No, no, don’t worry, it’s not me,” Bilbo hastened to assure him. “You’re a lovely dwarf, but I am not interested in you like that.”

Bofur let out a small sigh of relief.

“Thank Mahal.” He seemed to realize how that had sounded and tried to explain himself. “Oh, boy, that came out all wrong. What I meant is – you’re a good friend, one of the best that I have. I would hate it if things between us were awkward.” He cocked his head to the side. “If you are not interested, then why are you asking?”

“I’m doing a favour for a friend,” Bilbo said, “but I can’t tell you which one until you answer my question.”

“There might be someone,” Bofur admitted slowly.

“Yes?”

“The only thing that prevents me from approaching him is the fact that he has two overprotective older brothers, one of whom may or may not be an assassin,” Bofur said. “I would hate to get on their bad side, since they are my friends, too.”

“Then you don’t have to worry any longer,” Bilbo smiled, “because the friend for whom I’m performing this favour just happens to be a certain young librarian we both know.”

Bofur’s eyes lit up.

“That is excellent news. Excellent news indeed. I think I might use this shopping trip after all.”

“What are you going to do?” Bilbo asked.

“Buy him a gift, of course,” Bofur said. “Do not tell me that you don’t give out courting gifts in the Shire.”

“We do,” Bilbo said, “but it’s usually small stuff, like flowers and baked goods. How does the dwarven courting even work? Nobody seems to be willing to talk much about it and I found very little in the books.”

“You won’t find much, because it’s a private affair for the most part,” Bofur said. “We grow up learning all the customs, so there is little need to write it down and what is written is usually in Khuzdul. A lot of our customs are usually kept a secret from outsiders, but since you’re a good friend and practically an honorary dwarf already, I am willing to tell you about it. What do you wish to know?”
The opportunity to learn more about dwarvish customs proved too strong to resist.

“Are there any formalities? Restrictions? What are the steps? Can you just give any gift you wish, or are there rules for it?”

“Why are you so interested?” Bofur asked, looking at Bilbo curiously. “Never mind, of course you would be interested. You live here. Some of our customs must be baffling to you.” He gave Bilbo a smile. “To start courting, there must be first some declaration of intent. It doesn’t have to be public, but it’s preferable, because it lets others know that the dwarves are no longer available. It can be any sort of gesture – a declaration, a gift or an invitation for a walk, as long as the intent to court is clear to everyone involved.

“There are usually a few gifts given on both sides. Hand-crafted gifts are preferable, because it shows that you took the effort to make something for them. Gifts are also usually given to the intended’s families as well. Besides meetings between the two courting dwarves there are also the obligatory family dinners that nobody enjoys.” He took a careful look around, lowering his voice.

“Kissing in public is usually frowned upon when you’re not married and the traditions prohibit sharing a bed before the wedding, but in practice you can do pretty much anything you wish in the privacy of your rooms, as long as you’re discreet about it and nobody gets pregnant.” He gave Bilbo a look. “Does that answer your questions?”

Bilbo nodded.

“A bit. There are still a few things that I would like to know, though.” Bofur gave him an encouraging nod, so Bilbo asked about the things that he had been wondering about for some time now. “Are all the steps of the courting mandatory? Can the couple decide that they are not compatible after all and break it off? Does there need to be another formal declaration of the intent to marry, or is it implied in the first declaration?”

Bofur scratched his head under his hat.

“The intent to marry is usually included in the first declaration, though the couple can decide to take it slow and just try to court without obligations for a while and have a marriage proposal later. The courting can be broken off, but it’s usually considered in very bad taste if there has already been a family dinner. The steps are always adhered to.” He gave Bilbo a look. “It would be extremely strange if someone just proposed marriage out of the blue without the other side having any clue about their intention.”

“Yes, very strange indeed,” Bilbo said, the wheels in his head turning. “Thank you for the explanation, Bofur. A lot of things make more sense now.”

He got lost in thoughts and Bofur let him, the dwarf’s own head probably full of planning his courtship of Ori. Thorin’s words about propriety finally made sense. Now that Bilbo had all the information, he realized that Thorin’s proposal had been highly scandalous by dwarven standards. It made Bilbo wonder whether Thorin would have made the offer at all, had he been in his right mind at the time. Probably not, since reason would have prevented him from committing such an act of madness.

They arrived to Dale a few moments later and mingled with the crowds on the streets. Bofur led him through the streets with confidence born from familiarity and they soon reached the craftsman’s market, where the stalls sold both the craftsmen’s own artefacts and various materials for crafting. Bofur threw the carver’s stall a covetous glance.
“Do you mind if I leave you for a bit? There are a few things I need to buy.”

“Not at all,” Bilbo assured him. “I will be somewhere around here if you need me.”

It didn’t take long for Bilbo to find the weaver’s stall and he was very pleased to find that they even had the gold threads that were so rare in the Shire. He gave the selection an assessing gaze and handed the lady behind the stall a long list of the things he would need.

“You’re that halfling, aren’t you?” she asked as she was measuring the threads for him. “The one people talk about.”

“I may be,” Bilbo said. “What are they saying about me?”

“They say that you gave your share of the gold to Bard to rebuild this city. The dwarves say that King Thorin banished you from Erebor for that.” She leaned closer, peeking at him in curiosity. “Is it true?”

“Most of it is true, yes,” Bilbo said. “I have come back for the celebrations and have made peace with the king.”

The lady gave him an assessing gaze.

“That was a lot of gold you gave us. You know what? You can have whatever you wish from the stall for half the price.”

Bilbo raised his hands in protest.

“You’re very kind, but that would feel like I’m stealing from you. I am here today to make a purchase with the king’s own money, so you may keep the price as it is.” He leaned a little closer. “However, I might take you up on that offer for my own personal purchase. Do you have any rich dark blue fabric? Ten feet should be enough.”

Two hours later he was climbing the stairs back to Erebor with two bulky bags in his hands. Bofur walked by his side, carrying a bag of his own and a large flat parcel wrapped in brown paper for Bilbo.

“What is this?” he said, trying to peek under the wrappers.

“That is a surprise,” Bilbo told him, giving the dwarf a stern look when he tried to lift the paper. “It will take a few weeks to finish and I don’t want anyone to see it while it’s being made.”

“Ooh, it’s a secret,” Bofur said, excited. Bilbo gave him a smile.

“Yes, a secret.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you everyone who has been leaving comments and kudos on this story! All your feedback makes me so happy, you have no idea :}

I am well aware that Bilbo has been handed the infamous Idiot Ball of Obliviousness (for explanation of what an Idiot Ball is, visit the TvTropes). It was done intentionally because I want his feelings to be a natural process – I want them to develop on their own, without any outside influence, because I don’t think that ten dwarves going “He likes you, you should really like him back, hurry up” two weeks after he arrived to Erebor would help him much.

There are still about 40 000 words of the story left, because I wanted to take my time with the romance and not rush them into anything. When I mentioned at the beginning that it will be a slow burn, I really meant it. There is plenty for them to do yet before they can get together. I hope you will enjoy reading about it as much as I enjoyed writing it :)

Next chapter will be posted on October 1.
The farewell feast for the guests was nearly as glorious as the one celebrating the dragon’s death had been. Bombur and his army of cooks had been busy at work since early morning hours preparing a feast that left even the pickiest eaters leaving the table comfortably full.

Bilbo spent the dinner chatting with the elves, eager to use the opportunity to speak to them one last time before they leave. He had to suppress a smile when he saw the look Thranduil gave Thorin upon the dwarf’s entrance. Thorin had chosen to wear the chain he’d bought from Bilbo after lunch displayed on his chest, probably as a provocation to the Elvenking.

Thranduil’s gaze slid from Thorin’s chest to Bilbo, the question obvious in his eyes.

“I like giving gifts,” Bilbo told him with a benign smile. “I thought Thorin might like the chain, so I gave it to him.”

Thranduil’s eyebrows shot up.

“Did you.”

“I heard about the trade you made with my young cousin,” Bilbo said, still smiling. “You were most generous to him. Thank you for that.”

Thranduil’s expression lost some of its displeasure.

“It was a mutually beneficial enterprise.”

“I have been thinking about planting a wine yard here on the slopes of Erebor, once I make enough money to buy some lands,” Bilbo said. “The soil here is excellent and I am certain that I could find enough people from Dale willing to help me take care of the plants.”

“There used to be a wine yard near Dale that produced very fine wine, but it burned down in the dragon fire,” Thranduil said, looking intrigued. “It would be most convenient to be able to buy local wine again. If you are lacking the funds, I would be happy to make an investment.”

“It would take a few years before any wine could be made,” Bilbo warned him, “but that probably doesn’t mean much to you, compared to the centuries you have already seen.”

“No indeed,” Thranduil smiled, relaxing. “Time does not mean much to the elves and I am more than willing to wait for excellence.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Bilbo told him. “I can tell my cousins to send me some saplings with the caravan that will deliver the wine you bought. That should give me enough time to put my plans into motion.”

“I will be looking forward to it,” Thranduil said, raising his goblet in salute. Bilbo responded in kind, feeling very pleased with the exchange.

He spent the rest of the dinner stuffing himself with Bombur’s delicious desserts and listening to the conversations around him. The elves tended to switch to Sindarin whenever they wanted to say
something unflattering about the dwarves, so he often had to pretend he was sipping wine to hide his amused grin from them. For a race that liked to present themselves as noble and disinterested in affairs of the lower races, they were surprisingly fond of gossip. The dwarves remained blissfully oblivious, drinking and roughhousing, paying no mind to the whispers of the elves.

Several people requested songs from him, so after dinner Bilbo went to his favourite spot in the corner and sang a few pieces for those interested in listening. He bowed after his last song and stepped down from the stool, heading for the wine barrel. He barely managed to take ten steps before he ran into Thorin, who was leaning against a nearby wall. The dwarf gave him a speculative look.

“Master Baggins. Just the hobbit I was looking for.”

“Indeed?” Bilbo had no idea what could Thorin possibly want from him.

“If you are not otherwise occupied, would you be willing to join me for the next dance?”

Bilbo tried not to show how surprised he was by the request.

“No, I’m not occupied,” Bilbo blurted. “I mean, yes, I’ll be happy to dance with you.” He hoped the dwarf would go away soon, so that he wouldn’t notice the blush that was slowly staring to spread across Bilbo’s face. Thorin gave him a short bow and walked away. Bilbo went to hide in the corner until his cheeks cooled down.

Valar, what was wrong with him? He cursed his traitorous face. A few words from a dwarf and he started blushing like a maiden at her first dance. He hadn’t blushed like that in years. He fought the urge to bang his head against a wall and instead used the time to brace himself for the upcoming dance. Even a blind orc would be able to see what he thought of Thorin if he blushed like that at the dance floor.

Bilbo re-emerged from between the barrels a few minutes later, feeling more or less composed. He had faced a dragon, for Valar’s sake, he told himself, one dance with Thorin should be nothing compared to that. He spied Thorin standing near one of the tables, talking to his nephews. Since he did not want to appear too eager to dance, he picked up a small pumpkin pastry from one of the large plates and ate it, watching the crowd of dancers.

Thorin walked over just as he was finishing his last bite and waited patiently for Bilbo to finish chewing and wash the pastry down with some wine. Bilbo thought Thorin looked unseemly amused by his eating habits.

“Shall we?” Thorin asked, offering a hand to Bilbo, who took it without hesitation.

They walked over to the dance floor and mingled in with the other dancers, who gave them a few curious glances but did not stop their entertainment, unlike the first time. Thorin wrapped an arm around his waist and pulled him closer, the small distance between them making it easier to talk without being overheard.

“You wore this on purpose, didn’t you?” Bilbo asked, watching the golden chain in front of his nose sway with each step.

“I may have,” Thorin admitted with a small smile. “It does not do much credit to my character, but I find that I enjoy annoying him.”

“I suspected as much,” Bilbo grinned. “You should have heard what the elves said about you at the dinner. It is a good thing none of you understand elvish, or you would have had a disaster on your hands.”
“You listen to elvish gossip?” one of Thorin’s eyebrows shot up.

“What else am I supposed to do at the table? All of you dwarves sit too far away and Legolas spends most of his time admiring his reflection on the back of a spoon.”

“I could not help but overhear your conversation with Thranduil,” Thorin said. “Are you really planning to plant a wine yard here?”

Bilbo made an apologetic face.

“I know I should have asked you first before I said anything to him, but it was as good an opportunity as any to discuss it. Yes, I would like to plant a wine yard somewhere close to Erebor, if you are willing to sell me the lands. The southern slopes of the mountain would be particularly fitting for this breed of wine, if you do not have some other use planned for that piece of land.”

“No, I do not have any use for that part of the mountain,” Thorin shook his head. “A forest used to stand in those parts before the dragon burned it down. With some work, it could be easily turned into a wine yard.”

“We can discuss the price of those lands at a later time,” Bilbo said, pleased with the discovery. “Right now I do not have enough gold to consider a purchase of lands, but I hope that with a few months of work, I may be able to start considering the option. I think I might also plant a small field of pipe weed, since you dwarves are so fond of it.”

“I believe you would find plenty of dwarves willing to invest in that,” Thorin told him.

“I was thinking that the journey from Shire to Erebor is long and dangerous, so it would be better to have a local source of wine and pipe weed. My cousins can start a trade with the Blue Mountains, if they wish and I can supply the local market.” He looked up at Thorin. “Do you think it could work?”

“I think you of all people can make any plan work, when you put your mind to it,” Thorin said. “You can try discussing your plans with Balin - he should be able to estimate all the costs for you.”

The music changed and they fell into step with the new rhythm, but Bilbo barely paid any attention to it because Thorin was leading him with utter confidence.

“I wonder if Gandalf has any fireworks prepared for tonight,” Bilbo said, a quick look around the hall confirming that the wizard had indeed disappeared again.

“Fireworks?”

“Gandalf always used to make fireworks on his visits to the Shire when I was a small boy,” Bilbo said, smiling at the memory. “They had the most wondrous colours. It would be the perfect way to end the festivities.”

A dwarven herald ran into the room not a moment later, stopping a few feet from the king. Thorin released Bilbo from his hold and turned to face the newcomer.

“What is the matter?”

“Master Gandalf wants you all to come outside,” the dwarf announced. “He says that he has a surprise for you.”

Bilbo gave Thorin a knowing look. Thorin turned back to the herald.
“You have done well to inform me.” He addressed the hall. “Whoever wishes to see the surprise can come with me.” He waited for his nephews to fall into step with him, Bilbo trailing a few feet behind. The entire hall emptied, as everyone was eager to find what Gandalf had prepared for them.

The crowd poured out of Erebor’s giant gate and down onto the wide stairs, looking around in curiosity. They didn’t have to wait long. Soon there was a single bolt of red light rising into the sky from the field below, where it erupted into a shower of sparks. The crowd oohed and aahed, their heads turning skywards to see the changing colours.

Bilbo came to stand next to Thorin, smiling when the next rocket created a field of flowers against the night sky.

“I was right about the fireworks,” Bilbo couldn’t help but point out, feeling rather smug about his guess.

“So you were,” Thorin said. “Come, let us find a nice spot to sit.” And he put his hand on Bilbo’s lower back, steering him through the crowds towards a place with better view. Bilbo went without protest, too flabbergasted at the fact that Thorin was touching him of his own will to think about protesting.

He quickly realized that he had no desire to put up any sort of protest, because the position allowed him to walk close to Thorin and the hand on his back was pleasantly warm, the touch light, as if Thorin was not sure of his welcome and was prepared to withdraw the hand at any moment.

They found a nice spot of grass on the slope facing the field, where the fireworks could be seen in their entirety. Bilbo spent a moment wondering whether he should risk staining his fancy cloak, or if he should take it off and sit down in his clothes with the cloak folded in his lap. Thorin solved the dilemma for him by unclasping his own cloak and laying it over the grass, which created a place big enough for both of them to sit comfortably.

Bilbo sat down carefully on the cloth, taking care not to stain it. Thorin plopped himself down next to him, stretching his legs to make sure his heavy boots stayed on the grass. Bilbo wondered if Thorin was aware that they were sitting close enough for their shoulders to touch. The dwarf seemed oblivious, his head tilted towards the sky, but Bilbo felt hyper-aware of their position.

The heavy cloth of Thorin’s jacket brushed Bilbo’s arm when the dwarf shifted and Bilbo froze, expecting Thorin to pull away. When he didn’t, Bilbo figured that Thorin probably couldn’t feel the contact through his layers of clothing and allowed himself to relax and press back a little. He could always pretend that it had been an accident.

“You mentioned that Gandalf used to make fireworks in the Shire. Tell me about them,” Thorin said softly, his eyes not leaving the display on the sky. Bilbo turned his head towards the sky as well, the ray of colours helping to bring back memories from his childhood.

“Gandalf used to be friends with my grandfather, the Old Took,” Bilbo began. “When I was a lad the wizard used to visit every year and make fireworks on the Old Took’s birthday. It was always a grand celebration, because the Old Took was a Tháin whose authority was respected all over the Shire. The fireworks were much like the ones you see now. All colours you can think off turned into wondrous shapes. I remember that I especially liked the flowers that some of the fireworks formed. The whole Shire was always looking forward to the wizard’s visits, because the firework display could be seen from far away.”

Bilbo sighed.
“Then the Old Took died and Gandalf never visited again. I nearly forgot about his existence, until he appeared on my doorstep five years ago.” He found Thorin looking at him, so he gave him a smile. “I haven’t seen these fireworks for twenty five years.”

“I have seen them before,” Thorin said. “My travels have often taken me through the Shire. I think I happened to pass the celebration once, many years ago. I wondered what kind of hobbit craft the fireworks were, but never got around to ask.”

“It’s no hobbit craft, as you can see,” Bilbo said. “Hobbits have never been fond of machines and mechanisms, but the fireworks are pretty to look at.”

“Yes, they are,” Thorin said, but he wasn’t looking at the fireworks anymore. His gaze was firmly on Bilbo, who suddenly felt like someone had sucked all the air from the space around them and only looking into Thorin’s eyes could save him.


To his enormous frustration Bilbo did not get to hear what Thorin wanted to say to him, because at that moment Ori came over to them, eyes as big as saucers.

“Bilbo!” he exclaimed.

The moment shattered. Bilbo was forced to break the gaze and look at Ori, who was vibrating with excitement.

“What is it, Ori?” He tried to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Bofur and I have started courting.”

Annoyance forgotten, Bilbo jumped to his feet.

“Really?”

“Yes,” Ori nodded with a wide grin. “He came to ask me just this evening.” He suddenly stepped forward and gave Bilbo an enthusiastic hug. “Thank you so much for this.”

Bilbo patted his back, feeling pleased with his friend’s happiness. He waited for the dwarf to release him before he responded.

“You’re welcome, but please don’t make me do anything like this again. It was awkward enough as it was. Poor bloke thought I was coming on to him at first.”

“Oh.” Ori blushed. “I didn’t think of that.”

“It is no matter now,” Bilbo told him. “I am glad everything worked out for you.”

“I’m so happy right now, you have no idea,” Ori said. He finally noticed Thorin’s presence. His gaze slid from the king back to Bilbo. “Did I interrupt anything?”

Bilbo turned to look back at Thorin, but the dwarf’s face was unreadable. Bilbo shrugged.

“I am glad you came to tell me, Ori. How did your brothers react to it?”

“Better than I expected,” Ori smiled. “Dori grumbled a bit, but Nori didn’t seem to mind much. I think it’s probably because Bofur is their friend as well and they know he will be good to me.” He shot a look over his shoulder. “I think I’d better go before my brothers start looking for me. Come to
the library tomorrow and I will tell you all about it.” He gave Bilbo one last grin and scrambled away.

Bilbo turned back to the fireworks with a smile on his face.

“I’m so happy for them,” he told Thorin. He didn’t bother sitting back down, since the fireworks appeared to be near their end.

“Do you know the significance of your gesture?” Thorin asked with a strange expression on his face.

“What gesture?” Bilbo asked, genuinely confused. “That I acted as a go-between for them? Ori asked me for help, so I did my best. Did I commit some terrible social blunder by doing it? I’m not well versed in dwarvish customs.”

“No, you did not do anything wrong,” Thorin said, “but since you were the one who caused them to start courting, you will now have to officiate their wedding ceremony.”

“Oh, goodness,” Bilbo sighed. “I should have known there would be something like that.” He gave Thorin a look. “Is it terribly hard to perform the ceremony?”

Thorin shook his head with a small smile.

“Not that I am aware of, but there are several phrases in Khuzdul that you will have to learn.”

The fireworks had ended, so they both stopped their conversation to join the applause that rose around them. Thorin stood up and shook out his cloak, wrapping it around his shoulders again.

“There has never been a dwarven marriage ceremony led by someone from a different race,” he told Bilbo. Bilbo gulped.

“Oh.”

“It will be...unprecedented, but I see no reason why you couldn’t perform it.” They started walking towards the mountain at a leisurely pace. “The king is normally the one to officiate ceremonies such as these, but I will be more than happy to let you do it instead.”

Bilbo desperately wanted to ask who leads the ceremony when a king is getting married, but realized that it would be the height of bad taste to ask Thorin that and decided to stay silent. He could always ask Ori, who would be able to answer him without looking for any subtext to his question.

They climbed the stairs in silence and joined the crowd of dwarves that was heading back into Erebor. Bilbo tried to fight down his disappointment when Thorin did not touch him again. The crowd filled back into the Great Hall where the celebrations continued. Bilbo did not get another chance to talk to Thorin that night.

He went to sleep well after midnight, his head full of wine and music and fireworks. As he lay down on the bed, he couldn’t help but recall the conversation he’d had with Thorin. The words had been innocuous enough, but there had been an undercurrent to the conversation that he could not pinpoint.

With a frown he recalled Thorin’s moment of hesitation. Bilbo was convinced that Thorin had been about to tell him something, but what could it be? He felt utterly at loss. Thorin kept confusing him with his every word, every act. Most of the time the dwarf was perfectly formal and proper, not a hint of anything personal in sight, but there were also moments where he looked at Bilbo with the same look he had given him right before that disastrous proposal.
It left Bilbo swimming in confusion. What did Thorin want from him? Bofur had specifically told him that any interest had to be explicitly stated before any kind of courtship could start. Thorin had done no such thing.

What was Thorin doing then? Was he trying to start an affair with Bilbo without having to do any official courtship? Was he just toying with him as a revenge for Bilbo’s refusal of his offer of marriage? It would be incredibly petty, but then the dwarf had already proven that he was capable of holding grudges for decades on end. Or was this just Thorin’s own strange way of trying to form a friendship with Bilbo?

Confound dwarves and their odd manners, Bilbo thought as he fell asleep. How was he supposed know what they wanted from him?

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The elves were scheduled to leave the next morning after breakfast. Judging by the looks on his companions’ faces, the dwarves couldn’t wait to be rid of them. Bilbo himself marvelled a little at the fact that there had been no fights between the two races. Indeed, the dwarves had behaved themselves with admirable restraint. It made him wonder just what had Thorin promised them all for the behaviour.

The memory of their barely civil visit to Rivendell was still quite fresh in Bilbo’s mind. Since he doubted that the dwarves had suddenly developed a liking for the elves, he was convinced that there had to be some special price for everyone. His guess was free ale or extra money.

Thorin and his advisors assembled at the top of the stairs before Erebor’s gate to say farewell to the elves. Bilbo was present as well, since he had better relationship with Thranduil than any of the dwarves.

“Farewell, Thorin Oakenshield,” Thranduil said, looking all tall and polished in the light of the morning sun. “I thank you for the hospitality you have given us. I would be pleased to see you visit my halls one day.”

Bilbo thought it must have taken him centuries of practice to be able to say that with a straight face. Thorin’s smile looked a bit pained when he replied.

“Farewell, Thranduil. May you find your stay in Dale as pleasant as you had Erebor. I will consider visiting your forest, if the opportunity ever presents itself.” He hadn’t quite managed to give his words the same facade of sincerity that the Elvenking had, so the unspoken “when Valinor freezes over” was loud and clear in the subtext.

Thranduil continued smiling politely, looking more amused than offended by the dwarf’s reply. His smile became a bit more genuine when he turned his attention to Bilbo, who was standing in the front line between Kíli and Ori.

“Farewell, Elf-Friend. Your company has been most enjoyable these past few days. I sincerely hope that you will visit us again in our forest home.”

Bilbo gave him a bow, smiling.

“It would be a pleasure, My Lord.”

Thranduil’s gaze slid from Thorin, who was still provocatively wearing the Elvenking’s chain, to Bilbo.
“You have a generous heart, Master Hobbit,” he said quietly. “Far more generous than some would deserve.”

Before Bilbo could say anything in reply the Elvenking turned and started walking away, his entourage of elves falling into step behind him. Bilbo just started wondering whether he would be able to visit the treasury room after lunch when Ori latched onto his arm, looking excited.

“Will you come to the library with me, Bilbo?”

Bilbo decided that his exploration of dragon’s lair for artistic purposes could wait.

“Of course,” he told Ori. “I promised to visit yesterday, did I not?”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Bofur looking at them with a smile, but couldn’t acknowledge him because Ori started dragging him away, impatient to get some privacy so that he could tell Bilbo all about his courtship.

“Oh, Bilbo, I’m so happy,” Ori exclaimed once the library doors shut behind them. Bilbo sat down into one of the chairs behind the reception counter and Ori sat down beside him, nearly vibrating with excitement.

“So, how did it all go?” Bilbo felt compelled to ask.

“It was amazing,” Ori gushed. “I was at the celebration yesterday, just talking to Fíli when Bofur came over to me and asked me for a dance. He bowed to me and everything. And while we were dancing, he just asked me if he could court me. I think I just stammered for a while because I was so surprised and excited, but luckily he seemed to understand that I was saying yes.”

He turned a dreamy gaze at the opposite wall.

“We danced three dances together before he went with me to ask my brothers for permission.”

“What would you have done if he didn’t come to you but I told you that he likes you?” Bilbo asked. “Would you have gone to ask him yourself?”

Ori sighed.

“It’s not so simple. With couples who are both male, it’s traditionally the older partner who is supposed to do the asking. I could come to him and let him know that I am interested, but the asking still has to be done by him. I think I would have gone to him eventually, but it still wouldn’t make anything official.”

“There courting customs sound awfully complicated,” Bilbo said. “Anyone can start a courtship in the Shire, unless they are already married. More than one plucky young lady has managed to hunt down a husband who was too shy or reluctant to ask openly. It is not done often, but there are a few cases like that every year.”

“That sounds reasonable,” Ori said. “Our customs are dozens of centuries old and haven’t changed much since the old days. Some of the younger dwarves have been trying to come with ways to improve on the old manners, but the change comes slowly. Until a few centuries ago the courting couples couldn’t even kiss until they were married.”

“That sounds awful.” Bilbo made a face. “Dwarven courtships tend to be quite long, aren’t they?”

“At least a year,” Ori nodded. “I have no idea how the dwarves of old managed to wait for so long.
Bofur and I haven’t even kissed yet, but boy, am I excited. A year has never seemed so long.”

“I can imagine,” Bilbo smiled in sympathy.

“Have you ever...?” Ori blushed to the roots of his hair, but didn’t look like he was able to finish his question. It took Bilbo a few moments to understand what he was trying to ask.

“I used to be a curious lad when I was younger,” Bilbo told him with a grin. “At the midsummer festivities, there were always plenty of opportunities to steal away into the bushes with a fellow lass or lad. I didn’t use those chances of exploration very often, but my limited experience has helped me figure out that hobbit women were not for me. The lads were a bit better, but there was still something missing.”

“A beard, perhaps?” Ori asked with a grin.

“Possibly,” Bilbo nodded, chuckling. “It’s been years since I was interested in someone.”

“But you are now, aren’t you?” Ori cocked his head to the side, giving Bilbo a searching look.

Since the conversation had been so open until now, Bilbo felt it would be unfair to Ori to start lying now.

“I may be,” Bilbo admitted with some reluctance. “But there is no chance of the person ever being interested in me.”

“Who is it?” Ori leaned closer in curiosity.

“I’d rather not tell.” Bilbo gave him a crooked smile. “The matter is embarrassing enough as it is. I am hoping my interest will go away quietly so that I can continue living here in peace.”

“But peace is not the same as being happy!” Ori looked affronted with Bilbo’s attitude. “You of all people deserve to be happy. Why do you deny yourself the chance for happiness?”

Bilbo sighed.

“I have already destroyed my chances. There is no way there could be a courtship now.” He gave the door to the library a wistful look. “I have already learned to be content with the things that I have. Why vainly dream about the impossible?” He dredged up a smile from somewhere. “But enough about me. I’d rather hear about what you are planning to give Bofur as your courting gift.”

Ori looked like he would have liked to talk more about Bilbo’s unrequited love, but the topic of his own courtship got him excited again and he was more than happy to tell Bilbo about the scarf he was planning to knit for Bofur.

The two of them chatted well until lunch time. After saying goodbye to Ori in front of the kitchen doors Bilbo made a quick stop to his quarters for a few sheets of paper and his drawing supplies and went on an expedition to the treasury hall where the dragon used to sleep.

He had already seen it briefly on his tour of Erebor with Thorin, but now he finally had the opportunity to explore the hall properly. The few dwarves who were present there didn’t pay him any mind, so he could wander around to his heart’s content, taking in the sheer size of the room.

All signs of the dragon’s prolonged stay had been carefully removed. Even the smell was almost gone, much to Bilbo’s relief. The piles of gold were slightly smaller than they had been when he had first seen them, but the treasure was still enormous. When he closed his eyes, he was almost able to
imagine that the dragon was still there, watching him from his golden bed.

It took him a while to find the entrance to the hidden corridor, but when he did, he spent long moments just standing in the doorway, looking back at the room. From his vantage point the mountains of gold looked almost identical to what they had been on his first visit here. Paying no attention to the priceless artefacts around him, Bilbo sat down on the floor and started drawing.

Now that he had enough light to see the hall in its entirety, he was finally able to appreciate just how huge the dragon had been. Even though it had been pitch black when he had visited the dragon, he decided to include the room’s architecture in his tapestry, to give a better idea of the dragon’s size.

He was so focused on his sketching that he almost missed dinner. He only woke up from his trance when one of the treasury dwarves came to politely inform him that it was the end of their shift for the day and they were locking up the treasury.

Bilbo stood up, his legs a bit wooden after sitting on the stone floor for so long. To his surprise he found that he was ravenous. He hadn’t noticed the hunger or the uncomfortable position until now, because he had been so absorbed in his work. He stretched a bit and decided to just take his drawings to the dinner, figuring that he could just drop them in his quarters before the evening entertainment.

The dining room was almost empty when he walked in – only Thorin, Balin, Fili and Kili sat there. They all looked up when he walked in and Bilbo realized with a start that they were probably waiting for him.

“Where have you been?” Kili exclaimed the moment Bilbo crossed the threshold. “You’ve been impossible to find all day.”

“I was in the treasury,” Bilbo said, sitting down at the table. “I wanted to get a feel of the size of the room. Here,” he put his drawings on the table, “you can have a look at this, if you wish.” He proceeded to pile his plate high with every foodstuff within reach.

“This is scarily good,” Fili said, picking up one of the dragon drawings. “Was the dragon really so big?”

Bilbo nodded and had to chew a few times before he was able to answer.

“Yes. The mountains of gold haven’t changed much since my last visit, so the scale should be more or less accurate. The only thing that I’m having trouble with are the dragon’s eyes. There had been a sort of a sinister cleverness in them that I am just unable to portray. It would be a problem if I was selling a painting, but it doesn’t matter much in a tapestry.”

He pointed to one of the drawings with his fork.

“That should be the final version.” He looked at Thorin. “If you want to change anything, tell me now, otherwise I will just use the drawing you are holding as a model for the tapestry.”

Thorin shook his head, his eyes still taking in the dragon’s image.

“No, this is more than satisfactory.”

Bilbo gave him a satisfied nod and went back to his dinner. Only when he had already eaten a mountain of roast with mashed potatoes and was deciding what to have for a desert did he turn back to his companions, who were still sitting at the table, looking through his drawings.
“Unless I am very mistaken, you were all waiting for me here, were you not?” he asked them.

Balin smiled at him.

“Aye, laddie. We have something for you that you might like.”

Bilbo decided that he might forgo the pumpkin pastries for once.

“Well, if that’s the case, lead on.”

_To be continued..._

Chapter End Notes

There you go. I gave you a hot date under the stars and some heavy shoulder-touching. I hope you're all happy :D

I am very pleased to announce that this story is finally complete, spanning 17 chapters and almost 100 000 words. I have no idea how I managed to write so much, but I’m very pleased with the result. Therefore, I will be again posting two chapters this weekend, so you don’t have to wait for so long.

The next chapter will be posted on October 3.
“What is it?” Bilbo asked as they walked towards his quarters.

“Well, if we told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise anymore, would it?” Fíli told him with a playful smile.

Bilbo returned the smile, wondering what they could have prepared for him. Luckily he didn’t have to wonder for very long, because they soon arrived at his door, where the four dwarves stopped with expectant expressions. Thorin beckoned him to go first, so Bilbo did, opening the door to find that his sitting room was now occupied with the large frame of a brand new weaving loom. Forgetting about his company for a moment, he took a few steps forward to admire the instrument.

It was slightly bigger than the one he had used in the Shire, about five feet wide and four feet tall, and made out of beautifully polished cherry wood. He reached out his hand and touched the wood reverently, noting the smoothness of the surface and the expert craftsmanship of the carpenter who had made it.

Remembering the dwarves, he turned back towards the door to find them all watching him with smiles on their faces. He gave them a smile of his own, knowing that the appreciation of their gift must be visible on his face.

“Do you like it?” Kíli asked.

“No, I need to ask?” Bilbo replied. “I think that should be obvious.” He turned back towards the loom, running his hand along the wood. “This is a beautiful instrument. Far superior to anything I had at home.”

“So I have told them, but they wouldn’t believe me,” Kíli said, throwing an affronted look in Thorin’s direction.

“Since you are to be working on a royal commission, it is only reasonable that you should have the best available means at your disposal,” Thorin said, looking a little uncomfortable.

“I appreciate that,” Bilbo told him earnestly. His eyes caught Thorin gaze and held it, trying to convey his thanks. He only broke the gaze when Balin shifted next to Thorin with a discreet cough.

“I think we should leave Bilbo to enjoy his gift in peace.” He threw a pointed look at the two young dwarves. They looked from Balin to Thorin to Bilbo, something like understanding entering their expression.

“You are right,” Fíli said, tugging at his brother’s sleeve. “We can come visit you in the morning. Come, brother, let’s see if we can beat the Tooks at cards.”

“Thank you all for doing this for me,” Bilbo told them before they could leave.

“You are most welcome,” Balin said, herding the young dwarves out of the door with one last look at Thorin. Bilbo had the distinct idea that he had just missed something important.

To his surprise, Thorin remained in the room with him, looking a little ill at ease once the door closed.
behind the three.

“You really like the loom, then?” Thorin asked, taking two steps closer. Bilbo gave him a smile.

“Yes, it’s beautiful.” He turned away and went to rummage through the bags full of threads he had brought from Dale. “I have planned to spend the evening in the common room with the others, but now I’m sorely tempted to just stay here and weave.”

“Surely, nobody would begrudge you if you did.”

“Did everyone know about the loom?” Bilbo asked, carrying a bundle of black threads into a nearby armchair. He realized that he needed a place to keep them on hand, so he took a nearby table and started to push it towards the loom. Thorin seemed to realize what he was trying to accomplish, because he stepped forward and took the table out of Bilbo’s hands, carrying it over to where Bilbo pointed him.

“Yes, the entire company contributed to the gift,” Thorin said, putting the table down. “They all wanted to give you something to welcome you to Erebor.”

Bilbo made a detour into his bedroom and came back with a small stool that he put in front of the loom. Satisfied with the position, he went to gather the threads and placed them on the table, picking up the first one so he could fit it between the frame of the loom. He belatedly realized that the dwarf was still standing in the middle of the room. Bilbo had no idea why Thorin wanted to spend the evening in his company, but it seemed terribly rude to throw him out after the dwarf had given him such a magnificent gift.

“Sit down wherever you like,” Bilbo said, not looking up from his work. “You can borrow one of my books, if you wish. This stage of weaving is the most boring part, since it’s just preparation, so there’s nothing interesting to see yet.”

Thorin took his words as a permission to explore Bilbo’s living space. Bilbo didn’t mind. He was aware that Thorin had only been in his quarters once, very briefly, and was probably curious about the place. He let the dwarf peruse his library and look at the drawings on his desk.

“Ori has returned some of my translations, and I have a few more volumes that might interest you,” Bilbo told him, concentrating on fitting the strings correctly. “Some of the Old Tales are riveting, even if you don’t like elves.” He threw Thorin an amused glance. “It might please you to know that they weren’t always so noble and haughty as they are now. There used to be times when the elves murdered each other out of sheer hunger for power.”

“Did they?” Thorin appeared interested.

“Oh yes,” Bilbo nodded. “In fact, you might appreciate the irony when I tell you that their greatest battles had been fought over a couple of gems.” He paused in his weaving for a moment, turning to give the dwarf his full attention. “True, they were the most splendid gems the world had ever seen, said to contain the very light of the sun and moon, but it still seems a little hypocritical of Thranduil to scoff at the dwarves’ love for gems, when his father and grandfather probably fought wars over jewels.”

Thorin snorted, looking at Bilbo’s library with renewed interest.

“Go ahead, borrow whatever you like,” Bilbo encouraged him.

The dwarf spent another moment examining the book titles before he walked over to Bilbo’s desk to look at his drawings. He pulled one large sheet of paper out of the pile, lifting it up to see the details.
“You draw maps as well?”

Bilbo shrugged, focusing his attention back at the loom.

“I like maps. I like to know where I am going when I travel. I think I loved maps even before I started travelling properly, because to me they contain a promise of all the lands I could discover. It doesn’t matter that I will probably never travel that far. Just knowing that the possibility is there is exciting enough.”

“Are you still planning to go travelling in the spring?” Thorin’s voice suddenly sounded a lot closer. Bilbo fought the temptation to turn around and find out just how much closer that was. Instead he continued his work, pretending he hadn’t noticed.

“I am not sure yet,” he answered honestly. “It all depends on whether I will feel like travelling. The past few years I always felt antsy in the Shire and set out at the first sign on spring, wandering until the autumn rains became too unpleasant. Since I am here, I mind find that I don’t need to travel at all, because there are plenty of people and things here to keep me occupied.”

Thorin didn’t say anything to that, just kept standing behind him, watching Bilbo’s hands as they pulled the strings tight between the frames. If Bilbo concentrated for a bit, he could almost feel the heat of the dwarf’s body against his back. It sent his mind in wild directions, making him wonder whether Thorin was going to touch him again.

That thought sent a ball of burning fire into his navel, causing his muscles to tense in anticipation. He felt every breath acutely as he drew it in and his heart picked up speed, thudding against his ribcage with so much force that Bilbo became convinced Thorin must be able to hear it. Bilbo reached for another thread, barely able to pick it up because his hands were suddenly sweaty and he heard Thorin shift behind him, probably completely unaware of the effect he had on the poor hobbit.

They spent several moments caught in an impasse, neither one of them making any move, until Bilbo thought his head would explode from the tension in the room. Finally, he couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Are you planning to stand there all evening?” he blurted out and immediately fought the urge to smack himself when the dwarf took a step backwards.

“Does my presence here bother you?” Thorin asked, sounding hesitant. “Should I leave?” He turned toward to the door.

“No, wait!” Bilbo cried, mentally cursing himself for ruining the moment. “You can stay, if you wish. I just meant that this part really is dreadfully boring to watch. It will be few days yet before I start working on a pattern. You don’t have to be here if there’s something more interesting you could be doing.” He was fully aware that he was babbling, but despite his nervousness he didn’t want the dwarf to leave.

Thorin gave him a searching look, probably trying to ascertain whether Bilbo meant his offer seriously.

“I would prefer to remain here, if it is not an imposition.”

“No, of course not,” Bilbo said. He remembered his manners. “Would you like a cup of tea? I was so excited about the loom that I forgot you were a guest.”

He didn’t wait for Thorin’s answer, hurrying into the kitchen to put together some tea and a plate of cookies. After a moment he realized that Thorin was standing in the doorway, watching him. Bilbo
reached into the back of a cupboard and pulled out a metal container, feeling pleased when he found the contents intact.

“...I baked these cookies yesterday,” he explained as he pulled out the teacups and plates. “I didn’t believe they would survive for so long, what with your nephews and my cousins always around.”

He put together the tray and carried it to the sitting room, putting it on the low coffee table between the chairs. They both sat down in the armchairs on either side of the coffee table and Bilbo poured them tea, gesturing for Thorin to help himself to the cookies.

Bilbo’s fingers itched to get back to his work, but he figured that it would be rude to ignore his guest when the king had taken the effort to visit him. Besides, he quite enjoyed talking to Thorin, awkwardness notwithstanding, so putting off his work was not that much of a hardship in this case.

“So, what do you do for entertainment when you are not hiding away in my quarters?” Bilbo asked, raising the cup to his lips.

“Reading, mostly,” Thorin said, reaching for a cookie. “Though in my position, there is very little time for frivolity. There is always someone at my door, bringing in a report or asking me to decide something. I rarely get any time for myself.”

“Why are you spending it with me, then?” Bilbo couldn’t help but ask.

Thorin gave him a look that was a mixture of disbelief and frustration. He smoothed out his features quickly though, taking a sip of his tea.

“Because I enjoy your company,” Thorin said. There was warmth in his eyes that caused the fire in Bilbo’s belly to come back and spread upwards until it filled his chest.

“Oh,” Bilbo said, feeling at a loss. He gave Thorin a smile. “I am glad we were able to put the past behind us and become friends.”

Something in Thorin’s eyes shuttered and his smile turned a little strained.

“Indeed.”

Bilbo could have kicked himself for reminding the dwarf of their complicated history, right when they had been getting along so well.

“You can come here again, if you like,” Bilbo said, trying to repair the damage he had caused with his words. “My door is always open to visitors.”

“Even unpleasant ones?” Thorin cocked his head to the side, his momentary bad mood leaving.

“No,” Bilbo admitted. “Those usually get ignored, if possible. I must say that such a thing was much easier to do in the Shire, where I could see who was behind the door through the windows. On the other hand, there are much fewer people here that I would want to avoid. Hiding from visitors was a nearly daily occurrence for me back at home.”

“Was it?” Thorin raised his eyebrows. “I thought you were fond of visitors.”

“Did Gandalf tell you that?” Bilbo raised an eyebrow of his own. “He did, didn’t he, when he tried to convince you that I would be perfectly happy to have thirteen dwarves bunking in my house.”

Thorin coughed a little, looking a bit embarrassed.
“He assured me that you knew about our visit.”

Bilbo chuckled despite himself, finding the entire situation amusing in retrospect.

“No, he came to my door, being all cryptic and mysterious and talking about adventures. Then he announced that he would be around for tea and left. I had no idea there would be a treasure hunting party at my home the next day.”

“I suppose I should apologise for that,” Thorin said. “I am afraid some of us may have acted rather presumptuous that night.”

Presumptuous would be an understatement, Bilbo thought with amusement as he remembered Thorin’s own haughty manner, but outwardly he gave Thorin a nod and a smile.

“Apology accepted. I must say that I find the entire anecdote rather amusing, now that I have had enough time to reflect on it, though it didn’t seem that way when it was happening.” He took another sip of his tea. “There is one thing I have always wondered about.”

“What is it?”

“Was the entire quest your idea, or Gandalf’s?” Bilbo asked. “You seemed very determined to get your kingdom back when you came to my house that night, and yet it always struck me as strange that it had taken you more than hundred and fifty years before you decided to reclaim Erebor. From what Balin told me, you all had been quite content with your life in the Blue Mountains.” He gave Thorin a curious look. “What made you change your mind so suddenly?”

Thorin shook his head, muttering something that sounded like: “How can you be so sharp and yet so clueless at the same time, I will never understand.”

Bilbo leaned forward, unsure if he’d heard right.

“Pardon?”

Thorin straightened, clearing his throat.

“I had always hoped that I would be able to return to Erebor one day,” he said, “but I had almost given up hope of it happening in my lifetime. The meeting with Gandalf was...fortuitous. He told me of the secret entrance and my father’s key and helped resurrect a very old dream. I suppose that it was the height of foolishness, to try and take back the mountain with fourteen people.” He grimaced. “Yet at that time, I would have killed the dragon myself, if I could.”

Bilbo gave him an understanding smile.

“I know what you mean. I spent years convinced that nothing would make me leave my comfortable home and then Gandalf came along, filling my head with visions of faraway lands and adventures. I suppose he has that effect on people.”

“He does,” Thorin nodded. “It is a dangerous gift to have.”

They drank the rest of their tea in companionable silence and Bilbo eventually went back to his weaving loom, to continue working on the tapestry. Thorin sat down in a nearby chair, watching him work.

“How do you create the tapestry?” Thorin asked, sifting carefully through Bilbo’s mountain of coloured threads.
“This is called a warp,” Bilbo said, pointing at the wall of vertical black threads he was creating. “It serves as a basis for the tapestry. The horizontal strings are called a weft. Usually when one weaves something you mix the layers together, but with a tapestry the vertical threads serve as a sort of canvas for the colours. I can show you how I create the pattern if you come here in a few days, but the work will be very slow. It takes a lot of time before I get the proportions just right.”

“It is a fascinating skill,” Thorin said with genuine admiration.

“I think the elves came up with it,” Bilbo said, “but I learned it from my mother. Besides teaching me elvish, she also taught me how to weave and embroider. Some might think that those are skills more suited to women, but I consider those crafts just another way to create something beautiful. Since I will never have children, I think it’s nice that there will be something left as my legacy when I die.”

He saw Thorin’s alarmed gaze and hastened to reassure him.

“Do not worry; I am not planning to die for at least another fifty years. In fact, I would like to outlive the Old Took, who holds the current record as the oldest living hobbit at hundred and thirty years. I still have enough time left for a hundred tapestries.” He gave Thorin a reassuring smile. The dwarf relaxed a little, lifting a golden strand to examine it more closely. It reminded Bilbo of a distant memory.

“Do you still play the harp?” Bilbo asked.

Thorin gave him a startled look.

“You remember?”

“Of course I do,” Bilbo said. “It was the song you played that night in my living room that finally convinced me to come with you on that foolish adventure. I was all prepared to tell Gandalf where he can stick his meddling when I heard all of you singing and playing and realized that I wanted to see that mountain for myself.”

Thorin looked thoughtful.

“I did not know that.”

“I didn’t advertise it.” Bilbo smiled. “Would you be willing to play again, some time? The elves played the harp a lot while they were here, but it wasn’t quite the same.”

“It has been several years since I last played the instrument,” Thorin said slowly.

Bilbo shrugged.

“You don’t have to play if you do not want to. I still have the flute that Bofur gave me a few years ago, but I haven’t touched it since last winter. I wouldn’t dare try to play anything in public, because it would sound like I am tormenting an owl. I’m not looking for a performance,” he told Thorin with a look. “I just thought it might be something you enjoy. I am sorry if I made presumptions.”

“You do not have to apologise. Your guess was correct; I am just a little out of practice.”

“You can practice here if you like,” Bilbo said before he could think about his words. “As I said, I am not looking for a performance.”

Thorin was silent for so long that Bilbo thought he might have said something wrong. When the dwarf finally raised his head, there was something warm in his eyes when he looked at Bilbo.
“I will be glad to accept your offer. May I come here tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Bilbo said. “I think I will be spending most of my evenings here anyway, working on the tapestry, so I will be glad for some company. Unless I am much mistaken, your nephews will relocate here the moment they find about my absence from the common room, so you will not be wanting for audience.”

“No indeed,” Thorin said, the corners of his mouth turning upwards. He stood up. “The hour is getting late. I believe I should take my leave.”

Bilbo stood up as well, following him to the door.

“I am looking forward to hearing you play,” he told the dwarf before he could open the door.

“Goodnight, Master Baggins.” Thorin gave him a little bow and a smile and left, closing the door behind him softly.

“Goodnight,” Bilbo told the already closed door, wondering what was wrong with him when a single smile from Thorin could make his head spin.

He remembered Thorin’s promise to come for a visit tomorrow and grinned, the anticipation making him giddy for a moment. He belatedly realized that he probably looked half mad, standing in an empty room grinning like a loon, but couldn’t bring himself to care because there was nobody to see it.

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“What did you do to Thorin?” Kíli asked him a week later. He was sitting perched on the coffee table next to the loom, watching Bilbo work with interest. His brother stood a few feet away, perusing Bilbo’s books.

“I keep hearing that question disturbingly often lately,” Bilbo murmured. “Why do you think I did anything to him?”

“We saw him carrying a harp the other day.” The dwarves exchanged a meaningful glance.

“Thorin hasn’t touched a harp since the battle,” Fíli said quietly.

“Oh.” Bilbo had no idea what to say to that. Should he apologise to Thorin for making him do something he did not want to? But Thorin hadn’t looked unhappy when he played the instrument in Bilbo’s quarters. Quite the opposite. He seemed...content when he sat in Bilbo’s living room, plucking at the strings of his harp.

“I did not force him to do anything,” Bilbo said, meeting their gaze. “I simply asked him whether he still plays the instrument. I had no idea there was some taboo attached to it.”

“It’s not a taboo,” Fíli said, making a face. “We’re just a little surprised. It’s true that he seems less on edge lately, more relaxed.” They exchanged another glance that Bilbo couldn’t decipher, before they
both turned curious eyes on him.

“How often does he visit?” Kíli asked, trying way too hard to sound casual. Bilbo’s eyebrows drew together.

“Every other evening or so. He has a lot of duties to attend to, as I understand it. And before you ask – no, I am not forcing him to come here as some sort of twisted penance for banishing me. He seems to enjoy spending his time here and I don’t mind the company.”

They both frowned a bit.

“So he just...plays the harp here?” Kíli asked.

Bilbo gave him a puzzled look.

“Of course. What else should he be doing here? I offered to lend him some of my books, but his dislike of elves keeps him from reading them. I had to recount some of the stories where the elves behave especially foolishly to get him to even open one.”

“Right,” Kíli said, looking like he was desperately trying to hold back laughter. Fíli looked torn between disbelief and amusement.

“What is so funny?” Bilbo asked.

Kíli started laughing, his giggles always starting anew whenever he looked at Bilbo. Fíli just shook his head in exasperation.

“Honestly,” Kíli said once he got his mirth under control, “this entire situation is just ridiculous.”

Bilbo felt utterly lost.

“If you do not believe me, you can just come by this evening and see for yourself.”

The brothers exchanged another amused look.

“Oh, we believe you,” Fíli said. “But I think we might come for a visit anyway, just for the entertainment value.”

He put Bilbo’s book back on the shelf and started towards the door.

“I have to go; my guard duty is starting in ten minutes.” He looked at his brother. “Are you coming?”

Kíli shook his head.

“I’m not needed anywhere. I think I’ll just stay with our favourite hobbit for a while and keep him company.”

Fíli nodded and walked out, leaving them alone.

“Can I ask you for a favour?” Bilbo asked the dark-haired dwarf. Kíli shrugged.

“Depends on the favour.” He gave Bilbo a playful grin. Bilbo smacked his knee.

“Not that kind of favour.” He stood up to find his tape measure.

“Did you mean that?” He hastened to continue before the dwarf could say anything. “I don’t mind the flirting. I really don’t, but I would hate it if you thought that I was leading you on in some way.”

Kíli’s grin dimmed a bit.

“I won’t deny that the thought crossed my mind once or twice before, but I’m not looking for anything serious right now and I’m well aware that your attention lies elsewhere.”

Bilbo gaped.

“Am I that transparent?”

Kíli gave him a sympathetic smile.

“Don’t worry, it’s not very obvious. I just know where to look.”

Bilbo didn’t feel very reassured by that. If Kíli was able to find out that Bilbo was attracted to Thorin, what about the others?

“Does anybody else know?”

Kíli shook his head.

“I don’t think so. Balin seems to be rather amused by the whole situation, but nobody else seems to have noticed.”

Bilbo breathed a small sigh of relief.

“What was the favour you wanted from me?” Kíli asked, putting the conversation back on track. Bilbo remembered the tape measure in his hand.

“I need to take your measurements.”

Kíli’s eyebrows shot up.

“This should be interesting.”

Bilbo took a few steps closer.

“Not all of them, just a few.”

“Go ahead.” Kíli slid down from the table and spread his arms in invitation.

Bilbo stepped behind him, measuring the width of his shoulders.

“Really,” Kíli said when Bilbo bent down to measure the dwarf’s height, “if I didn’t know any better, I would think you were coming on to me.”

Bilbo looked up in alarm. Kíli started laughing.

“Oh, Bilbo, you should have seen your face right now. I should definitely do this more often. It’s so much fun to rile you up.”

Bilbo straightened and put the tape measure around the base of the dwarf’s neck, pulling it a little tighter than necessary. Kíli’s grin grew.

“If someone saw us right now, they would get the entirely wrong impression.”
Bilbo couldn’t help but smile.

“I think poor Ori is half-convinced that we are sleeping together, after the stunt you pulled at the tournament.”

Kíli started chuckling.

“Oh, that’s hilarious. Ori has always been awfully gullible. When we were younger, me and Fíli managed to convince him that dwarven babies are made of stone and their parents have to mine them from the rock. Poor bloke blushed for a month when he finally found out the truth.”

“That wasn’t very nice of you,” Bilbo chided him. His serious tone wasn’t very convincing though, because a grin kept tugging at his lips.

“No,” Kíli agreed, “but it was a lot of fun.”

“I bet you thought so,” Bilbo said. His smile dimmed a bit. “It might be fun that you managed to fool Ori, but I am afraid that he isn’t the only one who thinks that about us. I would hate it if your reputation suffered because of a rumour.”

Kíli waved a careless hand.

“Everyone here knows I like to flirt and the local dwarves are awful gossips. Made-up affairs are their daily bread. Their tales have already paired me up with half the Company. It’s a pity you had to be caught up in it, too, but if you give it a few weeks, they’ll get bored and moved on.”

His grin returned to full force.

“Should I tell you about the time when they thought I had an affair with Ori? They were convinced that we were having secret meetings between the bookshelves. Poor Ori was so flustered by the rumour that when he finally heard about it, he barricaded himself in the library for a week. Once, they even paired me up with my brother.” He made a face. “That was really disturbing, but didn’t last long, because mum announced that she would personally duel anyone caught spreading the rumour. I’ve never seen a rumour die so fast.”

Bilbo smiled at the image.

“I can believe that. Your mother is a formidable woman.”

“She is,” Kíli said fondly. He gave the tape measure in Bilbo’s hand a curious glance. “What do you need my measurements for?”

“That’s a secret,” Bilbo told him. Kíli pouted.

“That’s not fair. Here I am, helping you out of the goodness of my heart and you won’t even tell me why you need it?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” Bilbo promised. “But if you need further incentive, I can bake you a few apple pies after lunch.”

Kíli’s expression smoothed out.

“You would?”

“Yes,” Bilbo nodded.
“All right,” Kíli agreed. “It’s a secret.”

“Thank you,” Bilbo said, writing down the numbers. “Will you and Fíli come for a visit tonight, then?”

“We might as well.”

They spent several pleasant hours in Bilbo’s quarters chatting while Bilbo worked on the tapestry. Kíli left him after lunch, because he had a watch and Bilbo used the peace and quiet to go to the royal kitchen and bake a batch of pies and cookies under the ever-watchful gaze of Bombur’s mother. He was quite pleased with his work when he finished and carried most of the food to his quarters to store it away for his guests.

Thorin arrived an hour after dinner and went straight to his usual armchair, laying his carefully wrapped harp into the chair next to him. He had stopped asking permission to sit several days ago, a fact that pleased Bilbo to no end. The atmosphere between them had become much more relaxed after they had done away with the formalities.

Before they could start a conversation, there was a knock on the door. Thorin looked up in puzzlement. Bilbo suppressed an amused smile and went to open the door.

“Good evening!” Fíli exclaimed merrily, striding into the quarters with his brother in tow. Thorin watched their approach with a frown.

“I forgot to mention that we might have some company tonight,” Bilbo told the bemused dwarf. “Your nephews became convinced that I am holding you prisoner here and forcing you to play for me, so they came to investigate.”

“Oi!” Kíli called, laughing. “You invited us.”

Bilbo gave a dramatic sigh.

“I suppose I did.” He shook his head in mock exasperation.

“Is that any way to treat your guests?” Kíli said, grinning.

“There are pies in the kitchen,” Bilbo mentioned casually.

Kíli’s eyes lit up.

“Apple pies?”

Bilbo gave him a look.

“I promised you pies, didn’t I?” His gaze shifted to Fíli. “In case your brother eats all the pies, there are also cookies.”

Both young dwarves shot to the kitchen. Bilbo chuckled at their antics.

“I am afraid your evening will not be as quiet as you had hoped,” he told Thorin. The dwarf’s frown disappeared and he gave Bilbo a small smile.

“I expected that they would find me sooner or later,” Thorin said, looking toward the kitchen door. “I must admit that I am a bit surprised it took them so long to come after us.”

“Do not worry, I made sure there would be plenty of cookies for everyone,” Bilbo said. He raised his
voice. “Kíli, bring the whole tray to the living room. You can eat it here and your uncle would probably like to have a few cookies, too.”

They emerged a few minutes later, carrying trays with tea and baked goods. Kíli took a plate with an apple pie and went to sit in the corner, guarding his food jealously. Fíli sat down next to Thorin and watched his brother’s antics with amusement. Bilbo went to pour himself a cup of tea from the pot and sat back down at the loom to continue his work.

The dwarves started a conversation about Erebor’s mines that Bilbo found little interest in, so he turned all his attention to the canvas before him, trying to make sure he had the proportions right. He soon became immersed in his work, tuning out the company entirely. After a while, he realized that he was humming in tune with the harp that was playing one of Thorin’s favourite melodies somewhere behind him.

He also realized that the room was conspicuously silent. He stopped his humming and turned to face the dwarves.

“Does my humming bother you?” he asked Thorin. “I didn’t even realize that I had joined in. If you want to just play for your nephews, I can keep silent.”

“We don’t mind,” Fíli shook his head. Both he and his brother had thoughtful expressions on their faces when they looked between him and Thorin. Bilbo looked at Thorin, seeking confirmation.

“You do not need to stop on my account,” Thorin said, the corners of his eyes crinkling in amusement. “You have been humming for several days now. If I found it bothersome, I would have told you already.”

Bilbo gave them all one more searching look to make sure they weren’t just saying it out of politeness, but they all seemed sincere. He shrugged, turning back to the loom. Behind him, he heard Kíli whisper: “Wait till mum hears about this.” He had no idea what that meant, but wasn’t very eager to find out.

The harp picked up again and Bilbo soon joined in, humming the now familiar melody. Fíli said something behind him that made his brother laugh and the conversation resumed, creating a pleasant background noise for Bilbo’s work. With his back to them, Bilbo smiled widely, his chest filling with a feeling of contentment.

He may have left his relatives in the Shire, but he had found a new family here. With a jolt he realized that he now counted Thorin among them, even though his exact position was still unclear.

As the tones of the harp carried around Bilbo’s living room, filling the room with music, Bilbo found himself hoping that there would be many evening like this in the future.

To be continued...
Writing this story is like being snuggled in my favourite warm fluffy blanket. It’s fun and comfortable and I love playing with all the characters. This chapter practically wrote itself. When I first started the romance, I was a bit worried that Bilbo and Thorin would be awkward together, but luckily they have wonderful chemistry. I just plop them in a room together and they effortlessly fill pages on end with banter. I really adore these two.

The next two chapters will be a little more serious in tone, as the anniversary of the battle (and other unpleasant events) approaches, but if you bear with me, I will make it worth your while.

Next chapter will be posted on October 5.
“We’re not staying here for the memorial,” Isembold announced at breakfast one morning. Bilbo gave him a startled look.

“You’re leaving?”

The young hobbit shrugged.

“I think we have stayed here long enough. Since we had nothing to do with the battle, there’s no point in us attending the ceremony. Gandalf has promised to take us home.”

“Thranduil has promised to grant you safe passage through Mirkwood,” Bilbo told him.

“He would be a fool not to, after all the wine he’s bought from us,” Fortinbras said.

“Indeed.” Bilbo hid his amused smile behind his teacup. “When are you planning to leave?”

“In two days. We want to get to Beorn’s before the winter sets in. Gandalf said that you spent the winter there as well, the last time you travelled from here.”

Bilbo could almost feel the curious glances on him.

“Yes, I did,” he said. “I stayed there until spring, and then another month in Rivendell. It was almost Midsummer when I finally arrived back to the Shire and found half of my relatives at Bag-End, squabbling over my possessions. It took me days before I convinced them that I was really back and several months before I hunted down all my misplaced tableware.”

“That’s awful,” Dori said, indignant. “What sort of relatives are they to treat you like that?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“I had been away for a long time. Most of them thought I was dead. It must have been quite the surprise when I came back.” He chuckled. “I don’t think Lobelia Sackville-Baggins ever forgave me for not getting eaten by the dragon.”

“No, she didn’t,” Isembold said with a grin. “She even went to the Tháin to complain about you. He booted her out of the hall, much to the enjoyment of the entire Tuckborough, and told her in a very ungentleman-like manner just what he thought about her actions. She almost hit him with her umbrella and had to be dragged away by two of the Shiriffs. It was so much fun to watch.”

“I bet,” Bilbo said with a satisfied smile. “I am so sorry that I missed that. Serves her right for all the silver spoons she stole from me over the years.”

“And now you’ll never have to deal with her again,” Ori pointed out. Bilbo poured himself another cup of tea.

“You’re right. Now that’s a pleasant thought. I doubt she would travel across half the Middle-Earth just to harass me.”

“No wonder you were so eager to come with us,” quipped Bofur. “Even a dragon would be
preferable to dealing with that woman.”

“I’m afraid you’re right,” Bilbo nodded sombrely. “I dealt with one dragon only to come home and find another one in my home, hoarding my family silver.” He broke into a grin. “You know, Gandalf,” he addressed the wizard. “I still think you chose the wrong hobbit for your adventure. You should have taken Lobelia instead. She would have frightened the dragon into compliance.”

“I would not be surprised if she did,” the wizard muttered, much to the amusement of the dwarves. “No, my dear Bilbo, I was quite confident in my choice when I chose you as the fourteenth companion. The fact that you are sitting here today only proves me right.”

“In that case, I will have to admit you were right and bow to your superior wisdom.”

“You would be wise to do so,” Gandalf said with a perfectly straight face. Only his eyes belied his amusement, twinkling merrily. The dwarves laughed at his remark and raised their goblets in a cheer.

Bilbo, however, didn’t forget the original topic of the conversation that had started the whole debacle and made it a point for the next two days to spend as much time with his cousins as possible. Their arrival to Erebor might have been unexpected, but Bilbo found that he had enjoyed their company nonetheless and would be sorry to see them leave.

As he soon found out, he wouldn’t be the only one. Gimli did not take the news of their departure well and spent half a day grumbling before he was willing to rejoin the company again. The three of them had become fast friends in those three weeks that the Tooks had spent in the mountain and the young dwarf wasn’t pleased to lose his favourite partners in crime.

The day of their departure dawned cold and bright. There was no snow yet, but a slight chill was in the air as the Company gathered in front of Erebor’s enormous gate to say farewell to Gandalf and the hobbits. As the dwarves pattered around the ponies, Gandalf drew Bilbo to the side, giving him a piercing look.

“Are you certain the ring is at Bag-End?”

Bilbo fought the urge to roll his eyes. The wizard’s obsession with a single golden ring was becoming most peculiar.

“Yes, Gandalf, the ring is in the Shire,” Bilbo said. “I can’t tell you which cabinet I put it in, but my cousin Drogo should be able to find it for you, if you ask him nicely. I already left him a letter explaining briefly what the ring is when I left the Shire, but you can still take this note to him.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small envelope, handing it to the wizard. “If you give him this, he will be happy to help you. Just try not to frighten him too much, please,” he added with a grin. “I am rather fond of him and would be sorry to hear that you scared him to death.”

Gandalf harrumphed, giving him a stern glance. Bilbo’s grin grew.

“I shall be around in a year or two,” the wizard said. “Watching you deal with the dwarves here is too amusing for me to pass up.”

“I thought you’ve had enough of dwarves after our journey,” Bilbo couldn’t help but point out, reminding them both of one of the wizard’s tantrums.

To his credit, Gandalf didn’t seem fazed by the reminder. Instead the corners of his mouth twitched as he looked back at the unruly group at the top of the stairs.

“I like them well enough, in small doses,” Gandalf said. Bilbo laughed.
“Just like hobbits?”

“Indeed.” Gandalf nodded.

“Well, you are about to have a heavy dose of hobbit company,” Bilbo said, watching his cousins fool around. “I hope you are prepared.”

“One can never be prepared for hobbits,” Gandalf said just as the two hobbits in question made their way over to them, giving Bilbo identical looks of accusation.

“I thought you came to say goodbye to us and instead you are huddled in the corner with the wizard, ignoring us,” Fortinbras said. “One would almost think you didn’t like us at all.”

Gandalf gave them an amused smile and walked away to talk to Thorin and Balin.

“Of course I like you,” Bilbo reassured them. “Gandalf just got into one of his secretive moods and wanted to talk to me.” He opened his arms with a smile and they both stepped forward for a big group hug. Bilbo suddenly realized that they were both a little taller than him and wondered when that had happened.

They stood like that for a while, quietly saying goodbye. The dwarves kept a polite distance to give them some privacy, which Bilbo appreciated. When the two finally stepped back from him, they both looked a little teary eyed.

“We’re going to miss you so much,” Fortinbras said. “Shire won’t be the same without you.”

Bilbo gave them a smile.

“I think you will get by just fine without me. When you come home, you will have enough tales to keep the neighbours entertained for months.”

“And they won’t believe even half of it.”

“Precisely,” Bilbo nodded, feeling relieved when the threat of tears disappeared entirely, to be replaced by smiles. “Have a safe journey.”

“I suppose we can come here again, if you give us enough warning in advance,” Isembold said. “We wouldn’t want to miss it for the world.”

“Miss what?” Bilbo asked, puzzled.

“Your wedding of course.”

Before Bilbo could inform them that he did not know about any wedding, they turned and walked away to rejoin the group waiting by the ponies. It felt wrong to ask about the remark in front of the dwarves, so Bilbo kept silent, joining in the waving when the three travellers mounted their horses and set out on the journey back to the Shire

The matter was still weighing on his mind when he walked back to his quarters to clear out the room that the hobbits had occupied during their stay. What wedding? He could not come with any plausible explanation for why they might have thought that. In the end he decided that Kíli had probably played a prank on them and since they were ignorant of dwarvish customs, they had taken it at face value.

He personally didn’t find the joke very tasteful, especially considering that Kíli knew the full truth of
what had happened between him and Thorin, but since the hobbits were already gone, there was no reason to confront the dwarf about it. It had all been a misunderstanding anyway, he thought, so there was no point in obsessing over it.

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Two days before the memorial Bilbo woke up soaked with sweat, the vision of orc hoards and dead elves and a stone field covered in blood burning like a brand on the inside of his eyelids. His hand was shaking when he reached to pull back the curtains on the window and it took him a good while before the light of the rising sun finally dispelled the last remnants of his nightmare.

All the preparations for the memorial were starting to bring unpleasant memories back for him – memories that he thought he had forgotten long ago. For several days now, he had been waking up in the middle of the night with the smell of blood filling his throat, looking around frantically to make sure that he was not back on the battlefield, watching the dwarves and elves fall one after the other under the onslaught of the orcs.

The bad dreams had started even before the Tooks had left, but the presence of the hobbits had provided a welcome distraction for him, lightening his days with their mischief and helping him forget about his dreams. Now that the hobbits had gone and the anniversary of the battle approached, the nightmares had become stronger, occupying his thoughts even during the day.

The memory of his newest nightmare was still fresh in his mind as he went through his morning routine and when he saw the dwarves decorating the mountain on his way to the breakfast, he felt a little sick to his stomach. The battle had been one of the most horrifying things he had ever seen in his life. Why the dwarves and elves and men around him felt that the deaths of thousands were something glorious to be celebrated was still beyond his understanding.

He spoke little at breakfast and ate next to nothing and was glad when he could escape from the dining hall and go hide in his quarters under the pretence of working on the tapestry. There he locked the door for the first time since his arrival to the mountain and went to huddle under a blanket on his bed, unwilling to face the world.

Somebody knocked on his door a few times during the day, but he pretended that he wasn’t home. He managed to fall asleep sometime during the afternoon, the fatigue from the past few sleepless nights helping him sleep without nightmares for once. He woke up after dinner, feeling famished but in a slightly better mood and went to procure some dinner from the kitchens.

A distant sound of music reached him as he walked through the nearly empty halls and he took a moment to appreciate the irony that while the dwarves were celebrating victory and the restoration of their kingdom, he was reminded of death threats and fear and the horrors of the battle. He wondered if any of the dwarves ever had trouble sleeping, or if it was just him who had such a bad reaction to the event.

Luck was with him for most of his journey, as he didn’t meet many people on his way to the dinner, which gave him hope that he might be able to sneak into the kitchens unnoticed and avoid talking to anyone. However, when he arrived to the dining hall, he found the Company still there, talking at the table long after the dinner time had passed. They all looked up when he entered and several of them rose to greet him when he entered.

“Bilbo! Where have you been all day?” Kíli and Ori ambushed him. He tried his best to smile at them.

“I wasn’t feeling well.” He noticed the concerned gazes of the dwarves and hastened to reassure
them. “Don’t worry, it’s nothing bad. I just had a bit of a headache and wanted to sleep. I will be fine after a bit of rest.”

Bilbo sat down at the table and took the plate that Bombur handed him, feeling a wave of gratefulness that his friends had been thoughtful enough to leave him a portion of the dinner. He used the meal as an excuse to avoid conversation and pretended not to notice the curious looks that the dwarves were still sending his way.

He excused himself the moment he finished chewing his last mouthful and with a murmured apology fled the dining hall, going back to his quarters. His door was almost in sight when he heard the sound of hurried footsteps behind him, the sound of heavy boots echoing around the stone corridor. Bilbo didn’t have to turn to know that it was Thorin – he could already recognize those footsteps anywhere.

Normally he would be delighted to have the dwarf’s company, but tonight he was feeling anything but sociable and Thorin was the last person he wanted to see. Bilbo had avoided the king’s gaze all dinner, but from the determined look on the dwarf’s face when he rounded the corner Bilbo figured that he wouldn’t be able to do so now. He was briefly tempted to just turn around and flee, propriety be damned, but in the end decided to stand his ground, thinking that he owed his friend that much.

Thorin caught up with him a moment later, his eyes scanning Bilbo’s face as he came closer.

“I will not keep you long, if you are feeling unwell,” he said. “I simply wanted to know if there is anything I can do to ease your present state.”

Bilbo looked up into that painfully earnest face and suddenly felt a great urge to confess all his troubles to Thorin. How good would it be if he could simply cross those few feet between them and press himself close, and let Thorin soothe him with those large hands of his. But Bilbo had already rejected that offer once, closing that door between them forever. He suppressed the urge to sigh.

“No,” he told Thorin as honestly as he could, “there’s nothing you can do.” He lowered his eyes to the ground to avoid the dwarf’s searching gaze. “Thank you for your concern, but it’s just a headache. I think I’ll go lie down again.”

He turned to walk away, but before he could leave, Thorin laid a gentle hand on his arm, making him turn around.

“Bilbo.”

Bilbo looked up at the sound of his given name.

“It is not my place to pry, but even I can see that something is bothering you,” Thorin said, still looking concerned. “If you do not want to talk to me about it, why don’t you confide in one of your closer friends? I am sure Kíli or Bofur would be more than happy to hear you out.”

Bilbo sighed.

“I’m not sure if a dwarf would be able to understand.” When Thorin kept looking at him, he elaborated. “I have been having dreams these past few days. Nightmares. All the preparations for the memorial have been bringing back bad memories.”

Comprehension dawned on Thorin and he took a step back like he’d been struck, the open expression on his face shutting down.

“Oh.”
Bilbo nodded sadly.

“Yes, among other things. I am trying to deal with it on my own terms, but it will be a few days still before I feel brave enough to face the world again.”

“I understand,” Thorin said quietly. “Take as much time as you need. I apologise for bothering you.”

He gave Bilbo a small bow and walked away, his shoulders painfully straight.

Bilbo couldn’t help but feel like he had just kicked a puppy. It hadn’t been his intention to cause Thorin pain, but he hadn’t wanted to lie to him either. It was true that the infamous scene at the wall sometimes starred in his dreams as well, serving as a terrible interlude between the ubiquitous orcs and the scenes of his friends’ deaths that his fantasy sometimes conjured up for him.

His mind was a jumble of confusion when he came back to his rooms. As much as he would have liked to pretend to Thorin that everything was fine, that was not the case. They might have made peace and even managed to become friends, but the history still hung between them like the proverbial Oliphant in the room.

They had never breached the subject of the Arkenstone during their evenings together in Bilbo’s quarters. Through a mutual silent agreement, both of them had decided never to mention it to avoid spoiling their time together. Now Bilbo wondered whether they should have. They might tiptoe around the subject, but no amount of pretention would ever undo the fact that the scene had happened and they had both paid the price for it. As Bilbo’s new nightmares proved, at least one of them was still paying for it, in one way or another.

Will they be ever able to truly have peace, or will they always live in this terrible state of remembrance? Bilbo wondered, remembering the way Thorin’s face had briefly flashed with pain when he had mentioned his nightmares.

There was only one way to find out, but he wasn’t feeling brave enough to try it.

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He woke up the next morning well-rested, but no closer to a solution than he had been the previous night. Dawn was just starting to break over the horizon, so Bilbo hurried to the kitchens to get some food before everyone else woke up and started questioning him. He carried an armful of food to his quarters and locked the door again.

There was an important decision for him to make and he didn’t want to be disturbed by concerned well-wishers. As he polished off a full plate of scones, he tried to come up with a way to approach Thorin about the issue. However, even after he had already drank half a pot of tea, the answer was no closer than it had been before.

It seemed incredibly petty to confront the dwarf directly, especially since it was a topic that they had already made peace about. On the other hand, if he simply let the matter be, they would forever stay at an impasse. Something had to change.

His ruminations were proving to be unproductive, so he decided to do something useful with his time instead. All the thinking had brought on a headache and he knew from experience that he had always been able to resolve his issues better when his hands were busy. Since the door to his quarters was safely warded against intruders, he could finally work on his birthday present for Thorin without fear of discovery.

Bilbo cleared the clutter from the table and took out the swath of blue fabric from a cupboard,
spreading it on the wooden surface. He had planned to start working on the cloak for more than a week now, but with the constant stream of visitors in his living room there hadn’t been a chance to do much besides sketch the embroidery patterns.

He wanted to keep his present to Thorin a secret for as long as possible – a feat which was proving rather difficult to do here in Erebor. There was always someone stopping by for a chat and since most of his friends had fairly unpredictable schedules, there was no way to tell when a visitor might decide to come by.

Today was a bit different, though. Bilbo thought that Thorin must have told the others to leave him alone, because nobody knocked on his door the whole morning. Bilbo found himself grateful for the reprieve, because the peace allowed him to sort out his thoughts, which had been lately tangled in a jumble of confusion.

The rich blue fabric that he had bought on his afternoon in Dale slowly started gaining shape under his hands and when he pulled back an hour later to survey his work, he was pleased to see that he had managed to cut it well and none of the edges were crooked. Ruffling through the sketches in his desk drawer, Bilbo pulled out the few drawings that he had carefully hidden away from curious eyes. Thorin’s birthday might be more than a month away, but that still barely gave him enough time to create the pattern he wanted.

For several hours Bilbo lost himself in the rhythm of the thread and needle. The motion was strangely soothing and it was gratifying to see the pattern start to emerge against the background. As he worked, a familiar though started nagging on his mind. He had managed to successfully ignore the topic of his regard for Thorin until now, but the cloth in his hand brought back the issue in full force, its existence forcing him to finally give the matter his full attention.

He was attracted to Thorin. He could no longer deny that fact – especially not when it kept staring him right in the face. The dwarf had won him over with his honesty, kindness and those beautiful blue eyes that could make him feel like he was melting on the inside when they looked at him.

The five years of separation had erased nearly all of the unsavoury character traits that Bilbo had found so off-putting before. Long gone was the arrogance and rudeness that had been present in Thorin’s every word and action when they had travelled together. It was true that Thorin was still rather proud, but Bilbo did not begrudge for him that in the slightest. With Erebor restored and prosperous, Thorin had a lot to be proud off. Bilbo was well aware that it would be rather hypocritical of him to criticise Thorin for his pride when he himself had a habit of congratulating himself on his cleverness.

He had planned to ignore his feelings until they went away, but Thorin’s constant presence made that impossible. It was quickly becoming apparent that the passing of the time was making Bilbo’s feelings stronger, not weaker, and he was aware that it wouldn’t be long before he won’t be able to hide them anymore. If not earlier, they will become painfully obvious to everyone when he finally gave the king a cloak so alike his own.

Bilbo knew that the cloak would be a dead giveaway, but somehow couldn’t bring himself to care. He had spent weeks now in this uncomfortable state of hyper-awareness, furtively watching Thorin at the dinner table and admiring him when he played his harp, and he was becoming tired of it. Unrequited love was an exhausting business and the uncertainty of the situation was slowly wearing on his nerves.

The idea of confessing everything to Thorin had crossed his mind before, but he had always brushed it off as complete madness – it would be the height of bad taste to walk up to the dwarf and confess his undying love to him after he had rejected him so thoroughly five years prior. The smartest thing
would be to do nothing and wait for his feelings to go away; leave the matter to resolve itself on its own, instead of risking their newly-formed friendship over an unwelcome confession.

Despite knowing that he would be better off ignoring the problem entirely, he figured that it wouldn’t be fair to Thorin if he kept acting strange around him without explanation. Bilbo had always valued honesty, even when it was unpleasant to hear. Deception was for cowards and he was no coward. Therefore he decided that if no other solution presented itself by the time Thorin’s birthday came along, he would approach the dwarf then, even though it was more than likely that he would be rejected. He figured that he owed Thorin that much, since it had been him who had approached Bilbo the last time.

However, he could hardly come to Thorin with a declaration when they couldn’t even say two words to each other without one of them getting hurt. The past still hung between them like a storm cloud, casting a shadow on their interactions. *If only there was a way to give them both peace,* Bilbo thought, looking out of his window at the afternoon sun.

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As the evening came closer, Bilbo grew restless in his quarters. He had spent the whole day shut in his rooms, but still wasn’t any closer to a solution of how to approach the topic of their problematic past than he had been in the morning. Finally he gave in to an impulse and as the sun began to set on the anniversary of that terrible scene at the wall, he made his way to the gate and out onto the stairs.

Bilbo stopped near the top of the stairs, just a few steps away from the place where Thorin had threatened to kill him five years ago, and spent long moments standing there, gazing at the blood-red wheel of the setting sun. The memories hit him like a running horse and he couldn’t help but relive some of the fear and horror he had felt five years ago.

He was so lost in thought that he completely missed Thorin’s approach.

The dwarf’s arrival made him jump a foot in the air and back off several steps without thinking. Thorin watched his retreat with sad eyes.

“You are afraid of me,” he said quietly. To Bilbo’s relief he didn’t try to approach him, but remained standing where he was.

“I am, a little bit,” Bilbo admitted. “I’m sorry for starting like that, but you took me by surprise. I didn’t expect you to come *here,* of all places.”

“I come here every year on this date,” Thorin said. “It gives me a reminder of things that I never should have done.” He took a careful step forward, his eyes watching for Bilbo’s reaction. “I am sorry for what I did to you that day. Of all the things I have done in my life, this is the action that I regret the most. That, and the banishment. I never should have sent you away.”

Bilbo gave a resigned shake of his head.

“I think I would have left anyway, eventually. The battle was too much for me to handle. It took me months before I stopped having nightmares about it.” Remembering the dwarf’s apology, he gave him a small smile. “Thank you for the apology. I know you said it to me before, but I’m still glad to hear it.”

“A hundred apologies would not be enough to compensate you for my actions,” Thorin shook his head, his eyes full of pain. “To see you afraid of me even five years later is enough to prove that. I had hoped for forgiveness from you, but I see now that it was foolish of me to expect it.”
He turned away, gazing at the horizon. His normally proud posture was slumped and he seemed to huddle in on himself. Bilbo had never seen him look so defeated. This remorseful creature was a far cry from the arrogant king who had hurled insults in his face as he held him by the neck over the edge of the wall.

As Bilbo watched the slumped figure before him, he felt the last remnants of his old fear dissipate, bit by bit. This was Thorin, who came to his quarters every evening to play harp for him. Thorin, who liked poppy seed cakes and admired Bilbo’s drawings and laughed at his jokes. Thorin, who had spent the weeks since his arrival treating him like he was made of glass, or something precious that would break if he touched it.

Bilbo had spent five years waiting for an apology. It seemed that Thorin had spent them waiting for forgiveness. Bilbo thought it was only fair that they both get what they deserve. He took a few steps forward and raised his hand to touch Thorin’s shoulder gently.

“I forgive you.”

Thorin turned, the disbelief clear in his eyes.

“What?” his voice trailed off, as if he was not sure he had heard right.

“I forgive you,” Bilbo repeated. “You have been nothing but good to me since I came here and I don’t want you to live with the blame anymore.” He felt something in his throat constrict, but kept his eyes firmly fixed on Thorin’s. “I forgive you.”

Thorin’s eyes mirrored a mixture of wonder and disbelief.

“Thank you,” he said, the gratitude echoed in every word. Now that he had gotten his wish, he suddenly looked uncharacteristically self-conscious. Bilbo hesitated for a second before he gave into the impulse, propriety be damned. He stepped forward slowly, wrapping his arms around Thorin’s waist and buried his head in Thorin’s winter coat. Thorin stood frozen for a moment before his arms rose slowly, wrapping around Bilbo’s back in a careful embrace.

“I don’t want to be afraid of you,” Bilbo murmured into Thorin’s shoulder.

“I am sorry,” Thorin muttered into his hair.

“I know,” Bilbo said. The arms around him tightened in response, bringing a sense of peace and belonging that he hadn’t felt since his early years in the Shire.

Bilbo had no idea how long they had stood there, wrapped in each other’s warmth, but when he finally stepped back the sun was almost hidden behind the western horizon and the air was cold enough to turn their breath into white mist.

The look in Thorin’s eyes made Bilbo’s breath catch in his throat.

“Thank you,” Thorin said again, the gratitude as heartfelt as it had been the first time. Bilbo gave him a genuine smile.

“You’re welcome. I think we both needed this.”

Only then did Bilbo realize that he had just spent Valar know how long hugging Erebor’s king in plain view of the gates. He quickly turned around to check if anyone had seen them, but the stairs to Erebor were empty, not a dwarf in sight. He breathed a sigh of relief and turned back to find Thorin looking at him with something like amusement.
Was he that easy to read? Bilbo hoped not. It wouldn’t bode well for him if everything he felt could be seen on his face. He decided to get rid of the awkwardness.

“Let’s go back into the mountain,” he told the dwarf. “Unless you would like to stay here a little longer? I can leave you alone to think, if you wish.”

Thorin shook his head.

“No, let us return. The day is almost over and the temperature is far from comfortable.”

They walked back into the mountain, passing the suspiciously blank-faced guards at the gate and didn’t stop until they were near the corridor leading to Bilbo’s quarters.

There Bilbo turned to Thorin, feeling something like hope bloom in his chest.

“Would you be willing to play the harp for me tonight? I can make you a nice hot cup of tea to drive out the cold.”

Thorin gave him a genuine smile.

“I would be happy to come for a visit.”

With his mood better than it had been for days, Bilbo made his way back to his quarters, where he quickly tidied up, putting the unfinished cloak away. The full force of what had just transpired didn’t hit him until he was putting together a tea tray and he stopped in the middle of his kitchen, giving a soft laugh of disbelief.

He and Thorin had finally made peace with the events of five years ago. Bilbo had spent all day trying to come up with a way to approach the dwarf, unable to find a solution, but in the end it had all been so simple. An honest apology, a gesture of forgiveness, and the world had righted itself again, their old sorrows floating away on the wings of the sharp eastern wind. The memory of the hug they had shared made his smile grow wider, giving him hope that maybe his confession wouldn’t be as unwelcome as he had thought.

Once more the music of Thorin’s harp filled Bilbo’s chambers, the dwarf’s contented smile warming Bilbo down to the bone. The sound of the harp stayed with him the whole night and carried over into his dreams, driving the shadows away.

In the end everything had turned out better than he could have hoped, Bilbo thought as he lay down that night. Maybe the dreaded memorial tomorrow wouldn’t be so bad, either.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I had already written most of the ending to the story when I realized that the issues between them hadn’t been quite resolved. Thorin’s first apology had always felt like a formality to me – something that had to be said to allow the story to move forward, but it never seemed heartfelt enough. In my mind, these two needed a closure of the past before they could move forward.

I had always thought that the battle of Erebor and Thorin’s death (and Fili’s and Fili’s)
must have been a terrible blow for Bilbo. In the LOTR cannon, it had taken him over fifty (!) years, before he could bring himself to start writing about his adventure. Despite having all his friends in Erebor, he never went to visit them again in all those years. He mentioned to Gandalf that he had wanted to visit Erebor again, but never could bring himself to do it. Poor Bilbo. Just writing this makes me sad for him.

Therefore, to me it didn’t seem so farfetched that his stay in Erebor could bring bad memories for him. Thorin may have survived, but the battle still happened. The next chapter will be the battle memorial, which, while still a sober affair, won’t be as dark as this. After that it’s all rainbows and butterflies again :)

Next chapter will be posted tomorrow, on October 6.
Bilbo woke up the next morning in a better mood than he had been for days. He spent a few moments just laying snuggled in the warmth of his blankets and let his mind replay the memory of his reconciliation with Thorin for him. He still couldn’t believe that he had been bold enough to hug the dwarf. And Thorin had hugged him back! Maybe there was hope for him after all.

He went through his routine with a smile on his face and didn’t stop smiling all the way to the dining hall.

“Good morning,” he greeted the assembled dwarves. They all smiled when they saw him.

“So it is,” Balin nodded. “You appear to be all better.” He had a strange, knowing look in his eyes when he said that. Bilbo sat down.

“Yes, I am. I had a couple of bad days, but I am fine now.” He started piling food on his plate. “I am sorry for being so grumpy yesterday,” he apologised to his friends.

“You have a right to have bad days as much as anyone else,” Ori told him. The others nodded in assent.

Bilbo barely managed to eat his first scone before the door opened and Thorin walked in. His eyes immediately sought out Bilbo and the hobbit smiled in greeting, feeling a thrill of giddiness run through his stomach when Thorin smiled back.

The dwarves at the table all shot a look between the two of them and a few of them grinned, but they were all wise enough to stay silent, going back to their food. Bilbo couldn’t help but wonder at their newly found ability for discretion, but decided not to examine it too closely. He himself thought that his crush must now be painfully obvious to anyone who cared to look and was grateful that nobody made fun of him for it.

As he ate, his eyes kept straying in Thorin’s direction, studying the dwarf’s handsome features over his cup of tea. More than once their eyes met across the table and a few times he looked up to find Thorin already looking at him. He had no idea what the new current of awareness between them meant, but the feeling was incredibly heady and he enjoyed every minute of it.

Bilbo spent most of the day in his quarters, working on the tapestry. The dwarves took his improvement in mood as a signal that the door to his quarters was open once more and several of them used the opportunity to stop by and chat with him while he worked. The memorial ceremony was scheduled to take place at sunset on the field next to Dale, so he had plenty of time to kill before his presence was required in any way.

Bofur came to fetch him at teatime and they walked to the entrance hall, where the rest of the Company already stood assembled. The only ones missing besides Bilbo were Glóin and his family, who joined the group a few minutes later and they all set out to the memorial field. When they left the gate, Bilbo noticed that a peculiar construction had grown on the lawn by the river. It looked like a lumpy tent – three different pieces of cloth stitches together haphazardly covering a tall narrow structure.

“That’s the memorial statue,” Balin explained when he asked about it. “It was a joint project between
Erebor, Dale and Mirkwood. There are supposed to be three statues, one made by a sculptor from each race. Nobody has seen the statues yet beside the sculptors themselves, so it will be a surprise.”

“Oh,” Bilbo said. “The elves are coming, too?”

“They have been staying in Dale for the past two weeks,” Fíli said. “They are scheduled to sing some ballads at the ceremony. Everyone has promised to contribute in some way.”

“How come Erebor doesn’t organize the memorial?” Bilbo asked.

“The memorial is Bard’s responsibility,” Balin told him. “Erebor has already hosted the celebrations of the dragon’s death.”

As the crowd on the field came into view, Bilbo couldn’t help but feel a little out of place in his autumn-coloured clothes, since both the dwarves and the men of Dale had dressed in dark shades to honour to deaths of the fallen. The elves were waiting for them by the monument, dressed in opalescent white.

Bilbo hadn’t paid much attention to the preparations for the ceremony, lost as he had been in his gloominess, but now he belatedly wondered whether he should have asked about the etiquette of such an event. Hobbits didn’t have any special clothes for funerals and sombre events, but it seemed that all the other races did. In his green cloak and dark maroon vest Bilbo now stuck out like a sore thumb among the sombrely dressed attendants.

Since the memorial was scheduled to start with the uncovering of the statue, the crowd surrounded the monument, whispers travelling like wind as they waited for the artists to present their work. Each of the sculptors came to stand by his part of the sculptural group and when the signal came, they all pulled at the canopy covering the statues. There were gasps and murmurs in the crowd as the monument came into view, but Bilbo was too busy examining it to pay much attention to the reactions of others.

There were three statues standing on the wide stone platform. A man, a dwarf and an elf gazed in three directions with their weapons drawn, standing back to back. Bilbo couldn’t recall any part of the battle in which Thorin, Bard and Thranduil had ever come into contact, but he had to admit that the artistic work was very impressive.

Each of the statues was done in a different style, but rather than look jarring, the final effect gave each of the figures a sense of personality. Bard had been depicted drawing a bow and Thorin with a large axe in his hand, but rather than the elegant elvish scimitar he had been wielding in reality, the statue of Thranduil was holding Orcrist. Bilbo had to cover his mouth to hide his amused smile when he saw it, because it would be a highly inappropriate reaction for such a sombre event.

A quick look at Thorin told him that the dwarf had noticed the detail as well and wasn’t very happy about it. The sword had been returned to its proper master right after the battle, but its loss in Thranduil’s caves was still a sore point for Thorin. Bilbo wondered how long it would take before a random act of vandalism caused the Elvenking’s statue to “accidentally” lose a hand and had to pretend to cough to cover his chuckle.

He quickly schooled his features back into careful neutrality, because Bard had climbed up on the monument’s pedestal to address the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “Dwarves, Men, Elves. Hobbits,” he added as an afterthought when he spied Bilbo in the crowd. “We have gathered here today to honour the memory of the brave men and women who had fought along us in the battle on this field five years ago. Later tonight we
will go and celebrate the victory that we won that day, but for now let us remember the ones who fought and died at our side. I would like to ask for a moment of silence as a show of respect for the dead.”

They all bowed their heads and stood in silence, the only sounds around them being the murmur of the river and the occasional cry of a bird.

“Thank you,” Bard said after a moment. “While we may grieve for the ones who had died here, we should not forget about the bravery of those who helped us win that day.”

He called forth several of the warriors and talked about their deeds before his eyes found Bilbo in the crowd. Bilbo took an abrupt step back, feeling an awful sense of foreboding. Bard gave him a smile that held far too much amusement for Bilbo’s taste.

“I would also like to call forward Bilbo Baggins.” Bilbo gave him a glare that Bard pretended not to notice. Fíli gave him a light nudge in the back and Bilbo stepped forward, uncomfortably aware of all the eyes on him. “It was through his actions that bloodshed between our allies was prevented. He managed to stop two armies bent on destroying each other and unite them against a common enemy. Without him there would be very few of us standing here today.”

The people in the crowd started whispering and gazing at Bilbo with renewed interest. Bilbo wished that he hadn’t raised that toast to Bard back at the celebration. Bard continued.

“It was also through his generosity that the city of Dale has been rebuilt. He gave up his entire claim to his share of the dragon’s gold to me, leaving nothing for himself.” Bard’s smile turned genuine. “I am honoured to call him my friend.”

Confound the man and his honesty, Bilbo thought in exasperation as the applause erupted around him. He would have liked to live his live in Erebor in relative anonymity, but it seemed that Bard was determined push him into the spotlight. He sighed when he felt someone nudge him in the back again and climbed a few steps up to bow to the crowd, hoping that Bard would move onto someone else soon.

He felt embarrassed by all the attention, but still couldn’t help smiling when he saw that the ones cheering for him were not just his friends from the Company, but people from all the races. He was especially surprised by the dwarves, because up until now, he had lived under the impression that they didn’t think much of him. Yet here they were, cheering and stomping, the smiles on their faces completely genuine.

The applause finally stopped and Bilbo could go back to hide between Fíli and Bofur. He once again wished that he had worn some less conspicuous clothes, since this way it was incredibly easy to find him in the crowd. Bard’s speech continued for a while, still calling forth people who had done something heroic in the battle, but Bilbo paid it little attention. Several people came to talk to him and thank him for his gift to Dale and he found himself growing more and more flustered with every new show of gratitude.

Finally the speeches were over and the crowd started dispersing. Some went back to Erebor, some to Dale, but most of the attendants stayed on the field to listen to the elven ballads. Bilbo found that he needed to get away from the crowd for a bit and decided to climb a few of the stairs to Erebor, so that he could watch the crowds below without anyone bothering him. He planned to rejoin his friends later to go listen to the elvish songs, but for now he wished to have a few moments to himself.

“You!” a coarse voice suddenly called to his right, bringing him out of his reverie. Bilbo turned to see a tall unkempt-looking man with long dark hair walking up the stairs towards him. “You!
Midget! It’s all your fault.”

The man’s cries started attracting the attention of the other attendants, but everyone was too far away to intervene.

“Do I know you?” Bilbo asked. The man snorted.

“I doubt that.” He swayed on his feet. “I am Horn, son of Harold and you’re the reason why my family is dead.” The man ignored Bilbo’s surprise and continued his rant. “If it weren’t for you and your merry band of thieves waking up the dragon, none of this would have happened. But you had to go and wake the damned worm and now the Lake-town lays in ruin and my wife and son are dead. You are the reason for its ruin and now I’m going to make you pay for that.”

He drew his sword and started advancing at Bilbo, eliciting gasps from the bystanders. Bilbo heard the sound of running feet behind him, but didn’t turn, his attention focused on the man. He hadn’t brought Sting with him to the memorial. As he watched the sun gleam on the blade of the man’s sword, he wondered if he should have.

“Will my death help you feel better?” Bilbo asked calmly when the man was less than eight feet away, looking him straight in the eyes.

The man paused mid-step, hesitating. From the corner of his eye Bilbo saw several of the elves draw their bows, aiming them at Horn’s back. Bilbo raised a hand towards them with his palm outstretched, shaking his head subtly. They frowned but listened to him, pausing in their movement to let him deal with the attacker on his own.

“Nothing will ever make me feel better,” the man said, his sword hand wavering a little.

“Then what will you accomplish by killing me?” Bilbo asked him. “I am sorry that your family is dead, but their deaths were not my fault - the dragon killed them. Their deaths have already been avenged. Killing me won’t bring them back.”

“My family is gone,” Horn said with despair in his voice. “And now you’re trying to take my revenge away from me as well. What else do I have left?”

Bilbo looked at the man’s hunched form and his heart ached with pity at the man’s pain.

“Put away your sword,” Bilbo said gently. “There is no need for violence.”

Horn’s hand went limp, dropping the sword on the ground.

Bilbo’s voice grew stronger without him even realizing it.

“Today is a day for remembrance. We have all gathered here to honour our fallen friends and comrades. Look around you,” he told Horn. “Everyone who came here today has lost something to the dragon – a family member, a friend, or their home. You are not alone in your grief.”

Horn’s legs gave out and he dropped to his knees before Bilbo, bowing his head.

“What am I supposed to do, then?” he said, his voice breaking with a sob. Bilbo took a few careful steps forward and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Grieve,” he told him simply. “ Honour the memory of your family. Remember the good times you had with them and let go of your revenge. Violence won’t help anything.”
It was only then that he noticed that there was a circle of dwarves around them, their drawn weapons pointed at the kneeling man. He spied the elves standing behind the dwarves with their bows still drawn. Thorin stood next to him, the tip of his sword pointed at the man’s throat. Bilbo took a step back and put a gentle hand on Thorin’s wrist.

“No,” he said to Thorin. “Let him be.”

Thorin gave him a long searching look before he conceded, lowering his weapon. Bilbo looked around at the assembled warriors.

“That goes for the rest of you as well,” he called in a strong voice. “Put away your weapons, all of you.”

“But he tried to kill you,” Kíli protested, holding his position.

“That man is grieving. He doesn’t deserve to be killed for that.”

“But–” Kíli said.

“Enough blood has been spilled on the dragon’s account,” Bilbo said firmly. “Let’s not add any more to it. Put away your weapons.”

They listened to him this time, sheathing their weapons with great reluctance. Bilbo reached into his vest pocket, drawing out a large emerald.

“Here,” he said, putting the stone into the man’s hand, “this is the last piece from my share of the dragon’s treasure. I have carried it around in my pocket for the last five years as a good luck charm, but I think it will be of more use to you than to me. Take it and build a new life for yourself or use it to honour the memory of your wife and son. It’s the least I can do for you.”

Horn gazed at the gem in his hand in disbelief.

“I threatened to kill you and you do this.” He shook his head. “I didn’t believe the folks when they said that you had given all of your treasure away to Bard, but I believe it now.” He looked up at Bilbo. “Thank you for this.”

Bilbo gave him a gracious nod.

“You’re welcome.”

“I am sorry for threatening you,” the man said. “I didn’t come here today to attack you, but the memorial brought back bad memories for me.” He swayed a little and put a hand to his forehead. “I think I had too much to drink.”

Horn stood up slowly, but left the sword on the ground, as he had probably noticed the ring of hostile warriors around him and didn’t want to risk provoking them more than he already had.

“I used to be a blacksmith, back before the dragon came,” he said.

“Then take up your hammer and be a blacksmith once more,” Bilbo told him. “There is much rebuilding to do still and your skill will be useful.”

“I think I will do that. I am sorry for threatening you.”

“Apology accepted,” Bilbo said with a small smile.
Horn gave him a low bow and started walking away, the crowd parting around his retreating figure.

“Should my men detain him?” Bard emerged from the crowd, giving Bilbo a questioning look. Bilbo shook his head.

“I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Thank you for sparing his life,” Bard said quietly. “He’s a good man at heart, but the death of his wife has been hard on him.” He cocked his head to the side. “Why did you spare him?”

“Gandalf once told me that true courage lies not in knowing when to take a life, but when to spare it,” Bilbo told him. “I took his lesson to heart.”

“So you did,” Bard said, looking thoughtful.

He gave Bilbo a nod and walked away, most of the crowd around them dispersing as well now that the danger had passed. The dwarves from the Company formed a tight circle around Bilbo, all looking very displeased.

“Why did you stop us?” Kíli burst out. “He could have killed you.”

“But he didn’t,” Bilbo said calmly, making them all frown even more.

“You couldn’t have known that!” Kíli looked like he was holding himself back from taking Bilbo by the arms and shaking some sense into him. Bilbo shrugged.

“If he raised that sword, he would have been dead before his strike fell.” He threw a pointed look at the elves who were still watching the man’s retreating figure with mistrustful eyes. He gave the dwarves a smile and started untying his necktie.

“Besides, I am afraid that I wasn’t entirely truthful when I spoke to him. Even without the emerald, I am still in possession of one final piece of the dragon’s treasure.” He pulled away the collar of his jacket to show them the mithril beneath. “How do you think I survived the warg attack at Weathertop? It certainly wasn’t skill that saved me back then. Even if the man did attack, I would have been fine.”

“That’s not terribly reassuring,” Bofur muttered.

“That is still no reason for you to risk your life like that,” Thorin said, frowning. Bilbo didn’t allow himself to be cowed by his disapproval.

“That was my risk to take. I am responsible for myself. You do not have to protect me all the time.”

“But we want to,” Kíli said, looking deeply unhappy.

“I know,” Bilbo told him gently, “but I would still prefer to take care of myself, if possible. You weren’t responsible for my life when I travelled with you and you’re not responsible for me now.”

Kíli’s frown deepened, but he didn’t try to protest again. Bilbo raised an eyebrow and turned to the rest to find out what their objections were.

“Please don’t do anything like this again,” Fíli said. The others nodded in agreement. “I think my heart stopped for a moment when I saw the man approach you.”

Bilbo gave them a grateful smile.
“I’m happy to hear that you all care about me so much and I understand that you would like to protect me, but I am not made of glass. I don’t need to be locked away from the world just because someone might look at me the wrong way. The only person responsible for my fate is me. My moving to Erebor didn’t change that.”

They grumbled for a moment longer but eventually let him be and went back to the memorial. Only Thorin and Dwalin remained behind, the latter keeping a respectful distance to let them talk in private.

“I am responsible for you,” Thorin said, once the others had left. “Since you live here, your well being falls under my purview as the king.”

“Oh, don’t you dare and try to play the king card with me, Thorin Oakenshield,” Bilbo interrupted him before he could start a grand speech about responsibility and duty. “That one has never worked on me.”

Thorin gave him a long searching look before he sighed, giving in.

“No, it has not. You have never been impressed by titles. I used to find it disrespectful, but now it serves as a welcome breath in fresh air among all the people who can’t even approach me without bowing twice.”

Bilbo didn’t know what to say to that, so he stayed silent.

“You have a terrible tendency to become fearless at the least convenient moments,” Thorin said after a moment, shaking his head in bemusement.

“You had no problem sending me to the dragon’s lair three times,” Bilbo couldn’t help but point out. “A single assassin is nothing compared to that.”

Thorin’s face twisted at the reminder.

“That does not make him any less dangerous. What if something happened to you?”

Bilbo shrugged.

“Then you would simply have to deal with it.” He sighed when he saw Thorin’s unhappy expression. “We live in dangerous times, Thorin. You of all people should know that. There will always be danger, but that’s no reason to stay locked inside, trembling in fear when there’s a whole world out there to discover.” He looked Thorin in the eyes. “You cannot protect me from everything.”

Thorin sighed.

“I can still try.”

They both turned to watch the crowd below, which reminded Bilbo of a similar sight.

“Is this what the battle looked like from here?” he asked Thorin. The dwarf nodded.

“We sat behind the wall and watched the armies clash below. It seemed a madness to try and join them – there were so many of the orcs and so little hope for survival – and yet we still went to battle, because it would have been the height of cowardice to sit in safety while our kin died to protect our mountain.”
He gave Bilbo a look.

“I think I understand now why you faced the attacker. It was brave of you to do it, but that doesn’t change the fact that it was a folly.”

“I never claimed it was a wise move,” Bilbo replied, “just that it was something I had to do by myself. You wouldn’t have been able to stand idly, either.”

“No,” Thorin said quietly. “I wouldn’t.” They stood in silence for a moment before he spoke again. “I had no idea that you still wear that mithril shirt.”

Bilbo smiled.

“It has saved my life several times over the years. I think I wouldn’t have survived the battle without it.” He turned to face the dwarf. “I don’t think I ever thanked you for it properly, so I am telling you now: Thank you for the gift. Of all the things I could have taken from the dragon’s hoard, this has proved to be the most useful and most precious. You couldn’t have chosen a better gift.”

Thorin smiled back.

“I am gratified to hear it. I had your protection on my mind when I chose it for you, so it is good to hear that it has served you well.”

“It has,” Bilbo nodded. “I fell into the habit of wearing it when I started wandering the lands around Shire. There are plenty of dangerous beasts in those places and I have never been much of a fighter, as you well know. I do not wear it as much in Erebor, because I feel safe here, but I still put it on whenever I plan to leave the gates. One can never be too cautious.”

“No indeed,” Thorin said. “Today’s episode only proves that.” He gave Bilbo an intent look. “It will ease my heart if I know that you wear the mail.”

“I wear it most of the time anyway, hidden under my clothes,” Bilbo said. “I only showed you the shirt today to make you all stop worrying about me so much.”

“I am afraid that is an impossible request,” Thorin shook his head with a small smile. “None of us will ever stop worrying about your safety.” He ran his gaze across the field below, lingering on the memorial statue.

“When you spoke to the man before, you said that everyone here has lost something.” He said softly. “What did you lose?”

“My peace of mind,” Bilbo confessed. “Warriors are not the only ones who dream of blood and battlefields. It took me almost a year before I was able to sleep peacefully after I left here. I suppose you lot had it better, since you are used to stuff like this.”

Thorin shook his head.

“One never gets used to death. I have seen it in a hundred different forms and yet it takes me aback every time. None of us could sleep well after the battle,” he admitted. “It is no fault of your character to be repelled by violence.”

“At least now we have peace,” Bilbo said, watching the different races mingle on the field below. “Most of the orcs from the Grey Mountains are dead and our alliances hold strong.” Thorin said. “Let us hope this lasts for many years yet.”
"I think the memorial was a good idea," Bilbo said. "I was not sure about it at first, but now I see that it really works to bring everyone closer." He shot Thorin a look. "Come, let's rejoin the crowd. I would like to hear what the elves have prepared."

Thorin pretended to scowl at the mention of the elves, but readily fell in step with Bilbo when the hobbit started his descent back towards the field. Bilbo heard the distant sound of singing and smiled, the beautiful elvish music driving out the last of the gloom that had resided in his heart for the past few days.

He stopped near the group of musicians that sat below the pedestal and closed his eyes, letting the music fill his whole being.

"What are they singing about?" Thorin asked him quietly when the song ended.

"Death, loss and grief, but it's so beautiful that the words don't really matter," Bilbo whispered back. "I always thought that elves had the most beautiful songs about sadness. We don't have any songs about grief in the Shire, so I always found the custom interesting."

"What do you do instead?" Thorin asked, looking genuinely curious.

"We celebrate life," Bilbo said, watching the nimble fingers of the players dance over their instruments. "We remember the person that used to be with a feast and drink to celebrate them. After the wake is over, everyone simply returns to their lives. There is no point in dwelling in the past."

Thorin was silent for a while, lost in thought.

"Does it work?"

Bilbo shrugged.

"Sometimes. Our natures usually allow us to bounce back from trauma pretty quickly, but there are some things for which there is no remedy." He looked back at the musicians. "I think the elves know that better than anyone else. It must be terrible to lose someone whom you have known for hundreds of years."

Thorin seemed to see the elves in new light.

"A lot of elves died in the battle," he said quietly. "I never bothered to think about them."

Bilbo reached over and gave his upper arm a gentle squeeze.

"You are thinking of them now. You dwarves aren't the only ones capable of grief, you know. They just show it in different ways."

"So it would seem." Thorin’s voice trailed off as he got lost in thoughts. Bilbo let him. The king seemed to be experiencing an epiphany of a sort and Bilbo did not wish to disturb him.

He used Thorin’s moment of silence to look around them instead and spied Dís standing a few feet behind Thorin, watching them both with curious eyes. He raised an eyebrow at her, but she just shook her head and stayed where she was, unwilling to join their private discussion. A quick glance revealed several more members of the Company standing in the crowd nearby, but they all seemed lost in thought.

A new song started and a woman’s voice rose with the music, singing a prayer for the dead in Quenya. Bilbo didn’t understand all the words, but he could still make out enough to get the gist of
it. The crowd had fallen silent to listen to the song, so he closed his eyes and joined them in their quiet reflection.

The sun set slowly, marking the passing of the day. The elves ended their performance when the last ray of light disappeared beyond the western horizon and bowed to the crowd. Bilbo joined in the applause, still feeling moved by the beauty of the music. The dwarves were all strangely silent when they set out on the journey back to Erebor. Bilbo thought that the elvish music had probably given them all some food for thought.

The mood didn’t stay sombre for very long. Once they came into the Great Hall and the ale got flowing, everyone cheered up and soon there were songs and plenty of laughter. The entertainment soon became very informal, with people mingling and sitting down wherever they pleased. Bilbo spent the dinner sitting with his friends, chatting about the memorial.

He was just returning back to the table with a mug of ale in hand when a group of younger dwarves headed by Gimli approached him.

“Is it true that you killed a warg all by yourself?” Gimli asked. “I thought your cousins were having me on when they told me about it, but Fíli and Kíli both claim that you really did it.”

Bilbo nodded.

“Yes, I killed a warg near Weathertop two years ago. I have the teeth to prove it.”

The youngsters looked at each other in growing excitement.

“And what about the stuff with the spiders?” asked another lad. Bilbo realized with a surprise that it was Dáin’s son, Thorin. “Did you really fight an army of spiders all by yourself?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it an army…” Bilbo began, but Kíli popped behind his shoulder.

“There were enough of them to swarm us from all sides, so I think it is only fair to call them an army.”

“Are you telling them about the spiders?” Fíli appeared next to his brother. “I’d like to hear it, too. We haven’t heard this one yet.”

Before Bilbo knew it, there was a cluster of dwarves sitting on the floor around his chair, looking at him expectantly. It seemed hobbit children weren’t the only ones fond of tales. He gave them a look of resignation.

“Where should I start?”

“At the beginning, of course,” Bofur spoke up behind him. Bilbo gave up on trying to find out, how many people wanted to listen to his tale.

“Very well,” he said. “We were wandering through Mirkwood, starving…” He told them all about the elvish fires and wandering through the night, lost in the forest. Their eyes grew when he described how he had woken up in the middle of the forest to find a huge spider trying to wrap him in a spiderweb. He continued with a description of his search for his missing companions. “I finally found them all in the spider’s den, hanging from the tree in those horrible cocoons.”

“What did you do?” asked one of the dwarflings eagerly.

“He saw five dozen spiders as big as a horse and thought that the best way to act would be to
provoke them into murderous rage,” Fíli told them. “I was awake enough to hear you taunt them.” He gave Bilbo a displeased look.

“I worked, didn’t I?” Bilbo replied. “They went after me and left you alone for long enough that I could sneak back and free you all from the webs.”

“They came back soon enough,” Kíli grimaced. “The spider poison made us all so weak that we could barely walk, much less fight. I remember thinking how stupid it was, to survive such a long journey only to become spider food in the end.”

“But you didn’t.” Bilbo smiled at him.

“No, we didn’t, but only because you saw it fit to place yourself between us and an army of spiders. How many did you kill in the end? I lost count after five, because I was too busy trying to remember how to walk.”

“I don’t know,” Bilbo shook his head. “Ten, maybe twenty? I was extremely angry and the entire battle was a bit of a blur. The rest of the spiders fled eventually after I killed enough of them, so I didn’t really bother counting.”

Bilbo realized that the dwarves were all looking at him with huge eyes. He suddenly felt very self-conscious.

“I am not normally so violent,” he hastened to reassure them. “I don’t know what came over me in that forest.”

“Remind me not to make you mad,” Fíli muttered. The others all nodded, looking at him with newfound respect.

“Tell us about the dragon!” Dáin’s son said.

Bilbo raised his head to find plenty of eyes watching him tell his tale, not just the youngsters. Reaching for his tankard, he decided that one more story couldn’t hurt.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

I had the assassin scene in my head for the longest time, but it was terribly hard to write it convincingly. I have read other fics where Bilbo kills someone who is trying to assassinate someone from the royal family and while I think that the strong protective streak is consistent with his character, I thought it would be much more poignant to have him show mercy, instead of just killing the man off.

One of the songs sung at the memorial is this: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EAANKFPchtA - Leliana’s song from Dragon Age: Origins. I discovered the song when I was playing the game this spring and it still remains one of the most beautiful pieces of music I know. I am not a big fan of making soundtracks for fics, but this song fits the mood perfectly.

Also, I had planned to write the memorial as a sombre affair, but ended up giggling over Thranduil’s statue instead. I’m sorry :)
The next chapter will be posted on October 8.
The news of Bilbo’s confrontation with the assassin travelled through Erebor like wildfire. Those who had seen the scene with their own eyes were quick to tell their friends, who in turn told their friends, and when Bilbo walked through the halls of Erebor in the next few days, there were whispers following him everywhere.

However, while before their eyes had been full of curiosity and sometimes ridicule at his standing, now they were looking at him with respect. The official rumour said that he had been brave enough to stand unarmed against a full grown Man with a sword and came out victorious. A few dwarves were disappointed with the lack of bloodiness of the confrontation, but most were impressed with his courage.

The more perceptive ones made note of the fact that an entire squad of warriors had willingly laid down their weapons at a single command from him – a fact which they were more than happy to point out. And so, unbeknownst to Bilbo, his standing among the dwarves rose considerably.

The hobbit himself remained largely oblivious to the change in mood. He was pleased when the shopkeepers at Erebor’s market treated him politely and the ladies in the kitchens smiled at him, but other than that, he paid them little mind. The dwarves had been whispering about him ever since he had come to Erebor and he had long stopped listening to the gossip.

It was an early December morning when he pulled apart the drapes on his balcony window to find the world outside covered in a thin layer of snow. The sight of the snow-covered roofs of Dale reminded him that he was woefully unprepared for the winters here in Erebor. Bilbo had only brought with him his winter cloak and a single jacket – hardly enough to protect him from the harsh northern frosts that were sure to come soon. He decided to address the problem as soon as possible.

“Is there a tailor in Dale?” Bilbo asked his friends at breakfast.

“Why? Do you need clothes?” Fíli asked.

“I just realized today that I’m quite ill-equipped for the winters here and need to buy some warm winter clothes,” Bilbo said.

“What’s wrong with the tailor here in Erebor?” Glóin asked, narrowing his eyes. Bilbo let his gaze glide over the dwarves at the table.

“No offense to your dwarvish fashion, but I think I would prefer something a little more hobbittish. The fashion in Dale is much closer to what I am used to.”

“Why don’t you just wear dwarvish clothes?” Kíli asked, frowning. Bilbo gave him a look.

“If you moved to Rivendell, would you start wearing their elvish tunics?” The look of horror on the dwarf’s face was answer enough for him. “There you have it. Just because I live here, doesn’t mean I have to assimilate with you in every way.” He smiled. “I may wear your clothes from time to time for the ceremonial stuff, but try as you might, you won’t make a dwarf out of me.”

Some of them looked a little disappointed at his proclamation, but they respected him enough not to raise more objections. The meal was nearly over when Kíli leaned over to him in an attempt at
discretion.

“Will you need any money for the clothes?”

Bilbo decided there was no need to whisper, since most of the table had heard the question and was now looking at him.

“No, thank you, Kíli. I have more than enough.” He saw their sceptical expressions and sighed. “Did you really think that I would come all the way to Erebor to live off the charity of my friends?”

Most of them had the good grace to look ashamed for the thought. Bilbo smiled.

“You may not have noticed, but I was quite wealthy before I met you lot. Giving my share of the dragon’s hoard to Bard did nothing to change that fact. I may have left most of my wealth behind in the Shire, but I still have more than enough to satisfy my needs. I may not be as rich as you all are now, but I am far from penniless.”

“There’s a pretty good tailor near the marketplace in Dale,” Bofur answered his question. “I can show you the way, if you like.”

Bilbo gave him a smile.

“Thank you, I’ll be happy to have your help. You don’t mind going with me?”

“Not at all,” Bofur exclaimed. “It’s the least I can do for you in return for your help.” He threw a look at Ori, who grinned and lowered his gaze, blushing. Bilbo gave them both a fond look and nodded in acceptance.

Half an hour later they were both on their way to Dale, their heads turned towards the sky to watch the snowflakes fall. Bilbo was wrapped in the warmest clothes he owned, with a heavy winter cloak draped over his warm jacket.

“To think that I’ve been here for almost two months already...” he remarked quietly.

“A lot has happened since your arrival,” Bofur said. “Your stay here might have been many things, but it certainly wasn’t boring.”

“No indeed,” Bilbo laughed. “This is the most excitement I’ve had in five years. I don’t regret leaving the Shire in the slightest.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Bofur smiled at him. “You should have come here long ago.”

“I couldn’t,” Bilbo reminded him. “I was banished, remember?”

Bofur made a face.

“Ah, yes, Thorin’s famous fit of idiocy. It’s too bad none of us knew about it. If we did, we would have knocked some sense into him ages ago.”

Bilbo couldn’t help but grin.

“You might have tried, but I doubt it would work on Thorin. He can awfully stubborn. In fact, I bet that if you tried that, it would have made him even more resistant to the idea of inviting me back here.”

Bofur sighed.
“You’re probably right. Still, it’s too bad that you had to stay away for so long.” His face cleared up as he remembered something. He gave Bilbo a side-eye. “Has Ori told you yet that you will be the one to officiate our wedding? I wonder what Thorin will say to that when he finally finds out.”

“Thorin knows already,” Bilbo informed him. “In fact, he was the one who told me about the custom. He was with me when Ori came to tell me about your courtship.”

“Was he?” Bofur’s eyebrows climbed up. “What did he say?”

“He doesn’t mind. I think he is rather amused by the whole idea.”

“Hm.” Bofur looked thoughtful. He took a careful look around to make sure nobody was listening to them before he leaned closer to Bilbo. “There are a few who think that Thorin hates performing weddings. It’s just a rumour, mind you, but some say that he once tried to propose to someone and was rejected, which is why it makes him grumpy to see others who managed to court successfully.” He shot a look back at Erebor’s gates. “I wonder who it was. I think it must have happened back in the Blue Mountains, because nobody would dare to refuse him now, when he is the king of Erebor.”

Bilbo wasn’t quick enough to hide his reaction to that bit of information. Bofur took one look at his face and came to stop in the middle of the stairs, his jaw falling open in surprise.

“That was you? You were the one who refused him, weren’t you?” He was looking at Bilbo like he was seeing for the first time ever, the pieces of the puzzle clicking into place in his mind. “When did that happen?”

Bilbo sighed.

“Right after the battle. He called me into his tent, where he started rambling utter nonsense about wanting to marry me. He hadn’t even apologised for the scene at the wall at that point, so of course I refused him. He didn’t take it well.”

“So that’s why he banished you,” Bofur looked rather pleased with his finding. “I always found the whole banishment business rather suspect.” He gave Bilbo a look. “Oh, everything makes so much more sense now.”

“Can you keep the information to yourself, please?” Bilbo asked. “The whole business is terribly embarrassing for the both of us. There are enough rumours about me floating around already – there’s no need to add any more.”

“Of course,” Bofur hastened to reassure him. “I’ll keep it secret.” Still, he couldn’t help but grin in amusement all the way to Dale.

“It’s not funny,” Bilbo jabbed him with an elbow. Bofur tried to school his expression into something more serious but failed miserably. Bilbo decided to let him be.

The whispers started the moment the two of them entered the gates. Bilbo gave the curious people on the streets a resigned look.

“I guess my days of living in anonymity are over for good?” Bilbo said to Bofur. The dwarf nodded.

“You are the only hobbit in Erebor. Of course you would be noticed, but I don’t think that is why they are looking at you. Bard’s speech at the memorial made an impression on many.”

Bilbo sighed.
“I wish he hadn’t done that. I think he did it as a revenge for the toast I made in his honour at the celebrations in Erebor.”

Bofur gave him a look, but didn’t say anything. They arrived to the tailor’s shop without any incidents and Bilbo was gratified to find the shop devoid of customers.

“Excuse me,” he called. A tall thin man emerged from the room in the back.

“‘Yes?’

“I would like to purchase some winter clothes, if you are willing to make them for me,” Bilbo said. The man’s face lit up.

“You are Mister Bagins, aren’t you? The hobbit? I heard about you. What sort of clothes do you need?”

They spent over an hour going over measurements and clothing styles while Bofur sat on a stool in the corner, whittling a small wooden figurine. The tailor looked impressed with Bilbo’s knowledge of fabrics and fashion and was happy to customize the clothes to his specifications. The breaking point came during the payment.

“No. No, no, no,” Bilbo said when the man informed him that he would be happy to make his clothes for free. “Absolutely not. I have more than enough money to pay for the clothes I ordered and I would hate it if you thought that I came to Dale to get stuff for free.”

The tailor looked unhappy.

“You have done so much for this city. We all thought that the city should repay back at least some of what you have given us.”

“No.” Bilbo shook his head resolutely. “The gold I gave to Bard was a gift. I had no use for it five years ago and I still don’t need it today.” His expression softened when he saw the tailor’s disappointment. “Sir, I know how much work it takes to make the clothes that I ordered from you. I would feel terrible if you had to work for free. Please let me pay for my order.”

The tailor sighed.

“Very well. You are as bad a King Bard in this. I make clothes for him, too, and he always insists on paying the full price, even though I would be more than happy to make his clothes for free, just for the sheer prestige.”

The price he told Bilbo was still lower than it should have been, but Bilbo didn’t want to argue with him anymore. Instead of counting out the money, he simply placed a small money bag on the counter and left the shop, satisfied with the knowledge that the contents of the bag should be more than enough to cover all the tailor’s expenses.

As soon as he reached the marketplace, he was ambushed from all sides by a crowd of enthusiastic well-wishers, who all wanted to express their thanks for his gift to the city. It made him feel highly awkward and even though all the people meant well, he couldn’t help but feel a bit smothered by all the attention.

Bilbo refused all their offers of favours and gifts, only accepting a small bouquet of dried lavender from one of the little girls. One of the children even tried to give him a golden paper crown. He couldn’t help but ask: “Why are you giving me this? I’m not a king.”
The child’s mother gave him a look.

“You may not be, but you’re as good and generous as one. Please, accept it.”

Her little boy made pleading eyes at him for long enough until Bilbo allowed him to place the paper crown on his head. A cheer went up through the crowd at that and Bilbo couldn’t help but smile a little, shaking his head in exasperation.

“Please, no more gifts!” he cried when more well-wishers came forth. “I just came here today to buy some clothes. Thank you for all your gifts and best-wishes, but I really must be going, if I want to be on time for lunch.”

They reluctantly let him go, but a few of the children followed him all the way to the gates of Dale, waving goodbye when he left the city. Bofur hadn’t said a word the whole time, but looked like he was having a lot of fun watching Bilbo’s predicament. Every time the dwarf’s eyes slid towards the paper crown on Bilbo’s head, his lips twitched.

“Go ahead, laugh at me if you want,” Bilbo told him, resigned. The dwarf chuckled all the way to Erebor, much to Bilbo’s chagrin.

Since they had no shopping bags and lunch was already underway when they arrived to the entrance hall, they decided to head straight for the dining hall. Bilbo took care to remove the crown at the first sign of Erebor’s gates, but he still didn’t manage to avoid the inevitable teasing.

“How was your shopping trip?” Balin asked them when they both sat down at the table.

Bilbo frowned at the question, but Bofur grinned and pulled the paper crown out of Bilbo’s jacket pocket. He carefully straightened it out and put it on Bilbo’s head, ignoring the hobbit’s glare.

“The citizens of Dale have decided to crown Bilbo their new king,” Bofur announced gleefully. Bilbo promptly reached up and removed the crown from his head, stuffing it back into his pocket with a scowl.

“I’m never going to Dale again,” he muttered, turning back to his leg of pork. He didn’t have to look up to know that all the dwarves were now staring at him. He decided to ignore them all.

“Oh, this should be interesting,” he heard Kíli say with far too much enthusiasm.

Bofur was all too eager to recount their visit to the city of Dale, taking special care to describe all the praises the people had heaped on the hobbit. Through it all Bilbo just sat there and ate, scowling at his plate, until he couldn’t stand it any longer.

“Oh, for Valar’s sake, I’m not replacing Bard, or any other king for that matter,” he burst out when Bofur finished, which caused the dwarves around him to start snickering. He gave them a weak glare. “The people of Dale have all gone mad. I think I’m going to avoid the city for the next ten years until they forget about me.”

“Is it really so bad?” Fíli asked. Bilbo sighed.

“It’s not bad, just terribly embarrassing. I can’t even buy a scarf without ten people trying to thank me.” He shook his head. “Everything was much easier before the memorial, when nobody paid any attention to me. But Bard had to go and make that ridiculous announcement and now nobody will leave me alone. Why they have to make such fuss over a bit of gold, I have no idea.”

He saw the dwarves exchange amused glances, but he quickly stopped paying attention to them,
Confounding Bard and his conviction that Bilbo’s gift hadn’t been properly appreciated, Bilbo thought as he walked back to his quarters, the paper crown still in his pocket. He had no need for all this fuss.

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The package with his clothes arrived a week later, carried by the tailor’s young apprentice. Bilbo gave the lad a silver coin for his troubles and the boy went away, looking far more enthusiastic than a simple delivery would warrant. Bilbo carried the burly package to the bedroom where he put it on the bed to unwrap it. He was very pleased to find that all the clothes looked exactly as he had wanted them and all appeared to be the right size.

He was almost ready to just leave the pile where it was and sort through the clothes more closely later, when he noticed a flat wrapped parcel buried under all the other clothes. Bilbo drew it out, curious. What could it be? He tugged at the strings tied around the paper and pulled the wrappings apart to discover a beautiful winter coat made out of snow-white fur. He ran a gentle hand over the soft fur, feeling puzzled. He didn’t recall ordering anything like this from the tailor.

Before he could ponder the mystery of the coat any further, there was a loud knock on this door. He laid the garment back on the bed and went to answer the door. To his surprise he discovered Dís standing on the other side. The dwarf woman didn’t wait for him to invite her in, simply walked inside, where she kept giving him a pointed look until he remembered to close the door behind her.

Bilbo closed the door, feeling completely out of his element. Why was she here? Dís rarely talked to him and never visited his quarters. To have her visit him so suddenly was certainly unexpected. Luckily for Bilbo, he didn’t have to wait long to discover the reason for her visit.

“I’ve had enough of this,” she began in a firm voice, deepening Bilbo’s confusion.

“I beg you pardon?” Bilbo asked. She spun around to face him.

“I have watched you two dance around each other for months now and I have run out of patience. Either reject him, or start courting properly, but this half-arsed masquerade you two are playing is starting to get really annoying.”

Dís put her hands on her hips, staring Bilbo down. Bilbo felt utterly lost. He blinked a few times, trying to make some sense of her words.

“I am sorry, what? What are you talking about?”

“You and Thorin, of course,” she said like it was obvious. When she saw his ongoing bafflement, her stern gaze softened a bit. She blew out a small breath and shook her head in disbelief. “If you were someone else, I would think you were just leading him on and playing dumb about it, but you are far too honest for that. I’m now forced to believe that my sons were right in their assessment after all. You really have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Bilbo shook his head. Dís ran a hand through her hair, deliberating her next move. Finally she turned her piercing gaze back on Bilbo, making him feel like she was staring into his very soul.

“Well,” she said. “I have no bet placed in the pool, so I might as well tell you, because you are utterly hopeless and Mahal knows that my brother is much too honourable to break traditions for something as insignificant as his own happiness:

“Thorin loves you.”
She gave Bilbo a few seconds for the piece of information to sink in before she continued.

“He has been in love with you for months, which is part of the reason why he’s been so insufferable to be around. Since you arrived, he has been trying to court you subtly, but apparently that subtlety was completely lost on you. He is almost ready to give up, because he is convinced that you do not return his regard.”

Bilbo let out a breath of disbelief, sitting down into one of his armchairs when the full force of what he’d been told finally caught up to him.

“He loves me?” He gave her a bewildered look. “Why did nobody tell me? I had absolutely no idea. I thought he was just being friendly to compensate for the way he had treated me in the past.”

Dís shook her head in exasperation over his reaction.

“Honestly, you men are all so clueless. Thorin is a fool in love, and unless I am much mistaken, he couldn’t be more wrong about you.”

Her gaze on Bilbo suddenly sharpened, making him freeze like a rabbit stalked by a wolf.

“I will only ask this once, so I want you to give me an honest answer: Do you love my brother? If you do not, you should end this charade once and for all before he goes and makes a fool of himself in public.”

It took all of Bilbo’s willpower to continue holding her gaze.

“I like him,” he admitted finally, “very much. I am not sure if I am in love with him yet, but I’m well on my way there. I tried not to get my hopes up too much, because I believed that he would never be interested in me after the rejection.”

“You really are a pair of idiots.” Dís appeared torn between exasperation and amusement. “I think you deserve each other, since you are both equally clueless. If I hadn’t decided to have this conversation with you, you would have both continued to mope around Erebor for the next twenty years.”

“But he never said anything!” Bilbo protested. “He never told me that he’s interested in me. How was I supposed to know?”

“He never said anything to you, because he couldn’t,” Dís explained. “In our customs, it is forbidden to continue pursuing someone after they had already rejected you. The only reason why nobody was scandalised by his behaviour is because nobody knew that you had already refused a proposal from him in the first place.”

“I had no idea about any of this,” Bilbo said. “I even asked Bofur about dwarven courting customs, but he told me that there has to be a declaration of intent for the courting to start.”

Dís grimaced.

“Thorin was trying to find a way around the tradition and was hoping that he could make you like him enough to approach him yourself. I see now that the only thing he managed to accomplish was to confuse you.” She pinned him with the gaze again. “You really do like him then? You won’t change your mind in the future?”

“No,” Bilbo gave a decisive shake of his head. “No, I’m pretty sure that I will not change my mind. It took me a long time to start liking him, but now that I do, I don’t plan to ever stop. I have spent
long weeks convinced that I would never have anything with him, so to hear you say that he loves me is more than I have ever hoped for.”

Bilbo stood up.

“Since you are already here, you might as well tell me what you think about my birthday gift for him.”

He went to one of the nearby cupboards and took out the large pile of folded fabric that he had been working on for the last three weeks. He laid it on the table and gestured for Dís to take a look at it.

“I am planning to give this to Thorin. Do you think he will like it?”

Dís grasped the edges of fabric with her hands and shook it out, her eyes widening when she saw the embroidery on the cloak.

“This must have taken a lot of work.”

Bilbo nodded.

“Almost a month. It’s still not finished, but the rest of the work shouldn’t take more than a few days. Do you think it’s appropriate?”

“This is a kingly gift,” she said, laying the fabric carefully over an armchair, so that she could run a careful hand over the golden patterns. “How did you know the right size?”

“I convinced Kíli to let me take his measurements,” Bilbo admitted. “He and Thorin are close enough in size for a cloak.”

“Oh?” Dís raised an eyebrow. “And how did you convince my son to keep secret about this?”

“I bribed him with apple pies,” Bilbo said with a smile. “He doesn’t know that I’m making a cloak, only that I wanted to sew something. He probably has some idea that I’m making something for Thorin, but he likes Thorin too much to spoil the surprise for him.”

“So he does,” Dís said quietly. He turned her gaze back on him. “You surprise me. You didn’t know that my brother likes you, and yet you were willing to make this for him. How would you justify giving him something like this?”

Bilbo lowered his gaze to the cloak before him.

“I had planned to approach him eventually and confess everything, with the full expectation that he would refuse me. Hearing this from you gives me hope that it may go well after all.”

“I would go to him as soon as possible, if I were you,” she told him. “He’s been driving me spare for days now. The sooner you two get together, the better.”

She smiled suddenly, a genuine smile that lit up her eyes from the inside. Bilbo felt his breath catch when he saw it. No wonder Dís has so many admirers, he thought in wonder, any man would fall over his own feet for a smile like that. He smiled back.

“I am glad you like him,” she said. “My brother may have many faults, the chief of them being his pride and stubbornness, but he has a good heart, even if it may not seem like it sometimes. I had long hoped that he would find someone he could love, but nobody had ever caught his eye. You seem to be the only exception. I had wondered at his taste at first, but now I see that he has chosen well.” Her
eyes narrowed. “If you hurt him...”

Bilbo hastened to reassure her, raising his hands in front of him like a shield.

“You will make mincemeat out of me, I know. I have seen you with a sword and have only the utmost respect for your fighting abilities.”

She nodded.

“Good. Then we understand each other.”

“We do.” He gave her a heart-felt smile. “Thank you for doing this. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t disappoint me,” her gaze still had the appearance of sternness, but there was warmth in it as well when she looked at him. “If you do this well, I will be happy to welcome you into the family.”

She made her way to the door, but paused with her hand on the handle.

“By the way, everyone thinks that you two have been courting for weeks.” And with that she turned and strode out of the door, leaving Bilbo gaping after her.

Weeks?

He returned to his bedroom, where the mysterious fur coat still lay on the bed where he had left it. Bilbo lifted it slowly, taking in all the details. As the folds of the fabric parted, a small piece of parchment fell out. Bilbo laid down the coat and reached for the note, his heart picking up beat when he saw the familiar spiky writing.

_I hope you will find this coat to your liking._

_Yours,
Thorin_

Well, Bilbo thought, a wide smile spreading on his face, he would have probably figured this out on his own sooner or later anyway.

*****

“So, what’s the bet?” Bilbo asked Fíli and Kíli when they came for a visit after lunch.

They both looked at him with identical looks of horror, which they promptly tried to smooth out into cool nonchalance. Fíli was a little more successful in his attempt than Kíli, but neither of them quite managed to cover their surprise at Bilbo’s sudden knowledge. They both looked like they had been caught with their hand in a cookie jar. It amused Bilbo to no end.

That’s what they get for trying to keep important things from me, he thought as he watched them squirm in their armchairs. Bilbo had decided to put off his confrontation with Thorin for a bit longer and gather some information instead. He had been left in the dark for long enough. If he was to make an offer to Thorin, he should have as much advantage at his side as he could. Information was a powerful weapon, if one knew how to wield it.

Since neither of them appeared willing to be the first to betray the secret, he tried again.

“I know that there is a bet about me and Thorin that apparently everyone except for me knew about. So, spill. What is it?” When the silence continued, he gave them a hurt look. “I thought you were my friends, but now I’m having my doubts.”
His tactic, however underhanded, worked like a charm. Kíli wiggled in his seat a bit, before he burst out, carefully not looking at his brother:

“We wanted to tell you, but couldn’t, because we would have lost the bet if we told you anything.”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. Kíli grinned.

“Besides, we were having too much fun watching you two dance around each other to spoil it.”

“We almost lost the bet anyway,” Fíli gave his brother a half-hearted glare, “because Kíli here decided that it would be hilarious to meddle in your affairs.”

“I only tried to make Thorin a little jealous, Kíli protested. “Instead, I nearly caused him to give up on you, because he thought I was being serious,” Kíli made a face.

“So, what is the bet?” Bilbo said, sitting down into one of the free armchairs. “Since I already know about its existence, I believe you can tell me.”

The brothers exchanged a look, before Fíli gave Kíli a nod. The dark haired dwarf turned back to Bilbo.

“Well, since you already know about the bet, I suppose this doesn’t really count.” He took a breath. “Everyone is betting on when you and Thorin will start courting. A few companions have already lost the bet because they thought that you would be together already.” He gave Bilbo a grin. “You two have made some people so frustrated, you have no idea.”

“No, I don’t.” Bilbo sat back in his chair, trying to digest the information. “Are you telling me that everybody is waiting for me to ask him?”

They both nodded.

“Well, technically everybody’s been waiting for him to ask you, but since he can’t, then yes - everybody’s been waiting for you to ask him,” Fíli answered.

“Goodness,” Bilbo said in deadpan. “Not only do I have the citizens of Dale following me around like puppies, now I also find out that half of Erebor has been betting on the state of my love life.” He shook his head in exasperation. “Shire had nothing on this.”


“Your mother mentioned something about everyone thinking that we have been courting for weeks.” He gave them a look of alarm. “That’s not true, is it?”

“Well...” Fíli started.

“Mum was here?” Kíli spoke over him. Bilbo nodded.

“She came here before lunch to knock some sense into me. Her visit was very illuminating.”

“I can believe that,” Kíli muttered.

“Back to your original question,” Fíli said. “I am afraid she was right about therumour. There is indeed a pretty big part of the population that is convinced that you and Thorin have been courting for a while.” He made an apologetic face.

“But how?” Bilbo was baffled. “Why would they think that? There was never any announcement,
official or not.”

“You really have no idea?” Kíli asked. “The announcement is always more of a formality than anything. Even without it there were plenty of things that rumour-hungry gossips could draw their inspiration from.”

“Such as?” Bilbo raised an eyebrow.

“Do you need a list?” Kíli gave him a look. When Bilbo nodded, he sighed. “Very well. To start, when you came here, he took you on a tour of the mountain. Plenty of people saw you together back then, which started the speculations in the first place. The news of your banishment killed the rumours for a bit, but after you gave him the tapestry they started up stronger than ever.”

“Then he asked you for a dance,” Fíli said. At Bilbo’s questioning look, he elaborated. “Uncle never dances with anyone. The weaving loom he gave you became a small public secret. Then you had to go and give him that chain with diamonds.”

“That was a trade!” Bilbo protested. “He gave me money for it.”

“The people who saw you didn’t see it that way,” Kíli told him. “Bofur saw the whole thing and he confirmed that it hadn’t looked like a trade to him, either.”

“And then you convinced him to play the harp for you.” Fíli sighed. “Thorin hasn’t touched a harp since you left. Even a blind orc with a cane would be able to put two and two together after that.” He gave Bilbo a look. “We watched you two circle around each other for weeks. You are both really utterly hopeless at this. It’s no wonder mum ran out of patience and went to sort you out. Dwalín was almost ready to lock you in a room together.”

“Dwalín has been-“ Bilbo got a laughing fit, finding the idea that even Dwalin was apparently interested in his private life too ridiculous to comprehend.

“Believe me, I know,” Fíli made a sympathetic face. Bilbo tried to get his mirth under control.

“Well, when you put it like this, it really sounds like we are both incredibly dense when it comes to this.”

“You are,” Kíli nodded gleefully. “It was quite entertaining to watch at first, but got frustrating really quickly.”

“What are you going to do now?” Fíli asked.

“I am going to talk to Thorin,” Bilbo said. “I would have arrived at this point eventually anyway, your mother just helped to speed the process up a bit. I just wanted to talk to you beforehand to confirm if the rumours are true.”

“They are.” Fíli nodded. “Thorin is incredibly lucky that you like him even after all the things he has put you through, or this would be a huge embarrassment for him. The local dwarves are expecting an announcement any day and have been growing increasingly confused by Thorin’s silence.”

Bilbo sat back, shaking his head.

“I had no idea about any of this.”

“I think it was better this way,” Kíli said. He gave Bilbo a searching look. “You are going to start courting, right?”
Bilbo smiled.

“Yes. If everything goes well with Thorin, there should be an announcement soon. At least, that’s what I’m hoping for,” he added. “There is always the possibility that Thorin will turn me down.” He stood up, silencing their protests with a look. “Will you wish me luck?”

“Of course,” they both said. Kili jumped from his chair and gave Bilbo an enthusiastic hug.

“Good luck.”

Fili stepped forward to do the same.

“We will keep our fingers crossed for you,” he said when he pulled back. “Not that you will need it. Uncle will trip over his own feet the moment he sees you.”

Bilbo still had his doubts, but left them to their conviction. He decided that he would go to Thorin after dinner. If he were to be rejected, it was better if nobody saw his walk of shame back to his rooms. Since there was still plenty of time until the evening, he made some tea and hosted the dwarves for the rest of the afternoon.

He listened to their chatter and chuckled at their jokes, but inwardly couldn’t help but count every minute.

Evening couldn’t come fast enough.

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for the support you continue to give me. I am so happy that you like the story :)

The next chapter will be posted on October 10.
The moment of truth

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to everyone who left comments on the previous chapter! The sheer number completely floored me and I'm super happy that you liked the chapter. I hope you will like this one as well :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bilbo spent the rest of the day deep in thought, trying to come up with a way to approach Thorin that wouldn’t make the dwarf run for the hills. In the end he decided that honesty would probably be the best policy. After the dinner was done and most of the Company had gone to the common room, Bilbo gathered his courage and went to knock on Thorin’s door.

As he waited there for the dwarf to open the door for him, he tried to calm down his rising nervousness with the thought that the worst thing that could happen to him behind that door would be for Thorin to reject him. Dís didn’t think it was very probable, but Bilbo was willing to give Thorin the benefit of the doubt. The unpleasant thought made Bilbo’s stomach fill with ice and he almost turned on his heal and fled, but his stubbornness held him in place. He had already rejected the dwarf’s offer once, so he thought that it was only fair if this time it was him who put his head on the chopping block.

Thorin opened the door, the look of surprise evident on his face when he saw Bilbo standing there.

“May I come in?” Bilbo asked. To his great relief the room appeared to be empty. Good. It this went badly after all, there would be nobody to witness the failure.

Thorin nodded, stepping back from the doorway. Bilbo tried to remember how to walk. He had never been so nervous in all his life. He stepped over the threshold and crossed the room to stand next to Thorin’s desk, where he turned to watch Thorin close the door behind him.

This was it. The moment of truth.

Thorin remained standing by the door with an expectant expression on his face. Bilbo took several calming breaths, belatedly realizing that he had no idea how to do this.

“I had a very illuminating visit from your sister today,” Bilbo began, saying the first thing that came to his mind. “She told me a few things that I have been unaware of.”

“Such as?” One of Thorin’s eyebrows shot up. It was clear that the dwarf wouldn’t make this easy for him. Bilbo supposed that it was only to be expected, considering the way he himself had reacted the last time they had had a conversation like this.

Bilbo took a step towards him, then stopped. He figured it would be better to remain where he was in case his offer wasn’t welcome after all.

“Apparently everyone except me lives under the impression that the two of us are courting.” He tried to keep his voice as neutral as he could, but Thorin still closed his eyes briefly, as if he was preparing for a defeat. That little show of weakness gave Bilbo the courage to continue.
“If it’s any excuse, I had no idea what you were doing, because nobody bothered to explain anything to me,” Bilbo said softly. “I knew nothing about dwarven courtship when I came here and what I did learn didn’t help me with this situation in the slightest.” He raised his head to look Thorin in the eyes. “I am not normally this clueless about things, but I have little experience with romantic gestures of any kind and you have never been easy to read for me.”

“I am still not sure, what is the purpose of your visit,” Thorin said carefully. Bilbo bit his lip, taking a fortifying breath.

“I am aware that this is a highly inappropriate request to make, since I lost any claim I might have had on your affections when I rejected your offer five years ago, and that you are fully within your rights to refuse me, but if you are amenable, I would like to court you.” He said it all in one breath and felt utterly exhausted at the end, like he had just pushed an enormous boulder all the way to the top of the mountain.

“What did you say?” Thorin’s face was still unreadable, but he took a step towards Bilbo, something like hope beginning to bloom in his eyes.

Bilbo raised his chin.

“You can laugh at me if you wish – you would be justified in that, but I like you and I would like to court you, if you are open to the idea.”

Thorin’s breath left him in a whoosh.

“I was not sure if I heard you correctly the first time.” He gave Bilbo a searching look. “Are you aware what you are offering me?”

“I have a pretty good idea.” Bilbo nodded.

“If that is the case, then my answer is yes,” Thorin said, a smile lighting up his face. “Yes, I accept your offer of courtship.”

Bilbo sank back against the desk, his legs suddenly having trouble holding up his weight.

“Oh thank Valar. I was half convinced you would throw me out again if I did this.”

“No,” Thorin said, crossing the room to stand before Bilbo, “I could never treat you like that again.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Bilbo smiled at him. “I think this is the bravest thing I’ve ever done, stealing from the dragon included.”

Thorin raised his hand slowly and laid it on Bilbo’s cheek.

“I admire your courage in coming to me.”

“I am so glad you said yes,” Bilbo told him. “You have no idea.”

“No, I do not,” Thorin said quietly, stepping closer. “Tell me what made you change your mind.”

“Dís paid me a visit in my quarters this morning,” Bilbo said. “She came to inquire why I wasn’t responding properly to your courtship.” He made a face. “Of course, until today, I had no idea that there was any courtship taking place at all.”

“I was aiming for subtlety,” Thorin said with a crooked smile. “I can see now that it was not the best tactic to choose.”
Bilbo laid a hand on Thorin’s chest, enjoying the steady drum of heartbeat under his palm and the fact that he could finally touch him.

“It would have been a fine tactic under normal circumstances, if it wasn’t for the fact that I had no idea what dwarvish courting looked like and I was convinced that you were just being friendly. You can hardly blame me for not looking for any clues from you.”

“Dís tried to warn me that my tactic might not work, but I refused to listen to her,” Thorin admitted. “I believe I owe her an apology.”

“We both owe her a thank you,” Bilbo said, sliding both hands to Thorin’s shoulders. Thorin wrapped his arms around his waist, drawing him into an embrace. Bilbo went gladly, burying his head in the dwarf’s neck.

“I hoped that if I impress you enough, you may become tempted to make the necessary step yourself,” Thorin murmured into Bilbo’s hair.

“Oh, I was tempted,” Bilbo told him. “You have no idea how tempted I was, but I was convinced that you would never be interested in me again, so I kept myself from approaching you.”

Thorin sighed.

“It was...frustrating to see the difference in your behaviour when you talked to the others compared to when you spoke to me. You were always so formal in my presence. I found that I did not like it, especially after I saw how you act with my nephews.” He pulled back a little to be able to see Bilbo’s face. “There is truly nothing between you and Kíli?”

Bilbo laughed, shaking his head.

“No. I found out today that he was trying to make you jealous on purpose, so that you would make the first step.”

“He did make me jealous,” Thorin admitted. “Watching you two together felt like he was parading you under my nose.”

“I think he did it as a revenge for my banishment,” Bilbo said.

“He couldn’t have chosen a more effective way.” Thorin’s gaze slid to Bilbo’s mouth. “May I kiss you?”

Bilbo gave him a smile.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

He was still smiling when Thorin brushed his lips against his mouth. A sharp thrill ran through Bilbo’s chest at the first contact and he pressed himself closer, eager to join the gentle dance. He closed his eyes and let himself enjoy the sensations – soft lips against his own, large hands holding his waist in a gentle grip, a slight scratching of beard on his chin. The room around them disappeared as his entire world shrunk into the single point of contact and the sensual touch of their lips together.

Bilbo slid his hands from Thorin’s neck into his hair, and felt a thrill of excitement when the dwarf shivered against him. The hands on his waist tightened a bit, drawing him closer and he felt an answering shiver run through his own body when they finally stood pressed from head to toe. The kiss deepened and one of them moaned at that, but Bilbo was too far gone by that point to find out which of them it had been.
The kisses seemed to go on forever, nearly drowning him with the intensity, but he found that he
didn’t wish them to stop. Bilbo had no idea how long they had kissed – possibly hours. They would
have probably kissed the whole night, if Bilbo hadn’t remembered the half-joking promise Kíli had
given him on his departure just as Thorin’s hand started to slide lower to rest possessively on Bilbo’s
backside. Bilbo pulled back from the kiss with a small sigh of regret.

“As much as I would love nothing more than to stay here and continue this pleasurable activity, I am
half-convinced that your nephews are spying behind the door, prepared to drag you away from me if
you so much as look at me the wrong way.”

Thorin gave the door in question a weary look.

“You are probably right. I think I will have to invest in some quality locks in the future.”

“You should,” Bilbo told him with a grin. “I don’t fancy being interrupted by your relatives every
time you come within five feet of me.” Something occurred to him.

“How does this courting business work? Did we just start courting today, or have we been courting
for weeks? Everybody seems to think it’s the latter case.”

“Would you mind terribly if we let them think that?” Thorin asked, watching Bilbo’s face closely.

“No,” Bilbo smiled, tucking a strand of Thorin’s hair behind his ear. “It will save us the trouble of
having to explain why you couldn’t court me in the first place. The fewer people know about our
unfortunate incident, the better. We can just tell the rest that I was extremely clueless and needed
some encouragement.”

“I am sure Dís will be happy to take the credit for it,” Thorin told him. Before he could say anything
else, the side door to the chamber cracked open a bit and two curious heads poked into the room.

“Oh, good, you still have your clothes on,” Kíli said, striding into the room. Bilbo didn’t bother to
move from his place in Thorin’s arms.

“Why are you two here?” Thorin asked his nephews, the displeasure clear in his voice.

“We are here to chaperone you,” Fíli announced brightly. “To make sure there’s no funny business
going on.”

Bilbo buried his head into Thorin’s shoulder, laughing.

“What did I tell you?”

“Your prediction was frighteningly accurate.” Thorin said, turning to glare at the dwarves. “Are you
two going to stand here all night?”

“If we have to, yes,” Fíli said. “We have already left you alone for long enough.”

Bilbo raised his head to give Thorin an amused smile.

“I don’t think we can convince them to leave.”

“Are you two finally together, then?” Kíli asked, looking between them.

“What do you think?” Bilbo retorted, giving Thorin’s arms around his waist a pointed look.

“I think we interrupted you just in time,” Fíli said, grinning.
Bilbo and Thorin exchanged an amused glance at that, but Bilbo’s amusement didn’t hold long. Thorin’s eyes held a dark sort of promise when he looked at him and Bilbo realized that he was very much looking forward to having that promise fulfilled. Soon, if possible, and definitely without any nosy relatives around to barge in on them. He remembered Thorin’s words about sidestepping tradition and couldn’t help but wonder just how far Thorin would be willing to go to defy that tradition. Judging by the look in the dwarf’s eyes, tradition was the last thing on his mind at the moment.

“Oh, for Mahal’s sake, get your minds out of the gutter,” Kíli’s voice cut through their reverie. “There are young impressionable people in the room, you know.”

That made Bilbo chuckle.

“Nobody’s forcing you to be here,” he told Kíli with a sly grin.

“Mum would skin us alive if we left you alone,” Fíli said. He turned to Thorin. “You know the customs as well as we do. Can’t you at least maintain the illusion of propriety and wait until the announcement before you jump each other?”

Thorin released Bilbo from his arms with great reluctance.

“Very well, I will let you escort him back to his rooms.”

He walked with them to the door, where he drew Bilbo close for one last goodnight kiss. Bilbo went more than willingly and couldn’t help but laugh when he pulled back and saw that the dwarves had both clapped their hands over their eyes. The young dwarves were both pretending to be disgusted by their display of affection, but Bilbo didn’t miss that they both had pleased grins behind their hands.

“Come now, Bilbo,” Fíli said, ushering the hobbit out of the door. “You two can see each other tomorrow.”

Bilbo gave Thorin one last lingering glance before he let the king’s nephews accompany him to his room, listening to their excited chatter with only half an ear. His head was full of the events of that evening.

Had he really proposed courtship to Thorin? And Thorin had accepted? Just yesterday he would have thought such a thing impossible, and yet here he was, engaged to the king of Erebor, with his lips still tender from the Thorin’s kisses. He fought the urge to do a happy dance in the corridor and instead just smiled, knowing that he must look a bit silly, grinning at nothing in particular.

Fíli and Kíli gave him a single glance when they arrived at his door and wished him good night, wisely concluding that there wouldn’t be much reasonable conversation with him tonight. He waited for the door to close before he spun in place in sheer joy, the endless world of possibilities opening before him.

Finding out that Thorin returned his feelings had been the best things to happen to him in years. He couldn’t wait to see the faces of his friends when they found out about it.

It took him a long time to fall asleep that night, his mind filled to bursting with happiness and excitement, but when he did, he dreamt of Thorin.

*****

Bilbo woke up at the crack of dawn with a smile on his face. It took him a few heartbeats to
remember why he felt so happy, but when he did remember, he was flooded with a wave of giddiness so strong that he had to clutch his blanket close, his smile getting impossibly wide.

He was engaged to Thorin Oakenshield. He, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, had finally gotten his wish. He had never even imagined something like this when he had left the Shire half a year ago, but now that he had this, he wouldn’t exchange it for anything in the world. Let the dwarfs keep their treasure – this feeling alone was more precious than all the gems in the world.

Breakfast was still almost an hour away, so he took his time getting ready, giving into the temptation to wear the new clothes that the tailor’s boy had brought him yesterday. He was pleased to discover that they fit him well and the materials had been crafted with obvious skill. Bilbo had never been very vain about his appearance beyond his fondness of nice clothes, but he took the care to look into the mirror now, checking for anything out of place.

The air around him seemed lighter than usual when he walked to the dining hall and he smiled pleasantly at the passing dwarfs, most of whom smiled back, much to Bilbo’s astonishment. He decided to ponder that mystery some other time, because he had just reached the door to the dining hall. Bilbo walked in to find all the dwarves huddled together in the middle of the room, where they appeared to be squabbling over something. It was Nori who spotted him first.

“Bilbo!”

“Is it true?” Glóin demanded.

“Is what true?” Bilbo asked, confused.

Before anyone else could say anything, the door on the opposite side of the room opened and Thorin walked in. Their eyes met and Bilbo could feel that familiar flutter in his chest at the contact. He wouldn’t have been able to keep the smile off his face even if he tried.

“Oh, Mahal, finally,” Dwalin said. Everybody turned to look at him. The burly dwarf shrugged. “I’m not blind.”

Bofur gave a loud whoop.

“Yes! I was right.”

Nori, too, looked very pleased, but the others started groaning, shooting Bilbo and Thorin grumpy glances. Bilbo felt a little taken aback. Were they not happy for him?

“They lost the bet,” Balin told him with a smile, coming to stand next to him. “All the others bet that you two would be together ages ago.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” Bilbo told them with a grin. “I am afraid that I can be terribly obtuse at times.”

A few of the dwarves gave him half-hearted glares, but it was obvious that none of them were truly cross with him. Bilbo stopped noticing them right after because Thorin had walked over to him, looking at him with warm, amused eyes.

“I believe now would be a good time to inform our friends of this new development.”

Bilbo smiled at him.

“They all seem to know already, but you can go ahead, if you wish.”
Thorin offered him a hand, which Bilbo was only too happy to take. They turned to face the others with their clasped hands between them and found the dwarves all wearing wide grins.

“You may have probably guessed already,” Thorin began, “but tradition requires that these words should be said out loud to prevent any misunderstandings.” He and Bilbo exchanged a brief, amused glance. Thorin took a breath. “Bilbo and I have started courting.”

A loud cheer went up at that, as the dwarves clapped and stomped and whooped. Bilbo realized that he had almost forgotten how much racket a band of dwarves could make when they put their minds to it and had to smile when he saw that his friends were all happy for him.

Once they stopped their cheers, the dwarves all huddled around them to congratulate them on their courtship. Bilbo had to withstand several hugs and many vigorous pats on the back, but didn’t mind in the slightest. He was a little surprised by how happy Thorin looked standing there, surrounded by the acceptance of people whom he had finally started to call his friends. They would have stood there for a good while longer, if Bombur’s mother hadn’t arrived with a dangerous gleam in her eyes and ushered them to the table.

“Are you two really together?” Ori asked once they were seated. Despite the previous announcement, he still looked a bit doubtful. Bilbo nodded. Ori threw a furtive look in Thorin’s direction before he leaned over the table in an attempt at discretion. “And you like him?”

Bilbo noticed the curious glances sent his way and decided to have a bit of fun.

“No, of course not,” he said with a perfectly straight face. “I’m only doing it for the money.” He took a few seconds to enjoy the shocked silence that had fallen over the table before he continued. “Oh, and the title, we can’t forget that. I have always loved fancy titles.”

Fíli and Kíli started snickering at that, catching onto the joke. Balin looked rather amused as well, but poor Ori looked terribly confused. Bilbo kept his face straight with great effort.

“Though I suppose the good looks don’t hurt, either,” he finished, shooting an appreciative glance in Thorin’s direction. Bilbo could no longer hold his serious expression and started chuckling at their reactions. “Oh, if you could only see your faces right now. I can’t believe anyone thought that I was being serious.”

“You’ve been spending far too much time with Fíli and Kíli,” Dori said, shaking his head. “You used to be such a terrible liar.”

“That’s what you get for betting on me behind my back,” Bilbo told them. A few of them had the good grace to look a bit ashamed for keeping it from him, but most of them were just amused by the whole thing.

The rest of the breakfast passed in a merry mood, as the dwarves decided to tell Bilbo all about the bet and the many unsuccessful guesses they had made about him and Thorin. Bilbo couldn’t help but shake his head in exasperation even as he laughed at some of the tips they had made, because he found the idea that his friends could find so much entertainment in his private affairs utterly ridiculous.

Thorin came to him after the breakfast was over, leaning close to avoid being overheard.

“There is something I would like to show you. Will you come with me?”

Bilbo gave him a smile.
“I will be happy to.”

As they walked through the corridors, Bilbo noticed that Balin had joined them as well, probably out of respect for the traditions, but was discreetly keeping enough distance for them to talk in relative privacy. They took to route to the royal wing of the living quarters and for a short moment Bilbo thought that they were going to Thorin’s chambers, but then the dwarf passed his own door, turned right and led Bilbo to another, similar door around the corner.

Thorin stopped by the door and gestured for Bilbo to go first. To his surprise, Bilbo noticed that the normally unflappable dwarf looked rather nervous. That discovery only strengthened Bilbo’s curiosity, making him eager to find out what was behind that door. He put his hand on the knob and turned, revealing a beautiful, fully furnished sitting room.

Bilbo took a moment just to look at the room. It had a similar layout to his own sitting room here in Erebor, but was a lot bigger and the furniture looked more luxurious. Everything was done in soft shades of brown and beige and with a jolt Bilbo realized that the whole layout looked a lot like his own home back in the Shire. He shot a questioning look at Thorin, who gave him a nod and a smile, giving him a silent permission to explore to his heart’s content.

The wall opposite the door was dominated by an enormous marble fireplace that had a large fur rug laid in front of it. There were several armchairs standing around the fireplace and a massive wooden desk in the corner. One of the walls was covered with bookshelves, some of which were already full, but several still stood empty, awaiting new volumes. Between the armchairs and the bookshelves was just enough free space for a weaving loom.

There were four doors leading out of the sitting room. Going out on a limb, Bilbo chose the door on the right and couldn’t help his blush when he discovered the enormous bed that stood proudly by the opposite wall. The bed quickly slipped from his mind, however, when he saw the door to the balcony. As if drawn by some foreign force, he made his way over to the door and let out a small gasp of wonder upon seeing the large terrace beyond.

This was nothing like the small stone balcony in his room – the terrace was at least twenty five feet long and fifteen feet wide and covered with soil that just begged him to plant something. Most of the terrace was protected from the wind by the tall mountain walls on each side, but the top was open, allowing the rain to fall freely. Bilbo experienced a strong pang of disappointment that it was December and he would be forced to wait for at least another three months before he could start working here.

Bilbo finally turned to find Thorin standing by the balcony door, watching him.

“How do you find these rooms?”

“They are wonderful,” Bilbo said truthfully. “It must have taken a lot of work to put all this together.”

“They are yours,” Thorin said, crossing the terrace to stand before him. “These rooms have always been meant for you.” He probably saw Bilbo’s puzzled look, because he reached out and ran a gentle hand down his face. Bilbo leaned into the touch.

“These quarters used to belong to my grandmother, back before the dragon came,” Thorin explained. “She loved gardening and would spend many hours on this terrace. She had a beautiful garden here, full of flowers and herbs and rose bushes. I used to come here all the time and watch her work when I was a boy.” His eyes turned distant for the moment, filling with fond memories. “After we reclaimed the mountain, I had started to hope that one day they might host a different occupant.”
When Thorin finally gazed back at Bilbo, the light in his eyes made it suddenly hard to breathe.

“These were prepared for you years ago,” Thorin continued. “I had hoped that when you finally come to Erebor and Balin puts you in them, you will like them enough to be tempted to stay in Erebor permanently.” He chuckled suddenly, a sparkle of humour entering his gaze. “Of course, Kíli had to go and thwart those plans of mine, so I had to resort to other methods.”

Bilbo gave him a soft smile.

“Kíli was acting on my wishes when he did that. Before we came here, I had asked him to put me somewhere out of the way, since the relations between us were still strained at the time. I had no idea what to expect from you, so I thought it would be better if we crossed paths as little as possible.” He saw Thorin’s downcast expression and hurried to erase it. “Of course, at that time I had no idea about any of this. If I hadn’t been already planning to move to Erebor permanently, this garden alone would have probably convinced me to stay.”

“You like it, then?” Thorin still looked a little unsure. Bilbo took his hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Yes, I do. Very much.”

Thorin drew him into an embrace.

“I am very glad to hear that.”

Bilbo wrapped his arms around the dwarf’s back and enjoyed the warmth and closeness.

“Are you still planning to go travelling in the spring?” Thorin asked a moment later.

“Well, but certainly not this spring,” Bilbo told him. “All this soil will need an awful lot of work before it looks like a garden.”

Remembering Thorin’s previous question, he got a sudden idea. He pulled back a little to give the dwarf a mischievous smile.

“You know, you could come travelling with me,” he told him. “After all, Thranduil invited you to his palace, too.” When Thorin’s face scrunched up in automatic distaste, Bilbo continued. “I bet it’s the last thing he would expect. Imagine all the ways you could annoy him.”

“That thought should not be so tempting,” Thorin tried to hold on to his expression of disgust, but a smile was starting to tug at the corners of his mouth.

“That thought should not be so tempting,” Thorin tried to hold on to his expression of disgust, but a smile was starting to tug at the corners of his mouth.

“And of course we have to invite him to the wedding.” Bilbo started chuckling at the image. “Can you imagine his face when he finds out about it?”

Thorin shook his head in disbelief.

“I had never thought that I would ever willingly host elves in my mountain again.”

Bilbo’s smile widened.

“If you wanted to make this even better, you could try inviting Elrond, too. I have long suspected that Thranduil has some sort of inferiority complex towards him. He has never liked it when I mentioned him. This should be so much fun to watch.”

“And here I thought that it were my nephews, who were corrupting you into mischief.” Thorin gave
him a fond look. “Now I have to wonder if it was not the reverse.”

“No, they are entirely to blame,” Bilbo said with a straight face. “Before I met you lot, I was very respectable, predictable and terribly boring to be around. You dwarves have corrupted me with your adventures.” He sighed. “I wonder what I would be doing now if I hadn’t come with you back then. Probably sitting in my kitchen, bored out of my mind. Shire can be dreadfully dull on the best of days. The last few winters seemed endless.” He gave Thorin a look. “You know, if Kíli hadn’t come in April, I would have packed my stuff and left for Rivendell. It was only good that Kíli came and presented me with a better option.”

“I sent him over with the invitation because I knew that if he gave it to you, you would be at least willing to read what I had to say. He has always been able to talk people into getting his way,” Thorin said with a smile.

“Yes,” Bilbo nodded. “He was quite adamant that I read your letter. I found that I couldn’t refuse him when he had come so far to deliver it.”

“It took me weeks before I was able to write something that you would not toss into flames as soon as you had opened it,” Thorin admitted. “In the end I decided to only send a simple invitation, because all my other attempts ended up sounding angry, or far too personal. I was fully aware that you would not have been in the mood to read something like that.”

“No,” Bilbo said quietly, “not back then.” His voice trailed off as he pondered the meaning of what Thorin had just told him. Had he just admitted that he had been writing Bilbo love letters? He looked up into those blue eyes. “Do you still have those letters?”

“Yes, but only a few.” Thorin looked rather embarrassed by the confession. “I can show them to you some time, if you wish.”

“I do,” Bilbo smiled. “There will be plenty of time over the winter to read them.” Something occurred to him. “I wrote a book about our adventure,” he confessed in turn, “but nobody has read it, because it’s not finished yet.”

“Would you be willing to let me read it?” Thorin asked.

It was Bilbo’s turn to feel embarrassed.

“You can read it, but I am afraid you won’t be pleased with what you find there,” Bilbo told him with a grimace. “None of us are portrayed in a very flattering light. I wasn’t in the best of moods when I wrote it and it shows. I will have to rewrite some of the parts before it’s fit for reading.”

“I would like to read it nonetheless,” Thorin said. “I am well aware that my conduct was at times less than exemplary. It will give me an opportunity to see myself through the eyes of someone else.”

“Very well,” Bilbo said. “But I have to warn you that the author of the book didn’t have a very good opinion of you when he met you.”

“I would be more surprised if he did,” Thorin said with a wry smile.

Bilbo reached up to run a gentle hand along the edge of his jaw.

“Luckily for you, that opinion has changed drastically since then.” He looked around quickly to make sure they were still alone and was pleased to find that Balin had mysteriously forgotten himself in the living room, leaving them without witnesses.
“I would try to convince you of the fact, but I think it will be easier if I show you instead.” He leaned forward with a smile and was pleased when Thorin caught onto his meaning quickly, meeting him halfway.

The kiss was just as good as the ones yesterday had been. Their lips met slowly, enjoying the fact that they had nowhere to rush. Every touch of hands and brush of lips still felt as exhilarating as it had been the first time and Bilbo felt a wave of pure joy suffuse him as the kisses continued. The heat of Thorin’s body could be felt even through the clothes and Bilbo pressed himself closer, letting the warmth melt away the biting frostiness of the cold December air around them.

Thorin spent a while just running his palms over Bilbo’s back with long, slow strokes before he brushed the fingers of his hand over the side of Bilbo’s neck, making him shiver. Pleased with the reaction, he did it again before he reached up and tangled his hand in Bilbo’s hair, turning Bilbo’s knees into jelly. There could be a hundred dragons attacking Erebor at the moment and Bilbo wouldn’t care.

Bilbo had no idea how long they had stood there. A good while, probably, because he felt a little chilled when he finally surfaced from his reverie. There was a soft sound of somebody cleaning their throat behind him and when he turned his head, he saw Balin standing in the doorway, watching them with twinkling eyes.

“I see that the garden meets your approval,” he said.

Bilbo gave him an amused look.

“Oh yes, the garden is wonderful. I was just admiring it before you came.”

From the corner of his eye, he saw Thorin’s amused smile, but didn’t turn back to him, keeping his eyes on Balin. The old dwarf shook his head in fond exasperation.

“While I am very happy that you enjoy the view so much, you should probably both come back inside before you catch a cold. You haven’t even seen the rest of the rooms yet.”

Bilbo nodded.

“It is quite cold.” He gave Thorin a look. “You promised me a tour of the quarters, did you not?”

Thorin gave him a fond smile.

“I believe I did. I am afraid I got a bit sidetracked in the process.”

“Lead the way, then,” Bilbo told him.

Thorin put a hand on his lower back and led them both inside, shutting the door behind them. Balin had gone back to the living room, probably to continue his reading.

“That door leads to my own quarters,” Thorin informed him quietly, pointing towards a door in the corner of the bedroom that Bilbo hadn’t noticed before.

“Does it?” Bilbo raised an eyebrow. “How convenient. It would not look good if one of us was seen sneaking through the corridors in the middle of the night.”

“No indeed,” Thorin agreed with a glint in his eyes, “hardly proper. It would look strange if you moved to these rooms all of a sudden, but I think nobody will object if you do it after the announcement.”
“When do you plan to make this public knowledge?” Bilbo asked.

“I will make an official announcement at my birthday celebration.” He looked to Bilbo for confirmation. Bilbo nodded.

“That is as good a time to make it as any.” He reached down to take Thorin’s hand. “Now come and show me the rest of the rooms before Balin’s overactive imagination gives him a stroke.”

“As you wish.”

To be continued...

Chapter End Notes

When I started writing this story, I set myself a list of things I wanted to do with this fic. My main aim had been to write a (more or less) realistic romance between two fully fleshed out characters – to bring them together naturally, without the use of hackneyed plot devices and lazy shortcuts (magical soulmates etc.). There were also things that I wanted to avoid – over-the-top jealousy, inappropriate possessiveness, manhandling (Thorin), turning Bilbo into a woman and/or a doormat, or going the opposite way and making him an all-powerful Gary Stu.

I’m not saying all of these things are bad – some of them can make a compelling story if they are used well (soulmates, for example, can make for a beautiful romance), but plenty of writers use these tropes to avoid having to write actual feelings and meaningful interactions between characters. Whether I succeeded in my endeavour or not will be up to you to decide.

The last chapter will be posted on October 12.
A night to remember

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As Midwinter approached an excited atmosphere started spreading through Erebor. Everyone was looking forward to the midwinter festivities and Thorin’s birthday party, which both promised plenty of food and entertainment. Despite the huge turn that Bilbo’s life had taken less than two weeks ago, he couldn’t help but marvel at how little had really changed for him.

He still took all his meals with the Company and spent most of his time either in the library or the kitchens, helping his friends with whatever tasks they were currently performing. Even his evenings were similar to the ones before – he usually spent them in his quarters in Thorin’s company, talking or listening to the dwarf play his harp while Bilbo worked on the tapestry.

The only difference were the plentiful kisses that were now a regular part of his every day. Just remembering them made Bilbo blush a little every time he thought of Thorin. The dwarf always found the time during the day to come and see how Bilbo was doing, which often served as an excuse to drag Bilbo somewhere out of sight and kiss him soundly. Not that Bilbo complained. If it were up to him, they would be spending entire days curled together in front of the fireplace in Bilbo’s quarters.

Bilbo couldn’t help but feel a little amused with their situation. Here they were - a majestic dwarven king and a respectable hobbit, sneaking around the dark alcoves in Erebor to steal kisses like a pair of smitten youngsters. More than once it made him wonder why he found such a ridiculous thing so thrilling, but he could never find a satisfying answer.

Maybe it was the novelty of it all that caused his heart to give an excited flutter every time Thorin walked into the room. Maybe it was the fact that he had finally gotten his wish, after so many weeks of uncertainty.

Or maybe he was just in love.

His mind no longer shied away from that thought. Instead, he welcomed it, enjoying the rush of joy he felt every time Thorin looked at him or touched him. And touch him he did. Now that Thorin knew his advances were welcome, he couldn’t seem to get enough of Bilbo. More than one evening had been spent in slow exploration, their questing hands skimming over buttons and under shirts.

They still kept their clothes on, though, because their friends from the Company had lately developed a most annoying habit of barging into Bilbo’s quarters unannounced to “chaperone” them. Bilbo thought it was a bit ridiculous that anyone thought they needed a chaperone at their age, but the traditions demanded it, and since Thorin was supposed to lead by example, they had to at least keep up the pretence of upholding the traditions. Still, judging by Thorin’s growing frustration at getting his private time interrupted, Bilbo thought it was only a matter of time before they went and threw the traditions to the wind, propriety be damned. Bilbo thought that day couldn’t come fast enough.

Midwinter brought frost and a new wave of snow, which made the mountain’s inhabitants appreciate their warm clothes and fireplaces. Nobody was too eager to trample through the snowdrift outside or climb the freezing mineshafts, so everyone was pleased when the celebration gave them an excuse to stop working for three days and just enjoy the plentiful food and ale.

Since this celebration was meant to be a time for friends and family, there was only one feast in the
Great Hall at the eve before Midwinter, where Thorin thanked the assembled dwarves for the work they had done the previous year. For the Midwinter dinner the Companions gathered in their usual dining chamber, their number now increased thanks to the various members of the dwarves’ families who had been invited to join them for a private feast.

Bilbo now sat on Thorin’s right hand, where he had been persuaded to move a few days after their unofficial announcement. The position gave him plenty of opportunity to talk to Thorin during the meals, something that he enjoyed immensely. The dwarf was normally a pleasant companion, happy to talk about things that interested him, but this night he was quieter than usual, his thoughts turned inward.

Occasionally he gave Bilbo a contemplative look or answered a question aimed directly at him, but otherwise did not contribute to the conversations around the table. Bilbo let him be. Either the dwarf would talk to him about it later, or he would arrive at a solution to his problem on his own. Instead Bilbo turned to talk to Fíli, who wanted to know if hobbits celebrated Midwinter.

Bilbo was just finishing the main course when Thorin finally leaned over to him, looking strangely nervous.

“Will you come for a walk with me after dinner?” he asked Bilbo.

“Of course,” Bilbo told him, wondering what the dwarf had in mind.

He spent the rest of the meal in quiet anticipation, trying to guess what Thorin was planning that he had to act so mysterious about it. He didn’t have to wait for too long, because the dessert flew by in a breeze and for once in his life, Bilbo couldn’t care less what was on his plate.

Thorin waited for him to finish his last pie and they rose from the table in tandem, bidding the rest of the company good evening. They slipped from the dining room, leaving their friends to carry on the celebrations without them. Rather than going for a walk around Erebor or even to the front gate, however, they ended up in front of the door to Thorin’s quarters. Thorin opened the door for him, gesturing for Bilbo to come inside.

Once the door closed behind them Thorin walked over to his desk, where stood an angular box made of dark polished wood. He didn’t open it yet, running his hand gently over the lid before he turned back to face Bilbo. He took a deep breath.

“Has Ori told you about dwarven courtships?”

Bilbo nodded, not sure where the question was headed. Thorin took a step closer.

“Then you probably know that the courtship we have is unorthodox at best. We may have told our friends that we are courting, but in the eyes of the old traditions we are still not courting properly and the way we have been carrying on these past few weeks would be considered quite scandalous if anyone knew about it.”

“But I already asked you!” Bilbo protested. A sudden shard of memory came back to him, giving him a flash of insight. “Oh, the rule about the older partner.” He looked at Thorin, who nodded. “It has to be you, doesn’t it?” Bilbo asked.

“Yes,” Thorin said. “As brave and much appreciated as your offer was, I am afraid that it did not quite satisfy the conditions set by the tradition.” He gave Bilbo a look. “I am aware that we could simply sidestep those rules and continue courting as we have been for weeks, but I would like to uphold the old traditions, at least in this aspect.”
He stepped back to the desk and picked up the wooden box, carrying it over to Bilbo. Bilbo’s suspicions got fulfilled when Thorin lifted the lid of the box, revealing the Arkenstone. The gem was just as beautiful as Bilbo remembered it. He gave Thorin a bewildered look.

“You can’t give me the Arkenstone!” Bilbo protested. Thorin shook his head.

“The stone is mine and I can do whatever I wish with it. In the past it has caused only madness and death. I think it is time for its fate to change.” He took a fortifying breath, looking Bilbo straight in the eye.

“The Arkenstone used to be my grandfather’s most prized possession and his greatest pride. His love for the gem contributed to the downfall of a kingdom and the ruin of our kin, causing him to forget about his friends and family and focus only on his own greed. I almost followed the same path as he, letting gold blind me to the point of madness. I may have survived the battle for Erebor, but it was not until you left that I finally saw my own blindness.

“Since then, I have tried to learn from my mistakes and I swore never to get drawn under the thrall of gold again. Right now, there is only one gem that I treasure and it is not the Arkenstone.”

The expression in his eyes when he looked at Bilbo made Bilbo’s breath catch in his throat. Thorin gestured to the Arkenstone.

“Gems like this are found every day, but you are one of a kind, Bilbo Baggins. I waited almost two hundred years to find you.” He lifted the box with the Arkenstone, offering it to Bilbo. “This is the Heart of the Mountain - my heart - and I give it to you freely. Will you do me the honour of marrying me?”

All objections against the Arkenstone died in Bilbo’s throat when he saw the emotion in Thorin’s eyes. That crazy, romantic dwarf. How was he supposed to protest something like this?

Bilbo gave him a sincere smile.

“Yes, of course I will marry you. Now put this ridiculous thing away so I can kiss you.”

Thorin returned the box back to the table, barely sparing the Arkenstone a single glance. Once his hands were empty, he promptly wrapped them around Bilbo’s waist and drew him into a kiss. They spent several enjoyable moments wrapped up in each other before Thorin pulled back and led Bilbo over to his large armchair in front of the fireplace, where they curled together to resume their leisurely exploration.

“Why were you so nervous before?” Bilbo asked him a while later, giving Thorin a curious look. “Surely you must have known that I wouldn’t refuse you this time.”

Thorin lowered his eyes.

“You have already refused me once. When I made my offer the first time, I was so wrapped up in my arrogance that it never crossed my mind that you might say no. Hearing you dress me down provided a rather harsh awakening for me. I am afraid that I did not react well to you censure of my shortcomings.”

He took Bilbo’s hand, caressing the palm with his thumb.

“I am still a little astonished that you were willing to forgive me for everything, much less agree to a courtship. You must have hated me when you left here.”
Bilbo shook his head with a smile.

“No, I never hated you. I was angry at you for a long time, and a bit hurt, but I never hated you. Mostly I was just confused with the whole thing.” He gave Thorin a look. “There’s one thing that I still don’t understand to this day – why did you ask me in the first place? No matter how many explanations I tried to find for it, your first proposal never made any sense to me. Was it a mistake?”

Thorin sighed.

“Only partially. Even before we came to Erebor, I had admired you for your courage and resourcefulness. I had planned to try and court you slowly after we had reclaimed the mountain to see if you were at all amenable to the idea. Then the gold fever took over my mind, magnifying all my impulses tenfold and filling me with greed. It turned my anger into murderous rage and admiration into a savage need to possess.”

He ran a gentle hand up and down Bilbo’s back, resting his chin on the top of Bilbo’s head.

“When I called you into my tent after the battle, I had every intention to apologise to you for my previous conduct, but then you walked in and all my good intentions flew to the wind. What had remained of the fever surged up, driving me to present you with the most inappropriate marriage proposal Erebor has ever seen.”

“It was rather shocking,” Bilbo admitted with a small chuckle. “And wholly unexpected. I had absolutely no idea that you might be thinking about me like that. After you banished me, I thought you would hate me forever. Getting the invitation to Erebor was certainly a surprise.”

Thorin grimaced.

“It took me two years before I was even willing to listen to what Balin wanted to tell me and even longer than that before I admitted to myself that I had indeed treated you horribly. Bofur came back from his visit to the Shire a few months later and then spent several weeks talking about you, which made all the others excited to see you again. At that point I was too ashamed of my actions to try and explain to them why you did not wish to come to Erebor.”

“What was your idea was it to send Nori?” Bilbo asked.

“That was a group effort,” Thorin said, a small smile appearing on his face. “Everyone was hoping that he would be able to either convince you to come back, or find out why you did not wish to leave the Shire. Imagine their disappointment when he came back empty handed.” He gave Bilbo an amused look. “Is your curiosity satisfied now?”

“Yes,” Bilbo nodded. “Everything makes a lot more sense now.” He remembered something. “No, wait. There is one more thing I would like to know.”

“What is it?”

“What made you try and court me again after I came back to Erebor?” Bilbo gave Thorin a searching look. “You couldn’t have known that I would be open to anything romantic, when we were barely on civil terms at that time.”

Thorin looked mildly embarrassed.

“I am afraid that was a minor lapse of self-control on my part.” He raised his hand from where it rested on Bilbo’s knee to run his thumb across Bilbo’s cheekbone. “Dwarves only love once in their lives,” he said quietly. “Seeing you again after five years was like a punch to the stomach. I had long
come to terms with the fact that I would never have your affection, and yet I could not help myself and kept seeking you out, hoping to at least forge a friendship with you if no other option was available.”

He sighed.

“It was hard to keep away from you. You were always so close and yet so far away, your vibrant presence like a beacon at the end of a mine shaft, tempting me to come closer. It took all my willpower not to touch you. The only thing that stopped me from approaching you was the knowledge that my advances would not be welcome.”

“They are welcome now,” Bilbo said, reaching up to lay a hand at the side of Thorin’s neck. He gave Thorin a long, lingering kiss before he pulled back with a smile. “You can touch me as much as you wish.”

“I know,” Thorin’s eyes darkened and the arm around Bilbo’s waist tightened a bit. “Your offer is very tempting, but I would like to be able to spend the night with you properly – to have you wake up next to me in the morning and not have you run away in the middle of the night, because my relatives had barged in on us and shooed you away.”

Bilbo grimaced.

“As much as I hate to say it, that scenario is more than likely.” He gave the bedroom door a speculative glance. “Have you installed those locks yet?”

“I have, but no lock can keep my sister out when she is in one of her moods,” Thorin said, making Bilbo chuckle. “I believe your new quarters should solve all our problems. You can move in on my birthday, before I make the announcement. Once our relationship is made public knowledge, no one will be able to claim that I am just using you for my own pleasure.”

“It is not using when the pleasure is mutual,” Bilbo told him with a smile, leaning in for a kiss.

One kiss led to another one and a third one, the heat between them rising with each new touch. They ended up tangled together on the rug in front of the fireplace, where they lay in a pleasurably rumpled state and watched the fire as they waited for their breathing to slow back down.

“I am rather surprised that they have left us alone for so long,” Bilbo remarked some time later, running an idle hand over Thorin’s chest.

“Dís knew about my plan for the evening,” Thorin said. “I believe she is holding them back for the moment to give us some privacy.”

“That’s nice of her,” Bilbo said. “Still, we should probably straighten up a bit and engage in some wholesome activity before one of our friends barges in.”

“Do you have any ideas for such an activity?” Thorin asked, making no attempt to move from his prone position.

“Would you be willing to sing for me?” Bilbo propped his chin on Thorin’s chest. “You have such a beautiful voice, but I haven’t heard you sing since the time we claimed back the mountain.”

Thorin gave him a smile.

“I can sing for you, if it makes you happy.”
He straightened up into a sitting position, drawing Bilbo to rest against his side and started singing in a low voice. The song was in Khuzdul, but Bilbo did not need to understand the words to know that it was a love song. He rested his head on Thorin’s shoulder and closed his eyes, letting the dwarf’s deep voice wash over him.

“You will have to translate it for me some time,” Bilbo said when the song ended.

“I may,” Thorin smiled. “Or I can teach you Khuzdul and you can translate it yourself.”

Bilbo’s eyes lit up.

“You would do that?” He was well aware by now that the knowledge of the dwarvish language was one of the dwarves’ most closely guarded secrets.

“I would,” Thorin nodded, looking pleased with Bilbo’s reaction. “Shall I sing some more?”

Thorin managed to sing another two songs before the door to his quarters opened and Dís walked in, taking in the scene before her with sharp eyes. Her gaze slid from the two of them sitting cuddled together in front of the fireplace to the box with the stone lying abandoned on the table, a small smile appearing on her face.

“I take it that everything went well?”

They both nodded. Since she seemed determined to escort him back to his quarters, Bilbo disentangled from Thorin’s embrace with some reluctance and went to stand beside her. They were almost at the door when Thorin cleared his throat behind them. Bilbo turned around to find himself face to face with a wooden box.

“You forgot something,” Thorin said, pushing the box into his hands. Bilbo gave him a weary look.

“I still think this is utterly ridiculous,” Bilbo informed him. “I’m taking this back to the treasury first thing in the morning.”

The last thing Bilbo saw before the door closed behind him was Thorin’s fond smile. Dís looked thoughtful when she walked by his side. They were almost at his door when she finally spoke.

“I haven’t heard my brother sing like that for years,” she told him quietly. “I have heard him sing of treasure and revenge, but never about love.” She gave him a look. “Thank you for giving him a second chance.”

Bilbo smiled.

“I think it was a second chance for both of us.”

He bade her goodnight and entered his rooms, the box with the Arkenstone tucked safely under his arm. He put it on the table and opened it, still in disbelief that the stone was really in his possession.

Looking at the brilliant gem, he couldn’t help but feel awed and a little humbled by the obvious depth of Thorin’s regard for him. He of all people knew well how much that stone meant to Thorin. The easy way he had given it to Bilbo spoke volumes of his affection for the hobbit. Bilbo thought that Thorin must love him very much indeed, to be willing to part with his greatest treasure.

Closing the lid, Bilbo gave the wooden box a smile. It was only good that Thorin held such regard for him, because Bilbo loved him too.
The next week passed in a blur of preparations, all the inhabitants of the mountain looking forward to Thorin’s birthday celebration. For Bilbo the joy was of a more personal nature – this would be the day when he would finally be presented to the world as Thorin’s betrothed. That thought filled him with eager anticipation and he found himself counting the days that remained towards the celebration.

He would feel a bit silly for it, if he didn’t know that he was not the only one to feel that way. Thorin hid his impatience well, but even he was growing frustrated with the mandated chaperoning and the strict rules that the courtship imposed on them. There was always someone nearby to keep an eye of them, so they barely got any time alone.

Their forced separation only worked to heighten their anticipation. Bilbo became hyperaware of Thorin’s every move. Whenever the dwarf walked into a room and looked at him, the air between them thickened until Bilbo could almost taste the tension in the air. There was a new current of awareness between them, the air heavy with a thrum of promises unspoken.

After much waiting, Thorin’s birthday finally came. Bilbo woke that morning with a smile on his face, the anticipation making him almost giddy. He gave his quarters a fond look as he packed the last of his things and put them on a pile with the rest of his possessions. Over the past few days he had gathered all his things in the sitting room, where they now waited for Bilbo’s friends to come and help him carry them into his new living quarters.

Bilbo wasn’t terribly sorry to leave the rooms behind. Yes, they were nice and comfortable and he had grown reasonably fond on them in those ten weeks that he had spent in them, but his attachment was not so strong that he would insist on staying in them when presented with an infinitely superior option.

The moving itself didn’t take very long. It took four dwarves only one journey to carry all of Bilbo’s things from one set of rooms to the other. Bofur and Ori came back for the weaving loom and Bilbo made one last sweep of the quarters to make sure that he hadn’t left anything behind. Content that he had everything, he made his way over to his new rooms, feeling way more excited than a simple change of accommodations would warrant.

His friends decided to stay for a few hours and chat with him while he put away his books and clothes, so Bilbo decided to try out his new kitchen and made them all some tea and cakes. Thorin stopped by briefly after lunch to inquire whether the rooms were to Bilbo’s liking, using the pretext of examining Bilbo’s new study to steal away a few kisses before he left again, going back to the Great Hall to oversee the preparations for the celebration.

The dwarves left after teatime, leaving Bilbo with plenty of time to prepare for the evening. He chose to wear his favourite crimson vest with golden buttons and the cloak that he had worn for the celebration of the dragon’s death. When he was dressed, he went to the wardrobe and dug out his present for Thorin that he had carefully hidden among his other clothes to prevent his friends from accidentally finding it during the moving.

Now he shook it out and gave it one last look to make sure that it looked presentable. Pleased to find his work intact, he carefully wrapped the cloak in brown paper to hide it from prying eyes and went back to his living room to sit down for a while and relax with a nice book, since there was still plenty of time left until dinner.

Thorin knocked on his door an hour later and gave Bilbo an appreciative glance when the hobbit came to open the door for him. Bilbo went back to the bookshelf to put away his book before he
turned back to Thorin, smiling.

“I hope that my choice of attire meets your approval,” Bilbo told him.

“It does,” Thorin said, “very much. I used to find your way of dressing extremely impractical when you travelled with us, but now I have to admit that it has a certain charm.” He ran a finger over the patterns on the edge of Bilbo’s cloak. “Indeed, it would be a waste to force you to wear our fashion when these clothes suit you so well.”

“I am glad you think so,” Bilbo said with a smile. “Thank you for the winter coat, by the way. It is magnificent.”

“Ah, the fur coat,” Thorin remembered. “The fur came from the huge white warg that led the warg army in the battle for Erebor. I slew him myself before I got beset by orcs. After the battle I decided to keep the pelt as a trophy and kept it rolled up in my bedroom. A present for you seemed like the perfect way to use it.”

He gave Bilbo a smile.

“Come, let us join the celebrations. I am required to give the opening speech, but I should be free to dance with you afterwards. Will you stand by my side for the announcement?”

“Of course,” Bilbo said. “Let me get your present and we can go.”

Bilbo picked up the wrapped parcel and followed Thorin out of the room. The dwarf gave the packet in his hands a curious look but didn’t ask, leading the way to the great dining hall. The assembled dwarves looked up eagerly when they entered, the hall filling with excited whispers.

Thorin made his way over to the small makeshift platform that had been built behind the Head Table for the speech. He raised a hand and the hall fell silent, everyone turning to listen to him.

“Today is my two hundredth birthday,” Thorin began, “and I am very pleased that I can celebrate it with you today, here in our old ancestral home of Erebor. It was through your combined efforts that the mountain has been restored to its previous glory in such a short time. I would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every one of you for the work you have put into the restoration. Without you there would be no Erebor today.”

He paused as a cheer rose, the dwarves clapping and yelling. When they calmed down, he spoke again.

“Before you all go back to your entertainment, I would like to use this occasion to make an announcement.” The hall fell silent. He held a hand out toward Bilbo, who climbed up and took the offered hand with a smile. The crowd tittered excitedly but nobody spoke, waiting for Thorin to continue.

“It is my pleasure to inform you all that I have found someone I want to spend the rest of my life with and will be getting married next year,” Thorin said. “Citizens of Erebor, I present to you Bilbo Baggins as my chosen husband and future Consort.”

“YES!” Calls and cheers rose around the hall, the assembled dwarves whooping and stomping in joy.

Thorin and Bilbo both smiled at the enthusiastic response. Bilbo couldn’t help but be a little surprised at the easy acceptance he had gotten from the dwarves. There were one or two faces in the crowd who looked a little shocked, but other than that, the reception was uniformly positive.
“Kiss!” someone called. A few others heard it and decided to repeat it. “Show us a kiss!”

Bilbo and Thorin exchanged a glance. From his limited knowledge of dwarvish etiquette Bilbo knew that it would be highly unprecedented for an unmarried couple to kiss in public, but then, the two of them had never been very good about sticking to the traditions. He gave Thorin a small smile and a nod and couldn’t help but feel amused when the cheers grew deafening as Thorin leaned over to him.

They exchanged a short kiss, taking care to keep it chaste to avoid scandalising the assembled dwarves more than they already had. They pulled back to look at the crowd, their smiles growing wider as they stood in front of the cheering crowd.

The applause finally died down and they could climb down from the platform and mingle with the crowd, where they immediately got beset from all sides by enthusiastic well-wishers. Bilbo managed to slip through the crowd after a while, leaving Thorin to deal with his admirers on his own while he went to search for his friends.

Ori caught him at once and handed Bilbo the parcel that he had been holding for him during the announcement before he went back to Bofur, who was waiting for the young librarian by one of the side tables. Bilbo watched them head to the dance floor and wondered whether Thorin would be able to tear himself away from his adoring subjects for long enough to dance with him. Kíli walked over to him at that moment, giving him an amused grin.

“I would ask you for a dance, but Thorin might tear my head off for that.” He shot a glance at the king, who was still engaged in a conversation with one of his officers.

“He wouldn’t do that,” Bilbo told him with a smile. “He likes you too much.”

“Liking me didn’t prevent him from giving me a week of patrol duty after I danced with you at the annual celebration.”

Bilbo gaped at him.

“Thorin did that?”

“Yes,” Kíli nodded. “I thought it was hilarious. He didn’t dance with you at all that night because he was sulking that you didn’t congratulate him on his victory in the tournament.”

That made Bilbo chuckle.

“I remember that I spent the whole evening wondering what offensive thing I had done to make him frown at me like that.”

Thorin chose that moment to walk over to them, taking in their identical looks of entertainment.

“Dare I ask what is so amusing?”

“Congratulations on your victory in the tournament,” Bilbo told him, grinning. “You were very impressive.” Before Thorin could say anything, Bilbo handed him the wrapped parcel. “Here’s your birthday present. The hobbit custom is to give presents on one’s own birthday, not receive them, but I decided to make an exception for you. Happy birthday.”

Thorin took the present with careful hands, his eyes flickering between the parcel in his hands and Bilbo’s face.
“What is it?”

“What is it?” Bilbo told him. He noticed that Balin, Dwalin and Fili had come over to them as well, probably drawn by their curiosity.

Thorin pulled away the brown paper to reveal the blue fabric underneath. He ran a palm over the soft surface before he carefully grasped the edges and shook it out, drawing gasps from the bystanders when the fabric unfolded.

The cloak reached almost to the ground, the waves of rich dark blue swaying gently in Thorin’s grasp. The fabric was of elvish make, light but durable and the intricate golden embroidery gleamed in the light of the lanterns. Thorin raised his hands a little higher and Fili and Kili pulled at the bottom corners to give everyone a chance to see the pattern in its entirety.

The majestic slopes of Erebor took up most of the space, the shape of the mountain unmistakeable to anyone who had seen it before. Above the mountain were the symbols of Durin’s insignia, displayed proudly across the shoulder blades of the cloak’s wearer. The edge of the fabric was decorated with a long string of dwarven runes that together formed a phrase in Khuzdul.

Thorin ran a finger over the words, turning a questioning gaze at Bilbo.

“Is this-?”

“Mahal’s blessing, yes,” Bilbo nodded. “Ori helped me with the runes for it, because I still can’t speak a single word of Khuzdul. I hope I got it right.”

Thorin’s eyes flew over the runes, reading swiftly.

“You did,” he told Bilbo with a smile. He put the cloak around his shoulders, clasping it together in the front. “This is a most excellent gift, thank you.”

Bilbo smiled at him.

“You’re welcome.”

“I believe that I promised you a dance,” Thorin said, offering him a hand.

“I believe you did,” Bilbo answered, letting Thorin lead him to the dance floor. The rest of the Company stayed behind, watching them with pleased smiles.

“That cloak must have taken a lot of work to make,” Thorin said once they found a free spot to dance. “I did not know that you can make clothes as well as decorate them.”

“I’m no tailor,” Bilbo shook his head. “A cloak is simple enough to make, but I wouldn’t be able to create anything more complicated. I noticed that you seemed to like the cloak that I have when I first wore it, so I decided to make one for you as well.”

“It was not the cloak I was looking at that night,” Thorin confessed. “Your cloak is a beautiful piece of art, but I was always more interested in the person wearing the cloak than in the garment itself.”

“Oh,” Bilbo said, feeling his cheeks heat up a bit. How was it that Thorin could make him feel this ridiculously happy with such a simple thing? “You look very handsome tonight,” he told the dwarf and had to smile when Thorin lowered his eyes for a moment, obviously unused to such compliments. Bilbo made a mental note to compliment Thorin as often as he could, because he found the dwarf’s reaction endearing.
They danced another two numbers together before they returned back to the table, where they were forced to sit down at the seats of honour and listen to an endless string of toasts made in Thorin’s name. They toasted Bilbo too, which embarrassed the hobbit to no end, but he couldn’t help but smile when he saw the acceptance in the faces around him.

The dwarves around them got progressively drunker and the entertainment grew in volume as the evening passed, but neither Bilbo nor Thorin drank much. They spent most of the feast talking quietly together and watching the dwarves make a spectacle of themselves. The hour was growing late when Bilbo realized with a surprise that nobody was paying any attention to the two of them anymore.

“Do you have any more pressing duties to attend to tonight?” Bilbo asked Thorin quietly, leaning close to avoid being overheard. Thorin gave him a speculative look.

“Not as such, no.”

“Do you think they would mind if we stole away?” Bilbo looked up in question and was pleased to see the interest in those eyes.

“No, I am sure they can spare us for the night,” Thorin told him. They stood up slowly and started walking along the wall at a casual pace, taking care not to be noticed. Thorin put a discreet hand on Bilbo’s lower back and steered him through the crowd, until they finally managed to slip through one of the side doors into the empty corridor beyond.

They maintained a respectable distance while they walked towards Thorin’s quarters, but the moment the door closed behind them they latched onto each other, kissing hungrily. Thorin backed him into the wall, running his hands over any available surface in reach. Bilbo buried his hands into Thorin’s hair and pulled him closer, pouring all of his excitement and frustration into the kiss.

They were both wearing too many clothes but Bilbo did not hurry to remove them just yet. Even though most of his attention was occupied by the dwarf that was enthusiastically kissing his neck, part of his mind was still aware of the fact that their departure probably did not go completely unnoticed and that they were likely to get a visit from their friends soon. His prediction became reality not ten minutes later, when an impatient knock sounded on the door. Bilbo pulled back from Thorin, giving the dwarf a weary look.

“Give me a minute to get rid of our overprotective envoy.”

Thorin let him go reluctantly, his eyes going dark when he took in Bilbo’s rumpled appearance. Ignoring his own impulse to turn back and just continue what they had started, Bilbo went to answer the door, not even bothering to straighten up. He had lost his cloak and vest somewhere in Thorin’s sitting room and his shirt was untucked and half unbuttoned, but at that moment he couldn’t care less about his appearance.

Balin and Dwalin stood in the corridor, giving Bilbo’s dishevelled clothes identical knowing looks.

“No, you can’t come in,” Bilbo informed them, blocking the door with his body.

“But the traditions-“ Bilan began.

“No,” Bilbo repeated firmly. “I have a great respect for your traditions, but tonight is Thorin’s birthday and we are going to spend it in whatever manner we wish.” He sighed when he saw their dissatisfied faces.

“Oh for-“ Bilbo said. “Thorin is two hundred years old and most hobbits my age already have at
least three children. We do not need a chaperone. Go back to the party and enjoy the celebrations. Good night.” Before they could say anything in protest, he shut the door in their faces, turning the key in the lock.

He turned to Thorin, who was watching him from the bedroom doorway with an amused smile.

“I see that your diplomatic skills are effective as ever.”

“They got better over the years,” Bilbo replied, coming closer. “Your traditions are ridiculous, by the way. I can understand the caution when the pair is a young reckless couple that could end up with a child before the wedding has even taken place, but having a chaperone at our age seems downright absurd.”

“I am glad you sent them away,” Thorin said, a dark glint entering his eyes. “It leaves us with more time for much more interesting activities.”

Bilbo grasped him by the edges of the cloak, drawing him closer.

“So, where were we before they interrupted us?”

“Here, I believe.”

Thorin leaned down for a kiss, the bedroom door falling shut behind them.

Neither of them ever found out about the many bags of gold that exchanged hands that night.

*****

Many years after that day Bilbo sat down at the desk in his quarters, turning the book open to the last page. Now, after countless rewrites and additions, he finally felt ready to write an ending for his book. Paying no mind to the smiling dwarf who was reading over his shoulder, Bilbo tipped his quill into the ink and brought the tip down to write the last sentence of his book:

“And then he lived happily ever after.”

The End

Chapter End Notes

It’s done! Thank you so much to everyone who has read this far! I am glad you have made the journey with me and I hope it was worth it. I have spent two wonderful months working on this story and I enjoyed every single minute of the process. I am still a little surprised with the amount of feedback I got for this fic, since this is my first project of this size that I have been able to complete successfully and I still have plenty to learn.

Thank you so much for commenting and leaving kudos. I appreciate every one of them.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!