Summary

The deep places of the earth. Vaulted cathedrals filled with Mahal’s voice. And the perfect cradle from which to reform two souls; forged anew in synchronous heat and passion...

Only, things aren't going exactly how Thorin Oakenshield, Reformed King Under The Mountain, dreamed. Bilbo is confoundingly...confused. The bond that is tearing apart his very being is in danger of being snuffed out before it's even had much of a chance to begin, and there is far too much political chicanery than is good for his fraying nerves and temper.

And orcs. Definitely too many orcs.

If he is very lucky, he may just manage to woo Bilbo, and possibly save his sanity in the process...

A prompt fill for a Dwarven Courtship story; with lots of feels, a touch of fluff and a mine-cart full of Dwarven culture thrown in for good measure.
And Nori. Because he'd find a way to steal centre stage, regardless.

Notes

Many thanks to NephthysMoon, who once again saves me from making too many errors, and as always, pushes me to be a better writer <3
Gilded. Aurulent. Opulent. Practically ludicrous, even; there were many, many words one could use to describe the Treasury of Erebor. Bilbo had been both eager and nervous to see the newly restored once-lair of Smaug.

Quite frankly, though, this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind.

"Thorin! What heaven's name do you think you're doing?"

Bilbo found himself scrambling over coins, his soles scraping painfully as he slid down the treacherous footing on a handful of gemstones as he attempted to dance back out of reach. The dwarven king stood unmoving, arms crossed over his chest, holding his ground before the massive stone door and preventing Bilbo from simply darting out and leaving Thorin to this idiocy. His only concession to this ridiculous stand-off was ducking slightly as the hobbit, in a fit of frustration, scooped up a handful of coins and threw them at him. The small projectiles bounced harmlessly off his broad shoulders and arms with musical pings as the gold and silver pieces struck his armour.

Bilbo couldn't explain what in the name of all the West was going on.

"Relax, khufdûn," the infuriating dwarf rumbled, but showed no other signs of explaining, beyond his earlier, and equally baffling, statement that the Khebabel Azyungaz, was now to begin. This got him a second handful of loose coin thrown at him. Unfortunately, Bilbo was forced to concede, it was no more effective than the first.

The Great Hall of Thráin, now the Treasury of Erebor, was located deep in the mountain, far below the Great Chamber of Thrór the Mountain King.

Even after all these months, Bilbo wasn't certain he'd ever be able to get over the sheer scale of the dwarven kingdom. Not to put too fine a point on it - and it would be very ill-mannered of him indeed to insult his companions by pointing this out, he was sure - but when it came right down to it, dwarves were... not all that much taller than hobbits. They were broad; and they had muscles that Bilbo was privately certain Yavanna had never given to her softer children. They were louder, and angrier, and just noisier in general, Bilbo supposed, but not in actuality, much taller.

So why in the world did they feel the need to build such massive spaces?

For centuries, Erebor had stood as a mighty testament of dwarven craft and majesty. Its hallowed halls a citadel hewn from the ancient flesh of the Lonely Mountain, and over the years their on-going war with the orcs of Mount Gundabad had caused the khazad to create defensive measures
like no others in Middle Earth. Attacking the mountain itself would be a laughable venture, if your opponent were not a firedrake, of course. And it was deep in the roots of that mountain, in what was once the most protected heart of the kingdom, Thorin, son of Thráin now lost himself to Gold Fever once more. At least, Bilbo could think of no other explanation for such bizarre behavior as inviting a loyal companion and friend down to examine the recently finished restorations to the deepest chambers, and then proceed to give every indication of trying to lock them up in it!

Bilbo halted, panting, twenty feet still between him and the immeasurably high door that was thankfully, still sitting slightly open; a sliver of torchlight visible through the narrow crack this left. That narrow sliver was all that was keeping Bilbo's heart from beating right out of his chest. From this distance, he could still hear the deep, rumbling chant coming from beyond this room. Various voices had taken it up throughout its progression, and Bilbo was a bit affronted to find that he could recognise Bofur's higher register amongst them. That chanting had been the first indication that something was unusual was happening.

The chanting had built up to a crescendo, deep voices seeming to come from the very mountain, were now joined by a single voice raised above the others in a complimentary counterpart. Bifur, he thought. This new song was solemn sounding, in a minor key that seemed to burrow its way into the listeners' mind and settle on the skin as vibration, bypassing the ears as being completely unnecessary. Bilbo shivered, not liking the feeling of enchantment that permeated the air. He would have described the sensation as if something inside of him, without so much as a by-your-leave, was stretching; a sort of pleasure-pain tingling as a space seemed to be forming where previously only he had existed.

Altogether, he found it highly disagreeable.

Still, Thorin stood, impassive and impassable, seeming to take no heed of his kin's voices echoing behind him. Slowly, the voices trailed off, the sounds of their performance still hanging in the air for long moments, echoes held and cradled by the mountain stone as if reluctant to end. It was perhaps for this reason, Bilbo didn't immediately realize the change, so focused had he been on the vibrations' effect on his senses.

When he finally focused again, it seemed as if the entire world slowed in an instant. The flickering torchlight from behind the door was diminishing, the orange glow growing dim, and at first he thought the hallway torches beyond had burned down. With a sick feeling in his belly, he realised the torches were fine, and he watched helplessly as that narrow sliver of outside light got smaller, and then disappeared, and the sound of the door hitting the lintel boomed solidly; undeniable.

Time became real again, and he could hear the soft slither of metal rods, seeming terribly loud in the huge cavernous vault, finding their home in cold stone as clever mechanisms sealed the door. What in the world is going on here?

Gilded. Aurulent. Opulent. Practically ludicrous, even; there were many, many words one could use to describe the Treasury of Erebor. Unfortunately, and utterly confoundingly, Bilbo could now add one more.

Prison.
'Dwarvish Courting'

Dwarves have a very odd concept of courting their mates.

Instead of wooing them with flowers and love letters they Kidnap them!, then hold them prisoner for six months in which they must either gain their mates love or release them and consign themselves to a life of solitude unless they themselves are captured by a suitor.

During this six months they must show their potential mate their wealth and ability to support them, they must demonstrate their skills to impress their mate and show that they are not fools, they must also lavish them with affection through gifts of sonnets, songs, jewelry, and food to show their mate just how much they will be cherished.

They may not however harm their mate in anyway, nor are they to make any sexual advances upon them during this six month courting period unless the Mate falls for them sooner than expected and agrees to wed them.

However if the mate is posing a threat to themselves, by starving themselves, attempting to escape, making themselves ill, then they can intervene and restrain and force the mate to take food and water to keep them healthy.

Once the mountain is reclaimed and Smaug is dead, Thorin does not fall into gold lust, he takes this chance to capture Bilbo and lock him up in the treasury and spend the next six months wooing and courting his Hobbit.

Massive Kudos if Bilbo is totally horrified and alarmed when Thorin captured him and locks him up in the treasury, yelling for help from the company who are simply cheering that their King is courting!.

Bilbo being totally uncooperative at first, shouting at and begging Thorin to release him, throwing gold coins at the Dwarf and shouting very un-Hobbit like obscenities!

Thorin hand feeding Bilbo cakes and whispering poetry to him

A wedding presided over by Balin follows six months later!

Obviously, this sounds like it has massive potential for Stockholm Syndrome, which is something I'm trying to avoid and diffuse as much as possible. I took this writing prompt because I wanted to challenge myself to try and figure out some kind of cultural reason for this kind of courting right; what kind of belief and or social structure would they have to have for this rite to even exist? It takes a few chapters to sort out, but hopefully, when I'm done, I will have accomplished my goal of writing this in as justified a manner as possible <3 Please know that I've tried to be as sensitive as I can, while still honouring the prompt. The rest is just an excuse to do a whole lot of research and ponder just what makes dwarves tick *lol*
What I have done, is a whole lot of world building, a bit of humor, and a much bigger story than I ever intended to write :)

I hope you enjoy what I've come up with - I know I've enjoyed writing it ♥
2 - The Door Where We Began

Chapter Summary

In which Thorin and his company begin to plan...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Forge of Origins:

The Legacy of Our Fathers

The Door Where We Began

THE EASTERN Balcony might not have the spectacular view of the western one, which favoured the least of the Desolation, and overlooked Raven Hill and the deep vale between the two westernmost spurs of the mountain. That balcony, with its polished floors of inlayed blue agate sheathed in crystal and bisected with silver runes, had been a favoured place for gatherings and entertainments of the court, once. It was a wonder that the West Balcony had escaped the worst of Smaug's wrath when in his wroth over Bilbo's theft of the cup, he destroyed half the mountainside and blocked up Durin's Door. It remained still as a beautiful remnant of the past, but being there brought up too many memories to suppress - memories of fire and death and of hunger and humiliation, for Thorin to take any leisure there now.

Instead, the eastern view was soothing, if a little unvaried, and suited his current mood. It would still be some weeks before spring came to this part of the world, though they all were optimistic that the lands of the Desolation would show signs of vitality once the snows finally melted. The evening air was still chill, and the stone benches scattered artfully amidst carven stone and sculpted metal were covered in fine sheets of crystalline frost. If the sun was still in the sky, he could have made out the grey-blue smudge on the horizon that would have been the foothills of the Iron Hills. Instead, the wan moonlight showed him only shadows cast on hard granite floor by the hewn railings, and nothing but a dark unrelenting mystery spreading out below.

The night air might be cool, but Thorin's dwarven blood hardly noticed it. It had been three months since what was now being recorded in Ori's book of Mazarbul as The Battle of Five Armies, and Thorin finally had everything he had set out to achieve so long ago. He had a home to give to his people. He had restored their pride and honour. He had a birthright to offer Fili and Kili, one rich with history and accomplishments. He was finally home.

Yet, he was unfulfilled. And it was all one rather unassuming hobbit's fault.

It was probably childish to blame Bilbo for his discontent, he knew, but let that go in favour of having the privilege to lose himself in a bit of a royal sulk while there was no one about to witness him doing so. Even as he entertained feelings of being Mahal's most favourite victim, he knew that
this was all just a diversionary tactic to avoid thinking about the problem seriously, because frankly, it frightened him as precious little since the dragon had.

People without a home, those who had, at times, to rely on the charity of others, learned to make quick assessments. They learned to trust their instincts about others and to take in much and show little in return. His initial evaluation of Master Baggins had indeed shown him a soft, pampered gentle-hobbit, one who probably took many of his comforts for granted while Thorin had sold and debased his skill so that his sister would have enough food for the table, and his nephews, crown princes of Erebor, could wear new, if only serviceable, clothes. He was ashamed to admit that there may have been more of resentment than assessment in his comments to their burglar that first night.

And yet, despite that biting bitterness, Bilbo had shown surprising strength, and a refusal to wilt or cringe under its weight. His generous spirit and his insistence to see the dwarves home, people he had never met before the lot of them had trod mud into his heirloom carpets, challenged Thorin to re-assess the slightly podgy little creature, until, quite suddenly, he realized he didn't just not resent him anymore, he respected him. He began seeing things in the hobbit that had been obscured before, noticing his solicitous nature to all his companions, his courage and his quick wit, both in planning, and in jest. He couldn't pinpoint when it happened, but by the time Smaug was defeated, he could no longer imagine his kingdom without the halfling at his side.

He could feel the gentle invasion of the changes Bilbo had wrought in him; could feel the way his thoughts and soul had begun the pleasure-painful stretch of making room for his hobbit inside his very essence. But it was too soon! No courtship had been given, nor accepted! When he had first realized his feelings, time had not been his ally. With the awesome threat of the dragon still hanging over them, no such arrangements could even be considered; the distraction would likely have proven fatal to them all. With the Chiefest Calamity dead, he could finally take the time to court his hobbit, to convince him that Thorin, son of Thráin was a worthy life-mate.

*If only I could figure out how to do it.*

Thorin heard boots crunching in the delicate frost; they stopped respectfully behind him, just outside the arched doorway. He had been out here for hours now, time he should have been spending on those Mahal-cursed Reclamation Reports, so it really wasn't much of a surprise that it was Balin who eventually tracked him down.

"I suppose you're getting an early start on surveying your kingdom for tomorrow - Or shall we just go ahead and be honest, and call this a bit of brooding?"

Thorin didn't bother to answer that bit of disrespect with more than a grunt.

For a long moment, nothing more was said between them, though he could feel Balin eyeing him appraisingly. When he finally spoke, it was with a gentleness he had not heard since he was twenty-two years old, and his father's best advisor was coaxing an extremely uncertain young prince of the worth of his all-important first craft. Even then, Thorin had found Balin's calm to be soothing to something rough and uncertain inside of him.

"What's bothering you, lad?"

"Only you would be so soft as to call a dwarf in his one-hundred and ninety-fifth year a 'lad'," he snorted, sardonically. "I wish to be alone." He glanced over to his right, to see Balin give this grousing the attention it deserved; that is to say, none.

Briefly, Thorin considered ordering him away. *Probably wouldn't do him any good.* Balin knew he was far too skilled to simply banish, and calmly wielded this certainty as both axe and shield,
"You've not been yourself this last fortnight or more - you've been surly, withdrawn and taciturn. Even more so than usual, I mean." Thorin glared out into the darkness, feeling a little sullen. *He wasn't that difficult, certainly?*

"The company is worried; Nori had to forcibly eject Kili from your wardrobe - he'd had hopes you might talk in your sleep. Oin is more direct; he's preparing a concoction of jasmine flowers and poppy milk to have you spilling your guts."

Startled, Thorin spluttered, "I trust Dwalin has taken steps?"

"Yes, my King," Balin answered, seriously. He clasped his hands behind his back, and wandered over to the railing, to look out into the unbroken darkness below. Thorin relaxed; glad he could count on Dwalin and Balin to put a stop to any such nonsense. He permitted a small smile to escape his control, when he caught the other dwarf peering at him from the corner of his eye.

"I believe," he said, with a smug ring in his voice that had warning bells going off in Thorin's head, "I believe that he has offered his services to Oin - to hold you down."

Scowling, Thorin huffed and crossed his arms over his chest. "I am surrounded by traitors. I need a new guard captain, obviously," he muttered mulishly.

"No, you don't. What you need is to let the dwarves who have followed you so loyally help you with whatever it is that has crawled up your royal behind, and be glad you have such good friends."

Asking for help had never been easy for dwarrow pride. As a king, from a disgraced line at that, it was near impossible to admit that kind of vulnerability to another, even a trusted advisor who had known you since before you had donned your first plaits.

He shoved himself off the railing, a dismissal on his tongue, and the intention to get back to work; to put this longing behind him, or at least shove it as far into a corner of his mind as he could and pretend it wasn't there.

On the other hand, mind, there were very few dwarves as canny as Balin, and if the aged advisor were able to help him win the hobbit, he would swallow mine-carts full of pride. Balin would see to it that he did, he was sure. The older dwarf had always been there to take him down a bit when he felt his prince's pride threatened to get to big.

For a moment, he held Balin's eyes, faded blue now, but clear and keen as they had been when he'd first taken rule of a kingdom in exile, and Thorin swallowed his command. Gradually, he let the energy bled from his body until his shoulders slumped, fractionally. *By the Valar, he was just so tired.*

Concerned, Balin reached out, grasping his left shoulder gently. "Is it the hobbit?"

Thorin wasn't surprised to have it confirmed that Balin knew, or at least suspected, the depth of his regard for their burglar. What *did* surprise him though, was that he would actually speak of it. Dwarrow were a secretive lot by nature, and speaking of such a thing aloud by any but the most close of kith or kin was considered a terrible breach of privacy.

Making his decision, he turned his back on the yawning darkness below, and turned instead to face Balin, and his mountain kingdom. Shoulders set, he was surprised to find instead of the turmoil of the last six months, he was finally at peace. Bilbo cared for him; he had to trust in that. He had seen his regard grow during their journey, and had to believe that their moments of deeper
connection were not just of Thorin's own making. With patience and Mahal's blessing, he would
fan that regard into something greater. "I must make arrangements for the Confinement. I would
forge the halfling to my side, if he will but have me."

Balin rocked back on his heels in surprise, though he took great care not to react more than that.
He eyed his king carefully as he thought. For several long moments, his quiet breathing and the
whisper of cloth and armor as Thorin tried to contain his restlessness were the only sounds to be
heard. "Are you absolutely set on this, lad? You haven't exactly worn your heart on your sleeve
where the hobbit is concerned."

Balin had the decency to blush at Thorin's incredulous stare. Truly, he had to privately concede,
the king had made a bit of a spectacle of himself within the company with his constant protective
awareness of their hobbit companion. "We-ll, not in a way a soft creature like Master Baggins is
likely to have noticed, anyway," and here, Balin sighed. He hated to see the man he had come to
love as his own son set himself up for failure; a failure that would forever cost him the ability to
court anyone, ever again. Once given, a dwarrow heart could not be taken back.

"I admit he likely has no notion of my affection," Thorin acknowledged. "I do not know how
other races court, let alone gentle-hobbits, but I have no choice left. He is in my very soul, and my
heart can accept no other." Broad shoulders bowed under the weight of his thoughts, and he spoke
softly, but held Balin's eyes as if in plea for understanding. "I have already felt the threads of my
thoughts fraying. This has stretched on too long, and I don't know – I don't know for how much
longer I can continue to make rational decisions. I am possessive of his time and person. I cannot
think of anything else when he is from my sight." The admission was no less powerful for being
made so softly, and for the first time, Balin felt real fear begin to stir in his heart as he realised he
would not be able to talk his king from this path. "I may not be able to remain king much longer if
I do not take steps to rectify this situation."

"He's never going to understand, Thorin! The surface races court differently than the children of
Mahal- couldn't you just talk to him? Forgo the rituals, and just give the boy some flowers
instead?" He spoke more from a desire to see him safe than any real conviction; forgoing the
rituals, indeed!

"Forgo the rituals? Even if I could, I would not. Do you not understand, Balin? These rituals are
not for me, but for Bilbo; and for the people of Erebor." Thorin turned his back on his advisor, to
gaze instead on the ruined city below. Balin wondered if he was seeing again the all-consuming
dragon fire burning into the night sky, or instead looking to the future finally; or possibly just
seeing the hard labour it would take to restore his ancestral home. The chill in the air, which was
beginning to penetrate even dwarven hide, was clear and crisp, and he could plainly hear soft
night noises in the stillness; little sounds of life returning to the mountain after ruin.

"I would have him by my side forever, if he would but allow it." Though his tone was
melancholy, his shoulders remained set, his determined stance an almost exact replica of the one
that swayed Balin two years ago, when a throne-less king had declared his intention to take back
his mountain with nothing but a half-daft handful of misfits and his own burning pride. He had
been convinced then that his king could accomplish anything, if he but reached forth his large
hands to grasp it.

With one last look out over his city, Thorin turned back to him.

"How will my people respect their Royal Consort whom their king did not even deign was worth
the effort of winning?" he asked softly, still not meeting the eyes of his advisor who tried to search
for reason in his gaze. "For whom their king did not move the very mountain but to gain his
favour? I would not have them in any doubt as to Master Baggins tremendous worth, and his right
to rule them; in truth, to rule me."
Something in Balin's old heart shrunk at the sheer impossibility of the situation, even as a
desperate flame of hope was kindled in his belly. He owed him his loyalty, now more than ever.
"Well, lad," he said finally, reaching out to clasp the taller dwarf's shoulder, "I'd say you're going
to need a good healthy dose of cunning. Though in truth, the flowers probably wouldn't hurt,
either."

Balin used his grip on his king to gently push him back through the balcony doors, and into the
presence of his patiently waiting company.

And, with the help of his companions, Thorin began to plan.

"-..-

THOUGH THE room they were in now was grand, and they were thirteen, and not fifteen, and
certainly had no need to crowd around a too-little table, Thorin was sure he was not the only one
reminded of another gathering, fourteen months ago or so, in a cosy smial far to the west.

And if they did crowd a little more than was necessary, not one of them would mention it. They
had a racial reputation to protect, after all.

He wasn't exactly sure what this room had been used for originally – he had vague memories of
this wing being rather uninteresting as a lad, though he thought Balin could oft times be found
down this way, so it was probably the part of the kingdom where things were actually
accomplished, instead of just talked about, which ruled out council chamber rather neatly. Some of
the torches still amazingly held oil after all this time, and when Bombur lit them, a merry glow
suffused the room, but still managed to hide the dust from sight. It was the first time in weeks that
they had all been gathered together at once like this, though he saw them all singularly or in small
groups as they all pushed to assess what was left of their kingdom. Thorin felt himself relax, a tiny
bit of wariness he hadn't even been aware he could let go of leaving him in the company of
dwarf he trusted so unreservedly. In that moment, he felt rich indeed, and even Dori's fussing
was welcoming instead of tiresome.

"I think he's not so indifferent – I mean, he's always making meals for you, going on about it
being some great Auntie's recipe, or cousin's or whatever. Food is obviously important to him, it
stands to reason he might try and win your attention by feeding you." Bofur had stood, one furred
boot planted firmly on the seat of his chair as he surveyed the table hopefully, looking for support.

Thorin cocked his head minutely as he considered this, and tried to quash any hopeful fluttering in
his belly. Did Bilbo perhaps seek his favour through cookery? It seemed far-fetched, but he was a
hobbit after all –

Dwalin's rough growl cut through these musings. "The hobbit cooks for all of us. He helps
Bombur in the buttery, and the kitchens. Besides, who would court through food?" He stretched
out to give the leg of Bofur's chair a heavy nudge with his boot, causing the whole chair to
wobble and Bofur to almost lose his perch, points of his ridiculous hat flapping along with his
arms as he regained his balance with a squawk.

"But he always gives Thorin the best portions!" Bofur spluttered, two hands holding the brim of
his hat protectively as he glared at his attacker, clearly equally convinced of the hobbit's betraying
regard and Dwalin's general untrustworthiness.
Dwalin snorted, inelegantly, and made a rude gesture. "That's because he's the king, idiot!" Kili joined in the spirited bickering that followed, and Thorin groaned, reaching up to rub his face in one large hand when Bifur was dragged into the ruckus with a completely irrelevant speculation of a personal nature about Master Baggins – and his anatomy. It was not an image Thorin needed to focus on.

Not until he was in a position to find out for himself, anyway.

"Donna worry so, laddie," Balin spoke over the noisy rumblings of his younger brother and the rest with ease of long practice. "Mayhap Master Baggins does show his regard as Bofur suggests, more likely it's just that he likes being useful and seeks to help out where he may, but I have no doubt that regard for you he does have—"

"I thought you were against this?" Thorin asked, amused at his one-time tutor's apparent flip on the subject. The pre-supposition of the hobbit's regard he carefully ignored as a kindness.

Balin merely gave him a look, as though he were being obtuse. "That was before," he said loftily. "I know it's a struggle, but do try to keep up, your Majesty."

"I should have you replaced with a clockwork mechanism," he grunted sourly.

"No fear of that," the aged advisor retorted easily. "But at least with Master Baggins at your side, I might finally be able to retire." Thorin scowled when he heard Fili coughing. It was a distinctly snigger-sounding cough, after all.

Dwalin reached across Gloin to swat the young prince with one meaty palm. "Mind your manners, you," he rumbled absently, not looking away from the conversation going on around him. The redhead didn't even skip a beat in the heated discussion that seemed to have grown to include not just Bombur, Dwalin and Oin, but now Bifur, Kili, and Dori. Thorin resigned himself to the fact that his courting success - or even lack thereof, was likely to make at least one of his company moderately richer. Not that any of the filthy sods needed it.

Nori, who had remained uninvolved and watchful during the general ruckus, cleared his throat quietly. It was a mark as to how much each dwarf there respected his abilities that he gained their instant and complete attention. "Now, I'm not a nobby-nob, and the 'Ri family is not usually so high in the step that we would instigate a formal Khebabel Azyungaz," he paused here to smirk at his older brother, who had crossed his arms over his broad chest and silently fumed at this assessment. "We'd just make do with a room in our family home, and be done with it. But it seems to me that our King is right – our burglar deserves to be made a big deal of in front of all the old council members and other nob, who are going to have things to say about some top-lofty little baggage from the Shire thinking he can get his pudgy little hands on a Dwarrow King."

Thorin's hands clenched white-knuckled around his tankard, and Nori was personally convinced he could actually hear his teeth grinding from where he sat. "Not twice, they won't," he gritted out.

"Ah, right then," the thief hedged, suddenly a bit nervous as what had started as a way to tweak his brother's braids provoked such a heated response. "We're going to need to find the proper place to set this up – something sufficiently grand, to set the right impression."

Ori spoken up hesitantly, "I do not think Master Baggins cares much for grand, brother."

"Not for him; for the oldsters – the ones who are going to want to come back here and have things all their own way again." The rarely used patience in Nori's tone was only ever directed at his youngest sibling. "We have to show them that Master Baggins is off limits to their scheming."
Ori waved one tightly clenched fist, looking positively as fierce as one could look, while still wearing that much knitwear. "They'd better not try. He's our burglar." Instead of getting a scolding from Dori, there was a rumble of protective agreement from around the table. From under his heavy brows, Dwalin looked at the younger dwarf with startled approval.

"The Great Hall of Thráin would set a powerful message," Oin mused. "And the refuges are down there, too, so there will be a few chambers for use so that you won't be required to find comfort in a treasury," he glanced around the table, and noted the speculative looks on several of the company's faces as they obviously tried to find the difficulty in being comfortable in a treasury. "Comfort for the hobbit, at the very least," he amended.

Bifur opened his mouth, obviously intent on adding his thoughts to the use of those chambers, when Thorin clamped one calloused hand on his shoulder, hard.

"Don't," he said.

Bifur leered at him instead, clearly not nearly intimidated enough. Bofur moaned quietly in embarrassment at his cousin's antics and buried his face in his hands.

"Besides, I should think that given the absence of one, a latrine would seem as beautiful as the Arkenstone itself, and more heavily wished for." Oin finished practically, either not hearing, or simply ignoring the byplay. Thorin rolled his eyes, somehow disheartened to be discussing chamber pots in relation to his courting strategy.

"Alright," Nori took charge of the discussion once again. "I know we've got more and more refugees arriving from Ered Luin every day, but outsiders have no place in family business." Several nods assured him he had their agreement. "Bombur, you'll continue to get them settled and assigned tasks that will keep them out of our way. It wouldn't hurt if you mentioned the hobbit, and how much you admire him; don't lay it on too thick, but give them something positive to think about."

"Aye, praises sprinkled like seasoning to flavour the dish. All come to my kitchens at some point, to feed their bellies and to fill their minds; all the gossip comes to me eventually," Bombur grinned slyly, and patted his roundness where it rested against the table's edge.

"Exactly," Nori grinned. "As the only Cantor among us, Bifur should go down there to sing to the chambers, and find out if everything is still stable. When he gives the go-ahead, Bofur, Dori- you two head down and start any repairs that are needed. Clean out any rubbish, and prepare things the way Bifur tells you for the ritual. Oin – I don't imagine we've got a store of anointing oil laid by, so you had better start preparing some. It's going to take a barrel-full to do a chamber that size. I shall take care of acquisitions and trade from Laketown for anything we're missing – I'll take Dwalin with me. Balin and Gloin, you two head up the what there is of our council; you'll be needed to make sure everything continues running smoothly and no one pays us too much attention. Ori, you can continue your work with Master Baggins in the Record Hall and the library- maybe drop a word or two about our king in his pointed ear; see how he reacts."

Thorin flushed and glared at the auburn-haired thief, most certainly trying not to look too interested in the idea of murmuring anything in said pointed ear.

"What about us?" Kili threw his arm around his brother to include him in his protest at being left out.

"You two shall be with me," Thorin said grimly. "What time I do not spend in meditations and preparations shall be spent in your instruction."
"Instruction? For what?" Kili asked, warily.

"To rule, while I am confined."

Fili gulped, looking around the chamber a bit wildly.

This didn't sound fun, at all.

-..-

DEEP WITHIN the mountain, a hobbit slept peacefully, and dreamt of comely things, completely unaware of how much his life was about to change.

Chapter End Notes

I admit to being nervous when posting this, and I was overwhelmed with the positive response! Thank you all for being so tremendous :)
And There Are Many Paths to Tread

Chapter Summary

In which we learn there is more to being the eldest 'Ri brother than tea, and Thorin flirts. Possibly badly.

Chapter Notes

In any writing process, the unsung heroes are the betas. My heartfelt thanks to hazel-3017 and krystal lazuli for all their patient work and tremendous dedication. You guys are awesome!

And as always, thank you to Nepthysmoon, for being most incredible, in every way <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Forgo of Origins

Legacy of Our Fathers

<3

And There Are Many Paths to Tread

EVERY MOUNTAIN had its own particular smell, made up in part of its composite deposits, and in part of the spirit of the people who dwelt there. The distinct spicy, earthy and mineral smell of being in the deep mountain chambers of his home was something Dori, like all dwarrows who had been driven from Erebor, remembered in his dreams during the protracted exile in Ered Luin.

Once, long ago, Dori had thought he might spend his days in the deep dark like this, delving for new and precious things and gently coaxing them to light. His great strength made mining an obvious choice when it became apparent he had no leaning towards any of the weapon-smithing trades. It was a bit of a surprise really, when he finally felt his calling and it was towards horology—a surprise, that is, until one took into account his love of precision and minutia, though Nori had a much cruder way of putting it, of course.

He was his brother, and Dori loved him, but sometimes, he despaired for Nori ever finding a shred
Dori had been late in blooming, and heard no Call from any craft over another until well into his fortieth year. Most dwarrows tended to show talent by their second decade, third at the latest. To go four was of great concern, especially when there was some hope that if Dori showed especial skill his work may give financial relief to the struggling family. He had learned quickly to turn a deaf ear to the whispers, and to not see the pitying stares; he'd had lots of practice, of course. His mother’s method of dealing with grief was unusual—scandalous, even, though not completely unheard of. Dori's father had been Íth's life-mate and their love had been true and fine, but Suthri died in an orc raid in the outerlands when Dori himself had been just a babe in swaddling. For a grieving Íth, Nori's father had been a means of forgetting the pain for a while he supposed, but he'd not stuck 'round long once he found his mistress was expecting. Ori's father had been just the same, and suddenly Dori found himself an older brother in charge of keeping an eye on his siblings while his mother worked the forges at all hours, day and night, to bring in what means she could. Not finding his craft-calling was no longer just an embarrassment, it was becoming a huge weight from under which Dori couldn't seem to escape.

Once Nori and Ori had been old enough, he had been lucky to find an apprenticeship with a merchant who’d specialised in imports of fine wines, exotic fabrics and the like from the human settlements; and for the first time in decades the fact that he was a late bloomer was completely irrelevant. When, a few years after he’d made senior apprentice at trade, he had finally had his Calling, it was no great motivation to start over at another craft. He had some security with his current position, and starting his apprenticeship over wouldn't give them more coin to spend. Many dwarrows didn't work in their heart-craft, after all. It was enough that sometimes in the evenings, Dori had a moment to cast precise little cogs and gears from metal scraps Nori occasionally brought to him, and even then he knew better than to ask from where. For two years he'd worked at it, finding a few hours by candlelight after he'd seen to his brothers, and convinced Íth to rest. He gathered scraps of wood and built an ornate housing, encouraging the artistic little Ori to paint scenes on it, until one day he actually had accumulated enough parts to make the large hall-clock run. They had presented it to their mother for her naming-day, having never been able to give her anything so grand before, though it was still an apprentice effort at best. Íth had smiled, pulling her boys close, telling them that together, they could accomplish whatever they chose. She had died quietly in her sleep a week later, gone to rejoin Suthri in the hall of Mandos, to await the great re-forging.

Once they had been driven from Erebor, pride had made for thin supper for many families, and Dori's chosen trade served them far better than horology would ever have. He was able to keep his brothers dressed decently and fed better than most, and for a late bloomer, and son of a scandalous dwarrowdam, it was more than enough satisfaction. No one had the energy to whisper about the brother's 'Ri anymore, not in the daily struggle after the exile.

And now they were finally here. The dragon had been slain, the kingdom was theirs to reclaim with hard work and willing hearts, and now the only whispering that would be done would be about the King's Companions, Rescuers of Erebor, not squalid fatherless outcasts. The work in the Treasury and the refuge chambers was going much quicker than he had dared hope, though he knew his Majesty was chafing at every little delay. Bofur was a cheery companion, and Dori had come to respect throughout their journey that his original sense of humour and good cheer never interfered with whatever task he undertook, so he allowed himself to relax and enjoy the good company during what was proving to be largely tedious rubble-clearing and knee-popping scrubbing.

A low whistle distracted him from the heavy stone-wood chair he was attempting to repair, and he jabbed his finger with the sharp little awl when he startled. Cursing, and trying not to think of how
dirty it probably was, he stuck the injured finger in his mouth, and turned to search for Bofur in the vast expanse of the main vault. Piles of priceless items still littered the floor, despite the whole company having spent considerable time down here, cataloguing and claiming parts of the hoard. At least, the floor was, for the most part, visible now, its polished rose marble gleaming in the flickering lantern light.

It took a moment for Dori's wandering eyes to finally locate his companion, hunched over as he was behind the dull gleam of what was once the throne of Thráin I. Smaug must have had his reasons, but the throne itself was surprisingly intact, back in the far corner of the room, looking absurdly like an afterthought; a forgotten relic of a bygone era.

Not even bothering to grumble, he marched over to where the other dwarf crouched, to peer peevishly over his shoulder. "What are you on about?" Dori demanded as best he could with his bleeding finger still jammed in his mouth. Somehow, he wasn't surprised that the whimsical dwarf seemed to have no trouble understanding him.

"Would ya look at this, now?" Bofur shifted his weight back on his heels, to give Dori room and light to see what had caught his attention.

It looked like nothing so much as an innocent rough linen pouch, grey-brown and almost invisible where it was tied against the stone. It had a familiar look to it, Dori thought, searching his memory—like the kind he'd seen in the great forges…used occasionally for the making of flash fires…

Dori slowly looked up the length of the carven pillar, one of a pair standing behind the throne; there were four such pairs around the room, supporting all the arched doorways leading into this chamber from the refuge chambers to the anti-room of the vault that held the massive main doorway. With a sinking feeling, he forced his gaze over to the second pillar, on his left. An identical pouch was tied to the base of it. Suddenly, Dori didn't find them so innocent looking at all. He wondered how many of the other supports in the room had similar loads waiting at their base.

Bofur had obviously come to a similar conclusion, because when he looked up, his appearance was the most serious it had ever been. The expression looked incredibly out of place on his mobile and expressive face. "Reckon King Thrór was planning on blowing them?" he asked, and his voice sounded as if it hurt just to say the words. "Sealing his-self down here with the gold when old Smaug came?" Everyone had heard the whispered stories of how his grandson, Thorin, had rescued the king, pulling him bodily from the Treasury just as the dragon claimed it. But this! If this is what he'd actually been stopped from doing…it would be the ultimate dishonour to an already disgraced figure.

Yes, Dori wanted to say, and the thought tasted like the dregs of badly turned ale on his tongue, that's exactly what I think he would have done. While his people burned and suffered, he would have done everything to protect his gold—or die with it. But Dori said none of this. He understood the shame that came with having something embarrassing in the family that was no fault of your own. He understood the whispers, and the deep need to prove yourself. He understood the anger for, as well as the paradoxical need to protect the one responsible, and yet still loving them fiercely. It was a strange feeling of kinship for a bastard's brother to feel for his king, to be sure.

What he actually said, a long moment later, was, "All I see is more rubbish to be cleared out." He made sure his voice was level, and without any emotion, just a calm recitation of fact. Dori looked down to the dwarf still crouching at the pillar's base before adding firmly, "There is absolutely nothing to report to Thorin. Am I clear?"

Bofur looked at him for a long moment, clearly uncomfortable as he chewed at his mustache. Dori kept his face placid, projecting nothing but calm surety. He'd had a lot of experience guiding a

Methodically, and without looking at each other, they began carefully gathering up the last remnants of what must have been Thrór's final disgrace, and a last reminder Thorin, himself newly recovered of gold sickness, did not need.

IT WAS a week more before the end was in sight, though to be fair, it had been a lot of work for just the two of them; three, whenever Bifur was grounded enough to be in the same plane as the rest of dwarven-kind.

All dwarrows felt the earth around them—the minerals called to their bodies and fëa so that they were all aware of minute details that seemed to escape the other races, much to dwarven puzzlement. Cantors could take that awareness to a whole different level, and were to other dwarves in awareness, what dwarrows in general were to other races. Dori sometimes wondered what the world felt like from Bifur's skin. He could hear the rusty vibrations of his Song as it echoed and hung in the very rock of the larger chamber he and Bofur were working on, though Bifur had last sung here an hour before.

"Always gives me a bit o' the willies, how Bifur's voice can linger while my cousin does not," Bofur said, voicing what had been in Dori's thoughts all morning. "Still, I wouldn't want to send our little Burglar down here without Bifur's assurances—that's Mahal's own truth."

"We sent him down here before, when there was a live dragon at the bottom," Dori muttered, still a little embarrassed about the whole incident, and not quite sure how that part of the tale reflected on the lot of them.

"Aye, but you have to admit, he did better n' any o' us would have done. He's right clever and quick on his feet." Bofur's response was more pragmatic. He paused to lean on his shovel as he pushed his fur-lined cap back to scratch at his sweaty forehead. "Still, never know what more damage Smaug did when he came bursting out o' here in a wrath. Those pillars we shored up yesterday weren't anywhere near proper spec anymore, and that archway was darned near collapsed with the keystone cracked the way it was."

"Yes, yes," Dori conceded with as much grace as he could muster, which is to say, not very much while filthy and he suspected, with his braids in disarray. "$I shall be far more inclined to celebration once these caverns are habitable." He gave a particularly violent shake to the thick rug he was attempting to clean, and ash billowed out in a cloud. Dori gave the thing a sour look.

Bofur didn't take any offense at Dori's fussing. "$Ye should feel accomplished already. We've got the main cavern blocked up proper, Bifur says, to give the right acoustics for the ritual—that's a job that by rights should have taken more 'n just the three o' us, especially with you not being a miner and all. By tomorrow night, we should have the rest o' the junk cleared out o' here, too."

Dori gave a tired little grimace at the prospect of remaining this dirty for another whole day. "$I suppose then Bifur can start burning Ôin's incense and such—at least that will have the added benefit of clearing the air. You, master miner, stink," he looked down helplessly at his spotted and stained clothing. "$And I suspect I do, too."

In a rare moment, which proved that not much got past his droopy-mustached and pig-tailed-braided head, Bofur said, "$I'll take the good honest stink of a 'Ri brother any day, over some of those fancy fusspots as can't even spell courage, let alone do what we've done this last year." He
winked at him solemnly, and before Dori could formulate a proper response, or indeed had any idea what to say to such a statement, Bofur had tipped his hat back in place and resumed shoveling the last of the detritus into his handcart.

And if he whistled jauntily while he did so, Dori may have given him an exasperated look, just for the form of the thing, but chose not to object. He may even have hummed along, in a pleasantly soft baritone. A little. And very, very quietly, of course.

Bofur was a surprisingly agreeable companion, indeed.

".."

FAT BEESWAX candles burned smokelessly in polished iron brackets, freshening the air with their sweet scent. Glimpses of grandeur, of riches long forgotten and laying in wait, gleamed in the flickering light from beneath layers of neglect and disuse.

The royal apartments had been grand more than a hundred years ago; indeed, in his memory, they were opulent and rich beyond the dreams of men and elves. It was disheartening to sit here now and see the remains of once-rich tapestries hanging tattered on the walls and everything dull and covered in dust. Thorin had insisted that the company be housed in comfort and the main work of the kingdom be started before anything more than a basic scrub was done in here, for he could do no less for those who had given so much and so readily when he had asked, but the tattiness still rankled.

"Thorin, you're going to have to learn to focus if you're ever going to achieve the necessary calm for this," Óin was saying. He had been saying it, or variations of it, for almost two hours now. The aged healer had even gone so far as to imply that Thorin's behaviour was only proof that Fili and Kili came by their restless energy completely naturally, whatever that was supposed to mean. He couldn't imagine he was in any way responsible for the shocking lack of decorum displayed by his sister-sons. His mind was wandering again; with great effort he pulled his attention back to the present moment.

"How is this even possible, Óin? I shouldn't be so bloody open that I can barely function!" Thorin roared angrily, balling his fists against his thighs to keep from hitting something.

"Thorin, it's a bloody marvel you're still functioning at all, so don't split hairs over the how well of it," the healer retorted, clearly not intimidated one jot. "The fact of the matter is that it has been forming, completely one-sided. It will tear your mind apart if you don't take steps."

The king glared at him, mulishly. "Why is the bond forming, is the question Óin."

"He had just saved your life. Is it really any wonder your barriers were lowered enough to allow this to happen? Now, you need to meditate if you are going to be successful in pursuing your intended." Óin glowered at him, but beneath his habitually crusty demeanor there was genuine concern. "Like it or not, the process has already started, and if you do not achieve some kind of inner control to slow it down, you are running a very real risk of madness. If you had the sense to approach me after the Carrock, maybe—"

Bifur, with his usual lack of care for differences in rank, decided now was the time to chime in helpfully.

"Muck?" Óin screwed his ear trumpet in a little tighter and peered at Bifur from beneath craggy brows, probably hoping to lip read, for all the good the trumpet seemed to do him. "There was no muck at the Carrock, and I don't see how it is supposed to have helped if there were—"
The Cantor cut him off with a very vigorous series of hand gestures, and Thorin groaned.

When it came, the sharp knock on the door was so incredibly welcome that in his relief at the interruption, he found himself almost shouting his permission to enter before he caught himself.

"Er, is this a bad time, your Majesty?" Nori asked, peering around the door frame at the energetic discussion going on behind the dejected king.

Thorin sighed wearily, but shook his head and straightened his shoulders. "What is it?"

Nori sidled into the room, being sure to keep half an eye on the two dwarrows he considered to be an unpredictable element, especially when combined. "I just came back from Laketown with a load of calendula and comfrey for Óin, sire, and I thought you might want a bit of a report."

"Yes, proceed." Thorin tried to sit up and look attentive despite his difficulty in focusing on anything more immediate than the current whereabouts of his company's burglar. It's getting worse, he was forced to acknowledge, but he was still able to push it back, at least for now.

Nori's look was assessing, clearly seeing some of his monarch's turmoil, but he started his report obediently enough. "I can't believe you gave that lot a fourteenth share of the treasure," he started urbanely.

"It was at the behest of Master Baggins. It was his share, after all. It seemed churlish not to dispose of it according to his wishes," the king grumbled.

"Really?" It was almost obscene how much disbelief could be packed into that one word, especially on the tongue of their disreputable thief. "It's too bad you felt it necessary to be so accommodating in this case."

"Did you actually have something to report?" Thorin grumbled, in no mood for Nori's snide commentary.

The middle 'Ri brother unhurriedly finished polishing a small dirk against his jerkin and slotted it back into a hidden sheath, before answering. "Well, about what you would expect, I suppose, people being what they are and all," he drawled. "The Master, that pompous popinjay they had ruling that rabble, no sooner got to realising that being ruler when the town is razed and people are shitting in the streets for lack of even an outhouse is a lot harder than doing a runner with as much dwarven gold as you can carry, so he's decamped and headed for more agreeable climes, taking that rotter, Alfrid, with him."

Thorin let out his breath in a deliberate stream and stared hard at a faint spot of soot on the brick above the mantle. He knew his expression must clearly show his thoughts for a ruler who would abandon his people at such a time for any who would care to read them, and not even Bifur ventured to interrupt. "It is…unfortunate that this would happen," he finally said, because to say anything more would be to say too much when he was suddenly, irrationally, angry. How dare that little man take the generosity and largess of the hobbit and trod it into the mud with such an act? Vaguely, he registered a clatter, such as metal might make against stone.

"Your Majesty, you must try to relax," Óin was saying, and a large hand was holding his forearm; the healer's grip was still strong, despite his years. The king blinked and looked down at his hand, not sure why he was holding one of the candleholders from the table, until he saw its mate laying on the floor by the wall several yards away, clearly snapped in two. Carefully, he forced his fingers to relinquish their grip and placed the undamaged one back on the table.

"And what has become of the men of Laketown?"
"Bard leads them."

Bifur barked something highly derisive.

Nori shrugged. "True; he's just become a little more official about it, now."

"Uncle!" a familiar voice rang from the corridor, sounding a bit frantic. It was followed by Fili striding into the room without bothering to knock, or see who might be there.

"I've lost him! I lost…I mean…oh," the prince stuttered upon seeing a familiar auburn-haired thief in his uncle's quarters.

Thorin raised an eyebrow in censure, and Fili had the presence of mind to wipe the gobsmacked expression off his face, looking vaguely ashamed. "Can I assume your abrupt entrance has something to do with Nori?" he asked, feeling the beginnings of a headache throbbing deep in his skull.

His nephew and heir shifted nervously, well aware of what were likely his uncle's thoughts on his lack of control. "Well, uhm…," he stuttered, not really sure how he should answer in front of his supposed quarry, who seemed to be enjoying the proceedings entirely too much to be feeling intimidated.

"Let me guess," Nori drawled, leaning against one post of Thorin's four-poster bed. "Dwalin suggested you might keep an eye on me?"

Fili's expression was painfully struggling not to show his discomfort, obviously torn between telling the truth and possibly saying something he shouldn't. Thorin took pity on him. "It's all right, lad. What happened?" he asked, softly.

"Dwalin said we should keep an eye on Nori, that the crown should be advised on his whereabouts at all times."

"Dwalin said specifically that I had ordered this?"

The young dwarf's face flushed. "No—I guess not exactly, Uncle."

"You must be more careful, Fili. Listen to what is said to you, and take measure not only from what is said, but from what is not."

"Yes, Uncle," the prince bowed his head, furiously staring at his boots.

Thorin frowned. "Before long, I will not be able to look over your shoulder. Be thankful it was something relatively harmless this time."

Nori smirked. "Dwalin, though fearsome on a battle field, is not terribly skilled in the ways of mental or verbal combat, my prince," he told the crestfallen young man, clapping him on the shoulder lightly. "I'm sorry to say, his thrusts are rather predictable."

"And just what did you do during your time in Laketown to bait my guard-captain into this puerile counterstrike?" the king enquired suspiciously.

"Ah, it may have involved Grasper," Nori hedged.

Thorin raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"And a dung-pile," the thief added, trying to look innocent, whilst simultaneously judging the
distance to the door.

"What would you be doing if you were back in the Shire right now, Master Baggins?"

Ori's voice floated up to him from somewhere down below. Bilbo clutched the ladder a bit more firmly as he leaned over as far as he could stretch, balancing on one hairy toe to grab the last three books on this shelf. "Right now?" he hummed, only paying half attention to the question as he made a second, slightly more dangerous grab for the books. "Well, it's just past the Yule festival now, so I'd likely be shoving relations out of my door in hopes of a little peace and quiet, and a chance to restock my pantry. Aha! Got you, you elusive devils."

"Are those the last?" Ori fretted, holding the base of the ladder, and not liking Bilbo's acrobatics at all. Thorin would have definite things to say if the hobbit were to fall.

"Yes, yes. I'm coming down now, don't worry." He'd never understand these dwarves, really. They were perfectly willing, back when they had thought him useless, to let him brave a dragon on his own, but now they fussed and fretted when he climbed a simple ladder. Yavanna only knew what passed for logic amongst his dwarven friends. However, Ori hadn't been able to deny that as the larger of the two, it made sense for him to hold the ladder steady, leaving the actual climbing to the more nimble hobbit, to which he had eventually conceded with a worried frown.

"Here you go, I'm afraid I can't read the titles of these ones, but this last one is written in Westron, and appears to be an Herbal—shall we add it to the pile for Óin to look over, before we file it?" Bilbo handed Ori the books and began descending the ladder steps with exaggerated care at the dwarf's protective hovering.

"Hmm?" Ori murmured distracted, already leafing through the new books Bilbo had rescued and drifting towards his favoured work area with the hobbit trailing after him. Most of the damage done to the library was in the form of neglect during the dragon's stay. Mice had found their way into the stacks and chewed through an entire section on Elvin history, much to Thorin's enjoyment when Bilbo had told him of it; a cracked pipe one level up had caused water damage to the section of records spanning the late Second Age, and several shelves had collapsed entirely, burying their books under heavy piles of granite and timber. Some bindings were foxed from rubble and dust, but all in all, the Great Library of Erebor, largest repository of Dwarven records in all the seven kingdoms save that which was buried beneath Khazad-dûm, he had been assured, had weathered Smaug's occupancy surprisingly well.

Bilbo was only thankful that the dragon, like most animals, had showed the good sense to not foul his own lair, and had left his droppings and meal remnants out in the Desolation somewhere. He was a gentle-hobbit, after all, and he was afraid he'd have to put his foot down at dung-shovelling, no matter how fond he was of his companions.

"What have we found, Ori my lad?"

Startled, the dwarf looked up from his leafing with a squeak. "Oh, uhm—this one is on dwarven…customs, I guess you could say," he hedged, the tips of his round ears going faintly pink.

_The ridiculous secrecy of dwarves! It's all right, I won't pry into things you can't tell me._

Ori looked visibly relieved, but still kept the open book pressed to his chest, arms crossed over it protectively. _I wonder if I should remind him I can't read Khuzdûl?_ Bilbo mused with fond exasperation, and turned back to the books they had managed to pull this morning, carefully sorting them into piles according to the amount of damage done to them. It was consuming work,
and occasionally, he stopped to flip through one of the incomprehensible books just to look at the
colourful woodcuts. His concentration was gone, though; he kept shifting restlessly from foot to
foot, picking up and putting down several volumes without really examining them, his contented
mood seemingly vanished. "Have there ever been any instances of outsiders learning dwarven
secrets?" He didn't realise he'd planned to ask until the question slipped out. He told himself
repeatedly not to be so over-sensitive, but no matter how much he kept brushing these incidents
off, they still hurt.

Startled, the young dwarf didn't seem to know how to respond at first, but his expression quickly
began to look pleased, as though Bilbo had handed him some kind of solution to something he'd
been pondering. "We'll, uhm… The most famous is the deep friendship that arose between the elf
Celebrimbor of the kingdom of Hollin, and the great craftmaster Narvi during the Second Age.
Their friendship was so great they actually crafted together, which resulted in Durin's Doors that
guard the entrance to Khazad-dûm," he said, staring off over Bilbo's shoulder as he thought. "But
there have been a handful of humans, too, mostly warriors who have fought with us." He blinked,
and looked back to the hobbit with a smile. It was a wistful, hopeful smile, and Bilbo didn't have
the heart to dash his hope, even if he privately thought it would be a long day of no Elevenses in
the Shire before Thorin, traditionalist that he was, would consider teaching a hobbit sacred
dwarven secrets.

"Well, then I suppose there is hope yet, isn't there?" he said instead, and tried very hard to banish
the sudden image of sitting before a roaring fire, while listening to the deep voice of the king
patiently going over basic grammar again and again for Bilbo's edification. The image was entirely
too alluring for his own comfort, and he bit the inside of his cheek, hard, to distract himself from
his own nonsense. "After all, I still have Sting and a few instructions from Dwalin, so all hope of a
warrior's inclusion is not yet passed." He gave Ori a rueful little grimace.

"Oh, no, Master Baggins! I think you have already done so much for us, I'm sure his Majesty
would agree that you are worthy of inclusion as Khazâd Bâhâl—dwarf-friend. He, he values you
very highly, you know," he added shyly, peering anxiously at Bilbo as if willing him to believe,
though he was still blushing.

"I thank you for the thought, Ori, but I truly don't see that happening anytime soon, so for now,
you won't have Khuzdûl lessons for soft hobbits to add to your already overwhelming workload."

"I don't imagine it would be me giving the lessons," Ori said, apologetically. "I assume his
Majesty would insist on doing that himself."

And that really didn't do much for Bilbo's composure, as it brought back more images of fire-lit
evenings and deep, raspy voices that made him unaccountably agitated and nervous. "Other
kingdoms!" he exclaimed desperately, probably too loud for a dwarf who was actually no more
than two feet away, but not caring in the slightest if he did deafen him at the moment. "You
mentioned this being the largest library of the seven kingdoms. I don't recall Thorin ever
mentioning having more than the one, unless you are also counting his hall in the Blue
Mountains?"

"Not Thorin's kingdoms!" the scribe giggled helplessly. "There are seven kingdoms, each
belonging to a different family. There were once three, here in Eriador, but now only the kingdom
of Durin's folk remains. Four more lie far to the South and East of here."

"What happened to the other two kingdoms?" Bilbo asked, intrigued.

Ori paused in his sorting, gazing somewhere into the distance, as he was wont to do whenever he
was searching the file-cabinet in his head for the precise little card with the information he wanted
stored on it. One could almost see him patiently sorting through them all as he gathered a very
detailed list of facts to present. After a moment, he blinked and turned his eyes back to the hobbit. "Gabilgathol and Tumunzahar; or Belegost and Nogrod in Westron, were held by the Broadbeam and the Firebeard families," he said slowly. "Their kingdoms were destroyed during the War of Wrath, at the end of the First Age."

Bilbo had a feeling that there was probably more he wasn't being given, but honestly wasn't going to be bothered chasing it down. "What happened to them?"

"What was left of the two clans fled east and settled with Durin's folk in Khazad-dûm; the Sigintarâg, or Longbeards are actually much more mixed than any other dwarven kingdom. We've always felt it made us stronger."

"Are there any of the other families settled here as well? The ones from the South and East, I mean?"

Glancing down to the book he still held securely to his chest, as if just remembering it was there, Ori seemed hesitant for a moment. "Durin eventually took his life-mate from the Blacklock family," he admitted finally. "And we have always welcomed dwarves from the other families when they come to us."

The hobbit paused his careful examination of the volume in his hands, and looked over at the young dwarf thoughtfully. "Took his wife from the Blacklock family? That's an odd way of putting it," he commented mildly.

Ori’s eyes widened fractionally. "Did I say that? You're right, that's—"

"Ori!" A deep voice called from across the vaulted room, and Thorin Oakenshield strode over the dusty stone floor to where the hobbit and his scribe were seated amid towering piles of tomes. "Ah, Master Baggins. I thought I might find you here."

"You were looking for me?" Bilbo looked up at the towering figure above him, in obvious confusion. "I haven't forgotten some meeting, or other, er, have I?"

"And do I now have to set a formal appointment to see my Burglar?" Thorin questioned lightly. The dwarven king actually appeared to be smiling down at him, but Bilbo was sure it was just the uncertain lighting—and if the library was flooded in natural light due to shafts cut into the ceiling, then he was certain no one would be rude enough to point that out. "It seems to me there was a time not long past where I commanded you from my presence, and yet you would not go."

"That is because you were refusing to stay in your bed as Óin ordered you to," Bilbo sniffed, clearly not impressed. "Yavanna save me from the stubbornness of dwarves! It's a wonder you lot managed to heal at all, the way you and your nephews behaved."

"Then we are all fortunate to have had a bossy Shireling to look out for us."

"You only began saying that once you realised that if you looked pathetic enough I would help you with your paperwork," Bilbo harrumphed.

Thorin's look of contrition was ruined by a rather arrogant smirk. "That is what government is, Master Baggins; people I find who are better than I at the tedious jobs. Are you sure I cannot convince you to serve in my Counsel?"

"You don't have enough good wine or fine food to temp me into such a position," the hobbit dismissed him with an airy wave of his hand and rather deliberately turned back to his pile of books. The teasingly speculative look on Thorin's face was absolutely not causing his ears to flush. "Now, if you'll excuse me, some of us are actually trying to get some work done."
Ori just sat there awkwardly, watching the by-play with the air of someone watching a fisticuffs match, and unsure who might be winning. "Excuse me, but, I'll just carry on here, shall I?"

"Ah, yes, Master Scribe—I just wanted to steal our resident hobbit from you for a few moments." At Bilbo's firm look, Thorin remembered to smile reassuringly at the shiest member of his company. Ori bobbed his head and hurried off to his binding station, a good fifteen feet from where his king was now stealing his vacated chair.

Bilbo watched him settle himself with amusement. "Does Balin know you're skiving off?"

Thorin gave him an affronted look, to which the hobbit merely raised a brow. "I'm attending to affairs of state," he declared, daring him to disagree.

"In the library?" Bilbo asked, looking around the overflowing tables and benches, dust-strewn floors and absolute lack of state officials, with amusement.

"Yes. You are clearly an important asset to our kingdom, and I am here to remind you that you need to take a break every now and again." Though Thorin's face was less expressive than say, Bofur's, Bilbo still found that his eyes gave him away every time. Right now, they were glittering faintly with amusement and relaxation, though his actual expression remained serious.

"I took a break for lunch not long ago, thank you very much," he shot back, looking pointedly back down to his work.

He heard the dwarf king sigh and shift in his chair, but he didn't let himself look up and spoil the effect. Lightly, he ran his fingertips over the foxed edges of the large green tome before him, feeling for warping in the binding board. A shuffling of boot ed feet, slightly louder, still failed to make the hobbit look up, and he could almost feel Thorin's brow furrowing in frustration as he smirked to himself.

"Fine!" Thorin finally grumbled, losing patience. "I am here to request that you join me this evening."

Bilbo looked up, curiously.

"Bifur tells me they have finished repairs to the Treasury. I would like you to join me in inspecting the work…"

Chapter End Notes

It's been a few weeks, hasn't it?

When I first undertook this story, I had no idea that this chapter would be my major sticking point. The plot - which was rough and somewhat nebulous in my head, suddenly needed to be detailed, right-the-heck now if I was going to be able to write this chapter at all, something I hadn't planned on needing fully formed for another two chapters. Thus began a month of evenings; after work and after the dinner was cleaned up for another night, curling up with a glass of wine, my laptop, far too many scribbled notes on some truly dodgy paper (some of which looked suspiciously like napkins, or in some cases, even wrappers :p) and every Tolkien text I owned or could index on-line. The result? Well, hopefully you have all felt the wait was worth the
A Few Random Notes:

1) I love Dori. I don't know why, precisely, but I got an indecent amount of enjoyment from trying to figure out just what made him *him*.

2) Bifur is also the dwarf of my heart. There is just something so heartbreakingly fun about him. I tried to sit down and write the whole Thorin/Bifur/Oin/Fili scene from his point of view, but I just couldn't do it and I may have cried a little in frustration at my complete inability to do so.

The resulting scene is probably more readable than it would have been had I succeeded, but I make it a goal to find a way to write for him before this is over, even if it's only a few paragraphs <3

3) Hopefully, my ideas of Dwarven culture will continue to meet with everyone's approval :)

Thank you again to everyone for reading, reviewing and/or leaving kudos! I just got back from the dentist and my face is frozen from neck to eyeballs - and the idea that you guys are out there, enjoying all my hard work is making me feel amazing, despite occasionally chewing my tongue :p

You guys have super powers, you really do :)
4 - But Journey Long Before Me Lies

Chapter Summary

Thorin finds the path to true love is seldom easy, and Fili wishes someone else could be King today.

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to my beta, Krystal_lazuli, for her unceasingly amazing work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Forge of Origins:
The Legacy of Our Fathers

The FIRST NIGHT had been horrible. Bilbo was still too angry about the whole situation to be at all interested in any kind of explanation, once he had determined that Thorin was indeed, in possession of his faculties, and that there wasn't some kind of horrible threat that had prompted this kind of high-handed behaviour. Thorin reminded himself that this was not unexpected, and steeled himself to endure.

Deep in the heart of the mountain, in a cavern once belonging to Thror I, but now the repository of a kingdom's wealth and a symbol of the bright future for a whole nation, a newly restored king began an ancient rite that would hopefully bind his soul to him forever. It was a rite of understanding, of honor and, at the heart of it, of great patience.

*Patientia was a cruel, elf-loving mistress,* Thorin thought morosely as he watched Bilbo as the hobbit pointedly pretended any space where he stood was unoccupied.

The voices of the company faded as the song ended. The ritual had begun, with Thorin's heart
pounding a staccato rhythm in his chest that he was sure even Óin could hear outside the chamber. He and Bilbo had stood staring at each other, caught in a motionless tableau as the hollow boom of the vault door sliding closed echoed in the still air. If pressed—if his nephew's very lives had depended that he answer, Thorin could not have given any kind of estimate as to how long they stayed there, Bilbo poised, ready to flee, and he, feet planted solidly before the anteroom doorway, silently blocking any thoughts of departure.

The cavern was large, likely immense to the hobbit's eyes, but not as grand as some of the later chambers built above. Delicate wrought iron brackets holding oil lamps hung at intervals from walls and pillars, their light reflecting in warm pinpricks gleaming from precious metals and gems everywhere, like billions of tiny stars descended to earth; but no cold-bright star had ever shone with this warm and rich glow. Deep as they were here, it was too far for the starlight to be visible through the cunning channels that allowed small amounts of sunlight in during the day, but a faint draft brought fresh, sweet air and occasionally caused the halfling's light curls to tickle the tips of his pointed ears.

"So," Bilbo had finally stuttered out, and paused to lick his lips and swallow a time or trice before he seemed to be able to go on. "So, what, ah—what exactly is going on?"

Mahal give me the wisdom to speak rightly; to say what must be said and make him understand and look upon me with favour. In Thorin's experience, though, Mahal rarely saw fit to make things easy for his beleaguered son. Consequently, he did not hold out much hope for anything about this going easily. How to even begin explaining what must be said? He took a deep breath, and watched the clearly confused and nervous hobbit through half-lidded eyes. "We have now entered into the Khebabel Azyungaz," he began, and he couldn't help the small smile that crept upon his lips. It felt right to finally be beginning.

"Oh, good; The Kebalb—, Kehble—," Bilbo gave a frustrated groan and stamped one tough foot at his blatant inability to pronounce the guttural words. "We have begun what, exactly?" he asked, clearly irritated. Still, he seemed to relax some of his wary watchfulness with the idea that there was a rational explanation for what was happening.

"The Khebabel Azyungaz," Thorin reiterated patiently. He beckoned Bilbo to follow, and strode past coffers of gems and metals until he reached a small alcove. Here were a few benches and stools with smooth-worn seats and down-stuffed cushions nestled amongst the pillars; a place where royal officials would have held smaller audiences when this was still the heart of the kingdom. Picking one at random, he sat, and motioned for Bilbo to do the same.

Of course, the stubborn hobbit looked for a long moment like he was going to refuse, but eventually settled on one of the low stools that was only marginally too high for him and perched on the very edge of the seat. He tapped one foot against the stone floor in an impatient rhythm.

Thorin watched the flickering light cast by the oil lamps turn Bilbo's honey curls to a burnished bronze. They glowed more enchantingly in his sight than any polished treasure had before. He wondered how the Arkenstone had ever seemed more attractive—but the veil was removed from his sight now, and he could see clearly the beauty in the round lines of the hobbit's face, in the delicate point of his ears, and in his deceptive strength of will.

"So, what does it mean, then?" Bilbo demanded when Thorin remained lost in thought. "The thing I can't pronounce," he clarified when it became obvious that the king hadn't been paying attention.

He thought briefly of casting another prayer for success, but dismissed the idea immediately. There reached a certain point when begging, even from your deity, became embarrassing. Mahal was surely aware of his son's many weaknesses by now. "The Khebabel Azyungaz... It is a very
old rite among my people; in truth, the very oldest," he began tentatively.

"I've never heard it mentioned." Bilbo seemed entranced with the idea of learning more about his dwarven friends. His posture had relaxed a little further, and his expression was less stiff.

"Nor would you have. It is very sacred, and not one we share with outsiders."

Bilbo flushed, but seemed very pleased by this. "So, what, I have ceased to be an outsider, by virtue of being willing to give the king a well earned scolding when he's earned it?" he asked cheekily,

Thorin was startled enough for a fleeting smile at this honest observation, but the weight of this looming conversation quickly chased it away. He opened his mouth to begin, let out his breath, closed it again. He stared helplessly at Bilbo's encouraging smile and blew out more frustrated breath. "I do not know where to start," he confessed.

"Opening one's mouth is generally accepted as a fine way to begin," Bilbo chided. "Why don't we try this? What does it mean?"

"Mean?" Thorin parroted dumbly, and winced. And the hobbit thought this was the easy part to start with?

"Yes, you know – try translating the words to Westron." Bilbo's tone was encouraging, obviously mistaking Thorin's blank stare for lack of comprehension, as opposed to abject terror.

"Some things do not translate well, Master Hobbit," he hedged.

"Well, what is the purpose of this ritual, then?"

_I would have been better to answer the first question_, Thorin thought, morosely. _Instead of gaining time to ease into to my purpose, I will have to state it baldly._ Faintly, he could still hear the rumbling echo of Bifur's earlier song held within the rock surrounding them; he wondered if Bilbo could hear it, too. Slowly, he drew breath, filling his lungs deeply and allowed his eyes to drift closed, forcing out the sight of Bilbo's increasing agitation, and allowing him to focus more fully on that song. From it, he could feel his purpose here. He could feel his ancient connection to this rite, and to his people.

He could draw courage.

"It is a courting rite, Master Hobbit," he stated, knowing that any attempt to be more subtle and slow would inevitably lead to misunderstanding between them. Words were never Thorin's strongest suit, and he would risk no confusion of his purpose now.

"Courting?" Bilbo spluttered, a rosy flush rising on his cheeks. "What are you—I mean, we aren't — are we?"

Thorin nodded gravely and confirmed, "Yes, Master Baggins, we are."

Brown eyes stared disbelievingly back at him for a long moment as Bilbo tried to take in this new information. "And telling me about this required a locked door?" he prodded carefully, as one who wasn't entirely sure they wished to hear the answer.

Leaning forward with his elbows resting on his bent knees, Thorin only hoped his expression could convey his absolute earnestness, without actually scaring the hobbit. _An impossibly delicate balance, indeed_, he thought ruefully, _when the strength of my feelings scare even myself._ "Yes. Courting you shall encompass all of my attention and efforts for the next six cycles of the moon,"
he affirmed, trying to keep his demeanour open, his voice soft and inviting. Given the wary expression on Bilbo's face, he was fairly certain he didn't succeed at being at all reassuring.

"Wait,—what?" Bilbo goggled at him, aghast. "Are you telling me that that door is going to remain locked for the next six months?"

Thorin could feel himself frowning, and consciously tried to smooth it out. Bilbo had never heard of these rituals, after all—his confusion was to be expected. Even if the immediate rejection did sting his breast fiercely. "For the next six months we shall remain here, in the Khufdîn Juzurab. I shall endeavour to show you the depth of my affection, and the worth of your choice."

"You just reclaimed Erebor—who will rule your kingdom for the next six months?" Bilbo pointed out, still gaping.

"Calm yourself, Master Burglar. Fíli will rule in my stead."

"Calm myself?" Bilbo spluttered, indignantly. "And what, I don't actually get a say in this?"

Thorin winced. That was definitely accusing. "My cleverness in ensnaring you is also a part of it," he admitted stiffly. "I would not have initiated such a rite if I did not possess some certainty as to your regard."

"My regard?" he glared, though Thorin found the blush still staining his cheeks a hopeful, dichotomous reaction. "That's, I mean, that's rather, erm...I'm—Bother and confusticate you dwarves!" Bilbo burst out, finally, losing patience. He took a moment, breathing deeply, and staring at his hands where he had fisted the fine fabric of his trousers, probably without even realising it, knowing how he felt about creases.

"I would have you as my partner in all things," Thorin tried to interject. "I would bond with you through all the days of my life—"

This, apparently, was the wrong thing to say, as Bilbo's head shot up again. "Married?" he squawked. "I hardly think we've developed the proper relationship for that, do you?"

Thorin could feel the place this creature held inside him— the edges were still tender and raw, like the strings of his harp that had been forced to stretch too far. It was a place that wouldn't snap back into shape. It was a hollow feeling, a void that longed to be filled, and here Bilbo sat, questioning his devotion? "I think that we have journeyed far together. We have accomplished the impossible together, and we have faced the best and worst of each other, together. If this has not given us a sufficient relationship, I would very much call you a liar," and he was seething now, glaring daggers and drawing the tatters of his wounded pride to his breast like a shield.

"Sophistry," Bilbo snapped, clearly neither intimidated nor impressed. "I request that you let me out, and we can discuss this nonsense rationally tomorrow."

"This 'nonsense' is an ancient rite of extreme importance," Thorin growled, crossing his arms angrily. "And it will conclude in six months."

"Then I don't think we have anything further to discuss, do you?" he huffed, crossing his own arms and tapping one foot in an irritated staccato rhythm. "I would like to remove myself from your presence, before your bull-headedness drives me to do something decisively ill-mannered."

Thorin took a deep breath. Held it; let it out slowly. It didn't help. "Perhaps you are right," he conceded stiffly. "We shall leave it for now. There are rooms made up, part of the refuges, I will show you—"
"I'm sure I can find my own way, thanks," Bilbo said, coolly. He stood and walked away, head high and without looking back, leaving Thorin to stare dully at his own tightly clenched fists.

The next several days were strained, to say the least. Bilbo spent his time examining his surroundings, though when the sun was at its zenith, and the light that reached them through the channels was strongest, he would take a book or manuscript with him and curl up in the patches of sunshine that warmed the stone floor.

The vast hall was filled with dwarrow history; colourful murals made not only of pigments, but of mosaics of stone and gems and metals that depicted important events of past ages; Sculpture and carvings made by some of the most celebrated Craft masters, not to mention the literally thousands of examples of the best his people could produce included in the vast treasure itself. The walls still hung with armour so finely wrought as to offer no encumbrance to the wearer; battle-hard, but yet still somehow beautiful. Jewellery wrought so fine as to appear almost as gossamer, or more heavy adornments of intricate design could be found in hundreds of examples; pieces so resplendent, so agonized-over during their crafting that their names were remembered through the ages. Thorin longed to share it all with him, but Bilbo steadfastly ignored him whenever he attempted to intrude during the hobbit's solitary explorations. He could only presume the reason that he had not simply slipped on his confounded ring and avoided him altogether was because then he would not have the satisfaction of blatantly ignoring the fuming king.

FÍLI'S DAYS HAD been filled with tedium since his uncle had entered the Bonding Rite, and he had quickly confirmed that being King was less exciting than he and Kíli had once supposed. Long ago, in their nursery days, they had played at it; hardly able to wait for the day they could rule. Of course, there was no kingdom to rule, back then, but to Fíli and Kíli, there had never been any doubt that by the time they were old enough, there would indeed be a throne for them to take. Uncle Thorin always seemed to loom larger than life, with a truly impressive array of glares that sent his rambunctious young nephews cowering with a single glance, and Dwalin had always been the first to admit to Uncle's skill with a blade. Anyone who could best Dwalin must be able to accomplish anything - and what did a mere dragon have, next to that?

Right now, Fíli was wishing he were still back in his cold room in Ered Luin, instead of struggling with choices that seemed far bigger than himself. This past seven-day had plagued him with unending decisions, each one seeming to hold the weight of their kingdom's future restoration and prosperity. When the never ending questions from petitions and Council meetings dried up for an hour or two, there were inspections to be held, or, if he could squeeze it in, a hasty meal and sleep. He highly suspected his bed had forgotten what he looked like, and he supposed it was a good thing he had never had the time to pursue some nice dam to warm it, as this last week would have definitely had him in her poor graces. Even the granite throne was highly uncomfortable beneath his backside, and frankly, the constant attendance of one or more of his uncle's officials were giving him a headache.

He endured; neither he nor Kíli wanted to do anything that might let Uncle down when he had placed such unprecedented trust on their shoulders. This morning, though, he had just wanted to pull the coverlet back over his head when one of Bombur's nephews, who had been pressed into service as his valet, came to wake him. He had been so reluctant; in the end he had almost been late. He'd had to sprint for the throne room, careening down the narrow servants' passages, trying
not to be seen. It had been a close thing, but he had slide to a halt, panting, outside the heavily
ornamented doors just as they swung open to reveal Balin. He gave Fíli a reproving look, but he
didn't try all that hard to hide the upturn of his lips, either, so Fíli figured he was okay. Kíli had
arrived moments later, also trying valiantly to pretend he wasn't winded. Glóin nodded to them,
distracted, as they crossed the throne room. The red-haired Master Merchant was already scowling
at his fellow Council members despite the meeting not even having been officially begun.

It had been a week full of arguments it seemed, and the one that was waiting for him when he
arrived was making him wish he'd never allowed young Lýthur to pry him from his bed, no matter
how discouraged he'd looked.

"My Prince." With a nod that barely qualified as respectful, one of the many functionaries attached
to the King's Council approached the throne "May I remind you that we do not have the luxury of
an abundance of allies in our current situation?"

He was informed, almost before Fíli had even had a chance to set his bum on the throne, that
scouts had sent word of the imminent arrival of a representative from one of the Eastern dwarven
nations. No indication had been sent of which kingdom was sending such a delegate, so they must
not be traveling with banners furled or ornamentations displayed. Of course, this had caused the
entire assembly of Council dwarves and their assorted toads to erupt into violet discussion, which
Fíli had had the misfortune of interrupting with his untimely arrival.

Kíli stood stiffly behind and a single step to the left of the throne, trying to look serious and
grown-up. Fíli could practically feel him vibrating with his desire to contradict the officious little
toady, but Fíli was proud of his discipline in holding his tongue. He looked over the other
dwarrow standing before him, silently inviting them to be heard by the Throne, and resisted the
urge to shift on his seat and ease his aching backside. How does Uncle do this all day?

A lean dwarf, even leaner than Nori, with gaunt looking cheeks and a restlessness in his fingers
and toes when forced to be still in long council meetings, stepped before the throne. Lord Jústi,
head of the Banker's Guild, bowed low, but with efficiency, not obeisance. "Your Highness,
please consider that we do indeed have allies close at hand," he murmured, and somehow it was
the kind of voice that filled a chamber despite being barely louder than a whisper. Several of the
other dwarves and dams straightened as he spoke, obviously listening with respect. "It will surely
not be long before Dale is again hale and whole; they will certainly see how their interests lie with
ours. Dáin, also, can be counted on should we need for more military support. We do not need to
be too hasty in giving our hand in alliance; we have the luxury of time."

"Ask Dáin for any more help, and we might as well give him the keys to the treasury!" someone
else burst in. "His help will not come cheaply."

And the floodgates burst again, with frenzied shouts ringing across the chamber until the dust
moats were dancing hither and yon on the currents of their collective breath.

"We cannot trust the Stonefoot line—"

"Stonefoots? Send them back!"

"The Ironfists can be reasoned with; and their blades are second to none."

"We have no need to in-debt ourselves to anyone again; where were they when we needed a
home?"

Fíli took a deep breath and stood. "Correct me if I err," he said, trying desperately to sound
confident and reasonable, and probably failing miserably at both, "but we have not, in fact, heard
what this ambassador has to say. Is it not a bit presumptuous to be discussing the possible benefits of an alliance before we have been extended the offer formally?” he pointed out, a bit bewildered by all this discussion over the matter. It escaped him how these people ever got anything done, when they spent so much time in pointless discussions over unknowns.

The shifting gazes of the Council members, the way none of them would meet his eyes was answer enough. It was him they doubted, his ability. To be fair, it was probably completely reasonable for them to doubt his skills in diplomacy; heck, he doubted his skills! And it wasn't as if uncle Thorin was known for being a great diplomat himself, either, except with a sword. That was what this discussion was really about, whether or not they should allow the fledgling king to blunder before an outsider. Slightly anxious, he looked to Balin were he sat, puffing his pipe quietly, simply watching.

Apparently, the old advisor felt it was time to step in. Carefully, he snubbed his pipe, tapping it out before pulling out his flat leather purse; sliding the pipe in its place and tucking it back in some inner recess of his robe. Around him, the din had not decreased one bit. He stood, caught Fíli's eye and winked.

"Brothers!" he cried out, and Fíli envied how richly his voice filled the room and commanded attention. "Our esteemed prince is right – and thank goodness for his youth that has kept him from politics, so that his good sense has not yet been completely eroded." Fíli almost groaned when Kíli gave a muffled, very suspicious sounding cough. Several of the more astute lords transferred their hard glares to the pair of them.

"We do not yet know which clan has sent this ambassador to us, nor what it is they wish to tell us. And since it is impossible to make any plans without these key pieces of information, perhaps we can let this matter go and move on to something in which we may be able to exert some hope of success, hmmm?"

When the representative did finally arrive, several hours later, the announcement that he was from the Blacklock line was met with general relief from those assembled. Of all the other dwarven families, the Blacklocks were the ones closest to the Longbeards, having ties of the most ancient kind when Durin I took a Blacklock dam as his mate. For the next hour, while their guest freshened up and cleaned the dust of travel from his person, Fili was bombarded by advice and direction from his Council. Frankly, he thought he might have been far less nervous if they would just shut up and let him think.

It was with great relief that Fíli watched the throne room doors swing open, and one of Dwalin's men stepped forward smartly.

"My Prince," he interrupted the Council gruffly, "May I present Iór, of the Blacklock line?"

THE GREATEST DRAWBACK of having a Great Fit of Temper here in the bowels of Erebor was that it was monumentally ineffective, as there were no creatures in all of Arda as stubborn as the dwarves, Bilbo reflected sourly as he attempted to busy himself with a bit of reading. Of course, that would have been made easier if the tome in question had been written in a comprehensible language, but Baggins’ could be a bit stubborn too, when they put their mind to it. Besides, the stone beneath him was warm in the pools of late afternoon sunlight, and reminded him of sitting on his own sun-warmed bench in his front garden by his beautiful green door with is
polished brass handle. He had always been so proud of his home, and he missed it slightly less in these moments.

The dwarf king was perfectly content to wait him out, it seemed. Patiently, he gave the hobbit space to fume and stomp about the chambers, making no further overtures after the first few that had provided Bilbo with a few satisfying openings to vent his irritation. With his ears no doubt still ringing, Thorin retreated to wait out his temper. Days passed, and the infuriating king had the effrontery of not once trying to apologize, or mollify Bilbo's—entirely reasonable!—ire. Honestly, Bilbo couldn't fathom it.

The truth of it was, though, it was hard work to maintain that level of fury; an emotional drain that just left Bilbo feeling wrung out like one of Mrs Gamgee's cleaning rags on washday. Thorin was prepared to wait, stoic as stone, until Bilbo anger spent itself. Fortunately for the stubborn king, hobbit rages tended to blow over as hot tempests that quickly burned themselves out - unlike dwarves, who could hold onto their smoldering anger and fury for generations, it seemed. Not that Bilbo wasn't still very angry over his imprisonment, but stomping about and ignoring the dwarf king was doing nothing to rectify the situation. He could only hope that he would be able to talk Thorin into seeing some kind of sense. He shuddered to imagine the difficulties Fíli and Kíli were facing by now, trying to cope with the running of a newly reclaimed kingdom in their uncle's absence. He tried telling himself that it was none of his concern what their uncle chose to saddle them with, but a heavy weight of worry had settled in his heart. At the very least, he owed it to them to try and talk some sense into their erstwhile king.

And so, after nearly two weeks of fuming silences punctuated only by Thorin's infrequent attempts of sharing one of their delivered meals, Bilbo was finding his anger had cooled, leaving mostly weary frustration in its wake. The dwarves were his friends, after all. They had fought together through some of the most harrowing experiences of Bilbo's life, and forged a hard-won trust between them. He knew, however much he didn't feel like acknowledging it, that despite the complete unacceptability of their actions (at least, from his point of view), that this friends had intended him no harm.

Their evening meal was again delivered, utilizing a truly ingenious contraption that sent a box on the end of a pulley containing a tray of savoury dishes down a narrow shaft that lead to the kitchens, apparently. Thorin called it a 'dolly', though the only dollys Bilbo was familiar with were usually in little hobbit lasses arms, and most definitely did not contain food. He had found that whenever Thorin began trying to explain it to him, his eyes glazed over after the third or fourth mention of things like 'sheave' or 'adjustable operating diameters' until Bilbo wasn't entirely certain he wasn't actually speaking Khuzdûl. Still, from time to time in this past two seven-days, Bilbo had found himself wondering wistfully if he couldn't somehow increase the frequency of the deliveries to a more hobbit-approved schedule.

This particular evening, Thorin had just finished removing the covered trays, and sent the box back up with a sharp tug of the chain when Bilbo decided enough was enough.

"You truly plan to go through with this ancient rite of yours?"

Thorin paused before turning to place the dishes on the decorated table he had taken to setting their meals out on each day, but other than a tightening of his shoulders, gave no other indication that Bilbo's presence surprised him.

"Yes, Master Baggins, I do," he affirmed gravely. Slowly, as if worried he might spook Bilbo if he moved to quickly, Thorin sank down onto the bench opposite the hobbit. The fact that he did this without breaking eye contact from beneath his heavy brow was rather silly, in Bilbo's opinion. Honestly, it's not as if he was going anywhere, not after seeking out the dunderheaded bully.
"I intend very much to complete this rite with you," Thorin rumbled, continuing to stare searchingly into Bilbo's expression. "And it is my fervent wish that I may prove myself worthy."

Oh, now this just wouldn't do. Bilbo could feel himself blushing right up to the tips of his ears to hear Thorin speak that way; each confident declaration just turned his stomach into a writhing mess, and there was no way he was allowing that overgrown—overgrown dwarf! To interfere with his meals, on top of everything else. And he absolutely wasn't going to examine any feelings he may have held until he was good and through with being mad. "That's quite enough of that, thank you," he said crisply, reaching for the nearest tray and hastily scooping some of what turned out to be some kind of poached fish onto his plate. And if it was several moments before he was willing to risk raising his eyes above the level of his companion's chin that was strictly his own business.

When he did, it was to find Thorin scowling down at him.

"It's no use looking at me like that—you're the one who dragged me into this," Bilbo found himself snapping, thoroughly fed up.

Thorin's scowl got even darker, though Bilbo noted with some satisfaction, that he thought he also looked a touch guilty. And while Bilbo was enjoying putting Thorin in his place on the matter, it ultimately wouldn't be helpful if they devolved into a fight again. With visible effort, he took a deep breath and tried to catch hold of his temper. Thorin was his friend, he reminded himself. This was obviously some kind of... of a dwarf thing: a cultural mathom, if such a thing existed; meaningful to the dwarves, but the true significance totally incomprehensible to an outsider. Besides, he hasn't been in his right mind—perhaps there is lingering effect from the whole Arkenstone debacle? There, that almost made this whole fiasco—and his temper—easier to bear.

"I keep expecting Kíli or Fíli to pop in, laughing and confirming this was all a joke—a fit of childish exuberance, perhaps; but this?" he said, and he knew in that instant he sounded truly as lost and forlorn as he felt. Something in Thorin's impassive stare softened slightly, before he ducked his head. Bilbo looked down at the mahogany tabletop, hands clasped tightly in his lap. Why was this dratted dwarf always so confusing?

"You have always been fond of my nephews, haven't you?" Thorin asked, trying to break the awkward silence.

Bilbo gave a small, affectionate smile at the thought of the two princes. "It's rather hard not to be fond of them, isn't it?"

"I can introduce you to any number of their tutors who would disagree with you," Thorin grumped, sourly.

"Tosh. They suffer from an abundance of energy, perhaps, but their enthusiasm is infectious."

"Hmmm," Thorin grunted.

"Has there ever been turmoil between them?" Bilbo asked hesitantly, and Thorin quirked his eyebrow at him in confusion. "Because Fíli will someday be king," the hobbit clarified.

Comprehension seemed to dawn, and Bilbo found himself suddenly trying not to feel self conscious at the king's growing evidence of mirth. "While Kíli will remain a mere prince?" Thorin asked, and his whole countenance had relaxed—softened somehow. Idly, he pushed the remains of his meal away, and leaned back, regarding Bilbo thoughtfully.

"You are thinking of Kingship as if it were some kind of solitary prize, the way Men bestow
royalty. Kíli is just as important to the monarchy as Fíli is, perhaps even more so." Thorin's eyes were crinkled with silent laughter. Bilbo stiffened, defensively.

"What do I know about the convoluted thinking of dwarves?" he sniffed.

"No; convoluted is the thinking that one man alone can always know what is right, and what is wise. Convoluted is imbuing such an office with god-like mimicry as to render everyone vulnerable to his whims. Straightforward is knowing that one dwarf alone is not gifted enough to accomplish such a task, it will always take two, to ensure balance and tempered thinking. Kíli will be Fíli's advisor and most trusted voice."

Bilbo couldn't help his incredulous stare when trying to envision irrepressible, happy-go-lucky Kíli as being a voice of wisdom and diplomacy. The image of the princeling in a long, tatty grey robe and sweeping pointed hat popped into his head and he barely turned his desire to laugh into a coughing fit.

Thorin, of course, did not look at all fooled. "He is young yet, but he will be the strength behind Fíli's rule, and act in his stead when needful. Kíli holds the very important position of Prince of Erebor, and that is not just the voice of the crown to the people, but the voice of the people to the crown. It is a very delicate balance that requires much charisma and affability, and is one that Kíli is getting better at holding every day that passes."

And, Yavanna take him, Thorin was right. Kíli was charming and likeable, and invited you in to share your confidences with someone so sympathetic. He teased and fooled around, but rarely went too far with his mischief, always being able to switch off in an instant and displaying that despite appearances, he never lost himself for a moment. In fact, looking back on Fíli and Kíli's relationship with new eyes, Bilbo could see what he had taken for mere brotherly closeness was actually the foundations of a very important partnership. For a people who, individually, seemed to value solitary pursuits and self-reliance, dwarves it seemed, were profoundly dualist at the core of their society. So, where did a solitary, exiled king fit into this growing tapestry? Suddenly, Bilbo wanted to know Thorin, as he was beginning to suspect, he hadn't known him before.

"And you've ruled alone? Or is Dis your... co-ruler, or whatever you call it?"

"Melhekhur-dohyar," the dwarf murmured, and his eyes shuttered and looked distant, and Bilbo knew it was not happy thoughts that took the king, though there was fondness amidst the melancholy as well.

Not sure what to say, and feeling distinctly uncomfortable, Bilbo waited and tried not to fidget.

"Melhekhur-dohyar; the King's Anvil," Thorin clarified a moment later, bringing his attention back from wherever it had been. "The king is known as the Hammer; for neither is enough alone."

"So, Dis is your Anvil, then?"

Thorin hesitated again, and Bilbo regretted the question. "Dis is a wonderful sister. She supports my rule and aids me in all the ways she can," he said.

"But?" the hobbit asked gently.

The dwarf king took a breath, and held it for a moment before releasing it. His eyes, blue shards glittering beneath his brow, caught Bilbo's and held his gaze. "Dis was not raised to be my Dohyar," he said, and his voice was remote and his posture unconsciously stiff. "The difference between Frerin and I was the same as that between Fíli and Kíli; just five years. Such a small age difference is unusual between siblings, and we were very close. Before the dragon came, we
probably got into even more trouble than my sister-sons, between one thing and another."

"Somehow, I find I can imagine such a thing without any effort at all," Bilbo retorted dryly. "I'm sure Dis would be able to tell of some truly horrendous boyhood pranks." Thorin flashed him a fierce little smile that seemed to show more teeth than was strictly proper for an adult feeling shamed at childhood indiscretions, he felt.

"It has been over one hundred and forty years, and I miss him still. After his death at the Battle of Azanulbizar, we were in exile. There was never really a reason for Dis to begin such training, then."

This was probably the best opening he was going to get to broach the subject of Fíli's rule. He took a deep breath, and surreptitiously crossed two toes, for luck.

"And you've been in exile all this time," Bilbo started gently, knowing it was exceedingly bad manners to continue to pick at something so painful, but unsure how else to begin.

Thorin grunted, and looked away to stare off into the distance.

"And given your people's, er, circumstance," he tried, tactfully, "there was no real reason for Dis to begin such royal training."

"As I said, Master Hobbit," Thorin grumbled.

And now for the crux of it, Bilbo my lad. "Well, given that, "he began, tentatively, "I imagine Fíli, and especially Kíli, never really got much training, either?"

Thorin just shrugged. "Then, this is a good opportunity for Erebor and my nephews both."

"Ruling Erebor right now, with so much turmoil, must be incredibly difficult."

Thorin cocked an eyebrow at him, as if trying to fathom Bilbo's point.

"I would think," Bilbo said, being sure to clearly enunciate each word, "it would take a very strong king and experienced leader to not make a complete hash of it."

Thorin’s gaze rested heavily on Bilbo as he clearly mulled over what the hobbit had said.

"My ruling would impress you?" Thorin asked slowly, his blue eyes boring into Bilbo’s.

"Yes!" Bilbo cried, exasperated, throwing his hands up in supplication to Yavanna, perhaps—obviously Aulë wasn't having any headway with his stubborn son. "You doing your job would impress me very much." Thorin's expressions rarely gave away much of what he was thinking, but right now, Bilbo was left with the distinct impression of immense satisfaction.

"You will make an excellent ruler to my people. You are as compassionate and self-less as if you had been raised to this responsibility, even towards people who are not your own. Mahal has truly favoured me."

Bilbo shook this off impatiently. "So, you'll go oversee the reconstruction? Go look after your kingdom?"

Thorin looked at him, considering. "Therein lays our first compromise, Master hobbit." Thorin's tone was serious, and his look contemplative as he sat on one of the cushions, and flicked his eyes pointedly to the others nearby.
Bilbo narrowed his eyes, glaring. Thorin's lips twiched, and damn it if the confusticating dwarf wasn't laughing at his show of temper! Bilbo found himself tapping his foot in annoyance, but Thorin merely settled deeper into his seat, making a show of getting comfortable as he waited.

Giving up, Bilbo glared, leaving no doubt, he trusted, as to his annoyance at over-bearing dwarves and their high-handed ways, and plopped himself down with a deliberate lack of grace.

There was definitely a twitch in Thorin's neutral expression now. "Comfortable?" he inquired blandly.

"Just get on with it, if you please," Bilbo huffed. "You mentioned a compromise?"

Thorin regarded him for a moment, considering. "You would wish me to continue my duties as king," he finally began, his dark eyes never leaving Bilbo's face, "instead of allowing Fíli to stand in my stead."

"I should think you would wish this as well! It's too much responsibility for Fíli to take on all at once. Besides, not knowing what was happening would drive you batty in weeks."

"I am touched by your show of concern over my mental comfort, beloved."

"I simply don't want to deal with you, frankly. Now get on with it."

Thorin actually smiled at his comeback, but it lasted only a moment before he shook off his relaxed posture, and spoke seriously. "I have taken you here against your will, and for that I am truly sorry. I shall spend the rest of our lifetimes making it up to you, if you will allow me to," he held up a hand, forestalling Bilbo's obvious desire to cut in. "You are right, that I am torn in my desire to court you, and my desire to see to the needs of my people. I would welcome the chance to attempt to balance both, if you would allow it, but—" and here, he seemed to hesitate.

"But?" Bilbo prompted, curious despite himself.

"You are in possession of a magic ring, one that would make it relatively easy for you to attempt escape if I were to come and go through that door daily."

At the mention of his ring, Bilbo found himself glaring at Thorin, feeling unaccountably defensive. Thorin raised his hand, as if to ward off Bilbo's agitation. "Peace, Halfling. I did not wish to take this ring from you, and add theft to my many sins against you in this situation." Bilbo gave an awkward grimace at this, and dropped his gaze in mute apology for his assumption. "It is not as traditional, in a situation such as this," Thorin continued, giving a tiny nod in acknowledgement, "but a compromise I gladly made."

"What are you talking about, compromise? You have a kingdom to run!" he couldn't help himself from interrupting. "You should—" Thorin gave him a stern look, and Bilbo desisted. "Right. Sorry, continue."

"You have declared yourself desirous that I do this for you, that your discomfort would be lessened if you did not feel that you were the reason the keeping of the kingdom was given to Fíli, instead of receiving the attention of its king."

"My discomfort, as you so politely call it, would be greatly lessened if you would cease this foolishness and let me go," Bilbo grumbled, glaring at his clasped hands where they hung between his bent knees. Really, it wasn't fair that the dwarf should know him so well as to realize that he did indeed feel guilty for distracting the king like this when his people were obviously going to need him.
"That I cannot do; not until the Khebabel Azyungaz is concluded. Will you consider instead a different agreement?"

"I'm listening," Bilbo agreed, guardedly.

Thorin's grey-eyed gaze felt like a physical weight as he watched the hobbit fidget for a long moment, seeming to choose his words with care. "Can you agree that you will make no attempt to either evade me, or leave this place before the appointed time? That you will allow me this chance to win your affections and prove my worth to you?"

Make no attempt to leave? Just sit back and allow this farce to happen? Bilbo was aghast. "Are you mad?" he couldn't quite stop himself from bursting out. Thorin's expression, which had been open despite his stern demeanor a moment before, became closed and aloof, though he said nothing to the hobbit's rash words. Mortified at the rudeness of his outburst—never mind the truth of it, it was still terribly uncouth to simply blurt out like that; Bilbo sat back on his cushion and managed to snap his gaping mouth shut with a snap. Really, I ought to have better manners, even if I have been under the questionable influence of dwarrows this last year. "Thorin, I apologize. That was not at all polite of me."

"It matters not, Master Baggins." Thorin's tone was remote and closed off, and Bilbo had the uncomfortable sensation that he had managed to hurt him with his ill-considered outburst. Thorin may have deserved a bit of a dressing down for his high-handed ways, but that didn't excuse reciprocating in kind.

"I presented an option for your consideration. If you feel it is not something you can agree to, that is your choice. As I have already stated, I have no intention to take that which is yours," he said, stiffly.

Several scathing observations crowded the tip of Bilbo's tongue at Thorin's apparently selective definition of taking things that were his, and apparently not including his freedom on that list. The jumble of indignant remarks forced him to pause before actually speaking, and probably, when he thought on it later, saved the conversation from degenerating any further. The King continued to sit on his cushion, no more than a foot away, but his gaze had shifted so he was now staring over his right shoulder, to the vast hall and statues of his ancestors instead of pinning Bilbo with his stare. Thorin's broad shoulders were rigid; his posture looked to be almost carved from stone. Nothing about him suggested any kind of flexibility or willingness to bend, and Bilbo released his frustrations with a sigh. Thorin was stubborn enough to be perfectly capable of going through with this madness; there would be no talking any kind of hobbit-sense into him, so that left Bilbo facing two very simple choices.

The people of Erebor would need their king. Not a young heir who had never lead, but the dwarf who had kept his people together during battle and peace alike, who had earned their trust. There would be many complications in the coming months; food would likely be an issue and housing—could Fíli, inexperienced as he likely was, really manage to hold the people together through it all, without that bond of trust that Thorin would already own from them?

Either way, he was to be subjected to the dubious hospitality of this hall for half a growing-cycle, for if Thorin proceeded with his mad idea of locking himself in here with him, Bilbo had very little hope of escaping anyway.

What in the world had prompted this? While he certainly held no disparagement to his own worth—he was a Baggins of Bad-End, after all; a gentle-hobbit of high standing and reputation, but somehow that didn't seem like enough of a recommendation to prompt such an unexpected and altogether unruly declaration of intent as kidnapping! Bilbo peered at Thorin, suspiciously. Was this some new manifestation of the Gold Fever?
Thorin seemed to be rational, if one excepted of course, this rather bizarre imprisonment. And the
other dwarves, far from seeming alarmed at their king's behavior, had been actively supportive!
Incredible. Still, a question or two may give him a better idea of the rationality of Thorin's mind.

"What if I do give my word," Bilbo paused as Thorin's turned back to him, pinning him once
more with his intense gaze. "About the ring, I mean?"

"Give me your word that you will not try to escape, either," Thorin corrected, the corner of one lip
twitching ever so slightly, as if amused by Bilbo's attempt. "Give me your word, and I shall split
my attention as you have requested. I will still require that Fíli help me, but it will be good training
for him. I will be both King," and here Thorin's eyes grew darker and his shoulders drew back
fractionally, "and suitor."

Bilbo's fingers plucked at his worn pant leg, flustered. "Yes, well, I will settle for you fulfilling our
bargain and being King."

Thorin ignored Bilbo's stammering as unimportant. "Do we have an accord?"

"How do you know I will keep my word? That I will not simply wait for the right opportunity and
leave?"

Far from being disturbed by this possibility, Thorin appeared almost amused by it, which was not
the sort of reaction Bilbo expected from someone suffering from any kind of possessive fever.
Blast it. "You will not break your given word. You are, as you have reminded me innumerable
times during our quest, a gentle-hobbit, and you would not have so little honor—so few manners,
as to do that." He hesitated a moment, before adding in a much softer voice, "I must trust you, and
trust that I know you. I have no doubts."

Bilbo glared at him mulishly, instead. Thorin simply waited knowingly.

"Fine, yes. I give my word," he conceded irritably.

Thorn leaned back, with a slow, pleased smile curling his lips.

Frankly, Bilbo wanted to hit him.

Chapter End Notes

I strongly considering splitting this chapter, but in the end, decided on leaving it
whole. . Hopefully the fact that it's a stupid-long chapter can be a peace offering - to
make up for the fact that I was unable to post anything at all over the summer :p

You have all been amazingly loyal and awesome, and I love all your comments
tremendously! Thank you for putting up with my erratic posting schedule, and
continuing to encourage me to spend all my free time plotting the lives of some of our
favourite fictional characters ;)

As a last note - I posted this from my phone - which turned out to be a real pain in my
backside! - so any formatting errors are likely caused by that. Let me know, and I will
be sure to fix it as soon as I'm home and able to access a proper computer ;p
The Crownless Again Shall Be King

Chapter Summary

~In which Nori finds he actually likes his King, Thorin refuses to admit liking Óin, and Bilbo has had it with Dwarven secrecy ~

Chapter Notes

A huge thank you to Hazel-3017 and Nephthysmoon for all their help in getting this up to scratch - NaNoWriMo may be good for churning out volume, but it takes a lot of sifting to find the gold amongst the silt ;p

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins :
The Legacy of Our Fathers

IT WOULDN'T BE THE incomplete bond with the adamant hobbit that would destroy him, Thorin decided sourly. His own council was apparently set on driving him mad first. There was no other rational explanation as to why, in Durin's name, grown dwarves could not come to a reasonable agreement on anything. Their childish bickering over every aspect of the restoration process was reaching new heights of absurdity, and trying what was left of Thorin’s rapidly fraying nerves. Thankfully, Fíli had watched Thorin wanting to practically claw his way out of his own skin during the first meeting, and had then firmly forbidden him from attending another one. Instead, the young prince spent an hour or two each afternoon giving full, concise reports to his uncle. Privately, Thorin was fairly sure that Fíli and Balin were keeping the majority of the paperwork and decisions out of his hands. If what he was dealing with was only a fraction, he was grudgingly—very grudgingly—thankful to them for their interference.

It was late, well past the deep dark of the witching hour. He had retreated here to his duty chambers after dining with Bilbo, and was hoping a few hours of forced focus would help clear his muddy head. It had been a foolish hope, of course, and his pile of accomplished work was depressingly meagre. He was determined to keep his promise to the hobbit as long as he could,
though, and made a mental note to speak with Óin for any pharmaceutical aid that might be given.

Óin wouldn't like it, of course, but Thorin was fairly certain the healer would still follow his orders. Still, it was hard to tell with the crusty dwarf, and privately, Thorin thought he kept the damaged trumpet from their adventures simply for the excuse of ignoring things he didn't want to hear.

This chamber, the King’s Duty Chamber, as his father had been wont to call it, was where he received reports and missives. It was where he could be found when he wanted to be available to his staff, though at this time of night he could be all but certain that no one would disturb him. He was free to let his shoulders slump, to tiredly scrub his face with rough palms, and in all other ways let the image of mighty king hang with his cloak on a peg. At this hour, he was free to simply be Thorin, a dwarf who was slightly older than he wanted to admit, and who had far fewer of the answers to life’s questions than he sometimes felt he should have, who worried for his nephews having to shoulder responsibility too young, and worried for them if they didn't have the chance to try.

His study was rapidly cooling now that the fire had died down, but frankly, Thorin didn't have the energy to get up and tend to it. Instead, he shrugged his heavy fur-trimmed coat closer for warmth, and grimly tried to bring his wayward focus back to the task of running the kingdom. Herding wargs would be less appealing, he conceded privately, but barely.

Frowning, he tried to take another stab at thinking his way through the counter-proposal thrust on him by a thoroughly unrepentant Balin. The crafty old bastard. The Mining Guild had presented a ridiculous piece of muscle-flexing that was obviously aimed at manoeuvring the other Guilds into releasing certain quadrant rights, and despite having some difficulty keeping hold of the details, Thorin was reassured to find he was not so far gone as to miss the broad implications if he were to allow the proposal to go through as written. Clearly, some of my Council think I am no longer astute enough to be watchful, Thorin mused tiredly. The dark thought that soon he may not be, was quickly pushed aside. Erebor was not even fully rebuilt, though in truth that was a task that would likely last the rest of Thorin’s life, and yet his Council was already absorbed in their political sophistry.

A persistent ache was throbbing behind his temples, a pain that had been growing in the days since he had proposed the deal with Bilbo. Óin would no doubt want to be informed as his symptoms progressed, but Thorin knew it was the least he could expect from his separation from his intended, and would certainly only continue to get worse, anyway. Bilbo—and it was an illicit pleasure to even think of him so informally as Bilbo within the privacy of his own mind—Bilbo would no doubt scold him for such stoic behaviour if he knew; his compassion would always be stronger than his ire. However, Thorin had forbidden Óin from worrying him. Forgiveness, if given, would be by Bilbo's choice, and not because his hobbit had more empathy than sense.

Five days he had been trying valiantly to live up to his hobbit's expectations of him—the challenge he had laid on Thorin by agreeing to his terms, as was his ancient right; but somehow Thorin had not thought that his own advisors would seem to be bent on his failure, as all their pointless bickering and pettiness seemed almost a personal assault on his fraying mind.

Fíli had been only too glad to have his uncle's help when he had emerged from the Khufdîn, though his relief had quickly turned to apprehension when it became apparent that this was not the successful conclusion of the courting rite, but something else altogether. In his concern, his nephew had wanted to abandon himself so far as to plead with Bilbo to withdraw his request. Thorin was adamant, though, that the challenge would stand; he would not allow his own kin to
disrespect the hobbit in such a way, even if it was likely that Bilbo still didn't understand the full implications of his bargain. He was far too generous to suggest such a thing otherwise, but Thorin could not deny he probably deserved some suffering to atone for all he had done to Bilbo in recent months. Besides, he could think of no other thing that would be a worthy sacrifice to exchange for Bilbo's agreement not to use the ring. Shamefaced, Fíli had let the issue go, and honoured his uncle by not hovering over him, keeping any doubts of Thorin's ability to live up to his monumental challenge firmly to himself.

Of course, Thorin had to continue to watching Bilbo carefully for any signs of distress—he would put a stop to this immediately if it seemed to be harming him in any way. So far, Bilbo had been...disappointingly resistant. Not that Thorin wished to see him suffer in any way! But if he was honest, it would be nice to know that he wasn't the only one so deeply affected, and it would go a long way to restoring some of his confidence, he acknowledged morosely.

This doubt had driven him in search of Óin earlier in the day, and had found him in his newly restored apothecary, busy with some small item of glass on his workbench. The aged healer had carefully set it aside when Thorin raised his voice enough to get his attention.

"What can I do for you, Sire?" His tone was gruff and business-like, holding no more deference than that he paid any other dwarf—Óin had very little respect for anyone, it seemed. Thorin would never admit it, as it would likely only encourage the old codger, but he actually found it deeply...aggravating.

He had moved to join Thorin where he sat, in the small area he used for examinations. The whole space was meticulously clean—Óin was adamant about cleanliness, said it was cheerful and encouraging, though Thorin wasn't precisely sure how the dead raven stuffed and perched on the shelf was supposed to be reassuring. Knowing the irascible nature of the healer, Bilbo would likely tell him it very well may have been intended as a warning for those inclined to refuse treatment. He would probably be right.

Trying to bring his wandering thoughts back in order was like trying to sit through Lord Elrond's dinner—painful and mostly pointless, but somehow Thorin managed to do both. He took a deep breath, and suddenly found that he didn't know where to start. None of the deep fear that had driven him from the Treasury was easily articulated, and his tongue felt heavy in his mouth, like lead. "I am concerned," he managed, finally.

"About...Bilbo?" Óin hazarded encouragingly. "Is the hobbit all right?"

"Yes! No. I do not know." Sitting was suddenly too unbearable, and he drove himself out of his seat to pace the small room.

"Well that's...exceedingly unhelpful," Óin muttered.

Thorin suddenly halted before the empty grate. He braced his arms against the mantel, leaning his weight as he stared into the blackened hearth. For long minutes, Thorin gave all his attention over to studying the blackened soot scoring the new brick, letting himself get lost in the simple patterns, like watching clouds, and trying to find the words to vocalise what he was feeling. Finally, he spoke. "Did I do the right thing, Óin?"

Óin regarded his obvious distress thoughtfully, and with the detachment of a healer. Thorin knew the picture he must present—had caught sight of it in his mirror that morning, and been so unable to look at it he had turned the glass over to face the wall instead. His hair hung lank down his back, and his state robes were certainly rumpled. His braids, normally immaculate, looked to have
been done by a child—or a very agitated dwarrow with shaking hands and no mirror. Óin's observation took in all these details before he answered slowly, "Did you do the right thing by initiating the Courting Rite?"

"Yes." Thorin's voice was almost too low to hear, even in his own ears. "Was I right?"

"If you are asking me if he loves you, I cannot answer you," Óin pronounced briskly. He gentled his voice before continuing, "But if what you are asking me is if Bilbo was in any danger if you did not, and I will answer you again, yes, I think he may have been."

Thorin raised his head, and the haunted look in his eyes, the same one that had stared back at him in his mirror, was enough to force Óin to look away.

"Bonds don't form like this, Óin," he burst out angrily. "I hadn't given any offer to him! How can he be affected by something that cannot be?"

"And yet, here you are, deteriorating by the day from this ridiculous deal you've made with Bilbo, as some sort of penance. How can that be, if there is no bond?" Thorin, of course, stared back mutinously before turning back to his study of the carbonized wood left in the grate. That was the problem, of course, and he had no answer.

"You are experiencing, first hand, what it would have been like for Bilbo if you had not initiated the rite. I would think that would be all the experience you would need to know you did the right thing; the only thing."

"But how can I be sure he is experiencing the bond?" Thorin finally asked, exposing the deep fear that drove him here. "He does not act as any dwarf would."

"I would suppose he wouldn't—he is a hobbit after all, or do I need to send you for remedial anatomical studies?" The king glowered at him, but finally pushed away from the hearth to resume pacing.

Óin watched him circle the tiny room for several minutes before speaking. "There is no real way of knowing how a hobbit would respond to such a thing," he admitted finally. "It is very possible his race doesn't have such bonds between them. Ori hasn't been able to find anything in the records he had brought from the libraries of Ered Luin. It seems the Holbytla have managed to avoid the notice of other races with remarkable skill."

"If hobbits do not have such bonds, then he is unlikely to be affected, and I have wronged him deeply." Thorin threw himself back into his seat, slumping tiredly. He startled and sat up straight when Óin's flattened ear trumpet suddenly appeared, thrust under his nose. "What—"

"I am going to speak again, and this time I want you to listen, your majesty." Óin's gruff voice brooked no interruptions, his patented glare potent enough to spur grown dwarrows into feeling like recalcitrant dwarflings. "The. Bond. Is. Forming." he spoke forcibly. "If Bilbo were incapable of it, you would not be so affected." When Thorin appeared ready to argue, the healer tried changing tracks. "Look, think of it like a door. It can only open if there is space behind it for the door to open into. If there is a wall there, the door will remain closed, all right? We can see that the door is open, because you are experiencing the bond. Therefore, so is he."

The king nodded slowly, feeling hope stir tentatively.

"Good. So, the bond is forming, we know that. What we don't know is how it will manifest itself
in a hobbit. It may not be nearly as dangerous for him—Yavanna is, after all, a goddess of growth and change, so it stands to reason that her creations will be more adaptable than her husband's stone children."

Óin had been right, of course. The only responsible course of action, for either of them, had been to initiate the rite as quickly as possible, both for their safety, and so that Thorin would have the ability to explain the dwarven secrets to Bilbo. Unfortunately, the explaining part wasn't going well, as the hobbit seemed completely unwilling to discuss much of anything with him. Óin had promised to look in on Bilbo, just to set Thorin's mind at ease, but the basic truth of the situation had not changed. Thorin must have faith that his maker had a plan in initiating this unprecedented bond. He just had to hope that the plan would eventually include Bilbo forgiving him.

He would endure. There was little else he could do.

And have faith in Bilbo's goodness.

Moodily, Thorin sat alone in his empty chamber, staring into the dying embers of his fire, parchment forgotten on his desk—a lonely king, once again backlit by a fiery glow.

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THE DARKEST PART OF night had come and gone, and false dawn was beginning to bring flickering shadows to life in the Desolation. A fine drizzle, more mist than rain, was turning the evening decidedly unpleasant. Nori had run his pony hard in the cool night air, impatient to be back under the protection of the looming peaks of Erebor. The thief had felt a definite nervous itch develop between his shoulder blades in the exposed valley below Erebor's peaks, a feeling he was eager to be rid of in the relative safety of home. It wasn't the first time he'd felt that phantom brush with death; an over-developed sense of his own mortality and cynical distrust of everything and everyone he met were the healthiest things a thief and grifter could hope to have.

Apparently, the same could be said for spies, no matter the fancy title Balin and Thorin had coated it in. *Master of Foreign Relations, indeed*, Nori thought with amusement.

Laketown had been squalid and dismal, conditions that naturally brought the most cunning elements of any society drifting to the surface. Social order being at an all-time low tended to make for easy marks; frankly, Nori had felt right at home.

Still, he was happy to reach the warmth of the stables, and happier still to hand the reins, and the job of unsaddling and rubbing down the sopping pony, over to the sleepy stable-master. The surly grumble he'd gotten in return for the small coin he'd tossed the dwarf had only caused Nori to whistle jauntily on his way out the door, his dark cloak pulled tight to his body to ward off the weather. He was off in search of a drink, and the king's ear, and preferably both at once. Nori would be the first to point out his ability to be efficient, after all. Besides, Thorin probably had better liquor than the kitchens.

The lanterns in this part of the mansion were kept half-shuttered at night, their muted glow a mild hindrance to Nori's skulking, but he did it anyway, for practice, more than out of any real need. Irregular pools of light dotted either side of the granite floor, throwing just enough feeble light to turn the darkness between them to twilight shadow. At regular intervals, darker patches marked where smaller corridors intersected, spiraling deeper into the mountain.
The corridors were abandoned of normal foot-traffic. From somewhere over to his left, Nori could hear the heavy booted footsteps of some of Dwalin's guards making their rounds, but it was far off, muffled and distant. The quiet was disturbed by nothing more interesting than the faint hissing of the lantern wicks burning in the damp air. It was a mark of how late it was, Nori felt, that he didn't process what it was he was hearing at first; and by the time he did, they were almost on top of him.

There was no real way to avoid them other than darting down the yawning shadow marking a side corridor. Nori cursed softly, pressing close to the wall and the deeper shadow there to avoid being spotted. There was no real reason for him to do this, other than years of avoiding Dwalin's patrols and the itchy feeling between his shoulders that had dodged his steps home, and he cursed almost as much for his foolishness in overreacting as at his almost being caught unawares. In this game, you stayed sharp, or you got dead, and Nori had always prided himself on not being dead.

There was no way he was stepping out into the corridor before whoever it was passed. Nori had no wish to allow some report to make its way back to Dwalin and give the Guard Captain ammunition to tease him for being as jumpy as a scalded cat. That didn't stop him from being curious, though, and he tried to quiet his rabbiting heart so that he could catch some of the subdued conversation coming down the hall towards him.

"...the charges, they haven't found a way in yet," one voice was saying. "That's royally mucked up now, o'course."

"Will you keep your voice down?" a second, gruffer voice complained.

_Mahal save me from novices_, Nori thought with considerable scorn.

"Will you relax? Every dwarf with any sense is in their beds." The voices were almost opposite to where Nori skulked. By the devices on their sleeves and the cut of their clothes, they appeared to be miners, which, Nori knew, in a mountain full of dwarrow, narrowed it down not one bit—other than to say they weren't no nobles. _So that rules out the possibility of anything seriously criminal_, Nori thought with a certain amount of amused cynicism.

"Which explains why you're out here, wandering the corridors," the complainer rejoined, testily. "You ain't got no sense at all."

"You're right—I'm out here with you. Now shut it, and listen. It's obvious that it's still here—"

"What makes you so sure?" the complainer challenged, belligerently.

A muffled thump indicated that the complainer had gotten just treatment for his snark. "Deepest part, stands to reason right? 'Sides, he's got..."

By this point, the unlikely duo had tramped further down the corridor, and out of Nori's hearing.

_Interesting_. Nori stared after them for several moments, pondering. _Might be time to have a quiet word with Dwalin; he may be almost as thick as one of Ori's woolly cardigans, but not much escapes him in the end. If you point it out to him, anyway._

He set off again, whistling a soft but jaunty little tune under his breath, all his senses alert in the once-more deserted corridor.
And here I thought it was going to be a boring night.

The rest of the walk to the king's public chamber was as uneventful as Nori expected. There was a faint light spilling under the door, so he slipped inside without bothering to wait for an invitation, peering out into the hall through the crack as he closed the heavy oak door.

"You know, it is customary to knock first." Thorin's dry comment was loud in the silent room, and Nori winced at the rusty sound of his voice.

"Sorry, Sire." Nori sounded anything but apologetic as he turned away from the door and dropped gracelessly into a chair. He gave the dying fire a disgusted look and pulled himself to his feet to build it back up.

"Can I presume you are invading my sanctuary for reasons other than to annoy me?"

Nori could hear the clinking of a glass decanter behind him, so obviously Thorin's annoyance wasn't serious enough to preclude offering the drink Nori so desperately wanted.

"Oh, you know me, your Majesty, always turning up like the proverbial bad penny." He finished with the fire, which now crackled and blazed hotly in the cold hearth. "Besides, if this is your idea of a sanctuary away from disturbances, I may have some ruined mineshafts I can sell you in Bree."

Thorin grunted, and pushed one of the filled tumblers towards his unannounced guest. "I may as well hear whatever it is." He paused to give some kind of report on his cluttered desktop a sour stare. "I don't seem to be getting much accomplished here, anyway."

"Most gracious of you," Nori acknowledged with a sardonic grin. Settling further into the cushioned chair, Nori sipped his brandy and mentally shifted gears to give his report. "Right. Well, Laketown is a right buggering mess."

His tone must have caught Thorin off guard, because the king blinked at him slowly, before asking, "More so than your last report led me to believe?"

Nori gazed at him, assessing for a long moment, trying to get a measure of Thorin's mental processes. Under the king's eyes were heavy bags, the dark patches standing out on otherwise paler-than-normal skin. His hands shook, tiny little tremors that occurred with sporadic frequency. The glare that was being leveled at him was clear, though. Mostly.

"Forgive me for asking, but how's your head? You still hammering on all forges?" Nori asked, more to acknowledge what he had been doing, because he had already formed his opinion of Thorin's current thought processes.

"Not good enough."

"Clear enough, Master Thief," Thorin rumbled, and there was a definite warning note in his tone. "Now get on with it."

Nori shrugged and took a large swig. The brandy burned on its way down, but the sensation was enough to shock himself into alertness and combat a bit of the mental fog that was a combination of exhaustion and adrenaline leaving his system. "All right, so here's the thing. There's very little left of the town. No buildings beyond those piddling shacks the tree-shaggers helped them throw up before the battle with the orcs—and incidentally, I don't see why they're so grateful to those
pointy-eared bastards. I could build better, with one hand tied to me bum, and I'm no carpenter."

He knew, privately, Thorin had thought the same when he had seen the 'buildings' Thranduil had seen fit to erect so he could later boast of his compassionate nature, and presumably remind the poor humans of it at his earliest opportunity or convenience. What the elves had, in fact, left the town with was far fewer supplies to save themselves with, and a blemish of huddling hovels to show for it. "Thranduil of the woodland realm has continued to prove his measure to those in need," Thorin growled, and if there was a bit of bitterness in his tone, well, what of it? Watching as the humans felt grateful for the negligent and condescending 'help' provided by the haughty tree-shaggers had to grate on him, just as it turned Nori's stomach—a vivid reminder of their people suing for similar assistance, burned, broken and lost, and being turned away with little help for their desolate march, without even the chance to bury their dead. No, Thranduil's particular brand of mercy would never sit well with any dwarf of Erebor.

The homes of men were built of wood, and unfortunately, they did not have a forest beneath their mountain, to fell for them. "I had hoped that they might have made more progress towards rebuilding by this time," Thorin said softly, and Nori would bet his monarch could see it; the cold huddling bodies and too little food, with the acrid smell of dragon fire hanging over all.

"Oh, they get by. The items you asked me to divert from Dain's supply wagons have helped tremendously. I see to it that they get distributed where they're needed, quiet-like. Though, now that the Master is gone, I don't think you have to be quite so subtle in your help. I wager Bard's not the man to take from those under him, or I'll eat Dwalin's knuckle dusters."

There was a distinct flush to Thorin's complexion when he turned his face to the fire. Interesting. Seems the great king wasn't entirely comfortable being outed as a softie.

"Continue to keep the arrangement as it stands, Master Nori. I do not wish to complicate matters with the men, nor do I wish to hold anything over them when we must eventually barter for supplies."

"As you say, Sire," Nori said blandly. He ran a finger over the rim of his glass, watching the play of the firelight over the amber liquid inside it. "Even with the help we've sent, it may not be enough," he admitted, finally.

"They need more?" Thorin asked sharply, and Nori would bet a week's worth of Dori's fussing that he was mentally calculating how much more he could possibly spare. Their king had a deep compassion that was as hard to see as a pitch on a moonless night; he was very practiced at being the King of Carven Stone, a true heir of Durin. Nori tried really hard not to feel disturbingly privileged to see this gentler side of his bastard of a monarch.

To his annoyance, he failed miserably.

"It's not the supplies, frankly. That, at least, could be dealt with."

"What is the difficulty with Laketown, then?" Thorin barked, impatient.

"What it always comes down to: rumour and morale," Nori admitted, with some disgust. Give them problems they could sink their axes into, and his fellow dwarrow would be only too eager to solve it. This? This would end up firmly in his lap, mark his words. Subtlety was an art that most of his company had yet to master, though there was some small hope yet for Ori, and proper little
Master Baggins was a surprisingly dab hand. "There is murmuring amongst the general populace. They moved from the razed site, you know. Many of them think it's cursed. They've left the carcass of ol' Smaug to rot in the lake, and decamped to solid ground a half-mile away."

"Please tell me they are not leaving the means of their salvation to decompose at the bottom of the lake," Thorin ground out, outraged. "Smaug's belly was armoured with a fortune of dwarven gems and precious metals—there might even be mithril buried in the silt, somewhere. More than enough to buy the town, five times over."

"Be that as it may," Nori said, waving it aside as inconsequential—and it was. The men felt it was cursed, and they weren't going to convince the superstitious buggers otherwise, so why dwell on it? "There has been some mumblings that maybe the area is under a pall of bad luck, that all their suffering could have been avoided if they had simply de-camped when Dale was struck down. Many think they should leave; cut their losses and start over in other towns."

"If we are to survive here, we must have a thriving settlement—with planted fields—within market distance of Erebor. What happened to Bard's bold plans to revive Dale? Surely, he is not considering this madness?"

"But how can he hold them, if the people are set on this course? Frankly, right now, he has his hands full with just keeping things together, day-to-day. There is a lot of unrest. Rumours that maybe Bard isn't as good as he appears, that maybe he's skimming what's left of our payment, whatever the Master and Alfrid couldn't make off with, that is."

Thorin drew a deep breath, releasing it slowly as he stared into the fire. Nori watched him, wasn't sure how much of his struggling was with the new obstacles to his kingdom, and how much was with his own madness.

"I see," Thorin said finally. "Keep your ears open. I don't know if there is anything we can do, but I want to be poised to do it, if we can come up with something." Letting out a great sigh, he turned away from the fire. "In the meantime, I will have Glóin look into the possibilities of other markets."

Nori looked at him, skeptical. "Are there, anywhere?"

Thorin looked into the dregs of his cup, as if there were some portent there worth divining. "No," he said, hollowly.

"..."

THE TREASURY WAS ACTUALLY rather interesting, as prisons went, Bilbo had to acknowledge. The green-grey rock of the mountain's interior had been polished until deeper patterns of rich colour were revealed. The floor was inlaid with a colourful mosaic of stone tiles, though its spread was too immense for Bilbo to get a sense of the overall pattern. The chambers were cut with meticulousness that boggled the hobbit's mind with the sheer impossibility of the task, and yet the dwarves had done it not once, but again and again and again, with chambers lining every hallway of their ancient home with perfect precision. Intricate carvings lined each column, with patterns that rivaled even the most complex of prize-winning Hobbiton laces. Though the dwarves seemed to favour knot work and angular abstracts to the flora and fauna
motifs of the Shire, it still helped Bilbo feel slightly less transplanted as he wandered the Treasury. The ancient cavern was beautiful, in an alien way, and Bilbo was forced to accept that a culture he had thought rather lacking in grace and manners nevertheless had a deep appreciation for beauty.

The days had passed speedily enough, to Bilbo's surprise. The Treasury was nothing if not full of new things to discover, and the glimpse into the dwarrow history had been fascinating, once he had calmed enough to appreciate it. Hobbits loved genealogy, and history and the recounting of things everyone knew, and the walls of this gilded cage were a gorgeous motif of dwarven culture and history, and of tales told and retold until they were legend.

Thorin spent his time walking with Bilbo, explaining some of the history of those great art works. Their conversations were light, and rather strained, and Bilbo dearly missed the close camaraderie they had begun to enjoy before this whole debacle. Thorin made many attempts to deepen their talks, but Bilbo shut them down quickly; he really wasn't sure he was ready to talk yet, he was far too annoyed. Besides, he was absolutely certain he didn't want to hear anything the dwarven king might have to say—no matter how mournful and increasingly uneasy Thorin looked.

Especially because he was still deeply attracted to the mountain king, much to his dismay, because these certainly weren't the acts of the dwarf he thought he knew, the one with whom he had been steadily falling in love, and had honestly been ready to stay in Erebor for, if Thorin had just asked.

It had felt like he had finally gained Thorin's respect—a boon he had treasured more even than his Aunt Belba's lavender seed cake recipe. Bilbo was having a hard time crediting that he had been so very far off the mark about Thorin, and part of him was still entertaining some hope that this was all some kind of dwarven thing—something that meant he wasn't being forcibly held prisoner, or at least gave a damned good explanation. Of course, as far as he had been able to determine, there was no good explanation for this foolishness, so the sooner he mended his broken heart, the better, and preferably before he allowed Thorin to offer whatever justification he no doubt wanted to give. The very contradictory nature of these impulses was enough to keep him thoroughly muddled in all things concerning the dwarf king.

But there was still that part of him that refused to stop hoping. That still stubbornly believed in the arrogant dwarrow, with his infrequent, gentle smiles and thoughtful gestures.

During their walks, Thorin kept a respectful distance, and made no attempt to hold Bilbo's hand, as a hobbit lad or lass might, or even walk close enough to brush shoulders; carefully orchestrated, accidental touches that were so much a part of courting in the Shire. In fact, the whole process felt so alien, on several occasions Bilbo found himself ready to set Thorin straight on the matter only to turn away again, the words left unspoken between them. He was still hurt and confused and not at all sure he really wanted to set Thorin straight on anything pertaining to proper courting and cultural differences.

Frankly, the whole mess was giving him a headache.

Today, though, he could not settle. Restlessness had driven him from any number of agreeable activities. The time for the earliest of spring planting would be close at hand by now in the Shire; he wasn't completely sure what the date was according to Shire reckoning, only that it was somewhat different from the dwarven calendar. He did know it was late enough that the snows would be well and truly gone, even from the deepest dells and shadiest corners of the West Farthing and Michel Delving. Very soon, Bilbo supposed, the first brave little bulbs would push their way up in the beds beside his front walk.
He missed his home: the rich woods of the wainscoting; the plush fabrics of his upholstery; his, well usually anyway, well-provisioned larder and his comfortable kitchen. But most of all, he missed his garden. Of course, he had been considering the possibility of not seeing his cheery little kitchen garden, at least not for a very long time—had been seriously considering the offer to stay in Erebor, where he felt useful and needed, and oh, all right, he may also have wanted to see if maybe there was some small possibility for a still slightly podgy, and admittedly fussy hobbit to somehow forge a path with a once-exiled, entirely too prickly dwarven king. This was a thought he had not allowed himself to think before, rather scolding himself whenever he felt it rise up in the back of his mind, until he could push it back into the corner it slunk from.

Only now, it seemed that those wild, mad thoughts weren't entirely mad after all.

Some part of him, a part he pushed into the broom cupboard of his subconscious, was flattered. Of course he was flattered. Thorin was a king, and Bilbo, while a gentle-hobbit of respectable standing in the Shire, was of no real significance to the outside world. And perhaps, before all this had started, there were a few appreciative glances—Thorin was highly impressive, physically. And there may have been a bit of stammering. And Bilbo may have occasionally taken a turn in Bombur's kitchen, and if he just happened to try his hand at making some of the things that Kíli or Fíli may have mentioned as being Thorin's favourites while he was there, than that was no one's business but his own, thank you very much. Just because food was a very important part of hobbit courting efforts did not mean that anything should be read into that. At all.

Everything was just so tangled now, and what he may have hoped before was tainted with indignation at Thorin's heavy-handed treatment of him in his efforts to court him. And Yavanna help him, Thorin was courting him, which was an event so far out of Bilbo's expectations as to be unbelievable, even now, after almost a month of living it. He wasn't sure he could trust the fact that this wasn't some kind of new madness, because the Thorin Bilbo thought he knew wouldn't have done this.

What on earth could he have been thinking?

Bilbo didn't like this feeling at all, frankly. Thorin had him so thoroughly jumbled up that he didn't even recognize his own feelings. At times, his skin prickled as if with fever heat, and he felt the stirrings of unfamiliar agitation.

Obviously, he was missing far too many meals to be healthy. That was all there was to it.

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ALMOST A WEEK HAD gone by since Uncle Thorin had been released from the Khebabel Azyungaz, and at first the company had been thrilled that their king's courting had gone so swiftly and so well. When he had revealed the deal he had made with Bilbo however, they immediately grew concerned. Dori had gone so far as to try and fuss over Uncle, as if he were little Ori, though one of Uncle's bellowing roars and a sour glare had halted Dori in his tracks, and put a stop to the muttering and meddling of the rest of the company before they really had a chance to get properly started.

Kíli had watched his brother stand there in shock, looking both elated and guilty—grateful that, with Uncle here, he would no longer be in absolute control of Erebor, and knowing Fee, feeling equally guilty for that selfish thought. The last few weeks had been difficult for both of them,
though Kíli had enjoyed the challenge more than Fíli. His brother had become convinced that the time spent ruling had only proven that though they had a good teacher, he really wasn't ready to run a kingdom. Each Council session, each mound of incomprehensible paperwork, had just left him feeling more and more inadequate—after all, he'd pointed out, Uncle Thorin had already been leading the exiles to Ered Luin by the time he was their age.

Kíli just knew his brother would be wondering if Uncle hadn't agreed to Bilbo's terms so easily because he didn't think Fíli could handle the task before him.

Which was complete rubbish, of course, but that was why Kíli knew he was the smart one.

One small boon of the aid Uncle was capable of giving was that the brothers were now able to scrape together an hour or two of their own time, to spend as they wished. Actually, Uncle Thorin had insisted on it, saying that if they didn't find a few moments to just be Kíli and Fíli, they would likely forget how to be anything other than princes.

Kíli wondered what his uncle did that was just for him—not aware that Uncle did do anything just for him, which may explain a lot, come to think on it.

Today, he and Fee were locked in their quarters, and Fíli was trying to explain his ideas for his First Craft, and only really succeeding in highlighting the fact that he had no real ideas at all, and was feeling rather hopeless about it.

"It's got to be something special, Kee. Something to show Uncle Thorin...show him how much I've learned from him. That I can do this, be his heir, someday even look after our people."

Nobody but Kíli ever got to see this side of his brother. Fíli was the strong one, the serious one; Uncle had high expectations for his heirs, but Fíli got the brunt of it, being the eldest—and he thrived at it, was a natural as Uncle Thorin’s successor, Kíli thought. But sometimes, in the privacy of their own chambers, Fíli was nervous, and Kíli hated to see him doubt himself so much.

Kíli couldn’t even imagine this kind of pressure; as far as anyone knew, he had yet to feel the call of his Heart Craft, even though he was well into his seventh decade. It didn’t bother him, though, in fact, he was perfectly content to continue ignoring the faint-but-getting-stronger stirrings of longing and song in his soul. Oh, there was talk, more whispering and ruddy shite about 'that elven-faced man-child', of course; just another way Kíli wasn’t a proper dwarrow, and all that. Fíli and Uncle put a stop to it whenever they heard it, but Kíli didn't care. It would stop on its own as he and Fíli grew into their roles, and he proved himself worthy of respect, he was sure, so he really didn’t intend on wasting time worrying about it now. His Calling would come when he was ready, Balin had told him, offering comfort in his own practical way. Frankly, Kíli didn’t feel all that ready to know who he was, yet, but didn’t feel that this was the appropriate response to the kindly meant gesture.

Fíli, on the other hand, was stable, and solid as stone. It had come as no surprise to Kíli that Fee had been called to weapon-smithing, and he didn’t think it had surprised many of the court, either. Such a noble art seemed a natural fit for the serious heir-apparent.

Uncle hadn’t said a word.

Oh, he had smiled, lips upturned just a little, which was practically a grin for Uncle. He had clapped Fíli on the shoulder, and pressed his forehead to his nephew’s, tight. Had held the moment long, longer than was really polite in public, and the look in Fíli’s eyes in that moment
told Kíli how hard he was struggling not to cry.

That was almost ten years ago, and in all that time, Uncle Thorin had made no further mention of it. The brothers had expected fierce pushing from their uncle—he had always drilled into them their place as leaders, and what it meant to keep the image of the royal line strong, especially in the times of chaos after the dragon came, to keep their people's moral high.

Their people needed a symbol, the knowledge that the Durin line was un-breaking, and unfailing, especially after the failure of their great-grandfather.

Frankly, deep in his heart of hearts, Kíli was sick of seeing his uncle tear himself apart for the sins of a dwarf who had chosen gold over his own people.

Over his own grandson.

Uncle Thorin had always overseen their education, had always enquired after their progress and their studies, and never failed to take a hand when they needed some extra guidance. His patience had seen both of them through their early battlefield training, before they were old enough to be turned over to the Weapons Masters for further instruction. His persistence pushed both of them to succeed with lessons in state-craft and diplomacy—and despite what their mother said, Uncle Thorin did take diplomacy very seriously.

Just not with elves.

Perseverance had seen his nephews through their academic studies, always there to explain what they did not understand, or to push them when they faltered. When it came time for their first attempts at the forge, Uncle had taken them both to his workroom and guided them. Actually, he had set them both down and given a very impressive lecture on exactly what he would do to either of them if they mucked about in here, or failed to follow his instructions for safety and care. He had left the two irrepressible princes thoroughly cowed and never once had they dared misbehave in that place. Over the years, Uncle Thorin had left his hand on every aspect of the adults his nephews were growing to be.

Every aspect, but this.

Fíli seemed convinced that Uncle didn't think him worthy, that this strange silence was a show of disapproval of some kind. Maybe he didn't think Fíli was ready, or maybe he just felt that such a craft was wasted on so disappointing an heir. After all, Fíli had asked, what had he ever done that was noteworthy of anything?

"It will be brilliant, Fee. When have you ever done anything less than brilliant in all your life?" Kíli playfully punched his brother's shoulder, trying to incite a bit of a tussle to take Fíli's mind of his anxieties. Fíli, of course, recognized what he was trying to do, and with a put-upon sigh, attempted to pin Kíli's wrist behind his back. A satisfying scuffle ensued, that finally ended when Fíli tackled his brother into the chair by the fire, knocking all the air from his body as they both laughed, and Kíli wheezed until he had his breath back.

As they both lay squished across the chair, panting, Kíli grabbed his brother's arm and squeezed. "You'll do brilliant, Fee. You'll see."

When Balin came to find Fíli an hour later, it was to find both princes settled down with drafting pens and design vellum spread before them, deep in conversation about tensile strengths and the merit of varying shades of blue.
The old advisor just shook his head tolerantly; he knew the signs well, and had vivid memories of a young Thorin, furiously working in all his spare minutes whenever his inspiration had struck, furtively hiding the results of his brainstorming until one day, a very subdued prince had nervously shared with Balin his efforts for his all-important First Craft. It was a trying time in any young dwarf's life, to be sure, and more difficult still when so many expectations seemed to be heaped upon your shoulders.

He made a bit of noise as he crossed the threshold of the chambers, giving the boys plenty of time to shove the pages into a hasty pile. He had to suppress a snort as Kíli gave the entire mess a good shove with his toe, to push it under the settee. Balin kept his expression neutral, and his gaze bland, before reminding Fíli of his promise to give a tour to the Blacklock dwarf. Fíli, well trained and cognisant of his duty, rose without complaint, though he did cast one last, longing glance at where a corner of his work still peeked out from beneath the furniture. The Calling could be difficult to ignore, indeed.

Excepting a few pockets, the upper levels had all been mined out generations ago, and turned into living quarters, so the tour was mainly concentrated on the main and lower levels. The main levels, consisting of the ten levels moving upwards from the level of the main gate to the outside world, which was reached by a massive stair and was actually two levels above the ground, were turned over to official chambers, government chambers and trade spaces like workshops and classrooms.

The level of entry for the lower, or front gates, the ones that were actually ground level with the outside world and where the River Running ran through to terminate in a small waterfall just outside the Front Gate, was completely devoted to market space were dwarrow of all crafts and stations bartered and sold their wares and services. On this level too, could be found the practice rooms, guard houses and weapons rooms. The levels of living quarters below this level got progressively poorer, though no dwarf ever lived in true poverty while surrounded by their kith and kin. Dwarves took care of their own.

Everything beneath that were mines. Fíli had been showing Iór the main points of restoration, a massive project that would likely take all of his uncle's rule, and probably his own, to complete. Still, he couldn't help but be proud of what they had already accomplished with just a handful of dwarrows. More were pouring in from the Blue Mountains all the time, but until the weather improved, the number of exiles returning would be but a handful compared to what would come in the coming months. By this time next season, Fíli anticipated that more than half the mountain would be cleared of rubble and re-opened for real repair work to begin.

The foreign diplomat seemed to sense his pride. "The dragon was driven away what, only two months ago, you say?" he asked, his tone clearly meant to convey his approval, with only a touch of incredulity.

"A little over, yes," Fíli said with some pride, though the voice of a certain well-mannered hobbit in the back of his mind compelled him to add, "Smaug was actually finally defeated by the leader of Laketown, Lord Bard."

"Laketown, you say?" Iór asked curiously.

"A nearby settlement of Men," Fíli clarified, and didn't care one wit for the look of disdain on the southern dwarrow's face.
"WHAT ARE YOU DOING down here, Óin?" Bilbo asked, curious. In truth, he knew he sounded unforgivably annoyed in his address, but the healer's presence was increasing the itchy feeling under his skin, and he had the unaccountable urge to look around for Thorin. *What in the world was happening to him?*

"A healer usually visits the confined pair around this point of the ritual," Óin said absently as he rummaged in his ancient black bag of ointments and salves.

"Really?" Bilbo drawled, crossing his arms defensively over his chest. "A bit late, don't you think?"

"Hmm? No, it's about the right time." Óin finally seemed to find what he was looking for, triumphantly brandishing a glass stick in the air. Bilbo couldn't help but stare at it in confusion. Óin noticed, of course. "Marvelous, isn't it? I had it commissioned special. I'm going to call it a ThermÓin-metre."

"A ThermÓin-whatsit?" Bilbo asked, rather bewildered, and finding that the excited gleam in the healer's eye was making him decidedly nervous.

"A thermÓin-metre. It measures your temperature; shows if you have a fever, and how deadly it might be." He looked at the glass stick with pride. "It's a brilliant invention, if I do say so myself. Dwarves don't really get sick, of course, but if I'm to have the care of someone like you, who does, then I'd better be prepared."

Bilbo tried not to resent the fact that the aged healer looked positively gleeful at the prospect. The hobbit dropped his arms and took a step back from the brandished stick, not at all sure he wanted to know what Óin planned on doing with it.

"I'm sure just a hand on my forehead will suffice," he stuttered, a bit nervous now. "Or, of course, you could just ask me!"

"Don't be ridiculous. This won't hurt a bit. Besides, if you are sickening under the influence of the bond, you would hardly be objective, now would you?"

"If I were to—what?" Bilbo squawked, trying to dodge the surprisingly spry healer. "Will you hang on? I—" But he was interrupted when Óin lunged unexpectedly and managed to shove the thermÓin-metre into his gaping mouth and under his tongue.

"There now," Óin said, dusting his hands with satisfaction. "Now hold that there until I tell you."

He was met by a truly ferocious hobbit-glare, which he ignored.

"Honestly, there is no appreciation for genius," the old dwarf muttered irritably.

Bilbo rolled his eyes, but since the stick didn't seem to be doing him any harm, other than the now tender spot under his tongue where Óin had jabbed him, he decided it seemed safer to humor him. After a minute or two, Óin popped the stick out of Bilbo's mouth, held it up to the lantern light and
squinted before consulting a dusty tome he'd brought with him. Running at thick finger along the page, he muttered, "Let's see, baseline temperature would be somewhere between a man and an elf, so..."

"What do you mean—if I'm sickening under this bond? What bond?"

Óin stopped fussing, slowly straightening to stare incredulously at the confused hobbit. "What do you mean, what bond?"

He could die.
Thorin could die.

Okay, it was far more likely that one or the other of them could go mad, but still.

Why hadn't he been told about this?

"Surely Thorin told you this," Óin said impatiently, apparently dabbling in mind reading, as well as portents and divining.

"No, I'm fairly sure I would have remembered a conversation that went 'Bilbo, if I don't lock you down here, I'm afraid you might die because apparently your psyche is so bloody open you might go mad'—as a matter of interest, I'm absolutely positive I would remember a conversation like that," Bilbo snapped, irritated.

He was pacing now, and stopped at each turn to tap one foot impatiently. There was something building within him, too big to contain, but he was damned if he could decide if it was anger at dwarvish...something, or gratitude, both that he had not, in fact, misjudged Thorin, and that Thorin had taken this rather alarming step in order to save his life, which he hadn't even known was in any danger, thanks to one infuriatingly closed-mouthed dwarf.

He had a funny feeling that he might throw something at the dwarven king when next he came back.

"Ach, laddie, don't fret yourself. Thorin has always been a bit lacking in the communication department. And to be honest, did you give him much of a chance to explain? Perhaps he thought that bit of information would be best to hold until you were not so angry at him."

Bilbo winced guiltily, and forced himself to take a deep breath, then another.

Óin was at least partly right.

He hadn't exactly given Thorin much opportunity to discuss much of, well, anything after they had made their deal, weeks ago. Every time he'd tried, Bilbo had cut him off, and forced the conversation back to something inane, like dwarven dynasties, or craft history; anything that would allow him to keep the feelings inside of him at bay, until he could understand.

And Thorin, trying to be so careful, would never press him when Bilbo clearly didn't want to talk
about it. This changed things, of course. It meant that Thorin was indeed the dwarf he had
thought he was falling in love with, including his deplorable lack of basic communication skills,
and deep loyalty and caring.

Frankly, Bilbo wasn't sure he wasn't equally annoyed at this revelation.

*Confusticating, bebothering dwarves.*

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**Chapter End Notes**

Alright, long author's note is long. I have a problem, apparently - is there a group
meeting for wordiness? :p

First of all, I have to thank all of you for staying with me. It's been a long break since
the last chapter, and I'm sure many of you thought I had abandoned this.

Well, what I actually did was to write what was left of this story for NaNoWriMo this
year - naively, I figured I could only have about 45K words left to finish it, so if I
wrote a small epilogue, I'd comfortably make my 50K words during November.

*Sigh.*

I really should know better by now - every story I've ever written started as a much
smaller story, that just kept growing in the telling, and this one was no different. So
when November 30th rolled around I found that though I had my 50K words, what I
didn't in fact have was a finished story :p What I do have, though, is chapters 5-9
written and awaiting beta work and extensive editing. Many of you may also have
noticed that there is now an end chapter listed - I now feel fairly confident in saying
there will be 11 chapters in this story.

Well, probably :p

I will likely include some more generalized story notes with the next chapter - just to
address some questions about the whys and wherefores of this story, but frankly, I
just wrote it up and watched my laptop eat it :p I'm too tired to start re-writing it now
*lol*

You guys are awesome - this is my escape, my safe place away from the stress of
everyday life, and I want to thank each and every one of you for coming to play in
my playground with me.

-Ny(ruserra)
IT TRULY WAS getting harder and harder to leave this place, and the relief he felt in his very soul upon his return would bring him to his knees before long, he was sure. Once he could see, and hear and touch Bilbo, to know that he was safe, he could finally, finally think with one mind, instead of constantly having his reason cloven in twain.

It was soothing to enter these halls, to close the door behind himself and feel the consecrated rock envelop him, pushing out all else but Bilbo’s presence. He would close his eyes and savour the soft boom of the vault door closing behind him, letting all his tension bleed back into the stone of the mountain, and his mind and heart stopped feeling like a vast raw wound.

Except, of course, today, apparently.

When he entered the vault, the first thing he saw was a restlessly pacing hobbit. He felt unease coiling in his chest, and tramped it down as the door slid home behind him, though even the noise of that didn't seem to pierce his hobbit's determined movements. Thorin watched as Bilbo jerked to a stop, waved both hands in the air, as if giving shape to some thought, before dropping them to his sides again. He nodded sharply, as if resolved, then threw himself back into pacing. Only to repeat the whole process not a minute later. Thorin was at a complete loss to explain it, but knew,
with a sinking feeling in his gut, that this was probably his fault. And he was sure Bilbo was going
to explain to him why. Probably using very sharp, precise well-mannered words that still managed
to cut like finely-wrought blades; despite how politely they were couched. Soft, he had thought
him on their first meeting, only now could he see how fierce the hobbit could be. *The Shire must
be a dangerous place indeed,* he privately acknowledged, *when all its residents can defend
themselves with such deadly accuracy without lifting so much as a stone to throw.*

Gathering his courage, he straightened his shoulders and stepped further into the room.

This, of course, alerted Bilbo to his arrival. "Thorin!" he cried, finally stopping his agitated
circling.

"Good evening?" Thorin wanted to bury his face in his hands when it came out as a question, but
after weeks of cool tolerance, this new emotional outburst had him feeling badly on edge.

The way the morning light was filtering in and turning Bilbo's sandy curls a lovely tousled golden
may have been distracting, too. Thorin scowled at his own inattention, then winced when Bilbo
saw the expression, and of course, promptly misinterpreted it. His previously only slightly wary
expression shifted, his lips hardening into a tight line as he looked up at the bigger dwarf.

Thorin took another impulsive step forwards, and just barely stopped himself from reaching out.
"Burglar, I—"

"We need to talk," Bilbo cut him off abruptly, though not rudely; or at least, as politely as he could
manage, Thorin was sure, and the expression staring up at him was solemn, and very, very
determined.

"Anything," Thorin stated simply, not at all sure what had put Bilbo so badly off kilter, but
knowing he would help however he could. Bilbo turned on his heel and led the way through the
main chamber, passing gleaming treasures and gems that would make any dwarf stop and stare, no
matter how many times they had seen the sight.

Bilbo, of course, took no notice of the immense wealth literally lying at his feet; never had, Thorin
thought with fond exasperation. Tonight, he was practically marching through the Treasury,
obviously even less aware of the fortune all around him than usual, and Thorin smiled to himself.
His burglar would always be his breath of sanity. The far side of the main chamber held the
entrance leading to refuge chambers, ones that had been excavated down here in case of dire
emergency. These chambers had been central to the plans the company had helped him make, as
they provided all the main comforts of living, and were, Thorin had found, Bilbo's choice of
refuge when they sat to take meals. Thorin had a private theory, after having seen hobbitish
architecture, that the smaller confines of these rooms made Bilbo feel more at home, more *secure*
than the vast open spaces of the official parts of Thorin's kingdom. It was to one of these chambers
they went now, one that someone had seen fit to set up as a small sort of library for them
—*probably Dori,* he thought. They had, thoughtfully, picked one of the few, aside from the main
Treasury chamber, that had natural sunlight vented in; surely more comfortable for the Green
Lady's children.

There was a tome on dwarven myth, turned over to hold Bilbo's place, sitting on one furred
cushion. Despite the amount of time he knew Bilbo spent in here, the book and a small teapot left
on a low table were the only things Bilbo had allowed to remain out of place. Thorin liked the
little messes; small touches that gave the feeling that the hobbit was comfortable here.

And indeed, Bilbo marched right over to the biggest chair by the fire and flopped down in it—his
gesture for Thorin to do the same came as a bit of an afterthought, as if Thorin were somehow
within *his* fiefdom, now, and he tried to take courage at the reversal, and the familiarity it
bestowed.

For a long moment, Bilbo regarded him, seeming to weigh what it was he wanted to say. Thorin sat patiently, and only a lifetime of diplomacy in the face of their many adversities kept him rooted in place, and a neutral expression on his face. He reached deep, trying to feel the stone around him, and let it calm his terrified heart. Surely, the hobbit had not decided to reject him, now? Thorin feared very much that he might have. The rock offered no surety for him, if it even knew.

"Óin was here today," Bilbo said finally, and his gaze as he watched Thorin was sharp, as if waiting for some kind of betraying action.

Thorin stared back at him, unsure as to what he being suspected of.

At his lack of response, Bilbo went on. "He mentioned that he was concerned I might be sickening," he said slowly, "from a bond I may be forming, with a dwarven king, no less. Imagine my shock."

Thorin could feel his brow furrowing in confusion. Surely Bilbo had sensed his intentions, had understood—? And sickening? Why would Bilbo be sickening, unless Óin meant to see for himself if Bilbo was showing any outward effects of a bond forming, and didn't wish to own up to being meddlesome? Apparently age in my kinsmen only serves to increase nosiness, Thorin thought darkly.

"I told you I wished to bond with you—that the *Khebabel Azyungaz* was a rite of bonding," Thorin said slowly, trying to use words, which Bilbo seemed to prefer, rather than letting what he was, what he felt and thought stand for him, as he usually preferred. He fought to keep his tone steady, to push back the flush of indignation that Bilbo's faint accusations were bringing out.

Bilbo threw up his hands, and leaped from his chair to resume his pacing. "Bonding—as in, forming a close romantic bond! Not—not some kind of mystic dwarven condition!" he spluttered. "Condition?"Thorin rumbled, extremely affronted to have his greatest hope and deepest fear dismissed as some kind of lingering aberration, as if it were chapped skin, or a persistent cold.

"Yes, well, apparently it's contagious!" Bilbo shouted back.

There was silence in the room after that, as they started at each other in the wake of their small argument. Bilbo looked abashed; Thorin just felt incredibly tired.

"If you feel you have been infected with some kind of *dwarven disease*," Thorin started, his voice lacking any inflection or hint of the great wound that had been inflicted, "then reject the bond. Óin will assist you in the morning, should you need it."

The stiffness seemed to bleed out of Bilbo's posture, and he suddenly was unable to meet Thorin's eye. "I'm sorry. That was uncalled for." His hand fluttered uselessly in the air, some kind of vague gesture meant to stand in for actual words when the hobbit obviously had none to offer that would help. "You did tell me," he conceded, and the weariness of his voice made Thorin's chest ache hollowly. "I just didn't understand. Although you could have been more explicit, apparently we both made assumptions of understanding." Pursing his lips, Bilbo raised his chin so he could meet Thorin's eyes and in a very even voice, he said plainly, "I dislike feeling as if I have lost control of my ability to choose, Thorin. I don't think I'm okay with that in the slightest, despite the circumstances."

Thorin worried at this evidence of yet another misunderstanding, and he hastened to give reassurance. "You have the only right to choose, Master Baggins. In the end, the decision on
whether to accept the bond or not is in your hands, and you can decide to end this at any time." His voice was resigned as he added, "Even now, should you wish it."

Bilbo was clearly startled with this information. "I thought this was supposed to last six moon cycles, or some such?" he asked.

"Six moon cycles is the symbolic representation of the ages through which the dwarven fathers slept with their soul mates, awaiting the Awakening. That does not mean that the ritual cannot end early, should you choose it."

Hazel eyes stared deeply into his own, clearly weighing his words. "And if I choose not to accept this?" he raised one skeptical eyebrow.

"Then we shall go through a separate rite," Thorin said, dully. "One that will close the edges of this bond—cauterize it, I suppose, as you would the edges of a wound you cannot heal, and we shall part ways."

The look Bilbo was leveling at him was shrewd. "And everything will be as if this never happened? There will be no lasting effects on either of us?" he probed, clearly suspicious.

Thorin sighed. "A bond will never be able to take root in either of us again, once this one has been severed," he admitted.

Bilbo blinked, clearly not expecting that. "I don't anticipate that will affect me much, unless I were planning to take up with a different dwarven lover," he said dryly, before suddenly switching tracks. "But you! What if you find someone else with whom you fall in love with at some point in the future?"

Thorin couldn't quite stop his dismissive snort. "Dwarves only love once, and many choose the love of craft over that of another. Mahal made us to endure, not to change our minds."

Bilbo's look of pure horror was like a blow to Thorin's already bruised psyche, but he forced himself not to look away. If this was to be the last he was to spend with his hobbit, he would lock even these painful memories away; perhaps he could use them to fill the hole that would be left once Bilbo was expunged from his soul.

"You mean if I say no to this bond, if I decide I don't want it, I'll be condemning you to never be able to love another, ever again?" Bilbo asked finally.

"Master Baggins, stop!" Thorin said, sharply. "No matter whom I took as my One, my purest treasure, I would face the same possibility of rejection. Do not base your choice on that, for it is pointless."

The hobbit seemed to ponder this for a moment, staring at his toes, and clearly muttering to himself, but seemed to come to some kind of internal decision.

"All right, why don't we start again," he said, carefully. "Only this time, I want you to explain this to me properly."

"It was not my intent to deceive you."

"You didn't tell me about the bond," Bilbo reminded him flatly, "before locking me down here; let alone the reason why."

"I couldn't tell you." Thorin blew out a frustrated gust of air, scrubbing tiredly at his eyes with clumsy fists, preparing to struggle with his equally clumsy tongue. Why did his one seem to be
such a creature of conversation? Did Mahal struggle equally with his ever-changeable spouse? He took a moment, searching deep for some kind of wisdom to make the incomprehensible comprehensible—but if he could do that, he could render the grey wizard, Tharkûn's riddles into plain speech, too. Reaching deep into his obsidian soul, he tried to find the words anyway. "I could not even tell you that much, for the ancient laws of my people do not allow the sharing of such information with outsiders; even ones as highly regarded as Master Baggins, Dragon's Bane."

"That is a ridiculous title," the one-time thief sniffed, squirming uncomfortably in his pink-flushed embarrassment.

"I rather like it," Thorin commented mildly. When exactly the moniker had come about, the dwarf wasn't entirely sure, but he had his suspicions as to whose hand had pushed its popularity to grow, and he was grateful. He had first heard it in the initial weeks after they had reclaimed the mountain and the refugees huddled in the outer rings until they could clear the more habitable areas, and the name had made his heart glad. In the time since their confinement, the impavid epithet's popularity seemed to have only grown; the tale of his company, and their brave, clever hobbit was shared with the first waves of dwarven refugees as they hit Bombur's kitchens, the first of his people to come streaming back under the mountain. Each new group heard the tale from those that had arrived before, until the story had taken a life of its own and grew with each re-telling, perhaps living and imprinting into the very rock of his halls. Somewhere along the way, the company had all gained appellations of their own, like the heroes of old; Bombur Ironladdle, Nori Reiver, Bofur Fairgem, Fili Courageheart—everyone of his company was recognised for the monumental task they had accomplished, but none more than Bilbo. It had pleased Thorin immensely that Bilbo was receiving his rightful due for all that he had done for the company, many, many times over, and if Thorin was entirely honest, he also enjoyed how flustered it made the modest hobbit. He had made mention of it now to break some of Bilbo's tension, but knew this was still a discussion that had to happen, so with reluctance, steeled himself to forge onwards.

Bilbo seemed to force the worst of his discomfort over the hated title away and fixed Thorin with a steely stare. "So let me get this straight. You are allowed to court me—to have romantic intentions that apparently involve sharing the rest of our lives together—"

"There is no 'apparently' about it," Thorin gritted, realising afterwards that it probably wasn't the best time to interrupt when Bilbo's stare turned to a glare.

"You are allowed to contemplate spending the rest of our lives together, but not to, in fact, tell me before hand that you are doing it?"

Thorin nodded slowly at this stark assessment. "Before I initiated the rite, you had no standing as a dwarf within our society, so the laws forbade me from sharing any of our innermost culture with you," he explained.

"You said before you initiated it, I had no standing," Bilbo pounced on his words. "I have standing now?"

"Yes. It is what allowed me to actually tell you the rite had begun," Thorin said dryly, and held up his hand against Bilbo's indignant squawk, and forestalling his acrimonious rebuttal. "Understand, our laws were not actually written with this situation in mind. But yes, by being a participant in this rite, you are...part of me? I suppose." He felt dubious at this phrasing, but ploughed onward. "All that is mine, is yours, including my...dwarf-ness, if you will." He winced at the clumsy explanation, but many of his people's concepts defied his ability to translate into Westron. Stupid, mushy language.

Bilbo pinched the bridge of his nose, obviously annoyed. His voice was muffled by his hand
when he muttered, "And you didn't explain afterwards because—?"

Thorin just looked at him, disbelievingly.

Bilbo had the grace to blush. "Oh, all right," he conceded, waving his hand about irritated. "I may have made it a bit difficult. I'm sure you could have gotten me to listen, if you really wanted to."

Thorin merely grunted, knowing better than to wade into that argument, and turned his contemplation to the tiled floor instead.

"Thorin! These are things that need talking about," Bilbo said, clearly exasperated.

The dwarf took a deep breath, fighting for the words to explain, because Bilbo was right. "These are the traditions of my people, and even though I am king—especially because I am king, I cannot change those laws at a time to suit my own wishes and endeavours," he spoke slowly, thinking each word out carefully. "Even if I want some of these things to change—and if they do, it must be done carefully and slowly—even if I do, then it must be done after I honour the law as it is written. Can you understand?"

And Bilbo could understand. Changing the laws because Thorin, as king, truly felt them antiquated was progress. Changing them when it also coincided with the king's own interests could potentially raise questions as to the objectivity of that decision, Bilbo had to admit, and in the end, could mire his future decisions in similar doubts. Thorin had lost himself to an arrogant power lust once already; and Bilbo knew he would be thrice shy of doing anything that might hint at him doing so again.

"All right. What else should I know? Since I finally have you talking, let's be sure to get all of it."

"Surely, you have felt most of it by now?" Thorin asked, brow furrowing.

"Felt?" Bilbo asked, bewildered. "What are you on about?"

"From the earth, or the sun—? Surely your people feel the world through the elements of your creator?"

But the confused look on Bilbo's face was telling him that the hobbit had no idea what he was talking about. "Yavanna is Mahal's spouse—surely she must allow her children to feel all that is connected to that which is dear to her? Soil and growing things?" Thorin could admit he sounded a little desperate, but this was throwing him badly off kilter.

"What—Are you saying that you can feel things through the rock? Like people's thoughts?"

Thorin scowled. "Of course not, I am not a wizard."

"Well then?"

"The vibrations in the rock, the sounds of the stone, it tells us many things, and yes, given long enough, we can usually feel the intent of those we feel an especial connection with."

"And you thought I could...sense your intent through what—the sunlight?"

"And the earth as we travelled," the dwarf muttered, crossing his arms and glaring. He seemed to hunch in on himself in his embarrassment.

"Thorin," Bilbo said gently, "hobbits don't feel things that way. If you want me to know something, I'm afraid you're going to have to tell me."
Thorin stared at him for a long moment. "You truly did not know of my feelings for you, Burglar?"

"Of course not! And I don't see why you insist on calling me such things—I know you are aware that I have a perfectly respectable name, though I can count the number of times you've used in on both hands, with fingers to spare."

"Six," Thorin said, seriously, staring into his eyes, as if willing him to understand something.

"What? You've kept count?" Bilbo asked, startled by the heated feeling uncurling in his breast at the idea that Thorin put such care into the use of his name, that he would keep count of something so small.

"I remember each occasion, Master Baggins; each instance. Names are intimate things, and not to be used wrongly." If possible, Thorin's explanation only muddied the waters further.

Bilbo stared at him, considering carefully. He was tired of their repeated miscommunications; of speaking in Hobbit, only to have Thorin understand in Dwarvish. There was something here, worth understanding, he thought, if he could only find the right way to unlock it. "The others seem to have no problem in using my name," he noted cautiously.

"And they use it as you've offered it—in friendship. But I hope to earn the right to use it as something more, and so I have refrained, until by word or action, you grant it to me." Now Thorin looked away into the fire, as if wary of the intensity of their locked gaze. Frankly, Bilbo was happy to let him, for it granted him a moment to ponder what he had been told—because Thorin had rarely used his name, from the very first day they met in Bag End.

"I had hoped, outside the goblin cave," the dwarf suddenly continued gravely, "when you declared your intent to see us home, and then upon the Carrock, when I could feel your care through the very rock itself." Bilbo flushed at this reminder of Thorin's unexpected perceptions, never having suspected the rock he stood on would betray him. "But you seemed to retreat into caution, and so I bid myself to be patient, for you still smiled sweetly for me, and flushed in a way that counselled me to hope." Thorin paused to share a small, rueful smile. "When I say your name, I would leave it with you as the deepest declaration of intent, one that you will always carry within you."

Somehow, Bilbo couldn't help but enjoy the way his heart fluttered within his chest at this declaration.

"SO, IF THESE bonds can form so unexpectedly, why don't your people already have an exception worked into their laws concerning outsiders? Surely this situation must have cropped up before."

The fire had burned low, which gave Thorin the perfect excuse to get up and tend it while he considered his answer; or rather, delayed it, because there was nothing to consider. There could be nothing but truth between them, especially now that he realised just how deaf Bilbo was to the world. He fought back a shudder, not sure he could imagine a world that barren of his Maker's voice. Dwarves had always known that Mahal loved them deeply. He had just always assumed other Valar loved their children similarly.

The fire was probably burning too hot, now, and Thorin was left with nothing left to fiddle with. "The bond... it's not supposed to form this way," he said finally. "It should not exist without the assistance of a Cantor, willing it to grow." He sighed, and put down the poker he had been
absently passing between his hands, and moved to sit once more. He perched on the chair's cushioned edge, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands clasped before him to keep him from giving in to the urge to reach over and brush his fingers along the soft skin of Bilbo's wrist or hand.

"I had laid by plans, to woo you properly if we managed to be successful in our desperate venture. I planned to wait, until I had something to offer you." He spoke slowly, staring down at his absently flexing fingers as he tried to put his thoughts into words. "I wanted to have something worthy enough to weigh against the great injustices I had done to you."

"I never wanted something grand, just your respect," Bilbo admitted quietly.

"I know that now, Master Burglar, but it is how dwarves measure things. I had misjudged and mistreated you greatly, and my repayment should reflect the severity of my dishonour against you. Your mithril coat is but a small fraction of what I owe, and yet it is likely the most valuable thing I will ever lay claim to—and yet, I had the temerity to dream. I would have given you a formal offer to court you, which is a period that lasts a year. If, after the year, I were successful in gaining your favour that would have given you similar status of...dwarf-ness." Thorin frowned at this clumsy phrasing, tugging on one of his jeweled rings absently. "Then I would have been allowed to explain everything to you, and ask you formally to initiate a bond."

Bilbo frowned, clearly trying to digest this. "We seem to have jumped over several key steps," he finally said, wryly. "And there's no way Bifur...?"

The dwarf shook his head, wincing at the memory. "He swears—graphically—that he did not."

"And he couldn't have done it unintentionally?" Bilbo persisted.

Thorin was shaking his head almost before Bilbo had finished asking the question. "Bifur has been a Cantor since he first felt the Calling, before his majority, nearly a century ago," he explained. "He would not have been so clumsy as to do this unintentionally."

Bilbo sat back, clearly turning this new information over in his thoughts. "I don't understand," he said, finally. The statement was simple and plaintive, as he struggled to put some hobbit-sense to what he had been told. "Is there any precedent for it happening without a Cantor?"

"No." Frustration coloured his tone when he answered, Thorin knew; frustration at causing Bilbo yet more distress, and his own inability to provide answers. "In all the long history of my people, not once has it ever happened thus."

Bilbo gave a small sort of nod, as if expecting this lack of precedent. "If you were aware of the bond forming, and knew it could be so very dangerous, why didn't you act sooner?"

Thorin shifted in his seat again, wishing he had something to do with his hands. Words had never come easily to him, especially in Westron. Vaguely, he wondered if Bilbo would ever consent to learning Khuzdûl. "Because I didn't realise what was happening at first," he admitted, "not for a very long time. I had felt the feeling of you, the shape of you, gradually welling up inside of my heart from the first moment I entered your homeland." And here, he briefly gave in to his urge to touch Bilbo, brushing his fingertips across his knuckles, feather-light but yet electric. He withdrew quickly, and Bilbo shot him a startled glance. "It began as gentle vibrations, disturbances in the rock and stone that I had never felt before—but I did not know then what it meant. It made me irascible, and unreasoned in my responses to you, and by the time I knew my own heart, I had already given you far too much cause to doubt my intentions. The pain of that suppression was intense, and through it I did not at first detect the bond's presence." Thorin looked pained at this admission; ashamed for behaviour he could not go back and change. His hands clenched into tight
fists atop his thighs, before slowly uncurling again, one finger at a time. "Once I did recognise it, I considered the idea of simply having the bond severed without ever approaching you—Balin even encouraged this, feeling that this would be very difficult for you to accept—suggesting that I might be better off forgoing the bond, but courting you in a manner you would recognise and expect, without that deep connection ever being possible between us. Perhaps he was right, but I could not... I had to try."

Bilbo sighed, looking tired but settled, as though he had come to terms with some inner turmoil. Thorin tried to school his unruly heart not to take it as a hopeful sign, and to cease beating so frantically within his chest. "And you could tell me nothing whatsoever without initiating this confinement rite, without breaking the laws of your people," Bilbo said finally. "I think, that if I understand you correctly, your choices were between telling me nothing, and giving me no choice in whether or not to have a bond with you; or taking my choice away about this confinement, at least to begin with, but being able to tell me what's happening while I get to decide what to do about it." At Thorin's tight nod, he continued, "Given those options, I guess I'm thankful you took the option where at least the ultimate choices are still my own, and I know what's going on." He gave Thorin a tentative smile.

Thorin felt a cautious lightening of his heart at this admission. He had felt it so; had been sure Bilbo would feel this way about the impossible choice laid before him, but of course, there had been no way to be sure.

"It's probable it would have had to have happened on the Carrock," Bilbo continued to ponder. "Both of us were weak with relief and gratitude, and it is likely our mental shields or whatever term is appropriate, would have been lowered," he mused, idly swirling his cooling tea between his palms. The hobbit seemed quite determined to pin down this little mystery. It must make it seem neater, in his own mind, if there were no untidy ends, Thorin thought with amusement.

"Like as not," he agreed, shrugging it off. It had happened, the why of it was hardly important to him, now.

Bilbo was still fiddling with his cup, his eyes cast down and tracking the movement of the liquid within as if it were the most fascinating thing he had seen.

"What is it?" Thorin asked.

Bilbo startled, jostled back into awareness of his surroundings. He glanced back down at his teacup, frowning. "Hmm? Nothing."

"A shared carry-sack becomes a lighter load," Thorin recited one of his mother's favoured catechisms from his nursery days, feeling extremely foolish but unsure how else to coax Bilbo into divulging what was on his mind.

"You are attracted to me, right?" Bilbo blurted, promptly turning pink. "This is utterly mortifying, I will have you know," he snapped crossly when Thorin fought down a smile.

"You doubt me?"

Bilbo looked at him for a long moment. He blinked, shaking his head, and began industriously picking at a loose thread on his trousers so he wouldn't have to continue meeting the dwarf's eyes. "Well, yes, actually. I wonder—are you attracted to me, and not just because we apparently have some kind of bond? I mean, normally you would get a choice in this too, but from the sound of things, you got just as blindsided as I did."

"Bilbo," Thorin's deep voice drew him inexorably, "Bilbo, look at me."
When Bilbo raised his head, it was to find a far-too-handsome dwarf, far, far too close, kneeling on the stone floor before him. The look being leveled at him was heartbreakingly open and tender; such as he had never received from anyone in all his life. He had barely enough time to register the slight upwards-curl of Thorin's lips, before the dwarf had closed the distance between them. Close up, he smelt of pine, sandalwood and the mineral scent of rain-washed granite, and Bilbo found it was a musky, bright and heady scent that curled into his senses and lingered long afterwards.

One large hand moved slowly between them, closing the distance to cup the back of Bilbo's head, while Thorin carefully watched him for any signs of distress at this new contact. Thick fingers curled in his hair, rough palm enveloping his neck; holding him, but making no move to strengthen their embrace. The moment was gentle and surprisingly comfortable as Thorin's thumb traced lingering patterns across his cheek—slowly sweeping back and forth, mapping the firm roundness and the soft texture beneath his thumb.

Nerve endings Bilbo hadn't been aware of in an embarrassingly long time were flaring to life, marking each point of contact with hyper-sensitivity, drinking in the slight roughness of Thorin's work-damaged skin and the warmth that radiated like a blazing trail in the wake of that gentle, deliberate caress. The crease between thumb and palm would occasionally brush the lobe of Bilbo's ear, causing lazy little tremors to shake his body beneath the dwarf's explorative touch. Thorin, of course, noticed, his eyes burning hotly as he deliberately tested the reaction again, making Bilbo gasp before returning to less intimate touches. The fingers cradling his head curled to make languid movements within his curls, scraping gently along his nape with close-cut nails.

Blue-grey eyes regarded him gravely, a living connection that forbade Bilbo from looking away as each movement of Thorin's skilled, gentle hands forged new connections, causing new pinpricks of sensation to buzz beneath his skin, like a nest of bees on a summer's day. Thorin took in each hitch in breathing, each little shudder with serious, careful consideration and attention, and Bilbo was left with the distinct impression that Thorin was allowing him time to grow accustomed to him.

The feel of Thorin's thick fingers tangling in his curls was causing pleasant warmth to blossom in Bilbo's stomach, and before he knew it, one hand had made its shaky way up, passed an incredibly broad chest and muscled shoulder, to hesitantly ghost a trembling touch along the hard line of Thorin's jaw and close-cropped beard. Groaning, Thorin leaned forward, bringing his forehead to press against Bilbo's, minute movements almost nuzzling them together and forcing the hobbit to drop his hand down to Thorin's shoulder, instead. Shaking—tiny, hard tremors held tightly in check—Thorin was murmuring something against Bilbo's skin, the harsh consonants of the Khuzdûl strangely beautiful on his tongue as he whispered something over, and over in a voice so open and full of emotion Bilbo felt the bottom of his stomach dissolve into a fluttery, warm tangle, and a stretchy pull in his breast that ached without pain. Closing his eyes, letting his uncertainty fall away and relaxing into the moment and into Thorin, Bilbo gave an encouraging hum of contentment.

He could feel Thorin's answering sigh rumble softly between them, and his grip on Bilbo's shoulder and curls tightened briefly, before he gently pulled back, though not far enough to be outside of the hobbit's personal space.

Dark eyes held his gaze as they simply stared at one another, coming to terms with, and accepting the fleeting feeling of almost...blending, and the equally strange feeling of being wholly separate once more. Finally, Thorin spoke, breaking the spell and allowing Bilbo to pull back to a more comfortable distance. "Blindsided by the bond happening without conscious intervention, yes," he said seriously, and Bilbo was entirely sure his voice didn't normally sound that husky, "but not by my feelings for you." With one last lingering look, Thorin left him to his churning thoughts.
But whatever courage the hobbit normally possessed seemed to be in abeyance, because it took a long while before he dared to pull himself from his chair once Thorin left.

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THE DUSTY COUNCIL room they had used before, when they helped Thorin to plan out his courtship, hadn't changed been disturbed in the intervening weeks. The few cleaning staff they had pressed into service still hadn't found it, as evinced by the fresh layer of dust, and that suited Nori's purposes perfectly. "All right then, settle down," Nori didn't bother to raise his voice, lazily trusting Dwalin's surly glare to do the work for him. It didn't take long. With a jerk of his head, he motioned to Glóin and Óin to light the lanterns, and the rest found a seat. Fili looked tired; even his moustache was drooping, and though Kili looked slightly better, he wasn't as bright as he normally was. Of course, it was entirely possible the changes were due to the younger prince finally growing up under the pressure of running a kingdom—even one as small as Erebor currently was.

"What's going on?" Bofur asked around an obscenely large yawn. "Why are we not bringing whatever this is to the king?"

There was a general murmur of assent around the table from tired and irritable dwarrows held back from their beds. Nori looked them over, being sure to wait until each one had caught his eye. "Because," he said at last, "Thorin has enough irons on his anvil at the moment. He's got everything he can handle right now, and it's up to us to assist."

"And what are we assisting with?" Dori asked sourly.

"That remains to be seen," the thief replied evasively, enjoying the opportunity to annoy his fussy older brother.

"And just what in the buggering hell is that supposed to mean?" Dwalin's store of patience, never a very highly-stocked commodity, was apparently now used up.

Nori prided himself on his ability to play a room. He could build an atmosphere, and destroy it, often making a killing in the process. He was a bit of a showman at heart, and he loved playing to a crowd. He strode to the head of the table, aware that every eye in the room was following him as he paced slowly, hands clasped behind his back, drawing out the moment. "I think," he said finally, stopping just behind Kili and watching with amusement as the young badger tried to twist around and keep him in his sight, "I think that someone in our fair halls is up to some mischief."

His tone, which had been soft, forcing the others to listen close, suddenly hardened. "And I intend to find out who."

For the space of two breaths, the silence was so complete, they could have heard a pin drop, and each of the company looked around at the others in consternation. By the third breath arguments broke out as everyone tried to talk at once; each clamouring at the horrible fate that would befall anyone who would dare cause trouble now that they had finally re-taken their home.

"All right, you lot, settle down," Dwalin called the meeting of the company back to some semblance of order, proving once again, Nori felt, that despite evidence, the single-minded guardsman was useful for something. "You," he scowled, pointing at Nori, "Sit yer arse down and explain."
Not really wanting to push his luck, Nori snagged a chair and settled back. "There have been rumbles in Laketown," he began. "Talk of curses and betrayal. The Men there are starting to talk of leaving—of taking their families and setting off for more forgiving lands."

"Betrayal? Who's betrayal would that be?" Glóin demanded, looking ready for an argument.

"Ours," Nori told him, with an easy shrug. "Someone's been whispering in their ears: Talk about the line of Durin, and how they already fell twice now, to greed and madness. How there's more dwarves pouring in everyday, and soon they'll outnumber the men of Esgaroth, and will be able take whatever else they please."

Chaos erupted, every dwarf shouting their indignation over anyone believing such tales. Finally, it was Fili's voice that stood out above the rest, "Who in their right mind would believe such twaddle? What would dwarves want with their lands?"

"I understand, Highness, but you try telling them that. It don't make no sense to those that live and labour above ground as to why we'd want to live under it, never seeing the sun. They just can't seem to wrap their heads around it." Nori shook his head.

Dori eyed him, assessing, folding his arms over his broad girth. "What else?"

"Ah, Brother, glad you asked," Nori smirked. "It seems, that the ones that have been whispering these sweet nothings to our dear friends in Esgaroth," and he looked around, not doubting it, but wanting to make sure he had everyone's undivided attention before continuing, "were dwarves."

This time, it was absolute pandemonium. Nori leaned back in his chair, arms folded, as he watched the show with a satisfied twist to his lips. Apparently, I still have the touch, he thought, sardonically.

Reluctant as he was, though, he still had to break this up. He had one more piece of information to share, and frankly, he'd like to see his bed sometime before the sun rose. "There's more," he said loudly, immediately getting their attention once more. "I think someone here in the Mountain is up to some kind of shady business."

"What do you mean? More than just stirring up trouble with the Men?" Bombur groaned, pausing with his fork midway to snagging the last sausage of his distracted brother's plate. Bofur, following Nori's gaze, looked down, and swatted Bombur's hand away. "Leave off, Bom. You've had enough," he admonished absently.

"Little things," Nori acknowledged, ignoring the brothers' byplay. "And I wasn't really sure, not until I heard a couple of shifty fellows talking in the corridors last night."

"Friends of yours?" Dwalin asked, one heavy brow raised cynically as he regarded him.

"You know, I'm a changed man—work for the government and everything. You might try being a little more understanding."

"Aye, I'm understanding, all right. I understand that you're basically a legitimate thief now." The grizzled old coot gave what he probably thought of as a grin, Nori reflected sourly.

"No, they were not associates of mine, either past or present," he groused petulantly.

"And what were these not-friends-of-yours talking about?"
"I could only hear them for a moment, so I didn't get too much information, but it seems that they’ve been looking for something—and they definitely didn't want to be overheard talking."

Bofur looked dubiously at him. "That's no' a lot to go on."

"I know. Call it instinct, but keep your eyes and ears open for anything out of the ordinary, no matter how small. I got a feeling in me gut these two were up to something that is going to end up offending the sensibilities of Mister Dwalin here."

Dwalin grunted. "If you're involved, I can almost guarantee it will."

Nori tried really hard to avoid his brother's smirking gaze.

"YOU APPEAR TIRED this morning, your Highness," Iór remarked, urbanely, glancing at the pouches under Fili's eyes and his sallow complexion from the corner of his eye.

They were wandering the Market district again today; Fili was showing him the restoration work on what had been, and would be again, the commercial centre of their kingdom. A few brave venders were set up now that the majority of the rubble was cleared, but most of the workshops and stalls were still depressingly abandoned.

Frankly, Fili hated being here—it reminded him too much of the monumental task ahead, and how inadequate he felt in the face of it. He was grateful to his brother, though, for spending so much time here, listening to the people, and passing along all he learned.

Today, however, Kili was off working with Dwalin in the yards, so Fili was taking on exploring the possibilities of trade with Iór on his own. The Blacklock dwarf was polished in a way that none of the company were, save his Uncle and Balin, and occasionally perhaps he and Kili. He seemed stiff at times, and his manners were decidedly odd compared to the easy, casual relations he had enjoyed both on the road and back in Ered Luin. He hoped that the friendliness of the dwarves of the Lonely Mountain would encourage the foreign lord to relax a bit. Kili had told him not to hold his breath.

"I'm afraid I'm still unused to all the new demands on my time, my Lord, and my sleep is suffering for it," Fili said smoothly, definitely not wishing to think about the late night meeting last night, or its implications. He had been wracking his brain ever since, trying desperately to recall some hint, some small clue that all was not as it should be in Erebor, but had come up frustratingly blank. Sleep had definitely not happened, not with this new worry to gnaw at him.

"Perhaps your uncle may have considered training you before this," Iór murmured sympathetically.

Fili felt his hackles rising defensively. "My uncle held halls within Ered Luin, before we reclaimed the mountain a few months ago, my Lord. And I assure you, he took my training there very seriously."

"Of course, your Highness. I did not mean to offend," Iór hastened to assure him. "I merely meant that this is a lot for a young prince to step into, and I'm sure you would have enjoyed a more extended transition period, if your uncle had been...foresighted enough to delay his confinement."

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Dwalin grunted. "If you're involved, I can almost guarantee it will."

Nori tried really hard to avoid his brother's smirking gaze.
Fili grit his teeth, but had absolutely no intention of exposing his uncle's personal business and the unprecedented circumstances that had led up to there being no real planning at all. Let the pampered lord think what he will. "Obviously, my uncle has faith in my abilities," he said firmly, and steered the conversation to less personal waters. "As you can see, we have made considerable progress in the main areas. Despite having but three hundred dwarves under our roofs, we have accomplished much."

"Yes, it is truly remarkable. I am beginning to despair we will ever find something we may offer the industrious Longbeards that will help them in their work." The trade minister politely allowed the subject change. "What of your economic efforts? How soon before you are able to begin working the mines again?"

Fili sighed, tiredly. "Before we have full operations available? A long while, yet, I'm afraid." He allowed the other dwarf to lead where he would, not really caring for their direction as they talked. "A number of the lower levels are still flooded. We've got teams trying to dam the breaches, but until we can get the water pumped out, the progress is slow. Unfortunately, our existing pumps are at capacity and the water is flowing in faster than they can keep up."

"And are there more being made?"

"Pumps are hardly our first priority, my Lord. Without access to those mines, iron resources are limited, and there are more pressing needs for our first winter in Erebor than reclaiming those mines. Of course, getting access to that iron will be our top priority after our immediate needs are seen to. In the meantime, we've had to largely abandon the lowest portions of our mansion, with but few exceptions."

The swarthy-skinned dwarrow seemed to ponder this, though it was truly hard to gain any insight into his thoughts as he had an even better poker face than Nori. He absently skirted three dwarflings, busy with what looked to be some sort of game involving colourful glass balls, paying little attention as he thought. Fili was more than happy to let him think, taking the appealing opportunity to simply not think, and let his aching head rest while watching the younglings scrabble around happily in the dirt. He almost groaned aloud when Iór spoke again, shattering his moment of peace.

"I believe, your Highness, that we may have something worth talking about after all. One of the families close to the throne, the family Archimedes, may have a solution to your problem. They have developed an adaptation for a three-chambered screw pump that is quite remarkable, and incredibly efficient to build. It is, of course, their own Family Design, but I believe we can make an arrangement with them."

Fili startled, drawn out of his sleepy daze. "Your king is prepared to do that?" The offer of a Family Design was almost unthinkably good fortune. A truly unique, important invention or design created by a Master Crafter was designated a Family Design, and remained under the exclusive control of their line upon their death—in fact, inheritance rights of such designs took up an uncountable portion of the Rights and Duties all young dwarflings had to memorize as part of their craft learnings. It was not something that could even be commanded by their king, except under very specific circumstances. To obtain such a thing for a neighbouring dwarven kingdom would likely involve lavish negotiations, indeed. Such help was sure to cost the Longbeards dearly—though for all his strange manners, Iór struck Fili as being fair.

"I will have specifications sent with your ravens this evening, and then we may discuss appropriate...recompense. Until then, let us instead discuss other things." Their wanderings had taken them past a smithing-shop, where beautifully lethal weapons were displayed on purest velvet. The black-haired dwarf was bent over, carefully examining the patterning on a two-handed hilt and pommel stone, while Fili gazed around, wishing for the skill to produce even one of these.
"You know, my grandfather was a renowned weapons smith," Iór said casually, picking up one of the daggers to better appreciate its edge. "He was in possession of a sword design, which had been gifted to his grandfather by his One during their courting; a Firebeard dam of Nolgrod descent." He paused, allowing his young audience to fully appreciate the value of such a gift.

And Fili did. Nolgrod had been in the Blue Mountains since the Age of Trees, long before the War of Wrath that had inevitably destroyed them, and from this Firebeard kingdom had come weapon designs and works that had rivalled even the ancient Elvish kingdom of Gondolin. The greatest work to come hence, the sword Narsil, created by the master smith Telchar, had met its glorious end driving back the darkest enemy to ever walk the earth. No weapon could have a greater legacy, and Fili could only dream of creating something of even a fraction of that worth. Of course, most of Nolgrod's craft had been lost with their destruction, surviving only in this manner; designs that fled with refugees who had sought homes within other kingdoms.

"A tremendous gift, indeed," he acknowledged, hoarsely.

"Many have wondered at the good fortune of the Longbeards in being the only of our brethren to have come across the metal of Beaten Jewel-Light, as weightless and flexible as spider's silk, yet able to resist all blows; the great treasure promised by Mahal," Iór remarked casually, setting the dagger down and lifting a gleaming silver scabbard instead.

"You mean mithril, don't you?" Fili asked, startled. "But that's not true, the metal promised us by Mahal is something we must learn to craft, not a mineral to be found."

"And can you truly say that this metal is not crafted? Have you ever seen it mined?"

"Of course not!" Fili scoffed, feeling highly uncomfortable. "Khazad-dûm has been abandoned for centuries. No one living has seen it mined."

Iór turned the scabbard in his hand, so that he was looking down the length of it. "Curious, isn't it? That the seat of Khazad-dûm, the mansion of Durin the Deathless—he who lingered longest at Gundabad—is the only place in all of Arda that this perfect metal has been found."

"I don't understand," Fili said; not liking for one minute where this conversation was headed, and completely unsure of how to head it off.

"Only that I would dearly love to see, or perhaps even possess a piece of this mythic metal, this mithril, as, it seems likely it is the closest I shall ever be to Mahal's Legacy during my lifetime," Iór replied, his accented voice very soft, almost wistful. "Such a thing would be worth a great and noble trade, don't you think?"

Fili felt his heart lurch in his chest. A noble trade—a design out of Nolgrod could indeed be worth a trade in mithril, and he had complete command of their treasury during his uncle's confinement. His heart ached longingly for such a design—to even gaze upon it once. Something like this would be a craft worthy of a future king—of a Durin. He thought of his uncle’s face, if he were to present such a weapon to him, a soul-deep shudder shook him to his boots with fierce longing. Could he...? But the thought was only fleeting, and dismissed just as quickly. He tore his eyes away from Iór, but knew he could never banish the image of that perfect weapon burned into his granite soul.

"The house of Durin thanks the generosity of our kith," he heard himself say. His voice was so remote, as if coming from a great distance; he had to suppress the urge to look around for another speaker. His heart fractured quietly in his chest, but years of training straightened his spine without
any conscious thought, and pushed his doubts down deep. Later he would allow Kili to console him, but now he needed to show his commitment their people.

Like a king should, not a weapon-smith who's soul was crying.

Miserable, Fili didn't notice Iór watching with far more than polite interest.

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THORIN PRESENTED HIM WITH his first gem not long after.

It had been two weeks since their discussion, and slowly, Bilbo had learned to put away his anger and accept the fact that his was more a quarantine than prison. Of course, it also helped to know that he actually had ultimate control as to when this silliness ended. Thorin continued to leave each day, and spend a few hours trying to help Fili keep the kingdom running, but Bilbo could see the strain in the way he returned with shaking hands, damp brow, and pale, clammy skin. He desperately wanted to talk the stubborn dwarf into staying put—but when he had brought it up, Thorin had become so agitated with the idea that Bilbo would step out of their agreement and don his ring, he'd had to quickly abandon it.

Still, during the course of their evening meal he would improve, and so Bilbo held his tongue, though he continued to worry, and wonder.

Until this evening. Thorin had been fidgety the whole time he had been with Bilbo, hands and feet unable to keep still as he took up one task, only to discard it moments later for another. The hearth had been cleaned and a new fire laid, twice. Several small projects had been pulled from drawers, or even from the recesses of his state robes, fiddled with absentmindedly, only to be lain aside when Thorin seemed unable to keep focus on them. When the dwarf presented him with a cup of straw coloured, barely-steeped tea, Bilbo decided the time to let Thorin work things out on his own was up. Some things were sacrosanct, after all. Setting aside his manuscript, and pushing the unappealing tea aside with some relief—it had been a sweet, though unexpected, gesture, if badly executed—Bilbo watched Thorin for several moments before deciding on a direct approach.

"Thorin!" he called, and sure enough, the dwarf had been so focused on whatever was going on in that brain of his that Bilbo’s interruption caused him to drop the poker with a loud clang! and a startled oath. Slowly, he turned wide eyes on Bilbo, as though he had been caught doing something he ought not be. With great difficulty, Bilbo managed to suppress his urge to snort.

"Whatever is it that's got you so bothered?" he asked.

Thorin opened his mouth, making several attempts to speak, only to end up closing it again, words left unsaid. Bilbo crossed his arms over his stomach, firmly indicating he would be happy to wait Thorin out, and the dwarf's broad shoulders slumped. Shuffling his boots, uncertainly shifting his weight, Thorin began by speaking to his toes. "Would you say that by allowing our confinement to continue, you have granted me the right to court you?" he asked quietly.

Bilbo cocked his head curiously, having not really expected a question whose answer he thought was already understood, but apparently this was another example of speaking in Hobbit to ears only capable of listening in Dwarvish. "Yes, I think that's a fair assumption," he said gravely, for obviously actually hearing the answer was important to the dwarf, and Bilbo had honestly never seen him so uncertain before, except perhaps during the initial weeks after he had beaten his madness, seeking forgiveness from all he felt he had failed so totally. Despite their reassurances
that they forgave him for falling under the thrall of Dragon's Gold and the Arkenstone itself, Bilbo knew he was truly able to trust his friend was back for good once he saw Thorin cast the stone back into the depths from whence it had come.

His reassurance seemed to help Thorin relax, though not fully, and the look on his face was actually shy as he hesitantly drew a deep green silken pouch from his inner tunic. "It is tradition among my people to craft a gift for one whom you hope to prove worthy of courting," he said, turning the pouch over in his hands, as if testing it for virtue. Closing his eyes, he seemed to find his centre, and let out a slow breath. "My heart is in your keeping, Ázyungel," he said very formally, and gently tipped the contents of the pouch into Bilbo's open hand.

It was the most exquisitely wrought gem Bilbo had ever seen.

It was a deep golden-brown and highly polished, though that was not the part that captivated the hobbit so. It was the size of a hen's egg, heavy in his hand and patiently and meticulously carved into the shape of a warbling thrush. So lifelike was it; caught in the exact moment its throat swelled in song, that Bilbo thought it almost felt alive to his touch. His hand fairly burned where the gem lay. His heart felt both swollen and hollow all at once, and his stomach twisted and fluttered in a contrary contradiction of pleased and frightened. "What is it?" Bilbo breathed, overwhelmed.

"Yellow diamond – possibly the largest and clearest ever found in my halls." Thorin watched his examination hesitantly. "It is more typical to present jewellery, or even some symbol of craft, but I felt...I hoped that I was right that this was more to your liking. It...it reminded me of your comfortable home, of your verdant and nature-loving homeland."

The gift left him highly flustered, and Thorin's thoughtful words only made it worse. The burning warmth of the beautiful bird in his palm was made worse for the hollow vacuum in his gut and the guilty twisting of his heart. Very gently, he pressed it back into Thorin's hands.

"Really, Thorin, I can't," he stuttered, even as he longed to feel the weight of that beautiful piece in his palm again, to accept the warm feeling that washed over him when he held it. Resolutely, he focused instead on the voice that cried 'Too soon!' and kept his hands firmly at his sides. To touch it once more, he knew, would be to keep it, because he didn't think he'd have the strength of will to be able to give it back a second time.

Thorin frowned deeply, staring at the bird held gently between his fingers as if it had personally offended him, but made no move to tempt Bilbo with it a second time, for which the hobbit was grateful.

The king was understandably subdued over their shared meal, and despite himself, Bilbo felt guilty and wanted to distract him from his mood. But really, such a gift was improper at this stage of things! He had no idea what the soppy dwarf had been thinking.

"You haven't really been taking the traditions of my people into account through all this, have you?" he said, offhand, startling himself as well as his audience.

Thorin looked up from his plate, where he had been pushing around the remains of a rabbit for the better part of a quarter hour. "I know. I have been concerned by this, so I have had Ori researching it, but there is not a wealth of information regarding the rites and rituals of your people."

"Since you actually have a hobbit here, you could just ask him, you know," Bilbo huffed, before pulling the marvelous looking tart closer to himself, since Thorin did not appear in a mood to enjoy it.
Thorin snorted, and glanced down at him ruefully. "Up until very recently, you haven't exactly been willing to discuss the finer points of hobbit courtship with me, have you?"

Despite himself, Bilbo couldn't quite keep his lip from twitching at the ridiculousness of it all, and before long he was laughing, probably more than the situation warranted, but it felt good to laugh, and he indulged it until he felt some of his irritation slip away. "Yes, well, you have me there."

The dwarf king leaned back, relaxing into his seat so that he was almost lounging, and regarded Bilbo with a faint smile touching the corners of his lips. It was probably the most relaxed Bilbo had seen him in recent weeks, and he felt a warm ember in his heart at the sight. "So, what would we be doing if we were in your homeland?"

Feeling unaccountably on the spot, Bilbo ducked his head to pluck uselessly at the napkin in his lap. "Well, we're a simple lot, Thorin," he said, and then his tone turned deliberately teasing. "We show our interest in, well, in more gentle ways," Bilbo glanced around the stone cavern pointedly. Thorin averted his gaze, but couldn't fully hide the tips of his curiously round, blushing ears as his tanned skin flushed pink.

Bilbo took a moment, enjoying the dwarf's discomfort, before taking pity on him by resuming, "We, well," and when he got right down to it, to talking about courting, about courting with Thorin, he had to resist the urge to fidget and stammer like a lad just out of his 'tweens. Thorin's intense gaze bore into him again, with the air of someone not willing to miss a single detail. Bilbo blinked, breaking the connection, and looked at his lap, instead. "We show our interest in, well, in more gentle ways," Bilbo glanced around the stone cavern pointedly. Thorin averted his gaze, but couldn't fully hide the tips of his curiously round, blushing ears as his tanned skin flushed pink.

"I think," Thorin said carefully, and his voice was curiously strained after a moment pondering this. "I think," he tried again, "that we are well past this showing-of-interest stage. What would your people do when actually courting? Is there some ritual or, or ceremony?"

Bilbo looked askance at him, considering. "Hobbits have very few rites," he protested with a huff. "We're not dwarves."

"As I have been made aware," Thorin rejoined dryly. "But surly your people have...customs? What about that habit of giving...what did you call them? Mathoms?"

"Well, yes, but that's just good manners," Bilbo blinked, nonplused. "Besides, that's not a courting thing; we give gifts to all our friends and relations."

"And you do this as a show of wealth? Of your ability to provide?"

"No, we do it because it's polite," Bilbo huffed. All right, so maybe there was a little bit of showing off—a gentle hobbit was expected to give better gifts than a crofter, after all, but still.

Thorin was clearly bewildered by this answer, and studied Bilbo's face as if looking for some clue. Bilbo looked back nervously, not really sure what he wanted Thorin to see in his expression.

Finally, he sighed, and sat back in his chair. "Bilbo," he said, and Thorin's voice was curiously gentle when he said his name. "Please. What would we be doing if we were in the Shire?"

This was ridiculous, Bilbo thought. "Fine. But don't complain to me when you don't like it."
Thorin did a marvelous job of trying to hide his alarm, his eyes barely twitching as he smoothed out his expression. "Oh?"

Bilbo looked at him steadily, tapping his foot lightly against the leg of his chair. "Tea," he said, flatly, staring the dwarf king down and daring him to make the disparaging remark he knew was on the tip of his tongue.

Thorin, however, gave no indication of the disdain Bilbo expected. His eyes crinkled a little in confusion, and asked slowly, "Tea?"

Bilbo crossed his arms defensively, and tried to still his foot-tapping. "Yes, well, that's only for showing intent on serious courting, not for a summer party fling, or market romance, you understand."

"Of course," Thorin agreed, obviously not entirely sure what the hobbit was talking about.

Bilbo let out a long breath and dropped his arms. "It's a Tea party," he explained with resignation. "A ceremony, if you like," he added, and Thorin looked slightly reassured by this concession to familiarity. "You, as the one initiating the courting, would come by my smial for afternoon tea—the meal between luncheon and dinner, and—"

"Meal between lunch and supper?" Thorin asked, bewildered once more.

"No, no, supper comes after dinner." Bilbo waved it away before continuing. "Not important. The one doing the courting would bring tea with them. Something they had blended themselves, with their sweetheart in mind, preferably including at least one thing they had grown and dried themselves, especially for the courting gift, something that represents the giftee."

"Something that represents...?"

"All plants have meanings, Thorin. In the Shire, a lot of thought goes into gifted flowers and crowns, because it should be something personal. Even more thought goes into tea—this kind of tea, anyway. They would bring their mother's heirloom tea pot, and bake a family recipe."

"And it would be served at this meal after lunch." Thorin repeated uncertainly, and Bilbo was amused to see the king looking so out of his depth.

"Yes, well, elevensies and afternoon tea are for accepting guests, but elevensies are for friends and neighbours and family, while afternoon tea is more...well, more for romance." He could feel himself blushing, but decided he didn't care enough to look away. "Two family members of the giftee would also be in attendance, to help judge the effort, and consider the suitability of the match."

"Tea," Thorin repeated dubiously, as if trying to test the word on his tongue and reveal some hidden meaning.

Bilbo wasn't entirely sure he didn't look a little panicked.

Perhaps Thorin would not have noticed had they not been discussing his health and Óin's visit just recently. Bilbo certainly hadn't expected him to notice such a mundane thing, but when Thorin stood to retrieve their dishes, it was obvious that he did notice.
"You've lost weight." he blurted, sounding extremely disgruntled. His brows were drawn as he looked from the empty plate on the tray to his hobbit, and then Bilbo's waistline, and the definite loose fit around the middle. Bilbo had been thrilled when, finally released from healers' care and able to wander into Bombur's kitchens whenever he pleased, he had actually been able to loosen his belt; just a notch, mind you, and still one of the ones he had been forced to carve himself as he'd lost his comfortable padding on the journey west; but a sign that more comfortable times were on the way. Of course, that had been before all this foolishness. "Are you ill?" Thorin pressed; and for a moment, Bilbo would have sworn the look that crossed his face was one of absolute panic, though it was gone almost as soon as it appeared.

Bilbo shrugged, crossing his arms over his waist a bit self-consciously. So he'd lost a pound or three. Of all the daft things to notice, now. "I've quite gotten used to you dwarves' determination to get by on just three meals a day," he huffed. "I imagine my body wouldn't know what to do if presented with proper meals again."

If possible, Thorin's gaze sharpened even further at that tidbit of information. "Proper meals? You are not finding our food palatable?"

Bilbo gave an exasperated noise. Really, what was wrong with these dwarves? "The food is fine. I am rather accustomed to more meals in a day, thank you. Of course losing a bit of padding is to be expected when one eats less, not to mention treks all over Shire-only-knows-where."

There was silence for a beat. Two. Then— "You're starving?"

For a moment, the look of utter horror on Thorin's face was almost comedic. Until, that was, Bilbo took in the way the colour had drained from his skin, leaving it grey as old parchment. The way his knuckles had whitened and were nearly bloodless with the force of his grip on the tray, and the look of self-loathing that was beginning to push the horror from Thorin's stormy eyes. The honesty and depth of Thorin's reaction was plain to see, and Bilbo was reminded that this dwarf was, above all else, his friend, one who cared for him deeply. So, despite this rather bizarre situation, Bilbo found he was finally forced to face and accept Thorin's deep sincerity in his affections, firmly closing the door on his last bits of lingering doubt, leaving him feeling just a little bit childish.

"Not starving, Thorin," he said in a much gentler tone, wiggling his toes against the cool stone floor. "Hobbits are made of sterner stuff than you seem to think. We can tighten our belts in times of scarcity as well, or better, than the next being when called for."

Thorin stared for a long moment, until Bilbo finally felt compelled to meet his eyes. "You will not be missing any more meals, Master Burglar." His voice was soft and low, but there was an odd note in it that Bilbo couldn't quite shake from his mind, even long after he had sought his bed that night.

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else what to give Fili a cup of tea and a giant hug? *lol*

I was so excited to share this chapter - its sort of a small reward for staying with me this long :) It was just so much fun to write Bilbo and Thorin on a more relaxed footing.
Thank you to everyone who is reading - you guys are amazing <3
To Heal My Heart and Drown My Woe

Chapter Summary

~In which Dori and Ori attempt to teach Thorin how to make tea, and Kíli insists he's always the smart one ~

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to my beta's Krystal_lazuli and hazel-3017 - you ladies are awesome :)

And so much love given to Nepthysmoon, for being absolutely indispensable in every way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"BE REASONABLE, LORD IÓR—you can hardly expect a tenth share of all resources mined from those sectors!" Lord Glólin, the Merchant Master's outraged voice boomed hollowly in the closed chamber.

"I really don't see why not," Iór responded mildly. "And it's only for a year. You would not be able to reach those shafts for at least that long without our pumps, so anything you earn during that time is directly due to our assistance."

"Absolutely out of the question!"

"If you have found another means of reaching those areas, then I welcome you to use them. But I don't think you have."

Lord Glólin sat back into his seat, glowering at the southern dwarf from beneath his heavy brows. Lady Bylgja, the Mining Mistress, watched them spar with calm detachment.
To say that negotiations had hit a standstill would be understating the situation, Kíli felt. Frankly, he was about ready to suggest the Blacklocks could have all the profits from the drowned sectors, if it only meant he wouldn't have to listen to them bicker anymore. It wasn't as if the Treasury didn't contain more wealth than any Longbeard had seen in a century, so what matter a few loads of iron? From the tense way his brother was sitting, Kíli was sure the same thought was on his mind, as well.

Too bad nobody listens to us.

To be fair, Fíli tried. He was calm and rational. He listened to everyone, and carefully weighed the value of what was said; but the older lords and lady in the room didn't seem amenable to taking commands from an untried and unfretted king, and so Fíli was ignored as often as not.

They weren't in the Throne Room this morning, but in one of the smaller Council Chambers. A large table of polished malachite had room for twenty, which left plenty of room, as today there were only the ten of them. As this was one of the rooms on the outside ring of the mountain, diffuse golden sunlight filtered in through narrow windows, causing the colours in the mosaic floor to shine where tiny veins of quartz sparkled, and the polished stone table to glow iridescently. Kíli was still unused to being surrounded by so much neglected opulence; his uncle's hall-in-exile had been utilitarian at best, without the benefit of generations of crafts masters’ work, and life before _Ered Luin_ consisted of traveling from settlement to settlement, sometimes getting chased out, sometimes slipping away in the middle of the night, but never staying anywhere long enough to really notice anything about it. Here, he felt he could just get lost in _looking_ at things, each room full of unexpected touches from the past. His wandering through the markets and workshops only fueled his curiosity, with tales of before-times being swapped by oldsters; tales Fíli and Kíli had been hearing their whole lives suddenly coming to vibrant life amidst the bones of their ancient home. Kíli couldn't wait until Erebor was that vibrant place once more.

Which was never going to happen if they couldn't manage to find a way to get the various factions working together.

It just all made him so tired. They had spent so long without a home, travelling, never really welcome anywhere for long—oh, their coin was good, but they were forced to pay twice the going rate for anything. Barter had been much kinder, but did make hard currency difficult to come by for times of need. He had grown up surrounded by oldsters whose shoulders were bowed under the burden of being Master Craftsmen, forced to hawk their wares at traveling markets for a fraction of their worth, their dignity lost with the need to feed a family they rarely got to see. These same dwarrows were coming back to this new future and were immediately tarnishing every bright possibility with their narrow vision fed by decades of frustrations and slights. Kíli could only imagine what Bilbo would make of them. Grab Glólin by the ear, as like as not, and tell him to stop behaving like a fauntling with a sore tooth, and give Býlégia and Æsbergur a thorough dressing-down. Honestly, it would do some of the most staid segments some good to be shook up like that.

Frankly, Kíli couldn't wait.

Fíli, not occupied with Kíli’s speculations, was nodding stiffly to Iór, dismissing him.

"Ha! Good, send him away so he may rethink his completely ridiculous position," Glólin approved, glancing at Lord Jústi with pompous satisfaction. Kíli had to resist the urge to bury his face in his hands. The last Lord in their Council, Æsbergur, the ever-practical head of the Engineers Guild, seemed to be ignoring the proceedings, instead working quickly, making notations on a thin slate board. Kíli thought, that out of all of them, maybe he was accomplishing more with his time right now.
"I had thought, my Lord, that you might explain to me our position," Fíli said, firmly. "A tenth share does not seem unreasonable for a Family Design, without which, we will not reach those shafts for years to come. We simply don't have the resources to devote to it."

Lady Bylgja stiffened her already perfect posture to look down her round nose at Fíli with barely concealed condescension. "The Mining Guild is not willing to let such unspecified payments go into a contract. It's dangerous, and sets a precedent of weakness," she announced. "Surely our engineers can solve this problem, given time."

"I'm sure they can, Lady Miner, but how long before we have access to the ore we need?" Fíli tried.

"I hardly think it is as dire as that," she sniffed.

"Negotiations are an art, Your Highness," Glólin said. "Have no worry; our considerable experience has this completely under our control."

"It seems to me, my Lord, that Iór is correct," Fíli pointed out. "Leaving that mineral in the ground does no one any good—we need the iron contained there to continue our rebuilding; to repair the great forges. What is keeping a tenth payment, when we will have nothing?"

Lord Glólin was fat. Really, there was no other way to describe him. While Bombur carried his considerable weight in distinguished proportions, Glólin sagged. And everything about him was large, from his girth to his oration. Beside him, the rail-thin and angular Lord Jústi seemed to disappear into the background. Until he spoke, that was. His quiet voice was commanding in a way that all the bombast of the other lord could never imitate.

"Those shafts are exceedingly rich, Your Highness," Jústi said. "The Blacklocks would stand to walk away with a very generous payment for their aid. We can afford to wait a little; Iór, on the other hand, cannot—he knows his help is becoming less valuable the longer he sits, and his price will come down. Let us look after Lord Iór; we will ensure Erebor prospers from this."

Apparently, he was no less dismissive, though. Go away, let your betters handle this. At least he was a bit nicer about it, Kíli tried to console himself. He could see his brother tense where he sat in front of him, obviously just as frustrated. Surreptitiously, he pressed a hand into his shoulder blade, a warm reminder that they were in this together. Briefly, Fíli shifted slightly, pressing back into the contact before straightening his shoulders once more.

"Something else for you to consider, Your Highness," Balin spoke into the silence, smoothly diverting the meeting before Fíli was forced to respond. The consigliere nodded for his brother, who had been silent witness to their meeting so far, to come forward and speak.

The Captain of the Guard gave a single fierce stare at the assembled Council Lords before dismissing them utterly and heaving himself to his feet. "After the Five Army Battle, Gundabad is believed to be almost emptied," he began, giving his report directly to Fíli with a pointed deference he never bothered to show in private. "For almost four months, there hasn't been any sign of orc or warg activity on the mountain."

"Why do I get the feeling you're going to tell me that's changed?"

"Because you know I don't waste my time. Scouts have been spotted, Your Highness, and fresh warg tracks found."

"Is any of this near our boarders?" Kíli asked.
"Now, you'd think so, wouldn't you?" Dwalin gave Kíli an approving look before turning serious once more. "No, it's all been beyond the Woodland Realm; they've not yet crossed the Anduin."

"We have scouts out that far?" Fíli asked, startled.

Dwalin shifted uncomfortably, and looked more than slightly pained. "No, we don't. The information came to us from the elves, Highness."

There was absolute silent as they all stared at the fidgeting warrior.

"King Thranduil sent us this information?" Fíli asked, finally. "Tall, weedy fellow? Has an unnatural predilection for nearly-albino elk?"

"Actually, it was, ah, sent along for our Burglar."

Kíli looked at the gobsmacked expressions on everyone's faces and had to stifle a laugh. A burden, indeed.

"We should increase our patrols; we don't want to be caught unawares," Fíli said, ignoring his hinge-jawed council.

Dwalin shook his head. "I wouldn't bother yet, Your Highness. We can hold this mountain against a siege almost indefinitely, and aid would come to us from Dain and Dís in Ered Luin."

Fíli looked at his uncle's best friend in confusion. "We can withstand a siege when we have enough food stores. It seems to me, we need to protect our supply lines."

Dwalin was shaking his head almost before Fíli had finished speaking. "Ideally yes, but those supply lines are way to the south, and traveling with armed caravans from the Blue Mountains." He sighed. "Frankly, Your Highness, I just don't have the dwarfs necessary to keep up with a widened patrol area. Most of our people are still on the road, somewhere between the Shire and Mirkwood."

Fíli nodded slowly. "We'll do the best we can, then. Send ravens to all of those caravans—let's make sure they're prepared for possible trouble," he ordered. Dwalin nodded once and turned to leave. "Dwalin?" Fíli called after him. "Be sure to keep an ear for anything else King Thranduil wishes our Burglar to know."

The sour look on the warrior's face almost set Kíli to laughing again.

They were filing out of council when Lord Jústi approached him. "A word, your Highness?" he murmured, lips hardly moving and obviously trying to draw as little attention to their conversation as possible. It was odd behaviour for Jústi, a staid dwarf who had been part of his uncle's ministry for as long as Kíli could remember—in fact, as a dwarffling, he had often thought that the mountain and its government had simply grown up around the angular dwarf, instead of the other way around. To say he was intrigued was an understatement. He caught Fíli's eyes and gave a tiny jerk of his head to indicate that he should go on without him. His brother looked askance at him, but nodded surreptitiously before smoothly distracting Lord Glólin as they left the chamber. In moments, Kíli and Jústi were left alone.

"You wished to speak to me, my Lord?"
"YOU'RE QUIET, BROTHER," Kíli prodded once they had managed to retire to the dining hall—not usually the place for a private conversation, he supposed, but at nearly three hours into night watch, Bombur was the only one still putting around—and he was keeping strictly to the adjoining kitchens, no doubt sensing the boys dearly wanted a bit of peace. The eldest brother Ur may be a dwarf of few words, but Kíli had no doubt the relaxed cook would chase anyone off who saw fit to intrude into his domain to bother the princes. They probably had a better chance of being left alone under their cook's watchful eye than even locked in their private chambers, frankly.

Fíli looked over at him, opened his mouth, in protest, no doubt, and saw the look on Kíli's face; the one that told him there was no way little brother was going to let him get away with it. He deflated, letting out his breath in a quiet stream, and looked down, poking at the slurry he'd made of his uneaten dinner.

Kíli let him have his space, knowing his quiet brother would share his thoughts once he had a chance to arrange things in his own head. In the mean time, he dug into the roast boar he'd snagged with gusto. He'd missed this on the trail—he would likely be having nightmares of cram for years to come. Truthfully, it could have been worse, if not for Bilbo and all the ways the hobbit and Bombur had put their heads together and tried to make it palatable—but still. There was only so much dried sawdust one should be expected to eat in a lifetime, and Kíli knew he'd had more than his share.

Fíli's sigh interrupted his enjoyment of his crackly boar, and Kíli put his fork down, silently encouraging his brother to speak. The half-hearted smile Fíli gave him was tired, but genuine. "I just...I try, nadadith, but...I have not really proven myself deserving of the faith Uncle has put in me."

Kíli looked at his brother, eyes closed and head hanging low enough his moustache was almost touching his plate. He was the very picture of dejection, so Kíli did the only thing he could think of; he punched him, hard, right in the shoulder.

"Oww! Kíli—Lay off!" And the effort of trying to glare instead of wincing at the bruise that was surely already forming, had Fíli looking more than a little cross-eyed. "I said I was failing, and you show your support through injury?"

Glaring right back, Kíli debated whether he should wallop him again. "No, nadad," he said, deciding against it, but resolving to keep that option in reserve. "I show my support and family pride by stopping you from speaking any more of that crap."

"Were you in a different meeting, by chance? Or perhaps you weren't at the one last week—or even the one before that?" Fíli let his uncharacteristic sarcasm drop, speaking softly once more. "If it weren't for Balin's support, I'd be lost."

"Okay, so maybe it hasn't been ideal, but Fee, you've been doing great. Everything is still standing, the Council members are coming around—you know them, they're pompous, and think the monarchy only exists to give them a job. They probably think half the time that they could run Erebor better than Uncle, too, only he's far too scary for them to talk back to."

Kíli could feel his shoulders slumping perceptibly at the reminder. Fíli, of course, saw it. "I should be able to command their respect. I just...I just don't know how to do it. They've all got so much more experience than we do." They both lapsed into silence, and Fíli went back to poking at his dinner morosely.

"We can do this, Fee. Uncle will be proud, and he will not regret having left us in his stead, you'll
see." Kíli gripped his brother's shoulder in a display of solidarity and comfort. "And besides, if we think we're in any danger of failing we can always find a reason to annoy the elves—that will be sure to please Uncle enough to overlook anything we may have been less than stellar at."

Fíli laugh was more of a bark, and it burst from him in a surprised huff of air. "Bilbo would never let Uncle enjoy it," he said, regretfully. "Can you imagine the scolding we'd all get?"

Kíli felt wistful at this reminder of the likely reaction of their fussy, polite little hobbit. "True, but I imagine Uncle's diplomacy skills will be bound to improve with Bilbo to help him," he pointed out.

He missed Bilbo, and all the gentle scoldings he'd given the pair of them, never mind that they were Princes of Erebor. That same lack of deference allowed him to give equal numbers to their uncle, though his were usually less gentle. It wasn't until Kíli noticed that Thorin actually allowed it, that he realised his uncle, who was never very easy to read, had deep feelings for their Master Boggins. And once he was looking for it, over the coming weeks, a hundred little things began to stand out about his uncle's treatment of the hobbit. Most of it the kind of panic Kíli could, reluctantly, acknowledge their uncle would likely feel as this unexpected affection developed, but some of it was unbidden, deeply thoughtful gestures. Things like keeping a surreptitious eye on Bilbo and calling halts earlier than he usually would for the company when the hobbit seemed to be flagging, or even once, after Bilbo had seemed particularly withdrawn after a skirmish with an orc patrol, quietly asking Óin to keep an eye out for something that could be made into tea, knowing its soothing familiarity would offer Bilbo comfort.

The scathing dismissal of Bilbo's absence after the goblin tunnels was particularly telling, once Kíli had realised there was something more to his uncle's reaction; it was less a condemnation and more of a response born of fear and hurt. Kíli had never been so glad in all his life as when Bilbo had appeared, seemingly out of the ground; and he desperately hoped his uncle would recognise this for the opportunity it was to finally do something about his feelings, because Kíli was realising it was becoming increasingly obvious his uncle had found his One.

Of course then, Bilbo had gone and proved how incredible he really was by bodily throwing himself between his uncle's prone body and the great Albino Menace. He had hoped, so strongly, on the Carrock that Uncle would finally acknowledge his feelings—he could hardly restrain himself from urging him on or giving him a bloody good shove. As it turned out, neither were needed, thank Mahal.

"They really are... they really will be good together, won't they Fee?" he mused, sharing some of his wanderings when it became obvious he'd been lost in thought.

Fíli gave a little shake, obviously startled to be asked. "Of course they will be," he asserted quickly. At Kíli's look, he relented a bit. "It wasn't an obvious choice, in the beginning, but you could feel the way the stone around them gradually began to vibrate in time, gradually attuning them into a strong counterpoint. They balance each other with their strengths and weaknesses. Bilbo will make a great King Consort." When Kíli didn't respond, he added, "Uncle really loves him, if that's what you're worried about."

Was he worried? "No, well, I don't know. It's just nice to hear someone else say it, I guess." Kíli gave himself a shake, throwing off his mood. "You know, if Bilbo could see you so worried, he'd probably thump you worse than I did—or pinch your ear," Kíli said with a cheeky grin.

Fíli gave a weak smile at that image. "You're probably right, and I think my ears are thankful he can't see me now. Still, talking with him always seemed to make things clearer, somehow."

"He would say he was just a simple hobbit."
"Yes well, the Shire must be full of wise halflings, because his simple way of looking at things always seems to make things make more sense than they probably really do."

Bilbo was brilliant in his ability to make any situation clearer. It was something about his way of looking at things, uncluttered with 'dwarvish nonsense' as he was wont to call it. He was smart and persnickety, and didn't even take Uncle's moods. Why can't we? he thought. "Fee? Why don't you talk to him? I mean, if Uncle is breaking the confinement, I don't think he would object too much to you doing the same." At Fili's hesitant look, he urged, "Just ask him. You don't have to tell him why, simply that you miss him, if you like. Besides, it's entirely proper for family to visit the courting couple. Uncle's going to need to ask someone to negotiate the contract on his behalf, isn't he? So, tradition states that you should visit Uncle's intended."

A relieved grin broke out on Fili's face. "See? Sometimes you are the smart one. I'll ask him."

"I'm always the smart one," Kili groused back.

"SO, IT ISN'T NORMAL for this confinement, this azugal-whatever, to be broken by visitors?" Bilbo had finally broached a subject he had been intensely curious about. "Or for one of the participants to be leaving each day?" He had felt increasingly out of sorts these last few days, distracted and moody, and asked the question more for a distraction than out of any real hope of a useful answer. Thorin had been preoccupied, too, and had spent increasing amounts of time away from him, seeing to the needs of his kingdom, only to return pale, and on one worrying occasion, even shaking.

Thorin looked up from the small implement he seemed to be crafting, and Bilbo felt it was a miracle it wasn't paperwork, as the silly dwarf never seemed to relax at all. "It is our confinement, beloved," he said, soothingly. "And you asked it of me that I should leave you each day."

"Yes, yes," Bilbo acknowledged irritably, "but it's not traditional, is it? I mean, to other dwarves?"

Thorin's silence was answer enough.

Bilbo wasn't entirely sure what had him so agitated, but it had something to do with the incredible power he was beginning to realize he could wield over this proud dwarf, and just how much he might have been damaging something he hadn't even understood. "You did this, because you care what they think, don't you?" he asked carefully, trying to feel his way around his disquiet and all the jumbled things he was feeling. "Your subjects, I mean."

Thorin inclined his dark head solemnly. "I would wish that they could see you as I do, that they will learn to respect you as I do."

"Has it occurred to any of you that I am a hobbit?" Bilbo found himself yelling—truly yelling, all of a sudden. Weeks of frustration that he thought he was putting away suddenly bubbling to the surface. "That all this might seem slightly, I'm not sure—ludicrous, to me?" And he wasn't entirely sure where this was coming from—because he had forgiven Thorin for placing him in this confinement, seeing as the dwarf king really hadn't a lot of choices in the matter, but he had never really aired his frustration, and perhaps had allowed it to fester instead.

The king's eyes flashed furiously, and he abandoned his work, reaching over to grab Bilbo's shoulders. For a moment, Bilbo though Thorin was going to shake him, but he did no more than keep the hobbit in a hard grip—Thorin's large fingers were creasing the fabric of his second-
favourite waistcoat, quite dreadfully, Bilbo was annoyed to notice.

"Did it occur to you, Master Burglar," Thorin thundered, and the sound of his voice was like a storm breaking, "that your suitor is the leader of a lost kingdom? That I must prove not only my worth to you, but your worth to my people?"

The silence in the wake of their yelling was almost as loud as their argument. Both of them stood there, breathing noisily, glaring at one another and very unsure what to say.

Except... Oh. Bilbo suddenly had a sinking feeling that, in his indignation at feeling that the dwarves were trampling over his tendency to look at this from a hobbit’s perspective, maybe he’d been missing the larger issue.

He had been so focused on how he was being expected to behave like a dwarf that he may have been looking at this all wrong. *He was being courted by a king!* He knew this before, of course, but suddenly it was as if the words, words that he had known so long that they had lost some of their truth, re-arranged themselves in his mind and acquired new meaning. Thorin was a king. And that did change things, just a bit. A king didn't belong to himself alone, and Thorin cared deeply for his duty to his people.

Bilbo's breath left him in a whoosh, and he was sure the look on his face must have been quite ridiculous. "If I were to accept you, wed the King of Erebor, I would be, what, a queen?" he squeaked out, finally managing to get the worst of the confounded look from his face. Truthfully, he hadn't really been all that focused on his word choice.

"Consort," Thorin acknowledged, watching nervously as Bilbo made another, louder noise of distress. "Though we could perhaps change it to queen, if this is some kind of hobbit custom," he offered dubiously.

"No! No!" Bilbo spluttered. "But I would, in fact," he began, and found it difficult to look at Thorin right now, fiddling with the button on his cuff, instead. "Uhm...well, not to put too fine a point on it—" He seemed unable to stop dithering, because really, such an idea seemed awfully forward...

"Spit it out, halfling," was grunted at him for his troubles.

Bilbo glared. "I told you we don't like to be called that."

He tried to draw himself up as best he could while still being held in Thorin's grip. The king noticed, and hastily dropped his hands as if burnt, looking slightly sheepish.

"I am not half of anything, I will have you know."

There was a hint of a smile when Thorin said, "Yes, I do not doubt I will find you are not half of anyone when this is all said and done."

*Half of anyone...?* Bilbo felt his cheeks flush as a possible, rather licentious, meaning occurred to him. Thorin's expression gave little away, of course. *He couldn't have meant anything...anatomical, surely?*

Distracted, Bilbo pressed on. "If I were to be, be Consort, I would in actual fact...rule, wouldn't I?"

Thorin waited until he held Bilbo's eyes. "If you were to consent to be my own, then yes, your authority would be second only to mine."
"Rule—a bunch of dwarves?"

"You seemed to manage quite handily during our journey," Thorin noted, with a strong hint of possessive pride.

"Me? I hardly ruled anyone—you were their king!" Bilbo could feel his face heating up again as he sputtered. "I barely knew what I was doing! Totally unprepared; I ran out the door without even a pocket handkerchief!"

"Bilbo," Thorin said—and the shock of hearing Thorin call him by his actual name, an occurrence that never failed to make him blush since Thorin's declaration as to its importance some weeks ago—had the hobbit giving him his entire attention. "Let us be honest—it was not I who was the real leader of our company once we left the Carrock. You had been proving your worth so gradually, that by the time we were escaping the tree-shagger's dungeons, I had no hesitation in ordering my most loyal subjects and companions to be sealed in barrels, with no explanation, simply by your word alone. I have never afforded anyone that kind of trust; not even Balin."

Bilbo stared at him, dumbfounded.

"You have proven your ability to lead time and time again. Do not doubt yourself." Thorin's voice was husky in his ears, low and commanding.

Thorin reached out one calloused finger, running it whisper-light over Bilbo's brow, tracing along his temple and cheek. Nerve endings that had no business being there were suddenly firing, a sort of painless burning left in the wake of that gentle caress. "You will make an excellent consort and rule well by my side—or even in my stead, should the need arise."

And suddenly, Bilbo could see the situation clearly; a light was lit that allowed him to see not only the shape of the room, but the furniture and the mathoms as well; metaphorically speaking, that was.

"You think about your people all the time, don't you my king?" Bilbo's tone was unbelievably gentle as he looked at the dwarf with new eyes. The tension in the dwarf's frame was so obvious; he wondered how it was he hadn't noticed before. "You're not really doing this for me, are you?" At Thorin's offended look, he hastened on, "Not entirely for me, anyway. If you were, I think you probably would have made a different deal with me, instead of making it look like I've set you a challenge. Your block-headed insistence on doing things the dwarven way is for your kingdom, because you want them to think of me as a dwarf, to respect me as a dwarf."

The storm-blue eyes glittering out of a carven face looked altogether too sad, despite the tiny smile that graced the dwarf's face. "We do not accept outsiders with ease, it is true. Mahal made us of stone, and that means we do not adapt. We weather and lose our rough edges in the storms, instead. We weathered in our journey East with you, and you earned our respect many times over. My people—my people will not have the same contact with you, will not have the same opportunity to see all that is in you." Thorin flinched, as though worried about Bilbo's reaction.

"I should hope not—thirteen at a time is about all I can handle," Bilbo asserted, deliberately trying for a playful tone to lighten the heavy discussion. There were things about this he was going to have to think about, of course, but it should be far easier now.

His mind was finally clear.

"One thing I must insist on," he said, firmly pushing those thoughts away to be examined later, in privacy. He allowed his voice to take on the stern edge he usually used with Fili or Kili. "If we are indeed considering a union, then it will be a partnership."
The look Thorin shot him was questioning, so Bilbo huffed and added somewhat impatiently, "That means things like your cares and concerns, Thorin—and even the bloody paperwork." He glanced meaningfully at the overflowing stack of parchment on the table in the corner of the room. "I've had quite enough of your stoic majestiness, thank you very much. It's obvious that there is something weighing on you, and I expect you to share these concerns with me."

Thorin at least had the grace to look sheepish.

THE SUNLIGHT STREAMING INTO the main chamber was bright and crisp, if still a little wan at this time of year. Still, Bilbo luxuriated in the changing of the season, enjoying this evidence that Arda was again waking after her long slumber, and soon fields would be alight with gently waving blooms, and even here in his little library, the air carried the sweet scent of new growth. He thought idly of laying in the fragrant grasses, of weaving flower crowns with Thorin...and then thought of the look on Thorin's face if he were to actually weave one into his dark hair. The image was actually rather beguiling, in a way that wasn't entirely healthy for his equilibrium, especially when said dwarf was sitting just a few feet away.

Discussion, that's what we need, he thought, flustered.

True to Bilbo's desire, Thorin had shown him the daily decisions that took up his time, though Bilbo thought that the unholy glee with which the dwarf shifted a large part of his towering paperwork onto a second table for Bilbo to work through was a tad excessive. But it gave Bilbo something to do that felt useful, and as Thorin slowly instructed him on the running of a mining kingdom, Bilbo found the quiet time together enjoyable and surprisingly comfortable.

He quickly ascertained that Thorin was hopeless at the domestic details, and while he was very good at making a little stretch far, mainly by being good at hording, he was far less skilled with what to do with extras, which, while not excessive, were still more than the meager fare he had led his people with on their forced march into the West; but far less than the surplus of his rule in Erin Luin. So Bilbo slowly found himself taking over long-term plans for rationing, which naturally lead to examining future trade opportunities with Laketown—and even Mirkwood, if only he could figure out something to offer the blasted elves beyond the white gems he was fairly certain Thorin was still in no mood to give up, and his days were full and productive.

But that damnable image of a taciturn dwarf with myrtle and salvia woven into his locks wouldn't leave him.

"You told me once that all dwarrow have a Heart Craft," he found himself blurring one afternoon. "I don't believe you ever told me yours—or is that too personal?" It was the first thing that sprang to his lips, but he found that once it did, he was genuinely curious.

"It is not too personal to ask, merely uncomfortable," Thorin answered, and for a long moment, it seemed as though that was as much as Bilbo was going to get.

He fretted, twisting his fingers as curiosity warred with delicacy, and he tried to determine if there was any way he could assuage his conscience if he simply demanded an answer anyway. Thankfully, Thorin saved him the trouble when he pushed back his paperwork and leveled the hobbit with an exasperated stare.

"Go ahead and ask. You will not be easy until you do, and frankly, it's not as if my entire kingdom doesn't already know; it is no secret."
Hmmm. What could possibly be so objectionable about something the entire kingdom knew anyway? Bilbo straightened in his chair, being sure to look Thorin in the eye, knowing full well the dwarf wasn't above using intimidation when it suited his purposes, and wanting to make it clear that no such tactic was going to get him out of this.

"All right then, what is your Heart Craft?" he asked. Though he considered trying to be gentle about it, he ultimately decided on bluntness as a greater kindness.

Thorin stared at his thick, scarred hands, turning them over in his lap. "Is it not obvious I was born to a baser craft?" he asked softly.

Bilbo had no idea how to respond to this, but before he had a chance to say something Bracegirdlish, Thorin looked up and stated plainly, "I am a blacksmith, Master Hobbit."

Bilbo would seriously consider twisting a finger in his ears if it weren't so extremely ill mannered, just to check that he heard that correctly. Thorin, however didn't appear to be offering any kind of explanation as to why this was apparently a source of discomfort for him. "And?" Bilbo finally prompted when his patience had just about wore out.

Thorin looked away, uncomfortably. "There are many dwarrow who call Blacksmith their first craft, and are praised for their brilliance at it," he said. "For a king, though, it is not... it is not a noble craft. Weapon-smithing, Armourer, Engineer—those are kingly occupations. And though I can turn a sword well enough for sale in the cities of men, or a breast plate, or innumerable cogs and gears, I am not truly gifted at any of these."

"And what is wrong with being a Blacksmith?" Bilbo asked carefully, secretly sure that 'good enough for sale in the cities of men' still meant bloody amazing to anyone else.

"A Blacksmith spends much of his time repairing the craft of others. Oh, they craft some items of their own; household items and tools, mostly; whatever there is need for, really." Thorin made a tight fist of the hand he had been examining, still not meeting Bilbo's eyes. "They instead work in the shadows of other masters."

"You said that other dwarves claim Blacksmithing as their craft, and that they were honoured for it," Bilbo pointed out. "Why should that be, then?"

"I did not say that there was not great skill involved. Each craft is personal, each item an exact reflection of the thought process and movement of another. Most dwarrows never work with another; it is an intimate thing, to join your craft—your essence to someone else's, and requires complete trust. To repair the work of another's hand, to join your work to theirs is a special skill as you must understand their work completely, and then to make your own hand move as theirs, to make your thoughts flow as theirs so that you may keep the item unspoilt by a conflicting essence."

"When you say essence, I think we are talking about style. And what's wrong with blending a bit of your own style into whatever it is one is repairing? I would think that would only add to the strength of the finished product, frankly."

Thorin snorted. "Yes, you might say style, but that is a puny word for what happens when a dwarf crafts. I say essence for that is what it is, and much like our stone hearts, items of our own hands are unbending, and unchanging once set. If a blacksmith were to attempt to graft their own essence unto another's, it would fail; the repair would fail, as the item would reject what was not its own."

"An axe, with a new handle made in another style would what, fall apart?" Bilbo fought to keep
the skepticism out of his voice as Thorin was rarely this open about things he considered purely 'dwarven'. Despite his best efforts, he still thought he sounded incredulous at best.

Thorin definitely noticed, and he gazed back sternly. "Not in the ridiculous way you are endeavouring to imagine. The crafted item would no longer have its..."

The look of fierce concentration on his face as he struggled to communicate a very dwarvish concept in Westron was fascinating for Bilbo to watch—and, strangely flattering to know that Thorin wanted him to understand something so personal his race had never before tried to translate it for outsiders.

Thorin gave up with a scowl. "There is no word for it in common speech. It would lose its soul, its purpose, I suppose, though this notion is too romantic."

"Perhaps it's good practice for you, then," Bilbo said, cheekily, and then wanted to stuff his fist in his mouth. Of all the cabbage-headed things to say! Thorin most certainly did not need to practice anything remotely connected to romance.

There was very definitely a blush creeping its way across the king's cheeks, but the speculative gleam in his eyes was making Bilbo entirely too nervous and his stomach too fluttery by half to be entirely respectable.

"So what you're saying," Bilbo said, attempting to steer the conversation back to his original point, "what you're saying, is that a Blacksmith is revered for his ability to see all sides of a situation, to repair what is broken and to keep things strong and whole." Bilbo didn't try to meet Thorin's eyes, because he knew that would be too intimate and would only make the king close himself off. Instead, he kept his gaze focused on his hands, loosely clasped over his bent knees. "It seems to me that it would be the most kingly craft of all."

He wasn't sure Thorin believed him, but when Bilbo finally glanced at him, the soft expression on the dwarf's face was enough to have made the effort entirely worth it.

When Thorin made no response, Bilbo gently steered the conversation to what he hoped were safer waters. "So, what, Fíli is waiting to present his work; and then he will be what, a Master?"

Thorin snorted. "Hardly. It takes many, many learning cycles to achieve Mastery. Fíli is waiting to present his First Craft. It is a summation of all his apprentice work and an honour to his Master, displaying what he has learned, and what he will pursue if he should choose to progress beyond a Journeyman." Despite the rather unbiased description, there was unmistakable affection and pride in Thorin's voice as he spoke.

"And what is Fíli's Heart Craft?"

"Fíli has the Calling for Weapons-smithing." Thorin's look of deep pride was something that Bilbo hoped Fíli had seen.

"And I bet you hover over his shoulder, pushing him to acquit himself as a Durin?" It was a teasing comment, but Bilbo regretted it as soon as he said it. This was a dwarf who believed his own craft to be less than worthy, despite taking great joy in it—and there was no mistaking the look in Thorin's eyes when he had discussed it; Heart's Craft apparently meant Loved Craft as well—that dwarf would never push his heir on something so personal, though he probably made himself a thorough nuisance in everything else. It was a relief when Thorin didn't answer, instead leveling Bilbo with an un-amused look.

"As your heir, is he expected to become a Master in short order?" Bilbo asked instead, but Thorin
was shaking his head almost before he'd finished the question.

"Heirs and kings do not usually have time to pursue such things, even if they have the talent. A king - or queen, for that matter, must have an appreciation for a broad range of their people's works, so are usually instructed in a selection of crafts, not just his Heart's Calling. Mastery of their Heart Craft comes late, if ever."

Bilbo glanced at Thorin's dark hair, picking out one strand in particular. An incongruously simple braid always hung at the forefront, as though in place of honour. Three intricate beads finished it. Beads, that Bilbo was beginning to suspect, were rank beyond kingship, and possibly felt even more deeply. "And what about you? Did you burn the midnight oil and create the time to pursue your Mastery?"

Thorin nodded, looking distant and obviously thinking back to a time long past. "I did not have the luxury of learning as much about other crafts as I ought. Dís was alone, and the boys needed to eat...I had no choice but to learn what I was good at, and quickly." He looked down at his hands, which were resting on his thighs. They were calloused and rough, and scarred.

If, in his soft life before Bilbo had departed on his mad quest—if he had bothered to think of it at all, he would not have thought of those being the hands of a king. He would have thought a king to have soft hands, as befitting a gentleman of men, or an elf lord—hands that showed wisdom gained through learning and thought, not the hands of a common labourer.

But Bilbo had seen those hands locked around the shaft of a great battle axe, daring any to come and take the place he would defend for his people; had seen them work forges and bellows to defeat a dragon, and when it was over, had even turned to nursing his injured nephews, washing their wounds and changing their linens with heartbreaking care.

And those soft hands of those learned lords, suddenly seemed lacking.

Impulsively, Bilbo reached out and grasped one of Thorin’s hands between his own. 'I think you have gained a fair better understanding of your people by labouring beside them' is what he wanted to say, but knew that Thorin would shrug that off, again. It was odd. He had a deep conviction of caring for his people, but didn't see himself as being suitably kingly, and Bilbo was at a loss as to how to comfort him in this; how to see the many scars that had been left behind in the wake of all that had happened to him as the strengths they had become. He wanted Thorin to see himself the way he saw him, and to see that he was very much enough.

Instead, he said, "I can't think of a better example for Fíli and Kíli to have grown up with, than someone who looks after his people so fiercely."

For a long moment, Thorin silently regarded Bilbo's hands where they wrapped around his, before laying his free hand over Bilbo's and giving a gentle squeeze. "It is good you feel so highly of me, though I doubt I deserve it," he said, and Thorin's tone was almost teasing. "My family representative has asked to speak with you; may you impress him as well as I have apparently impressed you."

Bilbo blinked. "Family what—Thorin!"

His sputtering only made the confusticating dwarf grin, and he refused to answer any further questions that evening.

As the fire burned low and the evening light paled and then grew dark, Bilbo found himself yawning and all but nodding off at his embroidery. The stitches had come loose on his favourite shirt; a subtle tone-on-tone pattern that he thought looked particularly fine, and Dori had been kind
enough to procure the proper colour skein for him to repair it. It was pleasant work, something he had spent long evenings at back at Bag End, and it proved to be an equally enjoyable task while whiling away the after supper hours with Thorin. The dwarf worked quietly at his desk and made sporadic conversation easily whenever Bilbo happened to think of a question or observation he wished to share, and all in all it proved to feel distinctly domestic and...comfortable.

He was in the midst of stifling another yawn when a large hand appeared beneath his chin, and when he looked up he found that Thorin had quietly crossed the room to offer him a hand out of the chair.

"Come, Master Baggins, before you fall asleep where you sit and turn yourself into a pincushion by morning," he said gruffly, and Bilbo was so surprised he allowed himself to be pulled from his cosy nest of needles and fabric and skeins of floss.

Thorin, however did not release his hand, but tucked it into the crook of his arm instead, gently turning them and heading from the room.

"Wait—what! Thorin—what are you doing? I can walk myself, you know; besides, I haven't put anything away properly."

That suggestion of a smile was visible again, and it was botheringly distracting.

"Allow me to walk you to your chambers, beloved," Thorin requested as he started a slow pace towards their personal chambers at the end of the corridor. "I'm told it is an acceptable show of interest in the Shire," he said softly, and the tiny smile grew enough to actually curl the edges of his lips upwards, ever so slightly.

Bilbo harrumphed, though not with any seriousness. In truth, he was rather touched by the gesture—despite the impropriety the dwarf was likely deliberately ignoring. "I don't know where you got your information from, Master Oakenshield, but it seems to be a bit faulty. Walks in the open air are indeed a wonderful way to show affection—"

"However, a walk to someone's bedchamber is most definitely a bit forward!"

"Think of it as a walk home, then, if you like," and Thorin released his hand with a flourish, lingering only long enough to caress Bilbo's fingers before allowing them to slip from his grasp.

They were, of course, at his door. "I believe that probably constituted perhaps the shortest walk in Shire courting-history," Bilbo said after a moment, still enjoying the slight tingling in his fingertips from the gentle touch, and not at all sure what else to say.

Thorin's smile blossomed into an actual grin, though if one didn't know him they would probably mistake it for indigestion. "I will be sure to take a longer route, next time—if I have, in fact, earned the boon to do so again?"

He earned a swat for his impertinence, but also a shy smile, and Bilbo dreamt of that gentle, almost-there smile that night, and of crowns of glowing golden gems and fragrant blossoms.

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"MASTER BAGGINS IS A true connoisseur of fine tea blends," Dori tutted, again, as Thorin apparently chose the wrong ingredient from a truly baffling array of dead plants laid out on the table before him.

There really was only one choice when it came to asking for help with the mystifying ritual of Tea that Bilbo had described, and so Thorin had forced down his many misgivings, and gruffly requested eldest and youngest brothers 'Ri to assist him in decoding the process. He knew the middle brother would join in, regardless of being asked or not, as he saw fit.

He wasn't sure yet if the idea was another manifestation of his bond-madness, frankly, because he felt no closer to anything, other than possibly tossing the whole business into his hearth.

With great restraint, he pushed down the urge and instead grit his teeth as he attempted to learn. Again.

"Now, Your Majesty, please try to pay attention," Dori fretted, waving his hands about in a sort of nervous, fluttery motion that was threatening to ruin Thorin's scattered attempts at concentration. "Ori has managed to find the flower meanings most popular west of Rivendale. I think it's best you don't ask too closely how Nori was able to procure all of these Shire plants, though, if I were to be honest."

Ah. Now the fluttering and hand-waving made more sense.

"I will endeavour not to question our Master Nori on his methods," Thorin assured him dutifully. "Let's agree to allow a Master his secrets, shall we?"

Dori immediately relaxed—or at least, as relaxed as he ever seemed capable of, and promptly reached for the teapot, pouring himself a cup to settle his nerves, evidently forgetting Thorin's last experiment. Giving a great sigh, he allowed his shoulders to drop fractionally and took a sip from his dainty cup.

Though, thankfully, he did not forget that Thorin was sitting across from him.

The expression he made as he screwed up his face and tried not to spray the noisome brew was humiliating, to say the least. As gracefully as possible, Dori dabbed his lips with a linen handkerchief, and, Thorin suspected, most likely spit the tea into it.

Ori, for his part, tried not to titter in the corner as he hid behind his large tome.

"Ah, well, it's a good fifth try," Dori hedged once he'd gotten himself under control again. "But perhaps not quite the taste we're going for."

Thorin crossed his arms mulishly, glaring at the precise little measuring instruments and mystifying bundles of dried...stuff. "I picked as you indicated I should—to make something attractive."

"Ah—I think Blooming teas are a bit beyond our reach at the moment. I suggest you focus your crafting efforts to something pleasing to the senses. Try for something that warms the heart with meaning, and lifts the spirit with its aroma."

"Ah—I think Blooming teas are a bit beyond our reach at the moment. I suggest you focus your crafting efforts to something pleasing to the senses. Try for something that warms the heart with meaning, and lifts the spirit with its aroma."

"And tastes good," Thorin added, scowling at the teapot still holding the remnants of his failure.

"Yes, that is definitely a goal, too," Dori agreed briskly.

"All right," the broad merchant stood, rolling up his sleeves and looking over at Thorin dubiously before he looked back to the bench with an air that somehow thoroughly gave the impression of someone preparing to do battle. "We're not going for commercial success here, after all, but the
affections of one specific recipient. Let us start at the beginning, and perhaps a little simpler."

Doubtful, and more than a little chastised by this apparently remedial step back, Thorin regarded the box to which Dori pointed. It was flat and fairly large, and divided up into sub-compartments so as to resemble a grid of smaller boxes. In each box were different forms of...tea, he supposed, though by this point he wasn't willing to swear to anything.

"This is my personal stash; things I carry as samples in markets of what I can procure. These are tea bases—some black, some green, some even white or red. There are whole leaves, partial leaves and tea dust, each of which gives a different characteristic to your base. The ones in this box are amongst my best—my estate teas, if you will, but still, there are a few that stand above the rest." Dori's broad shoulders were thrown back with some pride at the apparent excellence of his collection.

"Show me," Thorin said, grimly.

"Well, I'd recommend this. Pure Gold, it's called in the trade, and comes from far east of here. It's got a nice, reddish-gold liqueur when brewed, with a gentle bouquet and a sweet taste on the palate. Of course, it depends what these Shire plants taste like, because it won't pair well with something strong."

Thorin stared hard at the unassuming box of pale yellowish-brown leaves, each one covered in fine wispy hairs.

"Now if something more robust is required," the bustling Dori continued, "a second-flush Assam is probably best. It comes from the far South East, even further than our Blacklock relations—where the Haradrim Mûmakil herders dwell. It's malty and brisk and will stand up to more astringent flavours."

Feeling as though his eyes were crossing, Thorin looked at the indicated slot in the box and found...a very similar looking pile of dried buds and whole leaves, minus the hairs. He looked back at the Master Merchant, without any conviction that he could tell the difference between the two apparently 'fine' teas and the common dried weeds his nephews may have dug up and proudly brought home as wee badgers.

"We'll, ah, maybe stay with these two for now—we can always branch out if we find the flavours don't suit the posies you're picking," Dori said, and wrung his hands before realising he was doing it and shoving them in the pockets of his leather smock. "Ori, what have we got here for His Majesty to work with?"

"Oh! This is really so fascinating! They can send entire messages using just a bouquet of flowers," Ori said, beaming up at Thorin from his stool, delighted to share new knowledge despite having done so twice already. Glancing down at his book, he began to catalogue Nori's catch. "Let's see, there's chamomile, for Patience, and coriander, for Hidden Worth. Snowdrops are for Hope, edelweiss is for Courage and Devotion, and heliotrope is for Eternal Love. Ivy is for Friendship and Fidelity in Marriage. Honeysuckle declares your affections to be generous and devoted and also stands for Happiness."

Ori finally paused to gulp a quick breath, and Thorin was dubiously impressed, unaware a dwarf could possibly speak so long without breathing.

"Hyacinth is for Consistency of Love. Hyssop for Sacrifice, jasmine for I give myself to you as well, as, ah...Sensuality, and lavender is for Virtue and Purity. Fennel states the recipient Worthy of all Praise. Lily-of-the-Valley is for Sweetness and Renewed Happiness, and marjoram is for Joy. Myrtle is the symbol of True Love in Marriage. Juniper and sweet woodruff are for Humility,
and raspberry is for Remorse—" and here, Ori had the grace to blush, as it was very obvious why Nori would have considered those good virtues to include.

"Ah, then there's red roses, for Love and Desire," he squeaked, not even recovered from his first fiery blush. "Oh, and look, there's, uh, blue salvia for I Think of You, and red salvia for Forever Mine. White roses declare you to be Worthy. Tarragon is Lasting Interest and thyme is Courage and Strength; violet is Loyalty and Faithfulness while yarrow is Everlasting Love."

"And Nori checked to make sure none of these plants are poisonous, right?" Thorin asked, trying desperately to focus on all the meanings, and not to wonder what Bilbo was doing right now, and if perhaps it involved clothes, because that tantalizing image was not at all suitable for his increasingly tenuous grip on the here-and-now.

Bilbo would look stunning though, especially if he were to wear Thorin's beads in his hair...

Ori squeaked again, startling the king out of his inappropriate musings. He watched as Ori dashed off, pale-faced and muttering wildly, presumably to talk with Óin.

Dori pursed his lips, watching him go, before turning back to Thorin with a sigh. Strangely enough, the near-mishap seemed to settle him, as if he'd been on edge, simply expecting disaster. "Well, let's start with the stuff I'm familiar with, shall we? Tarragon and thyme are safe enough, as are a few others I can name."

And so Thorin's lessons began in earnest.

Twenty minutes later, a winded Ori crept back into the room, trying to be surreptitious in removing three of the bundles.

Thorin, thankfully, was not paying attention as he struggled to understand how in the blazes to tell the difference between 'crab eyes' and 'fish eyes' and what in the name of Mahal's flaming scrotum either had to do with describing bubbles and the stages of not-quite-boiling water. An angry red burn was itching and stinging on his wrist, right where his vambrace would normally rest, and he just knew it was going to blister and rub itself raw.

It was a long afternoon for everyone involved, but in the end, he had managed to produce something that Dori deemed as being quite palatable, which he insisted was much better than merely acceptable and not at all unimpressive for an apprentice effort.

Thorin appreciated the attempts at reassurance immensely.

He wearily pulled out a leather pouch, intending to scoop into it his prize, when Dori stopped him with an excited noise, and a fussy little hand wave.

"Ooooh, no, just you wait, I have the perfect—" and he began rummaging around in various boxes and bales around his workroom. "I know I have it, just had it in from Khand, oh, where did I?—" and similar mutterings. Thorin could feel a twitch developing in his eye as he watched the large dwarrow root around on his knees, muttering under his breath as he contorted himself into impossibly cramped spaces amongst his wares.

"Aha!" Dori cried as he straightened, brandishing something small in his hand triumphantly. Whatever the object was, it was lost to Thorin's sight in Dori's large fist.

What Thorin was presented with was beautiful. It was a small joined box made of a wood unfamiliar to him. It had an almost stripped appearance of darker bands on a deep reddish-auburn base, and had been polished until it glowed. Already, he could see the pattern he could inlay with platinum wire and peridot. Platinum for strength of devotion, and peridot because it reminded
Thorin of the gentle spring. It would make a perfect vessel for his courting gift, and perhaps, if he was very lucky, could serve to make up for any lack of culinary skill he likely suffered from.

"This is a kingly gift, indeed, Master Merchant," Thorin said, feeling humbled by the gesture. He grasped his distant cousin's forearm in a warm grip. "If you ever have need of a boon from me, it shall be granted."

Dori flushed, looking ready to faint with pleasure.

Now, to procure a teapot; he highly doubted his late mother had such an artifact locked in the family vault. "Ah, Master Dori, there is one other thing I shall require..."

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IF BILBO WERE being entirely honest, he had been a trifle on-edge ever since Thorin had made that ridiculous comment about being questioned by some family member of his. Frankly, Bilbo had spent quite a while now with the portraits of Thorin's ancestors for company, and he had discovered that they were all an incredibly intimidating looking lot; many of them sporting bits of shiny, and in one notable case, spiky, metal in uncomfortable looking places. He really wasn't sure if his nerves were going to handle this.

The hollow buzzing was back; a sort of empty feeling place in his skull that was incredibly distracting. Like the peat bog he had read about, sucking in anything that ventured too close, this hollow spot seemed to distort sounds and sights, making concentration a nearly impossible task so he couldn't even settle on anything to distract himself properly.

Instead, he spent his morning in the main chamber, enjoying the warm patches of sunshine like a rather podgy cat. He would forage in amongst the treasures still remaining in haphazard piles, and drag a likely-looking bunch back to enjoy his sunbeam as he idly tidied and sorted what he found for later cataloguing, as he was sure Ori would be doing almost as soon as he was allowed back into the chamber.

Most of it was household type things; braziers and chalices, platters and even one jewel-encrusted chamber pot, which Bilbo hastily tossed back. He was just admiring a beautiful bronze telescope when he heard the vault door swinging ponderously on its hinges. He carefully set the priceless piece down and turned towards the door, bracing himself for what was likely to be a thoroughly unpleasant afternoon.

Seeing Fíli sauntering through the door with the same swagger and cheeky grin he'd worn at Bag End so many moons ago made Bilbo a little weak in the knees with relief and genuine happiness. He had missed the princeling during this confinement business.

"Hello, Mister Boggins, I thought you might like some company." Fíli grinned.

"Fíli! What are you doing here?" Bilbo thumped him on the back, well, more his shoulder blade as he was a half a head shorter than the prince, as he gave him a brisk little hug. Fíli would have none of it, and scooped the hobbit up into a tight embrace, swinging him around a bit in his enthusiasm.

"Well, I'm Uncle's family, aren't I?" he asked as he deposited Bilbo gently back on his feet.

"You?" Bilbo spluttered indignantly, not at all sure he was thrilled with the idea of having to pass muster with the younger dwarf. Not that he had any more concerns—merely that Fíli would see it for the opportunity it was for endless teasing. If he wasn't careful, he'd wind up doing something
ridiculous for the dwarf's amusement.

"Why, Master Baggins, aren't you glad to see me?"

"Of course I am, rascal," Bilbo huffed affectionately, and tugged Fíli over to the large table near the 'dolly' contraption to sit down.

Fíli took a long moment to appraise him, his blue eyes brighter than his uncle's but no less astute. "You look like you've missed a bit of sleep," he said seriously.

The buzzing in his head seemed to increase uncomfortably. Bilbo looked away, not wishing to meet that knowing gaze for some reason; it just felt too... intimate. The buzzing subsided somewhat before he looked back.

"Sorry," Fíli said, softly. "It's usually more comfortable when it's kin—less intrusive."

Though he wasn't entirely sure what this cryptic comment meant, Bilbo felt far too restless and tired to ask him. "What do I owe this pleasure to, my lad?" Bilbo asked instead.

"Well, I really am here as Uncle's representative, you know, at least in part. The rest is purely personal. We've missed you."

"And what do you have to do, as your uncle's representative?" Bilbo asked, feeling a bit wary.

The smile Fíli gave was genuine, with no trace of the mischief Bilbo half expected.

"Nothing much, I mean, it's not like Kíli and I don't already love you, or know you're entirely suitable for Uncle, but we will have to talk a bit, and hopefully not all of it has to be bond-related."

The dwarf flashed Bilbo a winning smile, full of genuine affection. "Actually, this is a good opportunity for you, too. Surely you've got questions, things you don't get around to asking Uncle—or don't want to."

They managed to while away a very pleasant afternoon, and it wasn't until later that Bilbo realised he had been very skillfully interrogated at the same time. It rather reminded him of the Shire, actually, and filled him with warmth. The topic of the confinement itself was something Bilbo had been a bit reluctant to bring up—oh, he understood why he had been confined, as the weight of all those other psyche were apparently a real risk to madness, and knowing he had control on when this ritual ended removed much of his earlier frustration. There were still little niggling questions, however, and now that the topic had finally been dealt with, he was reluctant to pick at old wounds by bringing it up with Thorin. Fíli, on the other hand, seemed perfectly relaxed, so Bilbo chanced a question.

"The confinement?" Fíli asked, wrinkling his nose a bit at the question. "You really want Ori for this, but I'll give it a go. You read some of those Elven histories, I know—I saw them on your shelves back in Bag End, so I'm guessing you know a bit about the Seven Dwarven Fathers?"

Bilbo nodded, rapt.

"And you know how they were put to sleep by Mahal, to await the proper time of awakening?"

Another nod, and Fíli leaned back, drawing from his tankard like an Old Gaffer settling in for a tale down at the Green Dragon.

"All right, then. When Mahal sent them to their rest, he set them carefully in pairs, together into confinement, each with their One; their soul mate. In their caverns, they dreamed together and grew as of a single heart and soul, housed in two bodies, as they were created together to walk this
life—all, of course, except one. The oldest Father was Durin the Deathless—the founder of the Longbeards, or the Sigin-tarâg, and he alone was sent to rest with no other. His dreams were empty, and his heartbeat had no companion, and when he awoke he had no partner."

"That sounds dreadfully lonely," Bilbo couldn't help but comment, "to be the only one on his own like that."

"Yes, well, he must have felt so too, for instead of creating his kingdom where he awoke, which was Mount Gundabad, he only lingered there for a score of years. He then wandered the Wildelands for a generation, giving names to all that he saw that no eye had beheld before. He sought, for what he did not know, only that he felt incomplete. Eventually, he came across a glass lake in the protected vale of three peaked mountains. Weary, he lay at the water's edge to drink beneath the hot sun of midday, but when he looked into the surface he saw a shining halo of seven stars crowning his reflection—he also saw a face, a beautiful dwarrowdam with soft black locks and shining tawny eyes the colour of amber. Upon this sight, he felt deep certainty that this place was meant to be his kingdom, and that this radiant dam was to be by his side. The connection forged was all-encompassing and strong, tying their two souls together. And so his wandering was over, and he prepared—he named the lake Kheled-zâram, or Mirrormere, and he founded his kingdom of Khazad-dûm within those three mountains and dwelt there for many years, venturing from his kingdom at intervals to search the surrounding area for his One, but he never found her. And when it came to pass that he found in his Mansion, alone in all the world, the priceless metal ore that would become Mithril, he took this as another sign. For days, he locked himself within his workshop, and upon this new gleaming metal, he bent all his considerable skill to create a treasure worthy of the hand that would receive it. When he emerged, he had crafted a set of marriage beads, upon which were graven a map of the sacred chambers of Gundabad as a place that would be dear to all dwarrows. His skill rendered the detail so fine as to be perfectly clear, even in such tiny miniature, and the likes of which have never been seen again, not least because the making of such beads from mithral has never been done again, as a sign of respect to the eldest Father. Since their awakening, the Seven Kindred kept close ties, and met at Mount Gundabad on occasion to renew oaths and discuss affairs pertaining to them all. It was at one such of these gatherings that Durin finally beheld his beloved, a dam from the Blacklock line, of Var's Folk. Her name was Dís, and many tomes have been dedicated to Durin's wooing of her, and in the end, she journeyed to his halls in Khazad-dûm to be his queen."

Fíli told a good tale—he could give Hamfast Gamgee a run for his money, so he could—and Bilbo found himself easily enthralled. "And where are the beads now?" Bilbo asked.

Fíli sighed. "One lies within our Halls here, held as one of the mountain's greatest treasures. It was one of Uncles reasons in asking the other Families for aid in retaking Erebor."

Thorin's frustration at this perceived double-betrayal made even more sense now, Bilbo thought. "And the other?"

"Went back to Dís's kin, in the Orocarni mountains."

Bilbo sat back, pondering. "So, Mount Gundabad was a rather important site for your people, I take it, before the Orcs came?"

"All dwarves hold it as sacred, not just Durin's Folk, and we shall never forgive the insult the Orcs have done us by profaning it."

"Because Durin the Deathless woke up there?"

"That, and because we believe it to be the original workshop where Mahal created us. According
to our Cantors and Storytellers, Mahal left us a great wisdom there; inscribed on the walls of our birthing chamber, in veins of purest shining gold, is the wisdom to create a perfect metal—a metal that glows like beaten jewel-light and weighs no more than a babe in swaddling could bear. It is our Maker's Legacy, and something we hold very sacred."

"Why do you not move to re-take Gundabad, now that the Orcs have been emptied out?"

Fíli looked at him with amusement. "Bloodthirsty little thing, aren't you? Let you hang around a gaggle of unmannered, underhanded dwarrows for a year or so, and suddenly you grow teeth."

"I most certainly have not, thank you very much," Bilbo sniffed primly. "I merely inquired why you hadn't, as I know very well you want to, not suggesting that you should actually do it."

"Unfortunately, you are correct. There are many of our brethren who would dearly love to take our mountain back—but at the moment, there are but four hundred dwarrows within my uncle's halls. We could call for the other four kingdoms to assist us, but by the time they got here, there is a very good chance that the mountain will be re-fortified. We cannot hope to hold it as we are."

"But your sacred chamber—surely you wish to get a glimpse of it?"

"In all our history, we have never found it, so I suppose it is safe from orc defilement until we have the strength to drive them out again." Fíli shrugged pragmatically. "Unfortunately," he said, and he tried to be nonchalant, but his voice wavered slightly, "I have concerns far closer to home to consider before I declare an assault on those peaks." Fíli looked away, appearing at once tense and weary.

"Fíli?" Bilbo asked gently. "What is it?"

"There have been a few...problems since Uncle Thorin's been indisposed," he began hesitantly. And so the whole tale poured out, his and Kíli's difficulty with the old members of the Council and their desire to do right by their people but being terribly afraid of doing something wrong. His fear that he was somehow letting his uncle down was left unsaid.

Bilbo understood, anyway, of course.

"It sounds to me, my lad, like you're, well, we'd say in the Shire that you're trying to step into braces that don't fit you, though I suppose you dwarves probably say boots, or axes," Bilbo began thoughtfully.

Hanging his head, Fíli finally admitted the crushing truth. "I'm not Uncle Thorin."

"No, you're not," Bilbo agreed. He watched regretfully as Fíli seemed to hunch in even further, squeezing his eyes shut tight. "You aren't your uncle Thorin, so you can't wear his braces without your trousers falling down. It's no use trying to be someone else." He reached out and patted the young prince's shoulder, a gentle reassuring pressure. "Why don't you try being Fíli instead?"

"But they don't listen," Fíli said miserably.

"And what have you done to make them listen?" Bilbo asked. "Because I know for a fact that a pair of Ereborian princes talked a completely soft hobbit into trying to steal ponies from a trio of mountain trolls. And I certainly didn't do it because they asked nicely and looked pathetic."

Fíli lips twitched in an expression that wanted to be a smirk. "We didn't exactly command you, either. We simply talked over you, until you gave up."
"Bad manners, even then. It can be hoped that in future, I might have better influence on the pair of you," Bilbo gave a long-suffering sigh.

"When you are our uncle, I imagine you might even have some success." Fíli's grin was definitely cheeky, now.

"Nevertheless, I think those manner lessons can wait, as I seem to be rather occupied for the next little while," the hobbit glanced around the Treasury facetiously, as if to demonstrate his point. "It would be terribly unfortunate if you had to get less than polite with a few stubborn hangers-on in your Council."

He and Fíli stared at one another for a whole space of heartbeats, before bursting out laughing.

"Just remember, Fíli—you are the Crown Prince, not those fussy old dwarrows who are probably more interested in protecting their own little fiefdoms than in the good of the kingdom, no matter the experience they may have. Listen to them, but make your own decisions."

The dwarf's lips twisted sardonically, and it was an altogether unfamiliar expression on his normally confident and centred face. "What if I choose wrong, then?"

Bilbo shrugged. "Then you choose wrong. It will happen from time to time, though as you get better and more experienced, you will manage to avoid making too many mistakes."

"I can't afford to make mistakes! People depend on me to make the Kingdom run properly."

"And you will. Follow your instincts, which should tell you things like not to start a war with King Thranduil or shoot his elk, and listen to all the information as it is given to you. Balin and Kíli will be there to help you should you begin to wander off the path. But as long as you let your advisors make all the decisions, they will continue to make all the decisions—they won't relinquish authority that you just leave lying around. Managing bureaucrats is very much like herding fauntlings, I imagine. Give them a task to do, let them make a mess and be sure to give them naptime while you get some real work done." Bilbo smiled gently at Fíli.

"Rest assured, your uncle Thorin would never have left you to rule in his stead, no matter the danger to himself, if he didn't know he had left his people in good stewardship. He would have quietly severed the bond before he would have put Erebor in bad hands. Don't be so afraid of making a mistake that you do nothing at all."

Fíli gave him a sheepish grin, though it was obvious he was mulling over Bilbo’s words.

A distraction, that's what the lad needs now. Bilbo cast about, and thought of something that should be fairly innocuous and was something he had been growing increasingly curious about for reasons he didn't feel like examining right now, especially with an audience.

"Do you know, after all this time spent in the company of such dwarrows as Master Dori, and I still don't know how to braid even the simplest plait?" he said plaintively.

"Really?" Fíli took Bilbo's distraction easily, staring at the hobbit with almost comic disbelief. "It's dead easy, at least the uncomplicated ones. There are fancier braids like Master Dori wears, but that's not something you just learn overnight."

"Could you, well, would you teach me?" Bilbo asked, eyeing Fíli's simple braids.

A bright flush gave pink blossoms to Fíli's cheeks. "Well, braiding is normally done between, well, between family members, or...those you wish to become family with, in a, a romantic way," he stammered. If possible, the heat in his cheeks grew even warmer.
Bilbo looked at him, trying to digest dwarven customs and how something like hair could be so private when it hung out in the open for everyone to see. "So, since you and I may be family in the future, would you not be able to teach me?"

Clear blue eyes stared back at him solemnly, so familiar but yet so different.

"Can you promise me then that you will accept Uncle," Fili asked, one eyebrow raised skeptically.

"You know I can't promise that." Bilbo sighed, dropping his shoulders and staring at his feet. "I'm sorry."

For a long moment, nothing more was said, and Bilbo tried not to think about how lovely it might feel if he did accept, because he really wasn't sure how to make such a decision, and nothing seemed to make much sense, especially when he couldn't quite sort out his reasons for saying no anymore.

The hand on his shoulder surprised him, as he was gently encouraged to shift so that he was facing the other way, with his back to the young prince, instead. There was a slight hesitation, and then thick fingers slowly began to card his wayward curls, testing the texture and weight.

"Then let it be my heartfelt wish that one day soon, I will be able to call you not just my King Consort, but also Uncle. In the meantime, it would be my honour to call you honorary kin."

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who is reading, commenting and/or sending kudos - you guys are so supportive and encouraging <3

I have been holding these last few chapters back, as I try and finish chapters 10 and 11; trying to make sure nothing came out of the writing process that needed me to change anything here, but I just felt bad for making everyone wait so long, so here it is :) Hopefully, I don't find that I end up wanting to change something after all *lol*

Bilbo truly is the strong one in the Thilbo dynamic, I swear. He may not be the stoic, burly one, but he is the one who has the greater emotional strength, and the greatest ability to adapt. I can see him being the one who guides Thorin, in years to come - the unbending support behind a powerful king, and that image just gives me warm fuzzies. I think it's too easy to think we have to work extra hard to write a strong Bilbo - he is strong, and we just have to let him be him.

Bilbo is awesome. Plain and simple.

This, of course, has nothing to do with this chapter, but I just had to share it anyway <3

I shall try to have 8 up much faster, though of course it will depend a bit on how quickly 10 and 11 move :p Sometimes, I think my muse is an alcoholic bitch. And she doesn't even share her rum with me >.>
"RIGHT, SO, WHAT do we know?" Bofur asked, looking around at what had become a regular meeting of the company.

The room they were using was going to become suspicious soon for its lack of dust and store of small ale kegs someone had smuggled in. Fíli suspected Glóin, though if Bofur wasn't at least peripherally involved, he'd give Kíli his best dagger. Still, if pressed, they could probably pass it off as the carousing of a group of dwarrow who wanted to relive and recount their epic journey, and the ale kegs certainly added to that. He eyed the kegs speculatively, wondering if he could come up with a reason to broach them—to test for proper quality, naturally. Balin, of course, noticed, and gave a minute shake of his head. *Spoilsport.*

"We're on our way to a trade settlement with the Blacklocks that will not only strengthen our ties to Durin's Chosen's family, but will also get us the iron ore we need a whole lot faster, and
without having to take any more *generosity* from cousin Dáin," Balin started off, serenely. There was a general round of approval to this announcement, which was far more positive than anything Fíli had seen from the Council.

Nori looked around from where he was lounging with his feet propped on the table, picking his nails with a needle-like dirk. The effect was good; urbane and yet dangerous, which is of course why he did it, Fíli suspected. "We know that there's trouble being stirred up in Laketown, and that it's dwarrow doing some of the stirring," he started. "The townsfolk are one step away from leaving, you know. Bard can't hold them much longer." He leaned forward and let his feet hit the floor with a thump. "We must do something, or we'll be back to *Ered Luin* with our tails between our legs by next winter."

"They'll not stay where they can't build! Above-grounders build their houses from wood—and Smaug burned everything from here to the Long Lake," Glóin pointed out gloomily. There was a muttered chorus of agreement from around the table, and they collectively stared into their tankards as if hoping to find a solution floating at the bottom.

Bofur seemed hesitant to interrupt those he considered smarter than himself when he raised a hand. "Ah, excuse me, does it have t' be wood, now?" He looked a little embarrassed when the focus of the whole company came to rest on him, and he sounded almost apologetic as he pointed out, "There's rock just laying around, you know, what with the rubble and excavations and all. Seems to me if I was cold and wet, I would welcome a roof ov'r me head, no matter the make of it."

The room erupted into noise, excited voices nearly drowning each other out, discuss and arguing the merits and draw-backs of this idea, but it was Kíli who pointed out, "But what use is stone to men, if they have not enough numbers with skill in working it?"

The room went quiet after that, and they all looked at each other, and then to Bofur, who shrugged his shoulders helplessly. Fíli and Kíli looked to each other briefly, easily understanding each other in that quick glance, and Fíli turned back to the company to address the miner once more. "Bofur, I want you to look into the logistics of transferring our rock to Laketown anyway. Even if they do not have a surplus of skilled masons, at least the availability of building materials may be enough to push back hopelessness and despair—and maybe combat some of this betrayal nonsense that is being whispered in their midst."

Bofur nodded dubiously. "I can organise everything on this end, but you'll need to get Lady Bylgja on board to move it anywhere."

Again, the princes glanced at each other. "I think we can manage to help the Lady Miner see our position," Fíli said finally, hoping he sounded as determined as he felt. Bilbo was right, this farce had carried on long enough and Kíli was as ready as he was to put some of the hobbit's advice into action. He turned to Dwalin, gently signaling the subject closed. "How is the surveillance of Lord Iór progressing?"

Scowling, Dwalin answered, "He's a crafty bastard, make no mistake. Slippery as a cold eel, and hiding something—I'd bet my beard on it. Thrice now, I've had patrols report observing him in the drowned tunnels, poking around."

"He is providing us with the plans that will hopefully clear out those tunnels, Mister Dwalin. Is it not possible that he's checking water volume, or air density or structural integrity?" Fíli asked, though even as he did, he noticed Kíli frown fiercely.

"Nah. That Lord knows no more about engineering than my dead dog did. Frankly, I have more engineering knowledge, and that's not saying anything at all. I don't like it. Those tunnels aren't all
that far away from the old Treasury, after all."

Fíli sucked in a breath. "You think there's some danger to Uncle and Bilbo?"

Dwalin gave a frustrated growl. "I can't imagine what, but I just don't like the bastard."

"I, I don't know how much weight to give it," Kíli spoke up hesitantly, "but Lord Jústi stopped me after Council last week."

"That sly bugger still alive?" Nori asked. "There aren't any flies on ol' Jústi; if he told you something, it's probably worth listening."

"He, well, he said he didn't want to report it in Council, 'cause he didn't want to make it official and take away our options on what to do with the information," Kíli was addressing Fíli now, and completely ignoring Nori.

"And what information did he give you, lad?" Nori asked quietly, watching the two princes with careful eyes.

"He said he'd had the chance of examining that shipment that came in from the Ocarina, and that he found a lead cylinder, packed in straw, tucked into the drum of one of those pumps that was shipped up."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Fíli asked.

Kíli grimaced. "Accusing a high-ranking diplomat like that will stir up all kinds of trouble with the other Families. I wanted a chance to look into it before I set fire in the mineshaft, you know? I was sort of hoping it would turn out to be nothing, and if that was the case, better only one of us losing sleep over it."

Fíli gripped his wrist in a warm clasp, even as he said sternly, "Don't do that again, brother-mine," and knocked his forehead against Kíli's for the kind thing his brother had tried to do.

"What was in the cylinder, lad?" Dwalin asked, bringing their attention back to the topic at hand.

"I think I can answer tha'," Bofur raised his hand again, looking as though he was wishing he was anywhere but were he was. "His Highness brought it to me and asked me to have a bit o' a look-see. It t'was an acidized paste, such as one might use in mining explosives. We used them for precise, controlled blasts so tha' we don't bring the roof down on our heads."

"Is that the only thing it's used for?" Fíli asked slowly.

"What does it matter if it isn't?" Nori broke in. "Can you think of a single reason a visiting Lord would need to have secret, explosive material shipped clandestinely—one that isn't something we should worry about?"

Fíli's shoulders slumped. "No, I suppose not," he admitted. "I want you and Dwalin to look into it. Have him watched. Keep it quiet, but I want to know where he is at all times. We still don't know for sure, and we desperately need those pumps, but until they're in place, better vigilance than getting caught with our trousers down."

THE STAGE WAS set very carefully, because if Fíli had his way he would wrest the reins from his stampeding parliamentarians. He wore his full royal regalia, including his finest tunic in Durin blue, tooled in gossamer metal thread with his crest and Hall affiliations. The whole was offset
with enough pieces of his plate steel armour to convey the image he wished. Though he had no weapon equal of Orcrist, he still had a pair of fine blades sheathed together at his side, as well as his official craft insinuations of rank and achievement braided into his hair. Kíli carried his short bow of carved and oiled yew, and even suffered his hair to be braided; something he rarely stirred himself to do. It was a visual reminder to everyone that the youngest Durin was not so unaccomplished as was widely gossiped over ale cups. Fíli was proud of how impressive his oft-overlooked brother was in his finery and polish. Several craft beads were visible within the intricate design, though of course, he had yet to find his heart-craft, so the centre was left with only his braids of royal blood and oaths.

He'd had the number of lanterns lit doubled, a psychological ploy, but one that he hoped would drive his point home—there would be no more hiding in the comfortable darkness of tradition and what had always been.

Lord Jústi seemed supremely discomfited by the glaring lights, and kept blinking his pale-coloured eyes in an attempt to relieve their watering. Many of these dwarrow had not been outside the mountain since it was reclaimed, and the brightness was jarring for one who had only been experiencing the muted daylight coming in through the vents.

Lord Glólin, however, glared around the room balefully, deciding who was responsible for his current suffering. When his gaze fell on the decorated princes, his eyes tracked them, considering. Iór sat near the end of the table, observing, but not a part of the gathering. As hard to read as always, his countenance was serene, though his dark eyes flitted about and took everything in. Fíli wondered if he saw what was coming. For some reason, he also wondered if he approved.

He could feel Kíli behind him, a bundle of tension and excitement and nerves, though his outward countenance was calm and committed.

Bylgja seemed as she always did, her expression smooth and untroubled. She regally ignored the other lords around her and sat politely waiting, occasionally glancing over to where the Master of the Craft Guilds, Lord Svíñ, sat with one booted foot propped up on the table edge and gave him a look of scathing distaste. Ásbergur was more interested in the sheaf of parchment he carried, pausing every now and then to grab a graphite stick from behind his ear to jot down changes. He looked more irritated at being dragged away from his workshop than anything else.

"It is time to take action, my lords," Fíli announced, working on keeping his voice strong and swallowing against the fluttering feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Laketown is in ruins, and soon we will be starving in our Halls and Mansion."

"We have discussed this before. I think that is a bit of an over-exaggeration, Your Highness," Svíñ drawled, twirling a coin between his heavily ringed fingers and watching the dancing glow it made on the table's surface in the overly-bright room. A faint clicking could be heard as the coin wove its path again and again. "We are hardly in danger of food shortage just because a few overly timid farmers don't plant their crops on time."

"There is no other market conveniently available to us. Do not forget that elves are no more farmers than we are, and King Thranduil has had many lifetimes to make all the trade agreements from west of his realm that he needs, which leaves only Laketown in reasonable distance." Fíli paused, making sure he had Svíñ's attention. "Unless you would have us treat with the Elf King for his excesses?"

"I think it might be a lesson in patience for our dear Master Glólin to try and negotiate with the pointy-eared bastards," Svíñ snorted contemptuously, clearly determined to add nothing of value to either side. "Or perhaps our very own Ice Maiden of Propriety here can charm it out of them."
The tiny tinkling of his dancing coin cut off with a startled oath, and the Crafts Master's boot hit the flagstone with a solid sounding thump as his chair was kicked out from under him. Lady Bylgja looked just a little too nonchalant as she shifted back in her seat, ignoring the commotion entirely. For his part, Svín was splitting his disgruntled look between Fíli and the Lady Miner, apparently not happy with either of them.

"There is no way we will be getting anything from the tree-shaggers," Ásbergur grumbled flatly, apparently having abandoned his slate. "Your Highnesses cannot possibly be thinking of offering to treat with them."

Fíli took a deep breath, and spoke with as much authority as he could muster. "No," he said. "I'm proposing we give assistance to the Men of Laketown." He was thankful he managed to sound firm and confident. "It is the only market available to us."

"You propose sending out some of our people as common labourers to build hovels for the Men?" Glólin questioned, his voice dripping with disdain. "It's a demeaning use of craft-master talent."

"No, of course not," Fíli demurred, glancing around the table as shoulders began to relax. He gave them a full minute to enjoy it before shattering their calm with firm efficiency. "I'm proposing we send out all of our people as labourers and craftsmen to rebuild the homes of Men."

"That could take weeks! Months even!" Bylgja shrilled, aghast. "The impact on mining operations alone will—"

"Your Highness, surely this needs to be talked about—we should appoint a committee, to assess the impacts such a drastic action will have on our economy!" Glólin interrupted, adding his protests.

"Securing Laketown is of paramount importance, you old bastard," Lord Jústi finally stepped in, turning his withering glare on the other lords in turn. Glólin glowered at him, while Bylgja seemed to be in shock. Svín's jaw was hanging open and Ásbergur was scribbling out rapid calculations, looking slightly ill. Jústi turned away from them all in dismissal.

"We have already paid the men Ereborian gold—if the lazy sods cannot manage their affairs, what concern of it is ours?" Glólin burst out, waving his many-ringed hands in the air wildly. "The Iron Hills will continue to assist us with supplies until the humans get their affairs in order. What is another season? Their own need to eat will drive them to become more efficient. The concern that they might simply wander off is ludicrous when there is such a lucrative market right here. What are they going to do, head into the wilds, in search of starvation and deprivation?"

Fíli stared at the Lord Merchant, trembling with indignation and smarting from the sting of dismissal from his peer, now trying to give he and Kíli a stern, disappointed fatherly look. Three months ago, Fíli acknowledged, he would have been cowed. Three weeks ago, he wouldn't have trusted himself to know what the right thing to do was. Three days ago, he would have worried at the repercussions of alienating such a distinguished peer. Now, he just felt irritated at the posturing of the old sod, wiggling and whinging for influence instead of being useful. He felt Kíli shift behind him, restless, and he would happily lay wager that his little brother's fingers were itching for their bowstring. For a long moment, Glólin's shrill words hung in the air between them, waiting for Fíli's answer.

Fíli nodded to him, once, a deep, formal motion of acknowledgment from the Crown. "Lord Glólin, I hear your words," Fíli said slowly, and Glólin posture eased, infinitesimally. "But now is where I am going to tell you what we're going to do," he continued, and there was no hint of deference in his voice now. "We are going to send every able-bodied dwarf to Laketown. We are
going to bring wagon-loads of our rock rubble, and every dwarf in this mountain is going to become a bloody engineer and architect and mason or even latrine-digger, because we are going to help re-build their town." Fíli suddenly understood why his uncle tended to yell at these meetings—there would be a tremendous sense of satisfaction in drowning out utter stupidity with the sound of logic and reason, he thought.

Glólin stared at the princes, as if seeing them for the first time. "I absolutely will not be part of this action, your Highness," he blustered, and Fíli finally had enough.

Gravely, he spoke to the bombastic council-dwarf, never raising his voice. "I respect that, my lord, and I respect that I've put you in a difficult position, asking you to commit to something you find so abhorrent. Kíli?" he spoke over his shoulder, without fully turning away from Glólin.

"Yes, Fíli?"

"I'm going to need you to procure some items, say, a shovel and a rake? Maybe an almanac? That should be enough to get our lord here started as a farmer, shouldn't it?"

"Maybe some seeds, Brother?" Kíli added, helpfulness and sincerity shining in his cheerful tone. "And some dirt? I think farming would take lots of dirt."

"Hmm, yes. Perhaps Lord Bard has some dirt we can have? Maybe even with worms in it? I think those have something to do with it, too."

"What? What nonsense are you boys talking about?" Glólin spluttered, his round face slowly turning purple in apoplectic rage.

"Your Highnesses," Fíli said. His voice was soft but very firm. "Pardon me?"

"Nothing to say? Then just listen. Since you feel it is beneath the dignity of our dwarves to assist the men in their recovery, then it would also be beneath your dignity to accept the fruits of that mutual labour. I respect your right to protest, and Kíli here will have a nice plot set out for you—we might even find one on the sunny side of our mountain. You can grow all your own food, with your dignity intact. Of course, I imagine this will take up a great deal of your time—farming does take time, does it not, Balin?"

"Oh, a great deal of it, I'm told, your Highness," the old consigliere advised serenely, clasping his hands around his middle as he watched the proceedings with barely concealed enjoyment. The look he received from the Merchant lord was positively filthy.

"So naturally, we will have to find someone else to serve in the council. It will be a sacrifice, but I absolutely will not interfere with your right to maintain your protest. If you are lucky, in the winter months, you may even have some time to see to your businesses."

He turned away, utterly dismissing the gaping dwarf. "Balin, I want you to start organising us to march. I want the first teams leaving by tomorrow afternoon."

"Yes, your Highness." Balin grinned as he gave a small bow. "If I may? I will need some assistance."

"Take whomever you need, just see it done." Fíli turned his attention back to the rest of his council members, who, for the most part, still hadn't managed to stop gaping at him, shocked and
possibly even a little frightened. Fíli felt it was the best thing he'd seen in months.

"You can't do that! The Council must ratify all decisions—" Svín protested hoarsely. The Lady Miner, who seemed to catch on to the new reality a bit faster, shot him a look full of condescension.

Fíli just raised one eyebrow—a trick Nori had taught him over their campfires in Rivendell to use on the tree-shaggers—and stared back, unmoved. Something in his expression must have convinced Svín, because it only took a moment for him to drop his gaze. Lady Bylgja stood up abruptly, and with a little bobbing curtsy to the throne, she turned to file out of the room. Reaching out serenely on her way by, she gave Svín's ear a savage pinch and tugged him to his feet. Fíli wasn't sure, but he thought he detected the merest hint of a smile on her normally stoic visage.

The council members, for the most part, still hadn't managed to hinge their jaws again as they mechanically followed Bylgja from the room. Once the last shocked dwarf had filed out, Fíli finally gave into the urge to slump in his chair, and turned to a grinning Kíli. "Did we just—?"

"I think we just staged a coup d'état," Kíli sniggered, "against our own government."

"That felt so unbelievably good," Fíli crowed.

For the next several moments, the ancient Throne Room of Erebor rang with youthful laughter. Thankfully, Balin was the only council dwarf lingering to hear it.

He smiled.

It was a triumphant look. With a lot of teeth showing.

Whistling a jaunty tune, the old advisor set off to find Glóin. This was the kind of victory that should be shared; and if there happened to be an ale keg broached in the process, well, that would be celebrating too, now wouldn't it?

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WHEN NEWS CAME TO him that Thorin had succumbed to his own pig-headedness, and gone down like a ton of iron ore, Bilbo's first instinct was to panic.

Bilbo's second instinct was to be furious with the stubborn dwarf for putting himself in such a position as to scare his would-be bond mate half to death.

When they finally barged in, a nerve-wracking seventeen minutes later, gently bearing a litter between them, for one heart-stopping moment Bilbo thought that Thorin was dead.

And then he saw the feeble rise and fall of his chest. The slow rhythm, up and down, broke the icy bond around his perception, and suddenly time started again.

"What happened?" he demanded of Óin as he directed the carriers to bring Thorin to his bed. And if he sounded a trifle aggressive, for once he didn't care.

The crotchety old healer harrumphed. "Collapsed. Thankfully, Kíli was right there, or we'd be trying to piece the inside of your head back together, too."

"Collapsed? But why?" Bilbo grabbed the back of the chair in a white-knuckle grip. "What happened, blast it!"
Óin eyed him for a long moment, before perhaps coming to the decision that he shouldn't further upset the already stressed hobbit. "He pushed himself too hard, being outside of the Khufdîn—the place of confinement," he clarified, seeing Bilbo's confusion. "Frankly, it's been an act of sheer will that he's gone this long before ending up on his royal arse."

"We always knew he was incredibly strong-willed," Bilbo murmured over the sucking sensation in his chest.

"No, what this proves is that our king is a stubborn bastard," Óin sniffed. He waved the litter-bearers onward, and turned his shrewd gaze to Bilbo instead, and when he started to sway, caught him neatly at the elbow. "Bit of a delayed reaction. I was wondering if you'd feel it, being a hobbit and all."

"Feel it?" Bilbo managed to gasp, having a hard time catching his breath with what felt like a band constricting around his chest and heart. Two fingers pressed into his wrist, almost uncomfortably firm, but Bilbo was grateful for it because it gave him something to focus on, driving the weak feeling away.

Óin seemed satisfied with his pulse, and he began rummaging in his bag as he talked. "Your bond's not stable, lad, being as you two haven't chosen to formalize it yet, so the energy necessary to keep it open is draining for both of you, and when one of you falls, it gets telegraphed back through the open conduit like water in a pipeline."

"So, what about good things?" Bilbo asked, feeling much less lightheaded now that the band seemed to have loosened somewhat. "Do they get telegraphed, too?"

Óin smirked, giving Bilbo a disturbingly leering look for such an old dwarf, he felt. "There's a reason why intercourse is discouraged before the bond is complete, lad."

Mortified, Bilbo could only hope that he could somehow forget this highly improper conversation by morning. Thankfully, Kíli barged in, just as Óin was pressing a phial of foul smelling tincture into his hands, instructing him to take it tonight, and again in the morning to keep up his strength. In a flurry of instructions to let Thorin sleep himself out, and not, under any circumstances, to disturb him, he left, giving one last admonishing glare to Kíli as he went.

Once the tightness in his chest had fully eased, Bilbo finally relaxed, assuming that must mean Thorin was recovering. Twice, he had tiptoed into Thorin's room, just to watch that steady rise and fall of his breathing, and allowing himself to be reassured by it, headed back to the library where Kíli was keeping vigil with him, trying to distract him from his worry. Kíli had been a wellspring of information once Bilbo had thought to question him. It turned out the youngest Durin heir was rather more knowledgeable than Bilbo had ever given him credit for, and he felt rather guilty for having dismissed him on their journey as merely a reckless youth who still had maturing to do, when compared to his steady older brother.

"It's not so much the close physical proximity," he was saying, "though that does help, but the cavern itself has been consecrated, and Bifur has sung to it, so that the rocks have been encouraged to vibrate and sing at exactly the right pitch to block out anything else—like the presence of a few hundred dwarrow not too far away."

"And this... singing? To rocks? It actually works to shield us?"

"Well, I don't know, Mister Boggins, have you had any peculiar urges to work a forge? Or clomp around in great iron boots?"

"Very funny," Bilbo said dryly.
For a moment, Kíli looked terribly serious, staring somewhere over Bilbo's shoulder. "I'll never forget the way he looked, like he'd never seen his own boots before. And all he seemed to be able to think of was getting his feet free." The young dwarf gave a little shudder, and came back to the present, grinning at Bilbo cheekily. "Still, it will make for a great verse in the tales, how the Hobbit fair set such a high standard in his challenge that it laid the king low."

"Pretty words to mean that this is my doing," Bilbo stated, dully.

Kíli shrugged, looking not at all accusing or angry with Bilbo for doing this to his family. "Frankly, most of the kingdom was kind of impressed with you—for you to have set such a difficult challenge, and for the king to actually try to meet it—it speaks highly as to how much Uncle Thorin would sacrifice to be allowed to keep your company. It is incredibly, well..." Kíli flushed, and mumbled, seemingly trying to share this last part only with his boots, "...romantic."

Bilbo just stared; sure he must have misheard that last bit. He waited for the sounds to rearrange themselves into something more dwarven-sounding in his head, but no, he still heard the same syllables that refused to become something else. "Romantic?" he questioned, and he was really rather proud of himself for asking so calmly, given that his insides where being dis-obligingly squirmy.

If possible, the normally gregarious warrior prince looked even more uncomfortable. "Yes, well, it doesn't translate well, all right? Most of our epics that tell of dwarrows finding their life-mate are the re-telling of the trials and challenges undertaken to win them. Why Durin himself, when he caught sight of Lady Dís, negotiated with her entire clan for the right to woo her! The descriptions of the negotiations alone span over one hundred verses. And besides—"

"This would be the same Durin who instituted the first of these confinement ritual things?" Bilbo interrupted dryly before he was subjected to an entire list of the many examples of how these stories were Not At All About Anything Soft, Thank You Very Much. "Your tough exteriors will no longer fool me, I can assure you. Dwarves are an entire race of well-hidden soppy romantics."

Kíli looked highly affronted. Bilbo privately wondered if he had learned that look from Thorin, or if perhaps it had simply been passed down the line of Durin for centuries. "They're highly traditional, those epics," Kíli muttered, mutinous. "Yours are even more grand, being as you helped Uncle to reclaim his kingdom and all."

"Epics being written? As in, currently in progress?" Bilbo asked, skeptically. "And what happens if I turn your Uncle down?"

"Then they will be epics of how he strove against impossible challenges to win the favour of one far above his reach." Kíli sounded almost philosophical about the whole thing.

Bilbo, not at all comfortable with this interpretation of events, could feel the heat of his blush as a fiery bloom beneath his skin. "I hardly think one lowly hobbit is above a dwarven king's reach."

Kíli eyed him curiously. "You doubt yourself too much. You left your home and your security, faced goblins and wargs—and even elves!—and saved us from them all. You, who faced Smaug, and riddled with him—learning his weakness so that the thrush could share it with others. You, who stepped in for a king incapacitated by illness and prevented a general war between elves and men and dwarrows. A war, I might point out, that would have meant death for us all. You are the one very much above anyone's reach, Uncle Bilbo."

Bilbo felt himself blushing to the very tips of his ears to hear Kíli speak so, especially about his actions after they had reclaimed the mountain.
"My nephew speaks the unflattering truth, Master Baggins," a deep voice rasped from the doorway. "You are definitely above my worth, but yet I dare to dream anyway."

Bilbo shot up immediately, of course. "Thorin!" he cried, hastily crossing the room to his side. "Should you even be up?" Bilbo fussed, reaching to lay a hand against his forehead. Thorin obligingly ducked his head, making the task easier and leaning into Bilbo's palm gratefully.

"I am well enough," he mumbled, shifting again, so that Bilbo's palm now cradled his cheek instead. "Besides, it's better out here with you."

Warmth suffused his chest at Thorin's unguarded words, and Bilbo allowed his hand to linger a moment longer, enjoying the feel of silken soft whiskers rubbing against his skin. "You great softie," Bilbo sighed. Neither of them noticed Kíli quietly excusing himself.

Eventually, Bilbo did pull his hand away, ignoring the pout he got for his trouble as he encouraged Thorin to sit down instead. Of course, as Bilbo was discovering, the dwarf's behavior seemed to be distinctly lacking in restraint at the moment, and Bilbo promptly found himself tugged down to sprawl into a warm lap.

"Thorin!" he squeaked.

"I feel better when you are near. You do want to aid in my recovery, do you not?" Thorin asked loftily, as if he weren't winding his arms around Bilbo in a most decidedly familiar way. "Besides, I thought Hobbit courting involved things that are comfortable and pleasurable?"

"Which is it—you're sick, or you're courting?" Bilbo asked, quite sure that his face must be ten shades of pink by now, though he was beginning to relax into the dwarf's hold anyway. The broad chest at his back was warm and inviting; it really was quite lovely being held like this. Not that he would admit that to the bothersome dwarf. It would only encourage him to more ridiculous behaviour.

Thorin's breath stirred the curls at the crown of Bilbo's head as he took several slow, deep breaths, his nose idly ghosting the tips of Bilbo's hair. "Why can't it be both?" he finally murmured. "I am very good at multi-tasking," and oh, that last bit was rumbled directly behind his ear, causing the heat of Thorin's breath to whisper over the sensitive skin there, and Bilbo's heart to stutter in his chest.

Thorin earned himself a swat for his trouble, though it was half-hearted at best. Undeterred, he began running his nose gently along the line of tendon in Bilbo's neck, inhaling as he went and humming softly in contentment when the hobbit tilted his chin slightly, exposing a bit more for his explorations. A pleasant tingling was left in the wake of this gentle caress, and Bilbo found himself enjoying riding the wave of anticipation that drew taunt between them. It was warm and solid, but not urgent or overwhelming, and he found that though he desired a kiss, and had spent an embarrassing amount of time wondering what Thorin's lips would feel like against his own—if he would be bold and firm in his lead, or hesitant, and if it were at all possible to give up breathing for any length of time—he found he was equally enjoying desiring to be kissed, and was in no rush to end the journey. Hobbits understood the comforts and pleasures to be had in physical companionship as easily as they embraced that of food, and knew how to savour both like a fine vintage of Bywater brandy, or Buckland port.

Unfortunately, just as Bilbo was accepting his desire for more, Thorin seemed to have other plans, as his attentions slowed down before finally stopping altogether.

Bilbo gave him a gentle nudge. "What are you thinking about?" For a long moment, no reply was forthcoming, and Bilbo was about to nudge him again, less gently, when Thorin finally spoke.
"I am uncertain how to properly phrase my question," Thorin admitted, sounding very unsure of himself, but his thumb began tracing a soft pattern over Bilbo's thigh again, so the hobbit was loath to turn around, despite how he had to twist his neck uncomfortably to carry on a conversation.

"Communication has never been your strong suit," Bilbo hummed in agreement, which earned him a pinch for his cheekiness. "You could begin by telling me what question you wish to ask—though I don't believe there is a proper way to ask questions, you know."

"I think there is probably a proper way to ask this question," Thorin said, gravely. He wavered again, hesitant and anxious. Bilbo tried not to squirm or to be disappointed when the caressing stopped again.

"I wish to ask you to have tea with me," Thorin finally managed.

Bilbo's heart stuttered and restarted at twice its normal pace. He must have heard that incorrectly. There was no way that Thorin, dignified and utterly dwarven to his large fingertips, was offering to make him something so Western, so utterly hobbitish as tea; not the important kind, anyway.

"Though I admit to having no family recipes suitable for the occasion, or that my mother never had a teapot for her son to someday use in this," he continued, sounding even less confident, if that were possible, as the hobbit's silence dragged on.

"Oh, bother the teapot," Bilbo groaned, blinking rapidly against suspicious moisture in his eyes. He began squirming, trying to be free of Thorin's embrace so he could properly face the dwarf.

Thorin allowed his hands to drop dejectedly, obviously misconstruing Bilbo's desire to quit his arms, so his look of surprise when the hobbit merely settled himself back in his lap to face him was highly amusing. Bilbo grinned, though it was still a bit watery. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You have created a Tea."

Thorin hummed in agreement, seeming to be focused on getting his arms situated around his lap-guest so that he could continue his earlier explorations.

"You made it with me in mind, to share?"

Thorin didn't bother to agree this time, but gave Bilbo a very sensual smile instead, and really, how he could go from humble and adorably unsure, to seductive in a span of heartbeats was beyond Bilbo's grasp, but it really wasn't fair. He pinched Thorin's ear for him, instead, and ignored the dwarf's wounded look. "You made a Tea," he said, soft and very serious. "For me."

"I did," Thorin affirmed, and regarded him with heart-stoppingly open affection, looking relaxed and certain for the first time since this conversation began. "And I am hoping you will see fit to advise me on the proper way to ask you to enjoy it with me."

"Frankly, I think you did a fine job," Bilbo told him, hating how strained and small his voice sounded. The taut, stretching feeling that Bilbo was beginning to understand as the bond, had created a pull between them, and for once, he saw no reason not to give in. Thorin watched him passively, as if divining the direction of his desires, but leaving the decision of what to do about it firmly in Bilbo's hands.

And Bilbo found he very much did want this—wanted to know and explore this proud and incredibly passionate dwarf in all they ways he was offering. Very slowly, he reached out to trace his fingers against the outline of Thorin's face. Starting with his brow, broader than any hobbit's, he explored the texture of the course hair of Thorin's eyebrows, smoothing them as he went.
Lightly, he traced his nails along the furrows that normally appeared whenever Thorin scowled, which was often, and he felt the involuntary shudder beneath him. Determined not to be distracted, Bilbo slowly traced his rather large nose, feeling a tiny bump beneath the surface, most likely a remnant of some past battle, and thought Óin must have done a fine job setting the brake to have left so little evidence. For good measure, Bilbo leaned in and brushed a butterfly-light kiss to the spot before moving on. Hands tightened briefly on his hips in response, but still Thorin made no move to hinder this unhurried exploration.

Thorin’s cheekbones were not high enough to be close to the surface of his skin, but were still high enough to prevent him having a rounded face, like Bombur, and Bilbo used the pad of his thumbs to massage the flesh over them in a wide, circular arc. Thorin's breathing was steady, but no longer silent as he took air through parted lips, and Bilbo realised he had been doing the same. In this moment, nothing else seemed to exist—not the expectations of a nation, not the impropriety of perching on someone’s lap, not Bilbo's shyness or Thorin's doubts. It was a cocoon, like Thorin had described so many, many weeks ago, and the hollow thread between them seemed to pulse in time to their thrumming hearts, a warm living tendril of shared emotion existing for them alone. Faintly, it felt as if the very chamber were somehow singing to them.

When Bilbo's fingers began to gently ply the strands of Thorin's short beard, carding each section slowly and scraping his nails along his chin, Thorin groaned softly. "You have no idea how that feels," he murmured, as if to speak any louder would disturb the spell between them.

But the hardness growing beneath him was enough to tell Bilbo how it might feel. Keeping Thorin's dark gaze, he deliberately, and very slowly, pressed his weight more firmly into Thorin's arousal, both acknowledging and accepting it, without the need to do anything more about it.

"Kiss me," Thorin whispered hoarsely, still staring at Bilbo from beneath hooded eyes. "Please."

Well. *It would be impolite to ignore such a heartfelt request, now wouldn't it?* Bilbo thought, feeling rather whimsical and free in this protected moment.

Bilbo kept his eyes on Thorin's as best he could as he leaned in, hovering over his lips and ghosting them with his breath. Thorin watched him, eyes burning, and waited with a pleased smile faintly visible, curling the edges of his mouth. Taking a slow breath, Bilbo did something he'd always wanted to do, and sunk his hands into the heavy mass of the dwarf king's hair, tangling them until he had a firm hold, and used it to angle Thorin's head to his liking before closing the whisper of distance still between them.

The lips beneath his were slightly chapped, but firm and pliant against his own, and Bilbo was once again enveloped in the heady smell of Thorin's skin. Firm pressure eventually gave way to a hesitant tongue tracing the broad seam of dwarven lips before licking its way inside, earning himself a pleased rumble in return. The sable strands of his hair felt like fine silk against Bilbo's fingers, or woven velvet, and Thorin groaned again, the vibrations carried through their joined lips, as the tugging grew firmer and less gentle. The sense of Thorin, the shape of him, welled up in some place deep inside Bilbo's chest, as if the dwarf king were both beneath him and within him, surrounding Bilbo with his presence. He felt a further stirring of desire, but wasn't entirely sure at this point if it was his or Thorin's, or how much separation there truly was.

Bilbo wasn't sure who began the rocking, but they were both doing so now, seeking and receiving friction as they leisurely moved against one another. It turned out he could go without breathing for a surprising amount of time with the proper incentive, though eventually he had to concede defeat, pulling back to catch his breath while tasting the flushed skin of Thorin's neck, trying to let the building urgency dissipate before they did something that would be a thoroughly clot-headed idea.
Thorin seemed to agree, for though he continued to hum and groan his enjoyment of Bilbo's mouth, he gentled his hands where he kneaded the hobbits hips, no longer pulling him against his lap, but tracing gentle patterns and caressing instead.

Bilbo pulled back, still panting slightly, but couldn't resist nipping in for one last innocent press of lips before he sat back completely, a pleased sigh escaping him and giving what he was sure was a soppy smile. Surprisingly, as the fog of ardour lifted, it felt comfortable, like they had truly shared something important, as opposed to being carried away in a moment of passion.

Large hands reached into his wayward curls, gently finger-combing them out of their disarray. "Will you let me braid your hair?" Thorin murmured, a note of hesitancy in his voice as he asked.

"And what would this braid mean, if I were to let you?" Bilbo asked, somewhat coy, but mostly curious. The pulse of the bond had gone back to being a background sensation, and he was feeling pleasantly satiated and lethargic in the wake of their embrace.

"It would mean... it would mean my heart." Thorin's voice was a husky rumble as he began fingering his hair, testing it's texture and weight, claiming a lock near Bilbo's brow. "My heart, worn here for all to see to whom it belongs."

"So not a commitment, then?" And Bilbo inwardly cringed at his insensitive phrasing. After what they had just done, Thorin would have every right to enquire about the possibility of a pledge. Really, in his previous life, Bilbo could never have imagined doing what he had just done without a clear idea of commitment—or lack thereof in the case of a pleasurable fling—being discussed, but he was finding that he wanted to let this bond take root before making any decisions. The slow pace of the dwarven Khebabel Azyungaz had started to make sense to Bilbo; it was a lot to adjust to, and involved making a lot of small changes to his thinking on things he had always considered immutable. Tonight had given him a lot to consider.

"No, beloved, not a commitment. You, as yet, have given me no promises you cannot keep, but I would be honoured if you would wear a braid for me." Thorin continued to section out his hair, carding the snarls from it with practiced ease.

"I think," and Bilbo stopped, having to clear his throat when it suddenly felt constricted, because that damnable moisture was back in his eyes. "I ah, think I would like that. Very much."

The noise Thorin made could only be described as a rumble, though it sounded extremely pleased, and Bilbo relaxed again as his hair was examined again for positioning and flex and weight and whatever else dwarrow took into account when plaiting. Closing his eyes, he felt rather boneless under Thorin's expert touch, so he settled back to enjoy it.

"Have you given any thought as to who you might like to have as witnesses, for your family? Or do I need to send Dwalin to the Shire with invitations for your relations?"

Bilbo couldn't help but snicker at the idea of tattooed and weaponized Dwalin in the Shire, handing out lacy little invitations. "Go on an adventure like that? I don't think any of them would be willing to just pick up and cross all of Arda—and for a dwarven courtship, no less! Honestly, Dwalin would probably frighten them half to death. Anyway, I am quite sure I shall be the official dandelion in the family garden after this," Bilbo told him, feeling far too comfortable to really bother opening his eyes.

"Will you not miss them?"

His sigh may have been a bit wistful, but it was an old hurt, long since healed, so the question raised no blisters for Bilbo. "My parents died more than a decade ago, now, and I'm not terribly
close to anyone else—I mean, I love my family, for the most part, enjoy visiting and family gatherings and such, but I'm not what I would consider truly close to the majority of them. Not enough to share this, at any rate. If I were to have someone there, I would want it to be someone who was truly happy for me, or at least trying to understand my choices, and I don't think there's one amongst them who could do that—not of the ones old enough to attend, at any rate. Besides," he said, settling a little more firmly into Thorin's solid chest. "I believe I have all I need for family, right here."

He could feel Thorin's pleased grin against his scalp at his words, and he couldn't quite quash the devilish impulse to add, "After all, I'm sure Thranduil will be available to witness for me, especially if Dwalin were to deliver a formal invitation."

He rather snickered at the choked sounds Thorin was making as he struggled to find a strong enough retort at the idea of Bilbo sharing any kind of kinship with *elves*.

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Chapter End Notes

Am I the only one who want's to fist pump right now? :D Fili and Kili continue to be so much fun to write and explore their transition into leaders, and Thorin and Bilbo's growth together just makes my heart all goopy.

This chapter caused more dissension amongst my betas than any other. Their reactions to the same events were wildly different. This honestly surprised me, as I thought this was an extremely straight-forward and gratifying chapter, with both Fili and Kili's triumph and Thorin and Bilbo's first kiss. With their help, it's been retooled, though of course, I had to make some decisions for 'yay' or 'nay' to one's point of view over another, so obviously there is still room for disagreement. The final product is definitely much stronger for all their hard work. I'm almost nervous as to what reactions might be, given how all over the board their reactions were! Still, it's my favourite chapter to date, and I hope you all enjoy it as much as I did :)

As I'm sure many of you have already figured out, I'm using a mix of book an movie canon; more book than movie, honestly, but there is definitely some of the movies creeping in, too :) I probably should have included that in my notes way back in chapter one, but, better late than never, right? *facepalm* Also, I think there is now going to be thirteen chapters in this story. Events in the narrative are conspiring, and insisting they each get their own chapter, so I've been forced to split things up a bit ;)

I will also add one final note - or even a question, as of course I welcome everyone's comments. The rating of this story may go up. I have started to hash out the final chapter, and the potential is there for some fairly explicit smut. I haven't committed one way or another yet, and it still depends on exactly how the narrative shakes out, but would anyone object if I were to go there? I wouldn't normally think twice, as I write a fair bit of smut, but I did start this story with a 'M' rating, not an 'E' - so fair warning is due, I feel.

This story may get smutty.
There, you have all been given a heads-up, so hopefully, there won't be any unwelcome surprises for anyone <3 (I will, of course, change the rating, if and when I do decide to go there, I promise)

Thank you to everyone for reading/reviewing/giving kudos - I am so thrilled with the response this little story had gotten <3
And Still On Gold Here Let Them Lie

Chapter Summary

~In which Thorin learns that the kitchen may not be as hazardous as battle, but it's close, and Bilbo decides to put his foot down; possibly on Thorin's ~

Chapter Notes

As always, my thanks, my wine supply, and my first-born child to the wonderful ladies who help me with this story. You hold my hand when I second guess myself, you tell me when I'm full of crap, and you dedicate so much time and love from your busy schedules to helping me create something I can be proud of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins:
The Legacy of Our Fathers

"A WORD, MASTER BOMBUR?"

Finding the rotund chef had of course, been easy. Though an architect by craft, Bombur had surprisingly seemed only too happy pressed into temporary service in the kitchens of Erebor, feeding the refugees and miners alike while Balin and Glóin tried to sort out staff without any dwarrows to do it with. Eventually, he would return to his more important task of helping Thorin and his nephews design the re-structuring of their mansion, and give order and beauty to that plan. Privately, Thorin was convinced that his stomach, and heart, would feel the difference keenly
once Bombur left his short-term posting.

A family recipe, Bilbo had said. Frankly, Thorin's mother had been a weaver by craft, and not at all inclined to culinary endeavours. She cared little about what appeared on her plate, provided it wasn't burnt, and his father, Thráin, only really cared if the meal contained meat that wouldn't attempt an escape when speared onto a fork. Somehow, he felt, neither of these approaches worked well for this kind of a courting gift. And while Bombur wasn't family, he was part of his company—a body of dwarves with whom he felt close ties of loyalty and warmth resembling the bonds of kinship. Hopefully, it would be an acceptable tie for this hobbitish rite, because Thorin had inherited a legacy of burning water.

To ask one who wasn't blood kin for such a favour was highly unusual in dwarven society, and not one that could be done without bearing a suitable token to be gifted. Thorin had thought long and hard before returning to his forge and crafting a long-handled tasting spoon. After travelling with him for so long, he was well aware of Bombur's insistence that each element of a meal must be tasted, to ensure flavour, and that it was a poor chef indeed who would not partake of his own cooking. The seriousness of his need dictated that only the finest materials be used, and so he had crafted it of the purest platinum, being a metal that wouldn't corrode or tarnish, and had engraved it with the runic knot work of the Ur family.

Of course, during the day, the kitchens were never really empty, but Thorin had tried to time it so that it would be as empty as possible, for his sanity's sake. A few pockets of activity dotted the huge room, dwarrows busy at various tasks of chopping and washing and prepping. Dishes occasionally flew through the air, and disparate songs could be heard in the various groups, blending melodiously into an unplanned whole. His people were content then, and Thorin felt a sense of pride that despite almost having thrown all this away, he had still stumbled into this happy ending for his people—mostly due to the wit and courage of a hobbit. No task could ever be great enough to prove worthy of such a One, but Thorin would try.

In a chair by the hearth, feet up on a stool and sipping a cup of tea as he surveyed the busy scurrying of those within his dominion, he found Bombur, and he was on his own, for which Thorin was grateful. Quiet by nature, Bombur seemed unsurprised by Thorin's invading his small realm, merely raising an inquiring eyebrow and asking softly, "May I do something for you, my King?"

Thorin stepped forward, trying to ignore the audience of gossipy dwarves who were desperately trying to pretend they weren't craning their necks to see what was going on. "I have brought to you a token, forged of my skill. If ye judge it fair, will you hear me?" he asked, formally.

Surprise flitted briefly across Bombur's round face, and gravely he took Thorin's gift. His inspection of the offering was exceedingly thorough, noting its weight and heft in his large hand, evaluating the symmetry and depth of the bowl and taking the time to examine and appreciate the fine engraving. Carefully, he laid the token onto the small table beside him and looked up into Thorin's tense expression. "Fair indeed, and welcome. I would hear you, Brother," he spoke the ritual acceptance solemnly.

Thorin allowed his posture to loosen and clasped his hands behind his back, more so that his fiddling wouldn't be immediately noticeable. "I require a recipe," he began, and it was obvious that Bombur wasn't shocked by this revelation at all when he settled back into his chair and steeped his fingers comfortably over his enormous belly, content to listen. Thorin frowned. "You do not seem surprised by my request."

Both ginger eyebrows were lifted at him this time. "Should I be?" he inquired politely. When Thorin's frown deepened, Bombur shrugged his massive shoulders. "I had hoped I would be seeing you eventually, my King."
If anything, this response only baffled him further. "Hoped?" Thorin asked.

It was Bombur's turn to frown slightly. "I know that Master Bilbo should be wooed with good food. If he did not make you familiar with himself enough for you to know this, then your chances would be very slim indeed, I would think." Thorin pondered this unique way of looking at it for a moment and found much wisdom in the plain-spoken dwarf, and Thorin again felt the rightness of putting his faith in him.

"Master Baggins has indeed made me familiar with the courting habits of his people," he admitted. "I have prepared the ritual tea, and petitioned for his acceptance in attending the rite, but I should also bring something made by my own hand. In his Shire, it would be made from a family recipe, but as that is not possible..." He clenched his hands behind his back helplessly.

Bombur's cheeks turned pink under all his freckles. "I am humbled that you consider me to be a close alternative to family, your Majesty."

"Should I not?" Thorin asked seriously. "I would value you or any of my company over all the Lords and Ladies of all the kingdoms, for none could have served me so well but for bonds of loyalty and willing hearts."

The pink in Bombur's cheeks turned a glowing red to rival his ginger hair, and he seemed to scoot down into his chair in his embarrassment. Thorin watched, fascinated. "Will you help me?" he asked earnestly.

Sitting up straight once more, Bombur nodded for Thorin to take a seat on a nearby stool. "It would be my pleasure, my King," he said. "Have you any ideas as to what you wish to make?"

Thorin shrugged helplessly. "I had thought something sweet, perhaps, as that seems more appropriate for a courting gift, but I am uncertain if this is supposed to demonstrate my ability to provide meals. Do hobbits hunt?"

Humming, deep in thought, Bombur tapped his chin with one thick finger. "What time of day is this Tea usually served, then?"

"Evening," Thorin said, and grew warm in remembering Bilbo's fussy voice informing him that was the time of day for romantic intent. "Just prior to their last meal, I believe."

Bombur patted his belly in absent approval at the mention of hobbit meals and frequency. "No, I think you're right about the sweet, but maybe something a little hearty. Hobbits seem to appreciate food for its proper importance, and we wouldn't want to offer something not substantial enough." Laying his feet flat on the floor in front of him, Bombur used the armrests to push himself up to stand before Thorin. "Come on, then," he said as he marched further into the cavernous room, and for one so large, he moved both silently and quickly. "We'll pour through my Granddam's recipes —she had wondrous skill in the kitchens, and always had the perfect dish for every occasion."

What followed were some of the most mystifying hours of his life, second only to those spent with Dori learning tea. At least, Thorin consoled himself, he knew he was familiar, mostly, with the ingredients in Erebor's kitchens. After a few hours of Bombur's patient edification, Thorin wasn't so sure about that anymore, either.

Marzipan was the way to go, Bombur had at length decided. A thick sweet paste, made of almonds and scented with expensive and fragrant rosewater, they would encase it in flaky, butter-studded pastry, further filled with brandy-soaked figs and spices. They would then baste the whole in honey until sticky sweetness oozed unctuously with every golden, crackling bite. Thorin just
stared at him, feeling as though perhaps he'd just been spoken to in Elvish—or even Troll.

"You will have to come and practice," Bombur admonished him as he efficiently cleaned up their work area. Other dwarrows had begun filing in, and now the kitchens rang with many voices, beginning preparations for the evening meal. "You will join me each afternoon, an hour past the midday meal, and we shall begin." He waved his iron ladle under Thorin's nose authoritatively. "In this you are my apprentice, your Majesty, and I expect your best. Master Bilbo deserves it."

Thorin bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Yes, he does," he agreed quietly. "And you shall both have it."


BOFUR WAS BEGINING to feel as if this dusty forgotten room was a second home. Certainly, the company was better than in the stuffy official rooms of the Mining guild when Lady Bylgja was holding court. Admittedly, she was dead good for the guild, even if uptight and rather proper for a miner. Bofur always found himself a trifle tongue-tied in her commanding presence, and privately, he thought she might be modeling herself after Thorin's grandfather, Thór's rule. Still, her pale gold locks shone in the lantern light of the tunnels, and her beard was done in a delicate filigree of braids gathered with tiny, shining beads in a finely woven net that was quite the most becoming thing Bofur had ever seen. It couldn't be easy, being a woman ruling a bunch o' unruly lads. Dwarven women may not be held back the way he'd seen in the societies of Men, but they were still precious to the dwarrows, and in something as rough and tumble as mining could sometimes find themselves the object of unwanted protection. It wasn't all that unheard of for one of the lads to come away with a broken nose for their trouble if they went too far, as the lasses had no qualms at all in sorting them out when needed. Lady Bylgja, though, was made of steel and ice, and Bofur sometimes wondered how much of that was a mask, to keep those overprotective tendencies at bay, and if there wasn't a warm, dwarrowdam underneath it all, somewhere, and if she ever got to be that dwarrow with somebody.

"Best not think on it too much, lad," he advised himself, not for the first time, and, he suspected, not for the last. He appeared to be developing a serious case of compassion for those who seemed left behind, though Lady Bylgja would likely roast his stones over hot oil if she ever heard herself referred to in that way, even in the privacy of an old miner's head.

Most of the mountain was emptied now, with only skeleton teams of dwarves left behind. Bofur had been supervising the shifting of their rubble rock onto carts for transport all night, and every muscle he didn't know he had before ached. Still, he felt cheerful to be doing something to alleviate the suffering, instead of sitting and planning in their dark mountain. He and his kin had been wandering a lot longer than the Longbeards they'd taken up with. He'd seen a lot of misery in the wide world, and he had learned that it was the simple acts that meant the most, like a door that was opened, however reluctantly, instead of closed in your face.

"The first loads of rock should be arriving in Laketown within the hour," he announced wearily as he gracelessly fell into a chair at the round table. Dwalin grunted acknowledgement, and the others nodded. "Can't send anymore until those carts come back, like as not tomorrow evening."

"Excellent," Prince Fíli praised with a genuine, if tired smile, before he turned to Dwalin and his spymaster. "What have you found?"

Nori had appeared to be positively in his element up until now. This morning, however, he was grimfaced, and there was a hard edge to his expression that gave Bofur a cold tingle down his spine. Trouble, indeed.

"There's been digging in the deep places," and the look on the thief's face was absolutely seething.
"That bastard has been searching for something down there."

"Did you see him?" Kili asked, and Bofur was glad the young prince had the courage to ask, because he wasn’t sure he would have in the face of the auburn-haired dwarf's obvious anger.

"Not a trace of him," Nori bit out, and now it was obvious to Bofur exactly what had him so angry. He wouldn't take kindly to someone besting him at his own game. "But the earth's all been disturbed that has been unearthed by the receding water. Bastard talked us into installing his pumps, and doing his work for him, it seems."

"What in the name of Mahal's flaming arsehole could be down there that he wants?" Dwalin erupted. Balin shot his younger brother a disapproving look.

"Is it possible there is another way into the old Treasury chamber from one of those adjoining tunnels?" Fili wanted to know.

"Not likely, laddie. Even if this Iór fellow managed to get into one of the flooded tunnels closest to the King and Master Baggins' chamber, he would still have to burrow through several yards of solid rock to reach it. I do not think that would go unnoticed," Balin soothed.

"Not bloody likely," Dwalin growled, glaring about at everyone, indiscriminately.

"The digging isn't anywhere near the sections of tunnels closest the Treasury, anyway, and it's not like it's undefended. Two guards stand outside at all times, and Thorin and Master Baggins are inside of it. No, there must be something else down there—"

Honestly, Bofur wasn't sure how much more of this kind of excitement his heart could take, when a young dwarf lad burst through the door, red faced from running, and eyes rolling in terror.

"Here now, lad, slow down and take it easy," Bofur said kindly, but was ignored in the youth's agitation.

"Captain Dwalin!" he cried, coming abruptly to attention.

"Stand down, Regi," Dwalin said, sternly. "Catch yer breath, before yeh throw up on yer boots."

"Yes, sir!" he said, taking in great gulps of air. "Only, sir, there's been word sent from the border land patrols—just came in through the drum heights a quarter hour ago."

He stared at Dwalin a moment, who stared back. The bald warrior's eyes started narrowing in consternation the longer he waited. "Well?" he finally barked, when the silence had outstripped his limited patience.

"Yes, sir," Regi whimpered. "Only, it was addressed to the King Consort," he gulped. "From, from the Woodland Realm, Sir."

"Listen close, lad," Dwalin began in a low rusty rumble. "I don't care if it was addressed to Mahal himself—you tell me what the blethering pointy-eared bastards had to say!" he finished in a roar that promised dire consequences for young dwarflings who did not capitulate immediately.

"Orcs!" he cried, cringing. "Orcs have been seen on the move for Laketown. Something has stirred up what remains of the Orcs of Gundabad, and they march on the human settlement."

Dwalin glared balefully at a spot over the lad's head, as if he could bridge the distance with his gaze and incinerate the Orcs where they stood. Frankly, Bofur wouldn't lay any bets that he couldn't, neither. "All right, lad, go get yerself a hot meal. Keep this to yerself for now, you hear?"
With a hasty promise, the youth took off, only too glad to escape the hot seat.

"Well, that's just lovely now, isn't it?" Dwalin growled sarcastically.

"There can't be much of an orcish force left in Gundabad—we devastated their numbers during the battle," Balin protested, frustrated and angry. "What purpose do they have marching so soon? They must know that we will not allow them to overrun a town so close to our borders."

"And we can withstand a siege here for months with just a dozen or so of us to defend the mountain! The gates are repaired, and the entrances all fortified," Ori cried. "We'll give them a taste of dwarvish iron. Just let them come!"

"Easy, Master Scribe," Dwalin said, gruffly, but with a curious look at the younger dwarf. "I don't think they would have their sights set on Erebor, but perhaps, if they thought there were food stores in Laketown..."

Nori glanced at the Guard Captain in disgust. "You aren't nearly as stupid as you look, you know that?"

"Shut it, you."

"No, really—it's been a hard winter, especially as far north as Gundabad, so there might even be less of them than we think. They could be coming down, thinking to find food stores—probably not so much for themselves, even, but they must know we'll be looking to Laketown to make a go of it, and if we can't get food, Erebor will be abandoned once more and easy pickings for a bunch of scavengers and opportunists. One more mountain that they can take from us."

"The dwarves on the way to Laketown will be there in time to intercept them, and if we send Roäc, they will have warning and a chance to build fortifications with all that stone they've brought," Dori spoke up, obviously trying to remain positive.

Bifur muttered mournfully at that, giving Dori an apologetic look.

"But no armour," Fíli agreed with Bifur, quietly, "and limited weapons."

The company sat back, dejection visible on every face.

"But wait!" Kíli cried out. "Are there not still small water craft in the gate houses? We have the River Running flowing through our Front Gate! Why not send axes, armour, supplies—anything we can think of, down to the Long Lake by water? It will go faster than even ponies could pull the carts, if we even had any at the moment."

"There are two falls to navigate—one of them right outside our gate," Balin pointed out, but he sounded more thoughtful than doubtful, for which Fíli seemed grateful. "Small though they may be, they are still formidable enough we cannot simply sail down them."

"Wheeled cradles," Ori said, excitedly. "There must be a few lying around we can repair, for we had to transport the craft before, as those falls have always been here."

"Clever Ori!" Kíli laughed, clapping him on the shoulder. The young scribe gave a shy little grin when he caught Dwalin looking over at him before quickly ducking his head.

"It should only take a few craft to transport what we need. Unfortunately, we only have but a few hundred dwarrow sent." Balin sighed.

"And we'll empty out as many more as we can spare," Glóin declared. "We said we'd see that
stinking town rebuilt, and I'm not about to let a pack of mangy orcs muck it up again."

"My lords, we are talking about going to war," Fili said, looking over each of the company seriously. "The King's Oath comes into effect. We cannot leave Uncle Thorin out of this any longer if we go down this path."

Around the room utter silence rang, not one dwarf lifting his gaze from the table's polished surface. Finally, Dwalin spoke, shoulders falling. "Aye, lad. And Balin and I will go with you to inform him." And if even the great warrior had an air of resignation and reluctance, no one commented on it, for they all felt it.

Fili sighed. "First—Dwalin, Nori, I want you to take Iór into custody. Let's not have any loose ends running around while our backs are turned. I'll get around to questioning him once we see to all the preparations for the defence of Laketown. Balin, please prepare a message for Roäc to carry. We'll send it once we speak with the King."

IN THE END Kíli went in Fíli's place to see Thorin. Someone had to organise what they were to ship down the River Running, and since Ori was by far the most organised of the lot of them, Fíli opted to accompany him and make sure his quiet suggestions had the weight of royal commands.

Bilbo and Thorin sat together in the main chamber, in one of the meeting alcoves along the perimeter, every inch the royal couple holding court. Briefly, Kíli wondered if Bilbo even realised how easily he'd slipped into the role of King Consort, and how comfortably he sat at his uncle's side. Or that the authority he welded had nothing to do with being chosen by Thorin, and everything to do with being worthy of being followed.

"An orc army, coming down from Gundabad?" Uncle's voice gave nothing away, of course, but his look was dark as he took in all that they had been keeping from him. He had gone positively pale while they had described the explosives, and Iór's excavations in the deepest caverns of the Lower Halls, and Balin's thoughts that he had been seeking a way into the Treasury itself. Convulsively, Thorin's hand had sought Bilbo's, reassuring himself of the hobbit's safety.

"Yes, Uncle."

"And you and Fíli have emptied my mountain of most of our citizens, who are nearly to Laketown by now?"

Kíli winced. "Yes, Uncle."

"And you are planning on trying to float an arsenal to them," Thorin continued relentlessly, "using ancient wheeled cradles and equally ancient water vessels?"

"Yes?" Kíli knew it came out as a question instead of an answer, and he was trying really hard not to scuff his boots and stare at the ground, the way he would when he'd gotten a dressing down when he was still a lad of twenty.

The King-Consort-to-be seemed to have had enough, and gave the King an ungentle thump across his arm that was plainly audible to those watching. "Stop it. The poor lad's terrified he's let you down," he admonished quietly.

Looking genuinely startled, Thorin peered at Kíli searchingly. "Nonsense. You don't think you've done badly, do you, Kíli?"

Put on the spot, Kíli could only stammer helplessly, "Well, I—that is we, uhm..."

"Kíli," Thorin said, halting his nephew's awkward stuttering, and waited until the young dwarf
returned his gaze. "Kíli, you and Fíli have done extremely well. It is a unique solution to a difficult problem, and you both had the strength of will to stand by your convictions. I am proud of you both."

Kíli’s cocky grin was belied only by his deep flush.

"Íór is in secure custody, you say?" Thorin asked, and there was more than a hint of anxiousness in his tone.

"Yes, your Majesty," Dwalin confirmed. "Sewed up tighter than one of Dori's braids."

"Good. See that as many more as we can spare are set to leave with us for Laketown within the hour. We'll make good time marching unencumbered, and even if the boats are not ready to sail until evening, they shall still arrive at the mouth of the Long Lake almost as we do."

Bilbo eyed Thorin suspiciously, but appeared to be willing to wait to question him until they were alone. From the sharp look the hobbit was giving him, Kíli wasn't sure if he didn't pity his uncle. "Kíli, I'm going to ask you to stay here, and interrogate our guest. Find out what in the blazes he was after, and absolutely do not let him out of your sight. Have Dori and Bifur stay behind as well. Dori's strength and Bifur's insights may come in handy."

Acknowledging his orders, Kíli and Dwalin left the king to try and explain things to a very annoyed looking hobbit.

"..."

ALONE ONCE MORE, Thorin lost no time in flying into action, forcing Bilbo to step smartly to keep up. "Thorin! You can't seriously be planning on entering this battle?" he demanded, following Thorin into his private room.

"I must. The King's Oath supersedes everything, even the Khebabel Azyungaz. It is the only thing considered more compelling than the Bonding."

"What oath?" Bilbo asked, clearly frustrated.

"Nothing grand or complicated, beloved. The King's Oath is his duty to defend his people," Thorin patiently clarified, digging through his chest for the pieces of armour he had traditionally worn as part of his royal regalia. He hadn't donned any of it since turning the office over to Fíli. "If we are to engage in battle, I must be there."

"Then I suppose I will have to accompany you," Bilbo murmured distractedly, and had half made it from the room before Thorin managed to process his words and stop him.

Their months of confinement had wrought many changes on Thorin; changes he wasn’t even fully aware of, most of the time. Today, though, he how subtle some of those deep changes were, especially when faced with the near-crippling panic the idea of Bilbo accompanying him in their current state engendered, and where once he might have tried to command, he had learned to ask. "Please, Bilbo—No, not this time. I need you to stay here. Be safe for me; for us," he entreated softly.

"I most certainly will not. I have been by your side throughout this entire mad adventure; I hardly think I can step aside now. Besides, I held my own in the last battle, and I still have my ring."

"You got lucky in the first battle, beloved," Thorin pointed out with brutal truthfulness, strapping on his vambrace with reluctance. His armour felt alien against his skin after months without it.
"I will not be left behind like a forgotten pocket handkerchief, Thorin Oakenshield!" Bilbo stamped one foot in frustration.

"I promise, I will train you yourself when I get back, and I will never again deny you my side in battle; but for now, I only barely have enough concentration to do this—I would be hopelessly distracted if you were there as well, and that distraction would likely get me killed. Please, for both of our survival, will you not stay here?"

Bilbo glared at him unhappily. "You don't fight fair, my king."

Seeing Bilbo's distress, Thorin laid aside his remaining armour. He let out a deep breath, settling his large hands carefully over Bilbo's tense shoulders. "Beloved, I would not have you wroth with me on the eve of battle," he murmured. "What can I do?"

For a long moment, Thorin could feel Bilbo's shoulders trembling beneath his hands, before gradually relaxing. "Nothing, I suppose." Bilbo sighed bitterly. "For you wouldn't be you, if you were anyone else, and you have to do this." Bilbo turned beneath his hands, and Thorin guided him into his chest. "Only, promise me you will be careful, for it is my thoughts as well you carry with you into that confounded battle." For a long moment, Bilbo was content to be held in his arms, and Thorin wondered if it were possible to simply cast this moment in bronze, forever unchanging, because he could never recall feeling as content as he did right now.

"You will be distracted by the distance, and the presence of so many others—you'll be in danger regardless," Bilbo spoke up, rubbing his cheek briefly against Thorin's chest before pulling back enough to look in his eye.

"Óín has some herbs that I used during my periods in the Upper Halls. They dull the senses, 'tis true, but allow me to function with less pain. I shall survive, for I know that you are here and safe."

"Used herbs, did you? That sounds a bit like cheating, if you ask me," Bilbo teased half-heartedly, but became serious again quickly. "Thorin, wouldn't this be easier if we were already bonded?"

Thorin was unprepared for the wave of longing that swept through him at the idea. His soul joined and whole, his One his to protect and encourage, as he in turn would be sheltered and supported. "Do not be cruel, beloved," he rasped.

"Cruel?" Bilbo asked, sounding very hurt.

"Forgive me," Thorin said and pressed a kiss into his russet curls, trying to order his thoughts before answering. "I know you meant no offence, but I would not have you refer to our bonding in so flippant a manner."

Bilbo twisted out of his arms so he could face Thorin properly. "What are you talking about, Thorin? I, I thought that if we finish the bond now, before you go—"

"No!" Thorin desperately cut him off, not sure if he would be strong enough to refuse if Bilbo were able to finish his offer. "Please, Bilbo," he begged softly. "I will not have you completing our union under this kind of duress. When I come back to you will be time enough for you to decide, free of any considerations save those of your own heart."

Bilbo glared at him crossly, but Thorin could tell the storm was already passing. "You're being needlessly noble, you great stubborn dwarf."

"Then let me be noble for you. I will return to you, I promise."
Bilbo regarded him sourly. "That's not a promise you can make, you know."

"I do not think Mahal would have engendered our unique bond, only to end it so. I have faith in my creator; now I ask that you have faith in me."

"I will. But let me at least... that is, could I..."

"Speak what is on your mind, please, Bilbo." Thorin took Bilbo's hand and traced one finger gently along the curve of his lips. "Did you not once tell me that there were no proper ways to ask questions?" he teased.

Bilbo allowed himself to be charmed, smiling briefly. "I supposed you're right. Fine. Would you, Thorin Oakenshield, allow me to braid your hair? To show were my heart lies?"

As Bilbo had suspected, the idea of wearing his braid into battle was so compelling that Thorin set aside everything and insisted they do it now. They settled themselves upon the hearthrug, and Thorin lounged completely pliant beneath Bilbo's hands, like a great sleepy cat. A small smile curved his stern lips, and his eyes, though half closed, never left Bilbo as he worked.

The braid he had eventually learned from Fíli, after much questioning about specific meanings, was complicated by Shire standards, and required a great deal of concentration for Bilbo to not simply braid his fingers up into Thorin's hair. However did dwarves manage it, with such thick fingers?

"You know, giving gifts in the Shire usually involves more food. And less difficulty," Bilbo said at one point, more to break the tension of having Thorin regarding him like that—all sleepy and sensual and open.

"You speak of fine things your people exchange to demonstrate their regard, yet you reject all my gifts to you." Thorin's tone, though mild, still rumbled with an undercurrent of discontent, and Bilbo was extremely conscious that he must step carefully if he were to avoid wounding the king's pride.

"The bird was beautiful—quite possibly the most incredible thing I'd ever seen" he admitted, ruefully.

Thorin's shoulders were tense with suppressed frustration. "Then why didn't you take it?"

The truth came tumbling from Bilbo's lips with little prompting, and less consideration as to its diplomacy. "Honestly? Because...I wasn't ready to feel the way it made me feel."

The confession seemed to stop Thorin cold for a moment, and he carefully considered Bilbo's words, cocking his head slightly as he mulled them over. He may also have been trying to listen with that other set of senses, but Bilbo had found that he'd grown used to the occasional insights he seemed to glean from it.

"And what about now?" Thorin finally asked, though there was a note of real hesitancy in his voice.

And what about now, Bilbo Baggins? Barrel Rider, and Riddle Maker, and no longer quite Hobbit of the Shire?

What about now, indeed. There was really only one honest answer. "I would dearly love to see that piece again," he said softly, aware he was admitting to far more than admiration over a piece of beautiful craft-work, and that Thorin would understand it. "However did you manage to make it so quickly?"
Thorin grinned as he settled back onto the hearthrug. He reached out one hand to trace idle patterns on the bare skin of Bilbo's ankle, seeming to affirm his understanding and joy in that soft touch. "I began carving it while we were in Laketown," he admitted shyly. "We managed to have a quiet evening, and everyone was relaxing...I had kept a few gems with me, sewn into the lining of my coat, and I had managed to rescue one of those after the debacle in Mirkwood; a perfect yellow-brown diamond that I wanted to carve your first courting gift from." He stared unseeing for a moment, gaze distant as he remembered. "I could see it in my minds' eye, so clearly, though carving has never been my craft of choice. I knew it would be a slow process, so I took every moment alone I could to work on it, polishing it by torchlight while on watch and leaving the fine detail until I had moments of sunlight while we waited for you by my grandfather's door. In truth, I did not finish it until I lay recovering, after my foolishness in the great battle."

Bilbo stared at him, deeply touched, his stomach fluttering uselessly. "That should be the gem," he said, decisively.

"Hmmm?" Thorin hummed beside him, fingers having moved to play with a strand of his hair now, no doubt envisioning where he would like to place another braid, Bilbo thought with fond exasperation.

"My crown," he clarified, feeling very silly even thinking about such a thing. Honestly, a hobbit in a crown? Ridiculous. "You were after me the other day, to choose a gem for my crown should I...should we...the bond. Should we finish it, I want you to place that yellow stone as the gems in my crown."

Thorin of course, lacked all of Bilbo's awkwardness, and his answering grin was heart-thumpingly warm.

".."

Chapter End Notes

I absolutely cannot believe the tremendous response the last chapter received. The readers here have proven to be amazing and supportive, and I thank you all for taking notice of what was supposed to be a silly little story. Without the interest of so many amazing people, I would never have developed this into the behemoth it has become :)

I simply cannot help myself but to write the other characters too. I love each of them, and I'm thankful that I have an audience who are patient enough to let me play with them all. The story continues to fight back, but I can say I have successfully finished chapter 11 :) The chapters are likely to continue to be shorter, say 5000-6000 words, for the last few. It's just the way the narrative is shaking down as I get to the end, but it's likely to help me to get it out faster, so this is good, no?

The chapter titles, I should also mention for those who may not be the giant geek that I am, are all taken from Tolkien's poems and songs from both The Hobbit and LoTR. This title is taken from the Barrow Wright's chant from Fellowship of the Ring:

Cold be hand and heart and bone,
And cold be sleep under stone:
Never more to wake on stony bed,
Never, till the Sun fails and the Moon is dead.
In the black wind the stars shall die,
And still on gold here let them lie,
Till the dark lord lifts his hand
Over dead sea and withered land.

Thank you all so much for your tremendous support!
Mist and Shadow

Chapter Summary

~In which Fíli finally accepts his worth, Thorin reflects on the virtues of blaming the amethyst, and battle is joined~

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks to my lovely betas and supporters. You guys never cease to amaze me with the amount of time and dedication you are willing to volunteer to help me bring this story to page. You ladies are amazing, and I love you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins:
The Legacy of Our Fathers

EREBOR WOULD BE all but deserted by the late evening bell. Fully four hundred dwarrows were mobilized; most already marching. The ravens were dispatched, bringing warnings to the advanced columns already in Laketown, as well as Bard, the man who would someday be king in his own right when he managed to re-colonise Dale. The message he had sent back was terse, but grateful, and Fíli felt a small ember of pride in his heart at the progress they had made in their
relations with the man who had less reason than most to trust them. By unspoken agreement, the members of the company all waited to travel with the last column to depart; the one Thorin Oakenshield would be leading into battle. Tinkers, toymakers, thinkers, planners and merchants—they would protect their king to the last.

The empty hallways reminded Fíli of his first impressions of the empty mountain, in the days after the battle at the gates. Refugees had begun streaming back to the mountain, but at first it was only a thin trickle, and once Dain's forces had departed for the Iron Hills, the halls of Erebor had seemed to echo with emptiness. Everything had seemed so full of possibility in those silences—as if the mountain was simply waiting for its masters to come home. Now it was the chink of his armour on stone that filled the vaulted spaces of the dimly lit corridors. Nervously, he fingered the heavy pommel of the sword he carried.

He had spent all of his limited spare time since reclaiming their kingdom working on his First Craft—this one piece meant to show his skill and potential. The blade was made of pattern-welded Sigin-tarûg steel, patiently acid-etched and hand polished to highlight the unique patterns created by the different layers of carbon and iron lamination. Each layer had been painstakingly chosen to impart qualities of toughness, hardness and edge. All this was further enhanced through differential hardening, giving the cutting edge a diamond-like strength that would hold its razor sharpness far longer than other, more traditional methods, while leaving the shaft and core slightly softer. This progression allowed for flex under hammering blows and helped prevent the blade from snapping off under shearing force.

He had used the ritual meditation each night, to force out thoughts of food rations and tunnel shoring, of ineffectiveness and doubt from his mind, to focus solely on the craft of his heart. And gradually, layer by painstaking layer, his vision had become reality under his hands; a physical embodiment of his soul. Fíli had been pleasantly surprised, once he was finished and able to assess his work with a more balanced, less detail-obsessive view, that he was proud of what he had wrought. His nerves now were due solely to what he was about to do.

His Master, Loní, a venerable and aged dwarrow who had been in service of the crown since before the fall, was more than worthy of all the honour Fíli could show him. But it was not to his Master that he now went, but to the dwarf who had taught him far more than how to work his craft.

The empty passages at least bore no witnesses to the clammy dampness of Fíli's palms, or of the slight tremble in his step as he finally drew near the Juzurab Khufîn, the Place of Ritual Confinement. Two guards stood stiffly at the portal of the Treasury, weapons close to hand but still sheathed as they kept watchful eyes on an empty corridor. Thorin had insisted that they remain, even as the rest of the kingdom was mobilizing; securing Bilbo's safety would hopefully leave Thorin's mind free to think once he left his hobbit's side. Respectfully, they drew aside as Fíli stepped forward. He reached for the leavers that would open the heavy portal, and his movements were slow and methodical to hide his trepidation. The swing of the door opening was seemed ponderous, suiting Fíli's mood perfectly.

Girded fully in weapons and heavy armour, Uncle Thorin seemed to be sharing a last quiet moment with Bilbo. They had withdrawn to the back of the cavernous main chamber, sitting comfortably on the slightly decaying thrones of Fíli's great grandsires. The pool of golden sunlight that warmed them explained the choice in seating area, and Bilbo's curls glowed burnished bronze within the gentle light.

Fíli could quite plainly see Bilbo's unhappy, but resigned expression, though it was apparent from the tone of their voices that he was being positive for Uncle's sake. Their soft conversation was audible but indistinct, buzzing around Fíli's awareness as he approached. It was Thorin who
noticed him first, tense and aware as he was with the half-complete bond pulling at him. He relaxed almost instantly once he realized it was his nephew and not a challenger to his claim. Absently, he left his fingers tangled with Bilbo's, thumb gently stroking the length of Bilbo's littlest finger.

"Fíli," Bilbo greeted warmly, giving no indication that he resented the intrusion, for which Fíli was grateful. Even Uncle's expression was open, though the wariness in his eyes clearly showed that he didn't discount the likelihood that Fíli was bringing some kind of news. That wariness turned to bafflement as Fíli stopped before him and then slowly sank to his knees.

Fíli could feel the grounding presence of the stone beneath him as he rarely had before, a sense of rightness permeating him, and calming his anxieties as he knelt before the only father he had ever really known. Lowering his eyes, he tightened his grip on the leather scabbard in his hands. He swallowed, feeling slightly nauseated.

"Generously, you have consented to forge the Craft-Longing in my heart; what peace I now have, I have gained by your labour," he began the ritual firmly, knowing Thorin may well be furious with his deviation from custom in this, but knowing in his heart he had created his First Craft with no one but his uncle in mind. "Patiently, you have ground away all that is not helpful in me; what character I have now, has been shaped by your hand."

You could have heard a diamond chip fall in the absolute stillness, and Fíli fought the urge to wipe his sweaty hands on his trousers.

"Long have I laboured to learn of what secrets of our craft I am worthy; what dedication I have learned, I have learned by your example," he forced himself to continue. Faintly, he could feel tremors in the marble that was surely Bilbo, suppressing his curiosity.

From his uncle, he could sense only a tangled welter.

"I have cleared my thoughts of all but what you have bestowed unto me, to create this work of my hands and heart to honour what you have wrought in me." He took a deep breath. Focusing only on the deep sense of grounding and stability he felt surrounding him, he offered up the sheathed sword, hilt first, and waited, holding his breath.

Nobody spoke. The silence was so complete, Fíli was sure he could have heard Dori's tight braids creaking, were the Master Merchant here. The moment stretched; an entire age may have passed while Fíli knelt, awaiting his uncle's wrath, and he dared not look up.

Seconds, or maybe years, later, a steely slither shivered up Fíli's spine as his uncle drew forth the blade Fíli was offering. Tears sprung to his eyes in his relief, and he ruthlessly fought to keep his shoulders and back stiff when all his body wanted was to sag in his sudden release of tension.

Thorin's voice was hoarse and halting when he finally spoke. "Lad, this is supposed to be for your Master," he said, with no hint of reproach, only thick emotion Fíli dared not try to identify.

Fíli's voice only wavered slightly, looking up from his crouch to meet his uncle's eyes; for what might well be the first time in his life, not afraid of the judgement of that stern gaze. Thorin's eyes were dark and fathomless as he stared at his nephew, completely gobsmacked at the priceless gift.

"Aye," Fíli said. "And I can think of no one who has taught me more than you, Uncle."

"Son of my heart," Thorin rumbled, pushing himself with shaking hands from the old throne to fall to his knees beside Fíli. He gripped his nephew's shoulders, giving him a sort of half shake before pulling the startled young dwarrow into a rib-crushing hug. "You have truly humbled me
this day,” he murmured into Fíli’s braids. "I am not worthy of such great affection and honour from you, but I accept it with a joyous heart."

Fíli wasn't sure, but he thought there might have been a hastily suppressed sniff, such as one might make when muffled by a finely embroidered sleeve, coming from somewhere over Thorin's shoulder.

When he stood, Thorin gave the sword once more to Fíli and moved to unbuckle the belt at his waist. His tried to unwrap it from his hips, finding it difficult while encumbered by heavy vambraces and gauntlets. Sensing his need, Bilbo stepped forward and batted the dwarf's hands aside, nimbly unwinding the belt for him. When he was finished, he set the sword and belt aside, and reached instead for the sword Fíli still held. Solemnly, he began strapping it to Thorin's waist where only moments before a priceless masterwork of Elvish skill had hung.

"Uncle—" Fíli protested weakly, but Thorin cut him off.

"I would hold this blade as an heirloom of my house," he said gravely. "What is more fitting than I should take such a blade, forged with the best that is in my line, to defend our kingdom and its allies?"

It was a good thing that his uncle didn't seem to expect an answer, because Fíli was having trouble swallowing around the lump in his throat.

When Bilbo finished, he solemnly reached for Orcrist once again, struggling slightly under its great weight and length, and laid it, scabbard and all, into Thorin's hands. Thorin then held it out to Fíli. "You shall proffer this to Master Loní, in lieu of the gift I have received in his stead," he admonished gravely.

Dazed, Fíli only barely reacted in time to take the sword from his uncle's hand before it dropped to the floor between them. A hint of a smile hovered in the oft-stern expression that gazed back at him, and Thorin reached to squeeze Fíli's shoulder.

"You will have to give a formal apology to Master Loní. He deserves that from you."

"Aye." Fíli winced, shaking his head to clear the last of the moisture from his eyes and regain some semblance of composure. "I will begin forging a suitable token as soon as I may, after we flush the scum out of Laketown."

"See that you do, lad."

--

SUMMER, OR EVEN almost-summer, was a horrible time for battle.

The heat made everything slippery; padded clothing worn under armour soaked up the sweat and grime, if not worse things, and quickly began to smell of a sour combination of poor hygiene and rust that never dried—and no matter how the battle turned out, there would always be fields of dead who bloated and rotted under the blazing sun long before the survivors could get to them, making the cleanup even grislier as bodies came apart in the hands of those that would do them honour. Thorin felt no great surge of battle lust or righteous fury as he surveyed the grey smudge on the horizon that those whose sight was keener assured him was the advancing Orc army.

All he really felt was exhausted. Before the dead of their last war could even begin to return to the earth, the orcs came to start the whole cycle over again. This time, Thorin was determined that it
would be at least a generation before the smelly skulking carrion ventured forth to bother anyone in Esgaroth, or even the whole of Rhovanion, again.

The forced march from the mountain had been gruelling, but Thorin had welcomed it as it had provided an effective distraction from his discomfort. The herbs Óin had been able to provide dulled the maddening, stretchy ache so that it became a persistent throb in his chest and a faint nerveless itch inside his head. Frankly, Thorin rather hoped for the chance to lose himself in battle lust soon, before he was driven to stick his fingers in his ears to try and scratch at his brains. It was a tempting thought, though.

Fíli rode somewhere in the middle of their column, keeping an eye on stragglers and occasionally dropping back to take reports from the rearguard, freeing his uncle to lead and direct their scouts. He had grown into a level-headed and steady young dwarrow, full of encouragement for others, and deep commitment to his course.

Thorin could still remember the day, over eighty years ago, when he had first been handed his heir to hold. Fíli had been such a wriggling, squalling thing, as if thoroughly displeased with the situation he found himself in, and Thorin was not too proud to admit he had panicked. No one was able to help him. The midwife was busy as Dís went through the last parts of the birthing process. Fíli was fully three weeks early, and his father was still in Bree, selling the labours of his forge. Messengers telling him of his son's arrival would probably reach him in the morning.

So Thorin, King-in-exile, found his hands full with a squirming, screaming badger, body almost small enough to fit into the bowl of his cupped hands, and looking thoroughly breakable. In the background, the Cantor's song swelled again, as though in counterpart to the small prince's wailing. Thorin resisted the urge to look around wildly, knowing there was no one to help, and equally sure that if he removed his eyes from his charge for a moment, something disastrous would happen. He would deny to this day that he began to tremble, or that his hands had shaken in any way, but somehow, the babe in his terrified grip seemed to sense his unease. The crying had stopped as if it were a sluice gate that simply fell closed. Restless little arms twitched once or twice more before lowering, revealing a round, pink-flushed face blinking slowly up at him. One of those hands latched onto Thorin's thumb, squeezing with all Fíli's tiny strength, as if to reassure his frightened uncle, as if the newborn somehow had enough confidence for the both of them. In that moment, Thorin had promised himself that he would someday have a kingdom to give this child, who trusted so easily and had such a deep sense of others.

Somewhere behind him, he could hear Fíli's voice rise up above the general hubbub, encouragingly starting a chant of hearth and home, and dozens of rough voices joined him. Thorin wished Fíli could see himself now, because this was the part of being King that really mattered. Not the dusty council rooms or the trade agreements or even the thrice-damned reclamation reports—and Mahal only knew how Bilbo managed to deal with them, but Thorin was thankful for it.

Though those were all very important, it was the part that happened in the hearts and minds of the people that truly mattered, and Fíli could command the hearts of those he ruled because of his warmth and openness—two qualities Thorin knew he himself sorely lacked. Despite all his uncle's failures, somehow, Fíli had turned into a strong and compassionate King-in-waiting, and Thorin knew their people were in good hands.

They crested the last rise of the Long Lake before the first glow of false dawn touched the dark sky. The moon had long since set, and cold starlight bathed the village in faint white light, almost lost to the ruddy glow of the torches as instead of a sleepy hamlet, Lake-town was a seething anthill of activity.

The noise of their marching down the town's main streets was lost amidst the bustle and clamour of the citizens readying themselves for battle. Grim faces and hurried orders surrounded them, but
Thorin was pleased to note that the hopeless fear he had witnessed during the first battle was gone, though Dwalin's grim visage was enough to make even the stout-hearted draw back a pace. The ready support of the Mountain Folk and past experience seemed to have heartened them, and Thorin was ashamed anew that he hadn't stepped forward the first time until it was almost too late.

Dilapidated buildings surrounded them as they marched, structures that seemed to be trying for the graceful—and wasteful—sinuous curves of Elven architecture with far too few materials to make it work, showed that Thranduil's people had tried; they just weren't particularly skilled at making due with less. It was experience that Thorin felt would be good for the lot of pampered tree lovers, but kept that idea firmly locked away as unhelpful—and likely to provoke Bilbo if ever uttered in the hobbit's presence. He would no doubt twist the whole thing to focus on the magnanimity of the elves instead of their bloody uselessness, as Thorin would prefer. A quick look over at Dwalin showed that his battle-brother thought as highly of the work surrounding them as he did, which made him feel somewhat justified in his thinking.

As soon as they had come into the town proper, Thorin was amused to watch Lord Ásbergurwave everyone else away, to survey both what they had, and hadn't, and get down to engineering their defenses, absently rumbling out equations as he became lost in the problem before him. Somehow, the engineer's marking stick had made the march still firmly stuck behind his ear, and from some hidden recess of his clothing came his slate board.

Thorin shook his head and let the Lord Engineer get on with it; he had his own forges to heat.

The water of the lake was running high, a fact that was plainly visible even from a distance. The massive carcass of the fallen dragon had finally come to settle at the western shore of the lake, damming the ingress of the Forest River to a slow trickle and making the ground a sucking boggy fen of what parts of the river channel unprotected by rock. Eventually, the carcass would decompose enough that the water pressure would flush it into the lake in an explosive force, but for now, Thorin rather enjoyed the idea that Thranduil was inconvenienced even a little bit by the smelly marsh forming on his north-eastern border.

The largest house lay at the centre of town, and had likely been the Master's residence before he decamped with saddlebags full of Ereboran gold. Lord Bard seemed to have different ideas about the rights and duties of station, of which Thorin thoroughly approved, and the near-palace was now very obviously an official building and the absolute centre of all the activity.

Halting his troops just outside it, Thorin went to push his way inside, only to find the remainder of his company grimly following him. Exasperated, he motioned for them to stay with the rest of the column. Honestly, it's not as though he was going to collapse inside the house of humans. Of course, being buffered by the familiar psyches of his fellows was considerably easier to bear than the foreign thoughts of men, and his company obviously sought to cocoon him as much as they were able, like a babe in swaddling cloth. Conscious of their intent, and the loyalty behind it, Thorin relaxed his habitual scowl, truly touched by the fealty being offered. He gave one, curt nod for them to follow, and once more led his company into a gathering of Men.

"King Thorin," Bard acknowledged gruffly once they had pushed their way inside, no more comfortable in the dwarf's presence than Thorin was in his. Bard was standing, bent over a map-covered table, obviously listening to a report from a sweaty-faced messenger. He dismissed the boy with a nod, and room was made for the dwarf king in the circle of men surrounding him.

"My scouts tell me that the orcs have reached the ridges to the north, and are waiting there; I know not for what," the grim-faced man told him.

Thorin grunted and looked around the circle sourly. "They await the setting of another sun. Orcs are foul creatures that crawl out from dark holes to pollute the earth with their presence." He
glared at the northern border of mountains marked on the map, conscious of the thoughts of some of the men here comparing dwarves to these defiling earth-dwellers. Thankfully, for their tenuous alliance, not one voiced the comparison. "There is not enough darkness left to mount an attack tonight, not now that they know all hope of surprise is lost to them. Our main concern now is that they will take their time, and dig in."

Bard pushed away from the table to pace a tight, frustrated circuit in the tiny space his men made for him. "And in the dark, my men will have a much harder time, and my bowmen will be next to useless."

"We can see in the dark as well as the orcs can," Thorin told him. "And with a full day at our disposal, we can have earthworks dug in place that will cost them many lives to storm. We shall dig breastworks along the edges of town; line the slopes with caltrops and sharpened stakes. We can construct a few small engines to hurl burning pitch or other nastiness into their midst—your bowmen could man them, for it does not require pin-point accuracy to lob such burdens into a charging line of the enemy. We have perfected a form of burning naphtha that sticks to the skin, and a flaming orc will panic, spattering and igniting their fellows."

Bard stopped pacing, startled, and a little sickened. "You dwarves have many inventive ideas for battle."

Thorin sighed inwardly. The children of Men had odd notions of chivalry and pacifistity that did not completely jive in Thorin's mind with the staggering amount of wars that seemed to plague their kingdoms. Dead was dead in Thorin's book, and the quicker the enemy ended up that way, the better.

Dismissing what he could neither fathom nor worry about, Thorin stared back at the circle of accusing stares without trace of apology or shame. "This is not a civilized conflict," he said, voice even as he stared around the gathering of allies, making sure to meet every gaze that would look down for him to meet. They were all uneasy. "These creatures would take your women and use them until they are nothing more than discarded sacks of flesh. They would take your children and kill them slowly with knives and hooks for sport—those they do not take back to their holes to put to work in darkness and depravity. I did not invite them to come or force them into this conflict, and I would fight this war so that we do not have to fight again the next season, and the next."

For a long moment, no one spoke. Soft leather boots shifted restlessly over rough floorboards, and no one was meeting Thorin's eye any more. The king waited, tense, knowing the Men had to come to terms with this and their own peculiar notions of battle conduct. A season ago, this town had known little of the savagery one being could do to another in warfare beyond what the dragon would dish out and they were helpless to prevent. Thorin wished he did not have to push them now to become hardened to more gore and dismemberment. He looked to Bard, knowing the townsmen would take their courage from him.

Unwillingly, he met Thorin's gaze. Pushing out a deep breath, Bard nodded slowly, grey eyes hard and unwavering. "You're right. Let's make an end of this threat, or our children shall be fighting this same battle."

They had an understanding after all, it seemed.

Elven intelligence had reported that orcs were attempting to cross Mirkwood over the Forest River. The orcs wouldn't be fool enough to attempt to cross the Long Lake, where they could be strafed by arrows and any other inconveniences that Thorin's engineers could devise to throw at them. Instead, they would make for the northern gap, and come down out of the sheltering arm of the Grey Mountains. It was a sound strategy, one that would give them cover until they broke it to make their final charge in full darkness. Thorin was only thankful that the northeastern most
extension of the Grey Mountains would prevent the orcs from splitting off and heading part of
their force to a virtually empty Erebor.

The sun rose over the horizon, illuminating the Lonely Mountain in the northeast in its rose glow,
and the heat of the newly risen sun promised for a warm day. In a few scant hours, the dwarves
had excavated trenches spanning the entire northern face of the town's borders, trusting Mirkwood
in the west, and the vast open desolation in the east to keep the orcs from flanking their lines en
mass, though small parties were likely to get through into the town proper.

The earthworks had been shorn using wood from the men's houses, as Thorin had bluntly
informed Bard that there was no way they were going to be able to save the outer edges of the
flimsy town, so they might as well put the buildings to use. Dwalin had gleefully set several teams
to pulling down the wood structures, leaving rubble to clutter the streets and impede any of the
enemy who got past the lines and swarmed the town and making them easy targets for the archers
in the torchlight. Bard’s face had been even grimmer than usual as he had ordered the destruction,
but was reassured when Thorin pointed out that they would have had to come down anyway
when the Dwarves helped them rebuild in proper stone. He tried not to feel just a touch smug as
the elvish eyesores were put to new and better use.

Lady Bylgja efficiently directed the work on the man-sized sections of the trench on the east and
west flanks, coolly laying claim to any available hands, dwarf or human, that came her way, with
absolutely no regard to rank or protests. Bofur and Fíli coordinated efforts along the dwarf-sized
centre stretch. Bombur worked with Balin and Ori to build war engines under Ásbergur
meticulous direction, while Glóin and his brother worked to mix naphtha and pitch and sealed
them into water-tight pouches made from the hide of sea animals harvested in the Far South. Nori
had led troupes of youths into the rubble of the destroyed houses, looking for anything that could
be scavenged as useful, and hopefully not filling his pockets as he went. Thorin feared for a whole
generation of younglings getting inventive ideas of which Lord Bard would likely not approve.
One Nori was enough for any King to have to deal with.

They slept in shifts so that the work continued throughout the heat of the day, and once the sun
had crossed its zenith and began its westward journey, they had largely completed their defensive
works. It was an hour or two before the evening meal, and Thorin was taking the opportunity to
seclude himself in his tent. Outside, he could hear the sounds of the camp; dwarves busy with last-
minute tasks, or relaxing after putting in full shifts on the trenches. There was much bragging and
jest, and Thorin was content to note that amidst the earthy voices of his people, he could make out
a few accented voices of Men. One of those voices he was sure belonged to Bain, the Bowman's
son. For some reason, the lad had seemed to attach himself to Nori, taking a keen interest in all the
ginger-haired thief did. Thorin wasn't sure if it was a case of Bain having some inkling of Nori’s
true proclivities and wishing to keep an eye on wandering fingers, or if the lad instead held some
admiration for him. Somehow, he imagined this was going to engender a terse conversation
between himself and the boy's father in the near future, and Thorin hoped Nori had the sense not
to teach anything truly objectionable to the boy.

The interior of his tent was cool and dim, and he'd removed some of his outer armour before he
tried to meditate. From the leather pouch that had once carried his grandfather's map and other
items important to their quest, he pulled seven small nubs of specially prepared indigo candles, and
lit them. Placing them around the perimeter of the room in a sigil indicating unity and focus, he
allowed their wavering dance to free his thoughts, and settled into a loose and relaxed crouch
upon a hide rug as he waited for his chaotic feelings to drain away into the waiting guidance of his
Maker's will. The resinous scent of rowan and the sweet notes of mountain woodruff quickly
permeated the close air of the tent, and Thorin breathed deeply.
The sounds of the camp began to fade, and he could feel the bones of the earth beneath him; granite and slate giving calm and rationality, but he could not keep his mind clear. Thoughts of Bilbo would intrude, scattering his concentration like a child's game of marbles, and he was left to start all over again. After half an hour of this, he simply gave up, and let the thoughts come, finding peace in the warm glow Bilbo's last words gave him and in the affection and favour he had somehow earned. Thorin suspected from the amorous turn of some of his deliberations that there were deposits of rose quartz or amethyst beneath Laketown, and he looked forward to sharing some of his thoughts with Bilbo when he returned.

Soon. He would see his beloved heart again soon—with Mahal's blessings, he would be seeing Bilbo's wide green eyes sparking with happiness at his return the day after tomorrow, no doubt to get a blistering reprimand of some kind, for unnecessary roughness or some equally spurious complaint.

Thorin found he didn't mind Bilbo's scoldings, for they were the hobbit's way of covering a heart that felt deeply and with great commitment.

If Bilbo's sharp tongue was his way of demonstrating affection, then, Thorin acknowledged wryly, he must be the most loved being in all of Arda.

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EVEN WAITING EVENTUALLY had its end, and before Thorin lost his sanity to longing, dusk began to fall on the Long Lake.

Songs had been sung; rousing verses extolling the great deeds they would do this day, encouraging the heart of every warrior and giving some steel to the more timid Men. Banners had been set along fortified trenches. They had evacuated women, children and as much livestock as they could to once more seek refuge in the ruins of Dale. Tense, their combined forces waited behind barricades or entrenched behind fortifications for the last of the setting sun's orange light to disappear behind the forested horizon to the right of their lines. Hundreds of eyes were trained on the northern gap, expecting the crawling forms of orcs to detach themselves from the covering gloom at any moment.

Thoughts of Bilbo had dogged Thorin's steps since he had left the mountain, his worry for the halfling he hoped to have as his bond-mate irrational given that the orcs were nowhere near the mountain, but were in fact right here instead. Rationality, he had to concede, didn't seem to be within his grasp at the moment. The day had seemed to drag on, every hour its own torture softened only by Óin's herbal galenicals and the amount of work that allowed Thorin to keep his hands busy. He almost welcomed the tense coil his gut had become waiting for their enemy. It was a familiar feeling of anticipation and readiness that promised the oblivion of complete focus. His eyes tried to pierce the gloom beyond the rough tangle of fishermen's huts and haphazard shacks, alert for any sign of movement beyond.
So far, nothing disturbed the gathering twilight.

The orcs must know that the men of this town would no longer be easy pickings; whatever surprise they had hoped to have was lost by Thranduil's warning, and Thorin wondered privately at the ability of Master Baggins to gain friendship with even those bastard elves. A head-on attack seemed impractical, and yet, Thorin knew they were out there, just beyond the circle of their vision, waiting.

But something was off; the orange-red glow of sunset had now sunk beneath the horizon, leaving only a faint rose smear above the trees, and still nothing moved. A quick glance to his left and he caught Dwalin's eye. The expression looking back at him from the grizzled face was as uneasy as his own. Dwalin's instincts, developed over a hundred battles, were clearly telling him the same thing Thorin's were. An uneasy prickle and cold sweat crawled down his spine; they had missed something.

Overhead, the hoary croak of a raven broke the stillness of the air, sounding like a powder-charge in the strained atmosphere. Thorin sensed Dwalin tense beside him, even as he did. Tense moments passed. Nothing. From further down the line, he could hear uneasy rustling, men unhardened by uncountable campaigns looking to their fellows for reassurance in the gloom. After a moment, even that died away. Thorin stared hard over the barricade of weathered pilings. A bloated moon was rising even before the last light of twilight faded, touching everything with silver light; it only served to make the shadows deeper.

"Come on, already," Dwalin muttered beside him. His gruff voice was no more than a whisper, breathy and nearly silent. Thorin was just about to give some noise of quiet agreement when he paused. The breeze picked up, causing the long grasses to ripple gently. All sounds of the wild were silent. No birds called, and no insects buzzed their chitinous melodies. Nothing stirred, as if the Green Lady herself were holding her breath with them.

Then imperceptibly, Thorin could feel the vibration of many feet upon the earth; could just make out the faint whisper of their passage carried on the wind.

"Fall back!" Thorin rasped, not sure what he suspected, but absolutely certain the attack would not come from the north. "Fall back!" he shouted, turning swiftly, trying to gauge where the danger actually lay. Beside him, Dwalin roared out similarly, shoving those nearest him to get them moving.

The last rose-light of dusk disappeared, dipping behind the distant horizon of forested hills.

And all hell broke loose.

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Chapter End Notes

Long author's note is long, again; Sorry!

First of all, yes, that is an exceedingly evil place to leave it, wasn't it?

Just remember, if you stone me, it will always be left there....
Secondly, it was asked by a reviewer about the Jewish influences on the Dwarven culture in this piece, and in answering their review, I realized that perhaps it was information that may be of interest to at least some of you :) 

If the dry, technical bits don't interest you, please feel free to skip ahead :) I am a huge nerd who loves research, and tying things together with real-world foundations. Sometimes, I think I write merely as an excuse to feed my research addiction.

Tolkien very famously likened his dwarven creations to the Jewish peoples - we can draw comparisons from this to their wandering, and surmise that this is an outcast state to some extent; never fully accepted or integrating with the other peoples of Middle Earth. They have their own language that is not used by anyone else, which they keep alive by force of will in a sea of the common tongue of Westron. They have been driven from their homes (and not just the dwarves of Erebor, but those of Moria and Belgost and probably countless other settlements) and forced to wander. They must devote themselves to study, because we see that they have mastery equal to that of the elves in many cases, despite living only a fraction of their lifespan. Also engineering, metallurgy and mining would all require serious understanding of mathematics and science, not just manual trade skill.

The list of Tolkien's famous *applicability* goes on and on.

From this, it's fun drawing some of our own conjectures about their probable social structure. Judaism is a bit unique in that it is both a religion and a culture, and this is where I started when I began thinking about this story.

So, my dwarves do not need to be particularly devoted to a structured concept of Mahal to be a dwarf. Their allegiance is to their shared culture, racial identity and a communal concept of religion that will vary greatly from individual to individual. Dwarves are stubbornly individualistic, while still being profoundly connected to all other dwarves; a theme I keep picking up. They study, a lot, in order to experience enough to find their Heart Craft in the wealth of all the various trades and disciplines available to them. I imagine retaking Moria would be similar in some ways to the concept of the retaking the temple of Jerusalem by the Maccabees.

Specific concepts also made their way into the structure of this story: A cantor will accompany the rabbi during services with haunting, minor-key chanted song. They have the idea of soulmates, *Bashert*; a perfect, fated partner who is announced from heaven 40 days before birth, which became the justification for the concept of dwarven 'Ones'.

The *Badeken*, is a ceremony where a Jewish groom veils his bride before the marriage ceremony, effectively "hiding" her, historically protecting her modesty, perhaps, and is something I used when struggling to find reasons behind the confinement ritual. I ended up taking a more 'romantic' interpretation of it, allowing Thorin to use it to highlight Bilbo's true character to his people while Bilbo's physicality, which can be deceiving, is hidden. This is supported by some rabbinic teachings of the *Badeken's* symbolism, that the veil is placed to remind us that 'the glory of the princess is the interior'; in other words, no matter their beauty and charm, the inner qualities of a partner are more important and lasting.

Inspiration also came from the *Yichud*, a tradition where the couple spend their first hour (the length of time for this varies from tradition to tradition - Jews are highly individualistic, too!) of their married life completely segregated in a private room
together. Symbolic guards are sometimes posted outside the door. The couple may exchange personal gifts at this time. There are many interpretations of this rite, basically encompassing the idea of unity, and to emerge stronger than the single souls of before, and as a lesson that no matter the hustle and bustle around them, they must always make time to spend together, privately, for a strong marriage.

I'm sure you can all see how I've tied this concept in *lol*

Well, if you are still with me after all that, thank you :) I hope you enjoyed these bits of my writing process, though I can well imagine that it certainly doesn't appeal to everyone. Of course, this is not one-to-one substitution, but background themes and reasoning that helped me find my starting points for this story. A lot has changed in the writing as things evolved, and became my own!

Thank you to everyone who is reading, reviewing, leaving kudos and bookmarking. You guys are amazingly supportive and wonderful <3
'Tis Evil In The Wild Does Fare

Chapter Summary

~In which orcs are orcs, dwarves are dwarves, and Lady Sigrid wonders why her town always seems overrun with them. Though, at least this time nobody came in through the toilet.~

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to the amazingly talented, and patient ladies who help me polish this story - any shine it may have acquired is directly attributed to their skill.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins:
The Legacy of Our Fathers

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'Tis Evil in the Wild Does Fare

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THEIR LINES WERE an absolute mess. Men scrabbled with goblins in ragged knots, while dwarven shield-walls tried to hold pockets of resistance to protect what remained of their formations. Their defensive earthworks had had to be abandoned when the wall of shrieking orcs had come loping in, not from the North as they had expected, but from the South. It was abandon the trenches, or be ground up against their own barricades by the army behind them. Frankly, they were barely avoiding being swarmed under as it was.

\textit{Fat lot of good Thranduil's scouts are}, Fili thought savagely, quickly reversing the arc of his light sword to bite deeply into the weapon-arm of his foe. Tendons and nerves were no match for dwarven steel; blood flowed thick and unctuous, and the creature's mace hit the ground with a flat thud. Moments later, its scarred and greyish head rolled to land beside the discarded weapon. The blood was quickly swallowed up into the parched ground, making the footing greasy and treacherous.

It seemed obvious in retrospect—things were \textit{always} obvious in retrospect—that the main body of the orcish force must have splintered off into smaller groups and followed the lesser fork of the Forest River to the Mirkwood Mountains, leaving behind a severely diminished force to make an ostentatious march north for the elven scouts to see. The splinter groups would then have
regrouped and crossed into Esgaroth from the south end of the lake.

The moon was staying low on the horizon tonight, lending very little in the way of useful light for the Men, though Fili found it was easy enough to see. They needed those defensive works back up—something to regroup around and protect the wounded. As it was, too many were getting injured trying to shield fallen comrades. "Bofur!" he cried, trying to get the other dwarf's attention through the chaos surrounding them. "Bofur!"

With a short, ugly swing of his mattock, the miner staved in the neck of a reedy goblin and caught the thing's warg with the pointed bill end on the back swing, neatly dispatching both, before looking around. Catching sigh of him, Bofur nimbly wove his way through to Fili's side, neatly sidestepping Glóin where he fought. The aggressive red-head had abandoned his weapon for the moment, and was wrestling an orc with every indication of enjoyment, shouting expletives and curses as he kicked it again and again for taking him away from his family, who had only arrived in the mountain the night before their march for Laketown. Fili thought Bofur wise for not getting involved and taking away Glóin's fun.

Thorin appeared at his side as well, having heard his cry, and the three of them pulled back slightly to hold a war council. Effortlessly, the surrounding dwarves flowed around them, clearing a gap. "What is it, Nephew?" Thorin rasped, sounding out of breath.

"We need to get the Men under cover. Some kind of defensive measure, at least for the fallen. I hate to say it, but the Big Folk are getting in our way with their panic and blindness—if we could get some kind of breastworks in place, they could follow the original plan, manning engines and bows, and protect the wounded."

Thorin didn't do him the disservice of pointing out that they were currently in no position to discuss defensive works, granting his heir the belief that he must have an idea if he had bothered to broach it. Bylgja had waded over to their small group, blood and oil smeared across her forehead, her perfect braids askew for perhaps the first time Fili had ever seen. She seemed to be in her element, and gave Fili and Thorin a savage grin. "We have a bit of a mess on our hands, my prince," she said by way of greeting, having obviously caught some of what Fili had said. "But we're going to have to make do with simple barricades. Breastworks will take too many dwarves off the field."

Fili nodded. "Bofur, how badly are our defenses damaged? And how easily could we re-work them into something useful?"

Bofur looked to his guild Mistress when Fili bypassed her, but she gave no indication of being offended, so he just shrugged. He pushed back his furry hat to scratch absently at his sweaty forehead, and stared out at their abandoned lines as he pondered. "Problem is," he said thoughtfully, "the walls we built are curved the wrong way now, being as they were meant to protect from a force coming from the North and all. Without rebuilding them, they'll never function as earthworks should. Right now, we're only barely managing not to get ground up against them."

"Yes, but will they do in a pinch?" Fili urged impatiently.

"Let him speak," Bylgja reproved.

Bofur squeaked, and flushed pink. "If we could find a way to keep the orcs back from the wall, it would give the munitions companies a chance to strafe the buggers and pick them off before they could swarm. The backwards curvature would actually function to corral them into a smaller area, which, given the difficulties the Men have in the dark, will only aid their archer's accuracy."
"But we need to find a way to keep them back, without extensively rebuilding the stakes and caltrops and glacis," Thorin summarized quietly.

Bofur nodded. "We can chuck a few more rocks onto the wall, give it more height to make up for the slope of the wrong side of it, build in a few defences while we're at it, but that won't solve the basic problem of keeping them back so they don't all simply climb over while we work."

Fíli pursed his lips and looked over towards the lake. "I might have an idea about that."

"It had better be a brilliant one, your highness," came a gruff voice. "Or this is going to be an extremely short battle."

"Lord Bard," Thorin acknowledged as they made room for him in their circle.

"What is it you're proposing?" Bard asked, starring intently around their small war council.

"The land slopes downwards from the lake on this side, doesn't it?" Fíli asked, though he could feel the answer himself through the soles of his boots.

"Aye," Bard agreed, clearly uncertain as to where Fíli's idea was leading him. "This side is all flood plains for a quarter mile."

"And the body of the dragon is damming things up, belly bloating in sun, full of trapped gas fit to burst..." Fíli said, trailing off as he looked around their circle expectantly.

Slowly, Bofur grinned back at him. "There's a certain amount of justice in using ol' Smaug to defend the town he once tried to ruin."

"I swear Balin can make a flash bomb from thin air if need be." Thorin's grin was wicked looking, indeed. Fíli felt like doing a silly jig as they all began grinning at each other, the excitement contagious.

"You give us that distraction, and Ásbergur and I will get the barricades back up," Bylgja promised.

"What is it you're planning?" Bard asked impatiently, the only one frowning. "What does the dragon have to do with aught?"

Fíli felt a giddy laugh welling up inside him—they would turn the tide yet. "Have you ever seen swamp gasses form candles of flame?"

"Aye, I've heard of such things, in the swamps far to the south of here," Bard acknowledged, obviously still not following.

"Ol' Smaug's insides have turned into a small stagnant swamp by now, my Lord. His hide is stretched taut over a kettledrum of highly combustible gasses, and we're going to light him up like a pyre candle."

Bard turned away, sightlessly surveying their abandoned trenches. He looked faintly revolted, but after a long moment a grim smile was slowly emerging.

There was a bit of arguing back and forth over who would actually do the deed, but in the end Fíli held firm that he was by far the most agile and least encumbered. Balin had indeed proved able to scrap together a flash charge with the scraps they had been able to turn out of their belt pouches, and Fíli was now scrambling his way towards the lake with his prize tucked securely beneath his armour plate. Behind him, the battle raged on as dwarves and men fought and died, distracting the
enemy, while engineering teams struggled and scrambled to raise the barricades. The covering darkness would not do much to hide him from orkish eyes, and Fíli stayed crouched low to the ground as he scuttled over the dirt and rubble.

His progress was uneven at best; quick bursts of movement when he deemed the coast clear, followed by terse periods of waiting. The near-deafening shouts and cries of battle followed him until he managed to clear the centre of the ruined town, finally diminishing until it was naught but background noise, and Fíli could hear once again. Furtively, he crouched on the north side of a once-neat little shack, standing like the last patron at a bar fight in a room full of over-turned tables and spilled beer.

Sidling close, Fíli pressed against the weathered wall, closing his eyes tight against the burn in his throat. Stocky legs were not built for stealth or quick distances, and his breath hissed between his teeth as he tried not to wheeze. He strained to hear movement in the gloom of the abandoned neighbourhood; the breeze picked up, whistling faintly through the broken boards and shattered eaves, but Fíli could discern no sound of booted feet. This was the most dangerous part, with the greatest risk of being caught by patrols, or even looters. Beyond this building, there was a wide-open square lined with collapsed remnants of hovels, then nothing but wide-open grassland and ruined fields before he made the next cover; the rotted remains of a landing pier and guard houses of the original town.

He took a deep breath. Held it. Let it out and took another before shifting his weight to run. "All right, on three," he murmured into the soft breeze.

"One," he whispered, still straining to hear anything that would mean it was unsafe to break his cover.

"Two." He dug his left toe into the hard-packed dirt like a race runner he had once seen at a faire. Cautiously, he leaned forward slowly, to avoid his armour creaking.

"Three," and the word was a ghostly whisper over his lips, barely even heard by his own ears. He shifted his weight, the thick muscles in his thighs clenching to power his flight, but before he could push off a slender hand shot out of the gloom and covered his mouth, yanking him off balance. Instinctively, he swiveled his wrist in a practiced motion, feeling the pommel of his knife slide solidly into his palm. A quick twist had him out of his attacker's grasp; a half-spin on the balls of his feet, and he captured them tight to his body, back to chest. His right arm crossed controlling over their chest, with his palm enveloping their cheek, pushing the face sideways and exposing the neck to the knife held in his left. The entire altercation had been nearly silent, thankfully, and Fíli blew out a silent thanks as he caught his breath.

"Do you think you might let me go?" The soft whisper managed to be reproving, despite the faint tremors in her hands as they grasped at his constricting arm.

*Her* hands? *Bloody hell.*

"Lady Sigrid," Fíli managed. Until this moment, he hadn't been aware he could speak through clenched teeth.

"Please? You're hurting me," she said quietly, and Fíli suddenly realized how close he had been to injuring her, and how sensible it was for the girl to be frightened.

He dropped his hands as though burnt, feeling slightly ashamed, but mostly just frustrated. "What are you doing here?" he whispered furiously, trying not to scowl at her and upset her further. From the small twitch of her lips, he thought the effort was probably making him look cross-eyed or worse.
Placing one finger before her lips and motioning for him to follow, she darted inside the small building. Blowing out a breath in frustration at the delay, but knowing enough of the Lady of Laketown to know she was practical and serious, and not the type to be wasting his time with frivolities, Fíli followed.

Inside was dark and dry. Moonlight filtered in faintly through broken boards, giving enough of a glow for even a Man's weak eyes, Fíli thought. Sigrid darted nimbly over to the far wall and crouched under the window there, where no hint of their presence would be betrayed. Curbing his impatience, Fíli followed slowly, for he did not have her lithesome figure.

Crouched this close, he could almost taste her sweet breath as she exhaled, and realizing it made Fíli feel awkward. Dwarrows did not normally invade each other's space like this. This close, he could see the streaks of grime and gore in her hair. A short bow rested over one shoulder, and a scabbard at her side contained a slender blade.

"What are you doing here? I thought your father sent all the women and children away for safety."

She shrugged and made a small hand gesture, as if dismissing his concern. Men, Fíli had learned, communicated with their bodies even more than with their words, but unlike dwarven Iglishmèk, their communications had no solid values of meaning. The gestures appeared to be only vaguely agreed-upon and could range incredibly from person to person, instead seeming to rely on knowing the speaker well in order to decipher their meanings. Fíli wasn't as good at interpreting the communications of Men as Nori was, but Lady Sigrid was easy to read; her gestures were as straightforward as her thoughts. He had often watched her in his meetings with Lord Bard when he was uncertain as to what the tall man's body language was supposed to mean. Right now, she was focused on a goal, and not wanting to stop for incidental explanations. Fíli decided to press anyway. He raised an eyebrow at her in a way he had learned she would interpret as 'I'm waiting.'

She blew out a frustrated noise. "Tilda is with them, keeping order and ensuring everyone's safety. Bain and I are here." At Fíli's continued silence, she snapped defiantly, "This is our home, and this is the second time those creatures have tried to take it. I imagine you have some idea as to what that feels like."

Indeed. To what lengths had they gone to in order to reclaim their home? Of course Lady Sigrid was here. Frankly, Bard should thank his lucky stars Tilda wasn't on the field as well.

Fíli nodded his head slowly, acknowledging her point, and at once she settled, calm and focused once more, letting go her brief anger as if it never was. He found himself smiling, and not entirely sure why. Something to do with her strength, perhaps, that had nothing to do with her frail arms and her utterly sensible practicality. "Are you any good with that blade?" he asked suddenly.

"Enough to know that I'm not sufficiently skilled for pitched combat, so you can rest easy." She made another one of those dismissing gestures, and this time Fíli let her turn the conversation. Time was running through his fingers.

"You're making your way to the lake shore, aren't you?" she asked, unconsciously looking over her shoulder as if to see it, despite the wall blocking her sight.

Fíli nodded. "I need to make it to the north end—where the headwaters empty into the basin."

"You mean where Smaug is rotting and partially damming up our lake." Again, she looked toward the water, and Fíli wondered if it was some kind of ingrained superstition. He supposed it made sense, given how tied to these waters the Lake Men's lives were. "There's a better way, you know."
"What do you mean?" Fíli asked, trying not to sound as impatient as he felt.

Sigrid flushed pink, and Fíli watched, fascinated, as the colour bloomed over her fair skin, leaving rubies in her cheeks in its wake. He was completely unsure what he had said that may have embarrassed her so. "Dad, well, he did a fair bit of smuggling, before.... Well before," she said, and her chin was tilted at a defiant angle, as though daring him to say anything. "People were starving, and the Master was no help. Dad and other smugglers had tunnels carved into the shore-side of the town, places to store goods until it was safe to move them into the town proper. There are tunnels that will lead you right to the river edge without being seen."

"Why wouldn't he have mentioned that?" Fíli grumbled, thinking back to their hurried planning.

Again, he got to watch that strange wave of pink suffuse her skin. "Dad thinks the tunnels at that end are all collapsed, after the battle with the dragon, and Smaug falling out of the sky and all." She twisted her fingers in her lap, looking guilty.

"But?" Fíli prodded.

"But the children have been clearing them, in secret, so they can go up and have a look at the dragon under the water. I haven't told him; it's been harmless enough, and it keeps them occupied. The adults all avoid it—say it's cursed, but the children all dare each other to go. There is enough of the tunnel system cleared to get there, though some of it may be rather small."

Elation blossomed up from his gut. Tunnels. Tunnels that completely avoided the open fields of the flood plains. Fíli grinned, wanting to leap with the light feeling suffusing him. "Sigrid, your dad was brilliant."

He pretended not to notice when she turned even pinker than before, and her stern countenance was softened by her hesitant grin.

True to her word, Sigrid led him to smuggling tunnels that were, thankfully for Fíli's nerves, concealed not too far distant. Sea-grass and bracken had been piled in an artful drift, blending in perfectly with the surroundings, and as they brushed aside the children’s handiwork, he had to admire their ingenuity.

The tunnels did indeed prove to be child-sized in some places, where small hands had obviously moved only enough rubble to clear a path. Fíli had to remove his armour to wriggle through, pushing it ahead of him as he struggled, leaving scrapes of skin on rocky outcroppings as he went. Sigrid, of course, slipped through much easier, being so slender. The bones of the original earthworks were good—not up to his kin's standards, naturally, but well enough that they held their structure even now. His stone sense wasn't as good as his brother's, but it was developed sufficiently enough to feel the earth around him and the shape of the tunnel and know it to be stable enough for their purposes.

When this was over, he was going to recommend for Bard to either have the tunnels shorn, or completely filled in to keep the wee badgers from any more excavations.

The dragon-dam wasn't a great distance, and the collapsed sections he needed to wriggle through were relatively few, but by the time they reached the end and could see moonlight filtering down through a brush-covered exit, Fíli was sweating from his exertions and the close air of the tunnel, and feeling as if he'd lost the skin over all his bones from dozens of scrapes. Lady Sigrid, of course, appeared perfectly comfortable and hale, stepping lightly and easily.

Nettled, Fíli threw back his weary shoulders and tried to sound less winded than he felt. Sigrid shot him an amused glance, and he ducked his head sheepishly.
They halted a few yards from the small pool of moonlight. The tunnel was collapsed beyond this point, splintered timbers choked with sandy soil and grass, but this had obviously been close enough for the children's purpose, and therefore for his. Fíli placed an open palm against Sigrid's shoulder to get her attention in the darkness. His skin tingled faintly from the boldness of the gesture, and he was sure he was blushing, despite knowing she would take no unintended meaning from it.

"When I go out there, I want you to start heading back," he whispered. "Stay under cover until they sound that the barricades are back up."

"What is your plan?" Sigrid asked.

Fíli thought she had shown marvelous restraint in not asking before now, and the trust implied in that one fact was both surprising and humbling. "We need to get the barricades functioning before our forces are completely overrun," he told her, making no effort to gloss over the tenuousness of their position.

She swallowed hard, and clenched her jaw for a moment against her fear before pushing it aside. "And what does the lake have to do with that goal?" she asked.

"I'm going to use a flash charge to remove your dragon-dam. His body will be full of gasses by now that will explode when ignited." Mindful of Bard's earlier confusion with their plan, Fíli frowned, and tried to explain more fully the bits that had been obvious to his kinsmen. He spoke slowly, concentrating carefully on his words. "The force of the water being held back will wash down the channel a ways, until it hits the flood plains—down where the fighting is. There, the land drops away, so the water will come rushing out. There's not enough of it to really flood the town, but there should be one big wave as the force of our explosion dissipates.

"The trenches that we built—which are now uselessly in front of our barricades—will flood, and hold the water, preventing the orcs from simply climbing over the wall. When that happens, our forces behind the barricade will be strafing a confused and panicked enemy. It will be like spearing fish in a barrel."

She digested this, her lips curling slightly as she appreciated the anticipation of hope. "And why is it you want me to stay here?" she asked shrewdly.

Fíli winced, but answered honestly. "Because when I light him up, Smaug's going to spray what's left of his armoured hide as glittering shards of gemstone shrapnel. Anyone left in the area is going to be shredded."

She stared at him in horror. "But what about you?" she hissed, aghast, thumping his shoulder just under his pauldron with one balled fist.

"I'll be fine," he hummed soothingly, trying to make placating gestures and having no idea if he was succeeding; he just knew he wasn’t comfortable with her distress. "I've got good Ereborian-forged steel for armour. I'll hit the ground behind what cover I can find, and tuck up tight, I promise."

"I'm waiting right here until you come back," she said. Her chin was slightly pointed and perfect for jutting out rebelliously, Fíli was exasperated to note. "Despite your dwarven belief in your own invincibility, you may not come out of this completely unscathed, and at least someone sensible will be here to put the pieces back together."

"Fine!" he threw up his hands, not wanting to waste any more time. Bard might kill him later, but perhaps he was already familiar with the impossibility of arguing with his stubborn daughter.
He hoped.

"Good luck," she murmured as he pushed his way out of the tunnel.

He shot her a grin and a jaunty wink; all cocky bravado to bolster her courage, and the soft sounds of her muffled laughter followed him into the gloom.

The fighting was further south, so there was not much risk of running into patrols, but there was still the danger of looters and deserters. Fili paused for a long moment once he was in open air again, listening tensely for any hint that he was not alone. Fifty yards distant, he could see the great hulk of the dragon, rising up out of the lake. The angry sounds of the dammed River Running were loud in the stillness.

He kept low to the ground, scuttling crab-like over rocks and sand until he reached the skeletons of a few wreaked fishing boats overturned on the lakeshore. Dimly, he could also make out the outlines of the small fleet of Ereborian craft that had carried their arsenal. From this vantage point, Fili could see one of Smaug's great, clouded eyes staring sightlessly down at him. Faint pinpricks gleaming in the moonlight showed that he had been right in assuming the dragon's purloined armour was still largely intact.

His position was good; from here, he had an easy shot to hurl his bomb, and while weathered, the dinghies were made of stout beams, which, while not stopping the shrapnel, should at least deprive it of enough force to not be able to pierce his armour. Carefully, he unwrapped the oiled cloth that held a flint and tinder, a coil of waxed wick, and Balin's charge. Fili judged the distance with a practiced eye. The charge was designed to splash oil and naphtha upon impact, which would spread over the dragon's leathery skin and burn long enough for the gasses to ignite. It would give him a few seconds to duck and cover as best he could.

He took a deep breath; held it. Carefully, he took aim, sighting along his forearm until satisfied with his target.

He released his breath, and the charge, at the same time in an easy, controlled motion. For a long second, the flaming pouch seemed suspended in the sky, fiery destruction hurtling towards the lake. Fili could see the ruddy hue of Smaug's hide, only somewhat muted in death—could see the sharp spines of his wings, and the grotesquely curled talons of one enormous hoary foot splayed over the rocky lip of the river channel, and the almost snot-like consistency of the great baleful eye that would soon dribble out of the snarling skull from rot. For one eternal second, the world seemed frozen, perfectly preserved before utter disaster or spectacular success.

Without daring to blink, Fili anxiously watched the curving trajectory of the pouch until it struck upon Smaug's hide. It burst. Without waiting further, he dove behind his makeshift shelter, inhaling a mouthful of sand as he crouched face down with hands and feet tucked as tightly under his body as he could manage.

He waited.

Faintly, he fancied he could hear the sizzle of oil-fueled flames on damp leather.

The air, which had been completely still, stirred faintly before giving up once more. The muffled quality of the stillness made Fili feel as if he had his fingers stuffed in his ears. He couldn't hear the sound of sizzling anymore, real or imagined, and his heart dropped.

So it was a complete surprise when the world suddenly erupted around him.

The explosion left him feeling like a rag doll in a tempest, and the sky lit with flames. He could
see the glow even behind tightly closed eyelids. An almost physical wave of sound whooshed over his head, deafening him to the tiny pings of priceless shrapnel. It was an eternity, it was a blink of an eye, and all Fíli could do was burrow down tighter and try not to be tossed or flipped with the force of it, where gem fragments would quickly grind off his exposed face.

He was almost grateful for the gouts of water that came after, despite nearly drowning in it, for when he finally managed to make his unsteady way back to where Sigrid waited, at least he was no longer covered in the stink of dragon guts.

She laughed in relief when she saw him, and with a silly flourish, he presented her with a ruby shard as a trophy.

He would blush when he remembered it later, for rubies are a stone of passion and not something he would normally gift in jest, but for now it felt good to simply be alive and marveling at a night now full of possibilities.

The water roared down the tight confines of the channel, and the noise of the distant battle rose to a screeching cacophony that Fíli hoped meant death and confusion for their enemies. It was a good day to be a dwarf, he felt smugly.

"Thorin!" Dwalin's voice managed to cut through the chaos remarkably well, Thorin reflected sourly, swinging Fíli's heavy sword in a tight arc, taking the ear off his opponent and smoothly skewering him when he shrieked his pain and rage. This new sword had a different temperament than Orcrist, subtle differences that forced him to adjust his normal force-based fighting style to one involving a little more finesse. He absolutely ignored the little voice inside his head that pointed out he had gotten lazy in his old age.

"Thorin!" Dwalin rumbled again, ducking under the reach of a towering orc, only to savagely drive the pointed end of his war hammer into its hamstring, then nonchalantly reversing the swing to completely shatter its shin before moving on to another.

Thorin stepped back to impale the howling orc as it fell. He watched a small dirk fall from its spasming fingers. He hoped Dwalin's shoulder blades itched for a month. "You should know by now not to leave live enemies behind you," he grunted.

"Why? That's what I got a shield brother for, now, isn't it?" The tattooed warrior dismissed his fuming king with a pragmatic shrug. Casually, he cocked one meaty fist and let fly over Thorin's shoulder to nail a snarling goblin dead on. Beater left a long black smear in its wake where the creature's nose now spread across one cheek. With a hard shove behind him, Thorin drove his sword through its stomach. "You really never did grow up, did you?" he asked, resigned, kicking the now-limp body off his blade.

"One of us has to have a sense of humour."

The air smelt of blood and fermented body odour, so much so that Thorin couldn't smell anything at all anymore, and couldn't be certain if his eyes were watering from the smoke and ash in the air, or the stink. His shoulder was starting to ache from the near constant strain of the brutal dance of the battlefield. Unwillingly, he was beginning to come to terms with the fact that war wasn't nearly as much fun once you're old enough to see how stupid it was. Except, perhaps, for Dwalin. Something in the burly Guard Captain would always resist growing up, should he live to be the age of Durin the Deathless himself. "I would have more time for humour if it weren't for your antics," Thorin told him, sourly.
"Dáin's more fun than you, you know that?" Dwalin shot back. It was a low blow, Thorin felt.

They had managed to clear their immediate surroundings, and for the moment, the fighting was moving beyond their position. Dwalin planted his war hammer at his feet, and leaned on the handle, catching his breath, pulling up the hem of his padded tunic to wipe his dripping face. Thorin did the same with his own weapon, and pulled out a sturdy linen cloth to wipe the sweat from his brow. He felt guilty, knowing the embroidered handkerchief was likely picking up all manner of vile fluids from his skin, but also knowing that Bilbo had given it to him expecting it to see use. Dwalin quirked an eyebrow at the fancy cloth, but chose not to make an issue of it. Thorin wasn't sure if he simply knew he'd get a solid thumping for his troubles, or if it was further evidence of his friend's carefully hidden romantic nature.

Probably both.

"We can't keep this up, Thorin. We're going to lose the town at this rate."

Thorin just snarled, slamming his fist into the broken doorframe of a house that had either fallen down, or been pulled down by one of Dwalin's teams. His knuckles stung, and he resisted the urge to suck on them like a sulking cub.

"Feel better?" Dwalin asked, sympathetically.

Thorin's shoulders slumped, and he let out a long, slow breath, attempting to release his tension and frustration. "You're right," he said. "Unless they get those barricades back up soon, this is going to turn into a rout."

"I'm always right." Dwalin shrugged. "I followed you, didn't I? Right into the belly of a dragon."

"That you did, my friend." Thorin smiled, tiredly. "One of us clearly needs their head checked."

"You first," Dwalin grunted. "Óin's apothecary always gives me hives." He hefted his war hammer once more, giving it a few loosening swings. He looked over the damp ruins of the human town, with its squalid huts and body-littered streets, and then toward the distant peeks of Erebor. "You ready for this?" he asked.

"I can go at least as long as you," Thorin assured him. He pulled his sword from the mud that had nothing to do with rain. It made an unpleasant squelching sound as it came free, and Thorin flicked it to drive the slop from the blade. "Let's take a few of those bastards with us on our way to the Halls of our Fathers." He tucked Bilbo's handkerchief into his vambrace once more, close to his pulse-point. They would survive the day.

He wanted to believe that. He would see Bilbo again. Even if he had to drive every orc from Rhovanion's lands himself with only his bare hands. But he wasn't fool enough to count on it, and wished there were some way to send his beloved one last message; some kind of permanent record of his deepest feelings for Bilbo to keep until the day they were reunited again. Surely, The Green Lady would grant her precious child entrance to Mandos' Halls—and if not, Thorin would beg her himself to join Bilbo in whatever awaited him after his time in Arda was past.

Dwalin was right; they were getting tired, and the town would soon be overrun with goblin filth. The dwarves had taken the bulk of the heavy fighting, as they were not nearly as susceptible to heatstroke under their iron armour as the Men were, and could see much better in the half-light besides, but even his sturdy forces couldn't last forever. They would give them one hell of a fight, though. With one last flourish of his blade to loosen his aching shoulder, Thorin nodded to Dwalin his readiness. He had the best of his people by his side, and if this town could be defended, they would see it done.
Off in the distance, a ruddy glow lit the north sky like a thousand candle flames. Thorin gripped his pommel tight as he watched the dancing fire flare bright as the sun, and fall back to a ghostly glow. He counted breaths; one, tw—

The ground beneath his boots rumbled, and a distant sound, like thunder over gravel beds, grew in size until it deafened them with its angry roar.

"The badger prince did it," Dwalin rumbled with gruff pride, once the explosive noise had receded.

"Of course he did," Thorin answered, thumping Dwalin's shoulder with his fist. "That should buy us—"

But he was interrupted by the deep, buzzing call of the large battle horn over the din. "That'll be young Lýthur!" Dwalin cried, a disbelieving grin splitting his face ridiculously. "Ásbergur must have the barricades back up!"

Thorin grinned back, feeling fresh strength at this turning of the tide. "Then we had better defend them," he said, breaking into a low-gaited, ground-eating jog, Dwalin close on his heels.

THE SCENE THAT greeted them upon rejoining the main engagement was heartening, to say the least. The barricades were indeed up, the trenches now acting as a moat, forcing the orcish army back from the low walls and making the task of scaling them far more difficult. Arrows flew, filling the night air with their high-pitched song. Wading into battle felt good—the burning of tired muscled faded, and he felt revitalized as he lay about him with Fíli's sword. It had more than earned a name, this day.

"Bain!"

He heard Bard's frightened cry, and looked around hurriedly. The frantic Bowman was helplessly committed in combat, a knot of foes between him and his beset son. To his left, Thorin spotted a shock of bright auburn hair, clearly identifying the Lord's son in the thick of battle. The lad was growing, with broad shoulders and a good height on him, but he was still underdeveloped by his race's standards, obviously expecting another year or two of development and filling out before he would have his full growth. While determined, the boy's muscles were tiring, and he was clearly in trouble, and the frightened look on his face showed that he knew it, too. A second strike from a leering opponent, and the lad was down, lost beneath the crush of bodies.

"Bain!" Bard howled in anguish, still hopelessly mired beyond help.

The thought of a young Fíli or Kíli being forced into such a situation had Thorin's heart clenching painfully in his chest and drove him to action. With a curse, and before he could think more about it, he dove, striking up at his opponent from between its legs, cleaving deep into the vulnerable juncture of thigh and groin. Black blood rained down on him as he rolled, uncurling just in time to catch the second strike against his gauntlet shield.

It was an undignified way to travel across a battlefield, but it paid off. Bain's unprotected body now lay behind him. He could see the lad breathing, but there was a purpling bruise covering the left side of his face, and his sword arm was a mess of blood. Thorin hoped not all of it was the boy's. His acrobatics had cost him—he had been conserving his strength, both mental and physical, and the move had left him sadly spent in both. Grimly, he tried to pull his thoughts back as his world threatened to grey out, his fingers trembling on the haft of his sword; he would not fail in this. He would not watch Bard loose his only son, unable to reach him. It would break a
man who should not be broken, a man Thorin had grudgingly come to respect.

Gritting his teeth, he tried to centre his strength, to push back against the weight of the blade still driving against the gauntlet shield, bearing him down. He had no leverage from flat on his back with which to push and give himself room for his blade to maneuver. He could practically smell the orc's fetid breath blowing against his cheeks. Spittle flew, getting in his eyes, and he forced himself not to flinch. The whole situation was eerily reminiscent of his final battle with Azog, of being pinned on the ice and feeling that blade slide home, of feeling he had looked his last at those he loved.

Thorin forcibly shoved those memories aside. This was not Raven Hill, and this orc was definitely not Azog. Kicking out suddenly with one iron-shod heel, he drove the nailed edge into the back of the orc's calves with as much force as he could muster. The creature's black eyes opened wide in pain and surprise, and that little bit of distraction finally allowed Thorin to get out from under its sword and push himself to his feet.

Bain still hadn't moved. At this rate, Thorin was worried the lad would be trampled in the confusion. Unfortunately, the orc's shriek had attracted the attention of one of its compatriots. Three goblins had now moved to circle him and the boy, all grinning horribly, canting their heads sideways in a strange, sinuous movement as they regarded their opponent curiously from eyes that seemed completely black. "You've got to be joking," Thorin muttered in disgust.

Two of them charged, showing that eventually, even mindless beasts learn. Thorin parried the first curved blade before dancing to the left and barely blocking the second blow in time. Cautiously, they circled again, still grinning their hideous grins of blood-blackened teeth. Thorin tried to keep them both in his line of vision, blinking sweat from his eyes and moving as little as possible so as not to leave the boy exposed.

Their strike was lightning fast, though a flick of Thorin's wrist drove the point of his sword into the first creature's arm, just above the elbow. It shrieked in anguish, its now-useless arm hanging awkwardly, but Thorin was already twisting, trying to anticipate the second, near simultaneous blow to his knees. He moved just in time, and sliced the weapon hand from the second creature with a grunt of effort. He made a mistake.

He had forgotten the third.

Everything was greying out. He had run through his reserves already, his body and mind exhausted as the fire erupted from his back. Stabbed from behind, he noted to himself savagely as the needle sharp dirk withdrew, presumably to make another strike. He pushed himself to stagger a few steps, collapsing over the prone body of Bain, knowing the creatures were unlikely to bother turning his body over to make sure of the boy beneath him. The creatures would finish him as he lay in the muck of the battlefield, and the ingloriousness of that passing rankled. Still, the boy would have a chance.

As blackness took him, he thought he could hear a distant shout calling him, to the halls of his fathers, perhaps.

"The King! The King has fallen!"

Chapter End Notes

A huge thank you to each and every one of you who is reading, or will read this in
future. You guys are amazing, and if not for your support and kind words, this story would never have grown so prolifically.

I have developed a new love affair for Dwalin. He is such a fun combination of softie and bastard that just makes his friendship with Thorin work so perfectly <3
There Shadows Lay by Night And Day

Chapter Summary

~In which Kíli finds he likes being the bad guy~

Chapter Notes

Thanks go to the generous help of three very special ladies; NephthysMoon, Krystal_lazuli and Hazel-3017. Thank you so much for all the talent, patience and time you guys have chosen to share with me :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins :
The Legacy of Our Fathers

There Shadows Lay By Night and Day

Days.
It had been...\textit{days.}

Four, to be precise.

One would be ridiculously too little, with the horrendous march to the field of battle and all. Two was perfectly acceptable; a nice long walk, followed by a brisk fight. Bilbo knew enough about dwarves by now to know that's how they preferred it. Three, okay, three was a rather long walk, followed by a rather lengthy battle, and the inevitable aftermath.

Four meant that Bilbo's rather battle-limited imagination was over-taxied to the point of uselessness in trying to come up with scenarios for a delay that didn't involve bloody disaster, death and mayhem. If Thorin were indeed okay, he was going to be facing those things right here when he eventually came home to a fuming hobbit. It didn't help that in the last ten hours or so, the back of Bilbo's head had begun to feel like one vast open sore through which all his thoughts were oozing out. Twice, his vision had greyed to the point where he thought he was going to faint, only to pull
himself from the swoon by sheer force of will. There is no way you are going to allow yourself to 
succumb to this, Bilbo told himself sternly. Pull up your braces, and step smartly now, lad.
Floating somewhere in the flotsam that had become of his thoughts, Bilbo was terrified that 
collapsing would telegraph back to Thorin, distracting him when he desperately needed his focus 
in the here-and-now of battle. The idea that his current malaise was anything more than simple 
separation pains was something he refused to even entertain.

In any case, the ravens bloody well knew how to fly between Erebor and Laketown. Was it that 
hard to ink a short note? 'Hullo, Bilbo, Having fun being moronically heroic and majestic while 
playing war, though Orcs smell worse than Laketown privies. Am mourning the fact that I have 
no new injuries to make my stupid dwarven countenance even more dashing. Much love, Thorin.' 
He was fairly certain Thorin knew how to write at least that much in Westron. No one else 
seemed that concerned by the lengthy absence, though, so Bilbo was forced to concede that the 
discomfort and irritation rubbing his insides raw in the face of Thorin's absence might have more 
to do with his unease than he really wanted to admit.

KÍLI WAS KIND enough to stay with him in the Khufdîn Juzurab after Thorin left to lead the last 
company of dwarrows out of the mountain. Even with the young prince's exuberant presence, the 
Treasury still felt empty to Bilbo. The dratted dwarf king seemed to have taken something rather 
important along with him when he left, and its absence rang hollowly in Bilbo's chest. All in all, 
Bilbo was irritable and out of sorts in the extreme, and rather felt like having a good pout and a 
strong cup of tea was a marvelous idea for dealing with the situation. He also strongly suspected 
Kíli, the short-bearded brat, was laughing at him every time he gave one of those hasty, 
suspiciously spurious sounding coughs.

He understood Thorin's logic in leaving him behind, but if the stubborn dwarf thought that Bilbo 
would forget about his promise of training, he had another thing coming. Though he had no 
delusions as to his actual likely prowess in battle, even with exhaustive lessons from Thorin, or 
Dwalin—or King Thranduil himself if it came down to it—he refused to feel like a dangling bit of 
thread, left out of the overall pattern. He would enter into this as a partnership, or not at all, thank 
you very much....oh. Well, yes, ensuring he was trained was probably Thorin's way of making 
him feel equal in this union. Only a dwarf would equate combat with commitment.

He knew that the company would do their very best to shield Thorin as much as possible—and 
really, the orcs' numbers could not possibly be anywhere near that first wave that attacked the 
mountain under Azog's command. Likely no more than a ragle-tagle amalgam of survivors that 
Thorin's army would chew up and spit back out. After the harsh winter they'd had, it was very 
likely the orcs were attacking as much out of desperation as out of any real desire to re-oust the 
dwarves from their mountain. Rather than soothe Bilbo's worries, these thoughts served only to 
increase them; cornered animals were all the more dangerous, after all. He didn't want to see his 
mulish, rude and somehow lovable dwarves suffer any more great losses now that they were 
finally home. And somehow, through all the foolishness of the Confinement, Bilbo had to 
acknowledge that the mountain felt like home now. He had been let in to the strange rituals and 
deep secrets to see a side of these people that outsiders were never shown, and he was oddly 
humbled by it. Looking back now, he was grateful to a peculiar grey wizard for all but forcing a 
staid gentlehobbit from his comfortable routine, to see such a wider world beyond his own smial.
Not all his experiences had been happy. In fact, many of them had been downright uncomfortable, 
but he felt as though he could count up each one as a bright copper penny in the hoard of his 
memories; and he felt rich indeed. He would not allow any further harm to come to these folk, and 
if he had to forge alliances with the elves and men all by himself to do it, by Yavanna's green 
gardens, he would.
Of course, this newly acknowledged resolution only left him more restless when he found that at the moment, he couldn't do anything to assist the kingdom that had, without even a by-your-leave, rudely—and wonderfully—adopted him as its own.

Kíli seemed to feel he had done enough laughing, and was now giving him a commiserating look, which only belied the careless inattentiveness he projected most of the time. Despite his youth, Kíli truly was very perceptive.

With so few dwarrows left inside the mountain, Kíli apparently decided they didn't need his presence as much as Bilbo. Though he did leave the Treasury occasionally to attend to various duties, he always returned after a few hours, often with sheaves of parchment balled tightly in his fists, or even overflowing from his arms. Bilbo would take one look at Kíli's gaunt face and direct him to deposit his burdens on his desk instead. The embarrassingly grateful look he received only confirmed what he suspected—Kíli was getting no more rest than he was. Still, Kíli wouldn't allow Bilbo to tackle all of the reports himself, and took his fair share to go over, eschewing rest in favour of keeping up with his duties—and likely, an irrational worry that word would come from the battle, and he would be asleep when it arrived. But Bilbo understood, as he was really only getting short kips himself, so chose not to make an issue of it; words like 'pot', 'kettle and 'black' were likely to come up. It had been too long since the last column had marched off to Laketown, and Bilbo's heart was stuttering and stalling, expecting to hear word at any moment. Surely, they had met the orcs in battle by now? Thorin would know how desperately Bilbo would need to know how they fared, how much Kíli would need reassurance of his family's safety. The longer they waited for news, the more Bilbo's anxieties climbed at the possible reasons for the delay.

Kíli, despite his own worry and exhaustion, tried hard to keep Bilbo distracted with tales and stories from his people's history, or his own family, and Bilbo found himself entertained in turns by heroic tales of days of yore, and amusing, if slightly embarrassing, anecdotes of a young Fíli, or Frerin and even Thorin, as obviously shared by Dís. The Great Throne Room in which Thorin had behaved so alienly during his madness, accusing kith and kin alike of treachery, became softened in Bilbo's heart by tales of a youthful pair of princes pulling pranks such as replacing all the brazier oil with their own, sulfur-infused concoctions, or getting hold of the Guard Captain's favoured mace and weaving into it fanciful ribbons and laces until it more resembled a shop mannequin for ladies dresses. No part of the mountain had been safe from young Thorin and his brother, though from the sounds of it, Dís had been a bit of a terror in her own right—and through Kíli's stories, the mountain hall began to feel less like a foreign land and acquired some of the familiarity of a home in Bilbo's mind.

THE THRUMMING VIBRATION alerted them of the great door sliding open, and Bilbo looked to Kíli in confusion. Kíli, of course, just shrugged, and pushed himself to his feet. Bilbo scrambled to follow suit, head buzzing unpleasantly as his sanctuary was invaded. The angular dwarf who strode in was not at all what Bilbo was expecting—that is, if he had had a moment to expect anything. Bilbo thought it was a sign of the respect Kíli obviously held for the Lord Councillor.

"Lord Jústi!" Kíli greeted, clearly puzzled as to the older dwarf's presence.

"Forgive the intrusion, Your Highness; Your Majesty." The Lord nodded briskly to each of them in turn, and it was with a queer start that Bilbo realized he was being addressed as royalty; as if his union with Thorin were an accepted fact.

"It's all right, my Lord," Kíli assured him, training obviously taking over when Bilbo continued to gawp. "I had thought that you were with the last column." Why aren't you? was the unspoken question Kíli left to hang delicately between them. Bilbo thought it was a sign of the respect Kíli obviously held for the Lord Councillor.
"Your brother thought that it would be best if at least one member of council were here, to assist yourself and the King Consort in keeping the mountain running. As your Highnesses have taken great pains to force us to see, there is a lot of planning to do if we are to function viably come spring." The wisp of a smile was self-deprecating on Jústi's severe face, and gone almost as soon as it came.

Kili nodded his head in wry acknowledgement, both of the barb, and the approval hidden within it. Bilbo watched the young prince in fascination; he seemed to deftly step into the role of a leader, as if his playful exuberance of ten minutes before had never been, and Bilbo felt a great welling of pride.

"Yes, he did mention something before he left. What brings you down here, then, my Lord?"

"Ah, yes. Forgive me, my mind seems to be wandering. Obviously, age catches up to all of us in the end." He gave a little shrug, dismissing it. "Cantor Bifur seems to feel that Lord Iór is sufficiently intimidated and frustrated by his lengthy incarceration, and is now ready for interrogation. He and Master Dori are bringing him to the guardsrooms; they await your arrival there, Highness."

Kili looked over to Bilbo with concern, but the hobbit waved him off. "Go, on then. I'll be fine; I expect I'll just curl up with a good book until we get word from Thorin."

"If you will forgive a further intrusion, Your Majesty," Jústi interjected, raising the sheaves of parchment he had been holding, "but I, too, am not suited for the actions of war." A glance downward acknowledged his unusually slight physique. "I would instead apply my talents to places where they have merit. I've had time to review your proposals for rationing, and I would like to discuss your suggestions. I'm afraid we do not have your experience with the production of foodstuffs." He gave another, quick little gesture, as if to clear away his own lack of knowledge. "Obviously, this is an area where your people are far more experienced than we, and I would like to see your proposal implemented." He gave a wry smirk and a nod in Kili's direction. "Thanks to their Highness' demonstration today, I am rather hopeful that the Council can be persuaded to see reason in this matter with little additional difficulty."

Kili beamed at him, clearly pleased with Jústi's idea and clear acknowledgment of Bilbo's abilities. Bilbo gave the young prince an amused sideways glance before nodding to Jústi. He smiled, feeling some of his frustration bleed away at the prospect that he was making a real contribution to the kingdom. Kili, still clearly torn, was watching him carefully for any signs of distress. After Thorin’s collapse, the young lad was being especially careful. Bilbo waved him off once more with a reassuring smile. "Go, go. I'll be fine here, and being productive will be the best medicine for me. I may not be as foolishly stubborn as a certain dwarf king, but I too can stand a little discomfort."

"All right then, if you're sure...?" Kili left the offer plain in his words, though he was already edging towards the door, obviously sure of Bilbo's dismissal and equally cognisant of his duties.

"Go!"

With a laugh and a nod at the council dwarf, Kili was gone.

The Lord Councillor merely grimaced at this exuberant behaviour, and watched as the door slid ponderously back on its hinges. For a long moment, he stood unmoving. Bilbo shifted restlessly on his feet, not liking the way the buzzing in his head had grown when Kili left, but understanding enough of what was happening by now to expect it. Finally, the old dwarrow seemed to remember he was there, and turned back to him.
"Now, Master Baggins," Jústi said, "perhaps you would consent to a small tour of Thráin's chamber, and then we should begin our discussion of your proposal? Perhaps over one of your hobbit traditions of tea-time."

Bilbo beamed.

BY THE TIME he had shown Jústi some of his favourite discoveries within the vault, someone had thoughtfully already sent elevensies down the chute, and Bilbo found himself feeling much more mellow once sitting down to the hobbit-sized meal. Jústi joined him at the table, though declined taking part in any more than a cup of strong tea. The quiet lord was proof that the commonly held image of hulking, violent fighters was definitely not all there was to dwarves. Jústi was thin—by dwarven standards likely painfully so. He sat straight, perfectly poised and comfortable, despite the unusual company, and displayed unconscious manners, as only one who was obviously brought up with constant practice could. This was a Lord that Bilbo felt he could find some common ground with in the years to come, and was warmed by the idea that he might forge ties of his own amongst the rough and tumble lords of Thorin's government. Jústi kept a light conversation going, asking questions about the treasury and things Bilbo had found in it during their repast, obviously sharing a hobbit-approved feeling regarding work at mealtimes, and made light conversation instead. Idly, he stroked the handle of an ornamental sword he'd picked up during their examination of the treasury, and lain on the table, obviously admiring the craftsmanship.

Jústi had proven attentive and curious during Bilbo's simple tour despite his rather stiff demeanour, and Bilbo thought it was a good opportunity for possibly getting an explanation as to why there was a pair of slightly mouldering old thrones sitting in the back of his Confinement Chamber.

He appeared startled when Bilbo asked, but settled back after a moment and appeared to be gathering his thoughts. Bilbo took the small break to dig into the mushroom tart that, while still good, his stomach protested was nowhere near as savoury as Bomber's.

"Did you know, not all that long ago, that this chamber used to be the Throne Room?" Jústi asked.

Bilbo shook his head, fork paused halfway to his mouth.

"A few centuries past, when Thráin I was King Under the Mountain, he being the first King of Erebor, he had this space hollowed out, and from it he ruled the kingdom."

"The first thing he did was have this thing carved out?" Bilbo asked as soon as he had politely cleared his mouth. He glanced around skeptically at the sheer size of the room. "Wasn't there something more important he could have been doing in establishing his Kingdom rather than excavating a bloody big cavern?"

"It wasn't this large back then," Jústi told him impatiently. "Subsequent generations have worked at it, but it was a practical place to set up the seat of authority, being close to all of the mining operations of the day." He paused, clearly gathering his thoughts again. "History tells us that King Thráin was bonded to Gylta, a fierce warrior and talented artisan. Some of her sculpture work still adorns the earliest parts of the kingdom, and Lord Balin has already begun laying plans to have them restored." He waved it away, clearly not that interested in the subject, but Bilbo wasn't quite ready to let it go.

"And the thrones remain here because...?" he asked, the question tumbling forth despite his wishes.
Jústí didn’t look like the type to give in to excesses, but if he were, he would have heaved a large sigh, Bilbo was sure. He tapped his littlest finger sharply against the tabletop, just once, before continuing. "The thrones are here as a relic, to be honoured as part of the Treasury of Erebor. Thráin and Gylta's love was so fierce and celebrated that there are five different epics written to honour it." Jústí took a quick sip of his tea. "The Long Beards were living in Durin's Kingdom at that time, and were prosperous indeed. That is until they woke the wroth of the mountain, and Durin's Bane slew many fine warriors, including Thráin's grandfather, Durin VI, and before the year was out, the Sigin-tarâg were driven forth, and Durin's Kingdom of Khazad-dûm was renamed Moria.

"Thráin, then just forty-seven and just barely beyond his childhood years, and Gylta, a dam at least two decades his senior, fought together during the exodus from Khazad-dûm. King Nain, Thráin's father, died during that battle at the hands of Durin's Bane. His father slain, Prince Thráin led the survivors from those cursed halls, and despite his youth proved to be a level and gifted leader. They wandered for almost twenty years before he founded a new kingdom here, under the Mountain. Gylta's strong presence and leadership during the madness of that final battle at Khazad-dûm had impressed young Thráin so deeply that by the time he came of age later, his heart had no room in it for any other dam, and he turned all his attention to wooing her. Gylta was by then determined to give her heart into the keeping of her craft, and rejected all of Thráin's advances for many years. The Gaginel zyungaz Gabilinbarmuzm recounts the long years of their courtship before Gylta eventually admitted Thráin into her heart and consented to become his Bond-Mate, and his Queen."

Bilbo wanted to make a comment about the propensity of Dwarven epics to recount romance and battle with equal fervor, but didn't feel the restrained lord would be an appropriate target for such teasing. "How did he win her?" Bilbo asked instead.

"Gylta had a keen mind; she loved puzzles and riddles. After every encounter, carefully orchestrated to appear accidental, Thráin would leave her with an enigma or puzzle box, or other problem to be solved. Gylta grew to anticipate his return, so that she could triumphantly give him the solution to his latest trinket or question. Slowly, she became impressed by him, even as she was entertained by his gifts. After a decade, she finally agreed to his courtship."

"That still doesn't explain the significance of the two thrones down here, unless you are saying that it's simply because this used to be the old Throne Room?"

Jústí made a face that may have been a smile, but it disappeared so quickly, Bilbo wasn't sure. "Not entirely. The thrones remain here, as part of the Treasure of Erebor, because they are relics of that time, but also because the history and love they represent is revered. Thráin carved Gylta's throne himself, as part of his courting gift to her. Her love of puzzles was carried over even here, and within her throne, he built a concealed secret for Gylta alone. Carving was not his craft, so it took him five full years to complete, and when it was finished, he crowned her throne with the newly found Arkenstone to signify that her worth was above even his right to rule. The stone was eventually moved to the King's throne when the throne room changed to the upper halls, in Thorin's grandfather, Thror's time."

Given how much importance dwarves seemed to place on courtship challenges, Bilbo was beginning to suspect that his supposed 'challenge' for Thorin would end up going down in similar epics—was already being penned into story and song if Kíli could be believed. The idea that his own love was going to be recorded along with the same annals that immortalized such stories as Thráin and Gylta was a thought that Bilbo wasn't entirely sure how to feel about, other than slightly ridiculous. Epics were things that happened far away, in foreign places and to distant peoples who probably didn't worry about important things like second breakfast, not to Hobbits of the Shire.
And to think, he'd been using the throne as a chair to curl up in, to catch the early afternoon sunlight while he caught up on his sewing. *Huh.*

"And now, maybe you could answer a question for me?" Jústi was asking.

Bilbo chuckled. "I don't know what I could possibly know, but I would be glad to answer."

"Have you seen any royal seals in your explorations?"

"What do you mean?" Bilbo asked.

"Along with *Khazad-dûm* and *Ered Mithrin*, Erebor is the oldest Long Beard kingdom, and is now the oldest repository of our history still in our possession."

"*Ered Mithrin?" Bilbo asked, feeling free to indulge his curiosity a bit more, being as it was his seclusion that was being breached.

"The Grey Mountains. After the fall of *Khazad-dûm*, many of our forefathers chose not to follow the young King Thráin I. They instead fled to the North, and expanded our kingdom in those mountains. It was eventually lost to use during the Wars of Dwarves and Dragons. Some treasures were brought with us out of those ruins, and I imagine there are relics down here that would mean much to the people of Erebor to reclaim."

"Lost war hammers of ancient kings, and the like, I suppose." Bilbo huffed with amusement.

"It's just as likely to be trinkets as weapons or armour," Jústi corrected him. "Jewellery, for example." His features and posture betrayed small agitation as he spoke, obviously intent and passionate on the subject. "There have been several noted bench jewelers of great skill in the royal line, actually. A royal seal would mark such items as to their maker, and would likely have been held apart, maybe even by the royal family. Has Thorin perhaps shown you anything like that? Perhaps something bearing a seal with crossed hammers, crowned by seven stars?"

"I wouldn't know a royal seal from the maker's mark of a non-royal craftsmaster, I'm afraid." Bilbo smiled ruefully. "But it sounds fascinating. When this is over, I will speak to Thorin about the possibility of appointing a team to carefully catalogue and recover such items, though. The people of Erebor should have their history back."

The grinding of the vault doors interrupted whatever response Jústi was about to give, and the frowning dwarrow stiffened, staring back towards the doors with obvious tension. Bilbo, who could feel the clawing emptiness deep in his head and chest as a double staccato counter-rhythm to the door's ponderous mechanism, was grateful for the old lord's obvious concern for his wellbeing with so many intrusions.

When the doors finally quit their grating progress, it was another ancient dwarf who strode into Bilbo's sanctuary. Fat beyond comparison, this dwarrow moved with none of Bombur's efficient grace and all of the stiffness of age. His black hair was more iron than ebony at this point, and his skin sagged in deep furrows where his wrinkles were losing their fight with time and gravity. Bilbo watched him approach, and the discomfort that Lord Jústi's presence was already engendering suddenly exploded into furious irritation. Grimly, Bilbo forced it down; caged, the buzzing that threatened to derail his thoughts and fought for a neutral expression and an even temper. *By the Lady, how had Thorin dealt with this each day?*

"Lord Glólin," Jústi greeted thinly, his grey eyes narrowed as he considered the new arrival.

Glólin, for his part, seemed equally startled and unsure at Jústi's unexpected presence, and for a
moment he could only stare at him, lips pressed into a firm line as his eyes flickered quickly around the room.

"Did you think to find the hobbit alone?" Jústi inquired.

Glólin glared. "I have to admit, I assumed I would. Interesting to find you here, of all people. I would wonder what you were doing here, were I a more suspicious dwarf."

"Perhaps you should be," Jústi said with a shrug and a quirk of his thin lips.

Glólin frowned. "Are you really choosing now to attempt an alliance with the King Consort? Even if you can bamboozle this woolly little creature, I hardly think it's likely Thorin won't see right through it."

"Woolly creature?" Bilbo squeaked indignantly, glaring at the rotund intruder.

Glólin glanced over at Bilbo with a start, as if he'd lost track of the hobbit's presence during his snipping with his rival councillor. Quickly, his expression slid into something he must have thought of as ingratiating and solemn. Bilbo found himself less than impressed. "Please excuse us, Your Majesty. It is the unfortunately habit of councillors to never let business be far from our thoughts, or our tongues, it would seem."

"Was there a purpose to your intruding?" Bilbo asked sharply. "Only I was rather under the impression that this was a very private confinement. As a matter of fact, I'm rather positive I would remember it if Thorin mentioned you were invited, too."

Glólin flushed angrily at being called out over what Bilbo suspected was unforgivably bad manners, but cast a meaningful and resentful glance at Jústi.

"Yes, well, Lord Jústi is here at my invitation, to work—you know, that pesky thing that keeps you both employed. I have yet to hear your reason for being here, however."

The lord was clearly thrown off by losing favour with Bilbo so quickly, and seemed uncertain how to comport himself to heal the breach. He settled for a clumsy and ill-practiced little bow. Bilbo thought the fat councillor looked as if he was in danger of falling over despite only lowering himself a few inches, and had to press his lips together tightly to suppress the laughter that wanted to burst out at the sight. When Glólin managed to straighten himself again, a feat of engineering if Bilbo had ever seen one, it was obvious from the grave expression on Glólin's face that the sycophantic games of a moment before had been put aside. Bilbo's desire to laugh died in his chest.

"Forgive me, Majesty," Glólin said. "Runner's have just reached the mountain with news from Laketown."

Bilbo's heart seized, only to resume its rhythm at double speed so that he could hardly discern Glólin's next words over its booming thump-bump reverberating in his ringing ears. "What happened?" he gasped, clenching his fists at his sides so tightly he could almost feel the skin wanting to split over his knuckles.

For the first time since entering the chamber, Glólin seemed to be animated by real compassion, a marked contrast to his earlier bombast and bluster. "I'm sorry, Master Baggins," he said. "It seems the King has fallen."

".."
THE HALLWAYS WERE mostly unlit now, with no runners left to keep the lanterns burning. Of course, this proved no great problem for dwarven eyes. Kíli navigated the dark hallways with ease, avoiding stubbed toes and tripping hazards without thought, and wondered how it was that other races coped with being blind in the blackness. Bilbo's fussiness about the lamps being lit made a bit of sense now that he thought about it, though.

With the corridors this empty, it took only fifteen minutes to make it to the lower levels. Dori and Bifur were waiting for him beneath the market level, where guard chambers and offices were located. The tightness in his gut only served to reinforce how much he was not looking forward to this. Iór was a titled dwarven lord related closely enough to the Blacklock throne to be tenth in line for it. There had never been strife between their two peoples in all their history, and the ripples of this treachery would likely reach out to influence all future relations amongst the remaining five Families in unexpected ways, and though he didn't have any choice in his role in this, Kíli really wished Iór had picked somebody else's mountain.

Iór still had standing as an official dignitary, which entitled him to certain courtesies, even while being held and interrogated. The room Dori had selected was well appointed for a guardsroom. The walls were patterned in soothing browns and golds, the furniture richly polished and comfortable, and natural sunlight filtered in faintly through a series of vents and mirrors. The room even had a small station with a brazier and kettle. All in all, Kíli thought, it was a huge step up from Thranduil's hospitality—and they had been guilty of no more than trespassing, and possibly making water on the elves' prized weeds or something. Elves could be funny about things like that, he supposed.

Having strong feelings about what constituted civilized behaviour, Dori had, of course, already started a pot of tea. The earthy aroma of his favoured brew was comforting familiar after months on the road together; it somehow helped settle Kíli's nerves. Bifur stood back by the door, leaning casually with arms crossed, his boar spear all the more threatening for being clasped so loosely in one hand. Iór seemed to be eyeing the unpredictable dwarf in horrified fascination. Kíli didn't blame him; Bifur had obviously taken some effort today. Glossy braids at his temples and crown kept the wild mass of hair in check. Wide steel cuffs adorned each forearm, emphasising the thick muscle there. Even the axe in his forehead had been polished and oiled to a bright sheen, and tied with finely wrought chain and what looked to be green ribbon to match the embellishments in his jerkin. The whole effect, which should have been ridiculous, was rather intimidating, in a mad way.

"All sewed up for you, Your Highness," Dori told him, pointedly glaring at their charge even as he put together a small plate of food for Kíli. How in Mahal's name Dori knew he hadn't had time for more than a strip of jerky since getting up this morning, Kíli would never know, but if this was an example of his sixth sense, he felt very sorry for Ori's chances of ever fooling that watchful eye. He accepted the food gratefully, taking a quick moment to introduce some sustenance to his stomach before his belly tried to suck out his spine. He hadn't realized until that very moment how hungry he was—and realized with a start how truly badly Bilbo must be doing to have not even thought of food the entire time Kíli had been with him this morning. Worry tugged at him, and he wanted to rush back to the treasury and check on him, but he pushed it back. At least he wasn't alone—Jústi was stable as keystones, and would keep a close eye on Bilbo until Kíli could return.

"Dori, please ask the kitchens to send up a meal for Bilbo if he hasn't already requested one," Kíli said quietly.

Blanching slightly at the idea of Bilbo being so badly off that he might forget to eat, Dori bustled
out to call up to the kitchens from the main guard office, returning just as Kili finished mopping up
his plate.

Ior sat, ignored, quietly observing his captors, and was looking less cornered and more
considering than Kili would have liked. Some of the confidence he had gained slipped away,
leaving his gut tight and his fingers flexing as his hands itched to be *doing* something—anything.
Instead, Kili pulled up a chair to sit almost companionably with their guest, hands clasped and
forearms resting loosely on his knees as he regarded Ior. He gazed back, projecting nothing more
than patient curiosity to Kili's considering stare. A minute ticked by, then two, and finally Ior
blinked, and shifted his gaze to rest on Dori, instead.

Kili firmly did not allow himself to smirk.

"We seem to be having a problem, Lord Ior. One that I'm hoping you can help explain to us," Kili
said, finally breaking the silence of the room.

For a moment, the southern dwarf appeared genuinely startled, before his expression quickly
smoothed out once more. "I live but to serve, your Highness. Whatever information I possess is
yours."

Kili regarded him for a long moment, and Ior stared right back; polite, smooth, calm. "But it's not
really, is it?" Kili finally said, deciding all the subtlety in the world would likely get him nowhere
here; Ior was too polished, too practiced to outmaneuver that way.

Ior blinked. "Highness?"

"The information you possess is most certainly not at my disposal, not yet, anyway." Kili shifted,
still thinking his way through his approach. Surreptitiously, he glanced back to Bifur. The
toymaker caught his eye and frowned. Very slowly, he gave a tiny shake of his head. He felt it,
too; something just wasn't right here. Bifur could obviously sense what Kili was also suspecting—
Ior didn't feel guilty in the way they thought. Shifty, and closed off as one of Nori's deals, but
not...*right* for this, and Kili was tired of being left behind. That was going to change right the hell
now.

"I assure you, Your Highness, I have no knowledge—"

"Don't," Kili cut him off.

Ior's expression wavered for the barest second. "You are obviously suffering under
misinformation—" he tried again.

"Bifur?" Kili didn't even raise his voice, and the lord's words cut off abruptly when a well-used
spearhead appeared beneath Ior's chin. "I have no interest in your posturing or your protests," Kili
told him. "And if you think for one moment that I would hesitate in starting an inter-Family
incident by having you summarily beheaded, I invite you to think carefully. My uncle and brother
are out there, right now, trying to clean up this mess, that if you didn't create, you at least have a
dammed good idea of who did, and I promise you, I will have your head up on a spike if they
come back with even so much as a scratch." He paused, making sure his audience understood he
was in deadly earnest. Ior stared back, taking in every gesture and intonation and weighing them
behind flat, unblinking eyes.

Kili stared right back, willing his point home. "And *I'm* the gentle one to deal with. Know this—
even if I were to decide to show you mercy, there is a hobbit downstairs who will most definitely
pluck out your eyes and use your scrotum for teabags if anything should happen to his bond-
mate."
Iór considered him silently, a flicker of something softening his blank expression before finally flicking his eyes to the spear still scraping his adam's apple. Kíli nodded for Bifur to withdraw. The Cantor grunted menacingly, but shuffled back a step, and Iór massaged his throat with tentative fingers. "I had not realized that Hobbits were such fierce creatures," he said, carefully keeping an eye on Bifur.

"You have no idea, my Lord." Kíli smirked. "Dori, why don't you bring our guest some tea—he's going to be awfully parched once he's done answering all my questions."

Iór considered him for a moment, then sighed. "Two lumps, if you would, Master Dori," he said, doing a damned good job of appearing unruffled and in control.

Kíli allowed him to get his cup, and even take a sip before discarding the rest of the diplomatic niceties. "Let's start with what we do know. Someone is playing silly buggers with explosives in our basement, and I'd really like to ask them to stop, quite possibly with one or two of my arrows sticking out of them. Be a good neighbour, and tell me who they are."

Kíli rather enjoyed the look on Iór's face as he tried not to choke on his tea.

"WE HAVE LONG suspected that one of our citizens had fled to seek refuge with the Longbeards of Erebor."

"When you say 'citizen', somehow I doubt you mean an upstanding one," Dori tutted.

Iór nodded. "The Longbeards have always been known to accept dwarves of other families with ease; it would not have been hard to disappear into such an accommodating population."

Bifur grumbled, gesturing pointedly.

"I wouldn't presume to criticize," Iór agreed, eyeing the boar spear Bifur wielded warily. "But the fact of the matter is that such a policy has made for a rather convenient refuge for those who may want to disappear."

"Why didn't your people simply send word to the King? The Sigin-tarâg have always cooperated with any requests made for extradition," Kíli pointed out stiffly.

The silence that met this suggestion was pained, to say the least. Kíli did his best to stare Iór down, determined that he was going to get the answers he needed, even if he had to pull his best Thórin impersonation to do it.

"The situation was somewhat...embarrassing for King Beukak," Iór admitted finally.

When more didn't seem to be forthcoming, Dori gave him a stern look and shoved one thick finger in the diplomat's direction. "Well, there's no point now trying to hide the cave-in; tell us what happened, and maybe we can still shore up this mess."

"I would take it as an exceptional courtesy if you could not reveal to his majesty how much I've told you."

Kíli threw his hands into the air. "Right, fine. No revealing to your king how efficiently you've handled the situation," he agreed. Iór at least had the decency to flush.

"The King's personal treasury was broken into; a treasury protected by some of the most complicated puzzle locks his ancestors could devise, as well as a highly trained rotation of..."
Bifur gave a rough whistle, and asked a smug question.

"Well, obviously that wasn't the kind of thing he would want getting around," Iór agreed sourly. "It is not something he is willing to admit to now, either. He built some of those locks himself."

"Okay," Kíli said, rubbing his forehead, "just how much did this thief steal from the Orocarnian treasury?"

"Not the kingdom's treasury," Iór corrected, seeming to forget his discomfort as he got caught up in relating the crime. "This thief stole from the royal family's private vault." He leaned forward in his seat conspiratorially, eyes gleaming. "And it wasn't so much a how much, but a what."

"Some priceless piece of royal history, was it?" Kíli tried not to sound as unimpressed as he felt given the trouble this stupid theft was causing him right now. "And what I'd really like to know is what makes you so certain your thief came to Erebor?"

"Ah. Now we get to the crux of it." Iór leaned back with a hard gleam in his eye, and Kíli was suddenly reminded of Dwalin, on the trail of one of Nori's schemes. Clearly, diplomat or no, Iór had the soul of a watchmen and guard. "The item that was taken was part of a set. A very unique set of mithril marriage beads. Now, unless you Longbeards are keeping something from us, only one pair of such beads exists in all of Arda."

"Lady Dís,"

"Exactly. And I imagine my thief is hoping to acquire the other one, kept by Durin's heirs, presumably here in Erebor."

"When did this all take place?" Dori asked.

Iór took a long sip from his tea, clearly gathering his thoughts. "The break-in actually occurred nearly one hundred and ninety years ago. Obviously, with your kinsfolk displaced and forced to leave all their treasure behind, our thief has bided his time until Erebor, and all the vaults therein, had been retaken before he could search for the matching bead."

"You sound as though you know who this thief is."

Iór nodded. He looked tired, Kíli noticed. "King Beukak currently rules the Orocarnian kingdom. His father, King Beukni, was a jovial dwarf, and very young when he took the throne. He was given to spending his time hunting with his lords when he wasn't in the mews with his falcons, or crafting in his workroom. He was a gifted artist; a frivolous Calling for one of royal blood, to be sure, and may account for his less than steady temperament. His council despaired of his youth and of his flighty nature, and sought for him a bride to help balance him, or failing that, someone with a steady head on her shoulders, who could unobtrusively step in for their easily distracted king, and make the decisions that needed to be made."

"To run the kingdom," Kíli said bluntly.

"Just so." Iór's agreement was reluctant. "They chose for his queen a dwarrowdam of the Longbeard kingdom, a daughter of the primary merchant guild of the time; Currencies and Tenders, I believe."

"Lady Áslíg," Dori murmured. "And it was Weights and Measures."

"Yes, Queen Áslíg. It was hoped she would prove to be a tempering influence for Beukni, and
had shown to have a good head on her young shoulders, but the King spent more time with his falcons and his hunting hounds than he did in his queen's company." Iór paused a moment, to roll his cooling tea between his palms. When he resumed, his voice was clipped and cool, lacking the warmth it had held in relation to the queen of old.

"Sakakni was born a decade after Queen Áslíg came to our mansion. A bastard son, it was always assumed the lad's mother had been from the lower levels—a dam of one of the less fortunate families. Regardless of his origins, the King took interest in his by-blow, and the lad seemed to take after his father in temperament. Even at eighty years old, Sakakni still showed no signs of settling, nor any inclination towards a Heart's Calling. It was as if Mahal's blessings simply skipped over this lesser son, and because of that, something was lacking in his very core. Craft after craft, the King found him apprenticeship in, and again and again the lad would set himself to his lessons, but never finding his heart's match. It was becoming increasingly obvious that the boy was damaged in some way. Very charismatic and clever, but all who knew him for any length of time found his company disquieting and his humility ingenuous. Eventually, the King found placement for him within the Banking Guild, hoping that there he would, if not be happy, at least disappear out of scrutiny. The boy's existence was shameful enough, but his failures had by now escalated to become a source of additional ridicule for the King himself, undermining his rule and all that he sought to accomplish, for in the intervening years, Queen Áslíg had finally found her way into her husband's heart, and he had settled into his duty to his people.

For fifty years, the young dwarf worked within the bureaucratic halls, never quite fading from the populace's minds even as the King and Queen ushered the kingdom into prosperity in new trade and alliances with the Haradrim tribes. One day, the King was out with a hunting party with their new allies. A stray bolt struck the Mûmakil transporting his party, and maddened by pain, the beast trampled all in his path. The king's body was badly broken, and his spirit did not linger more than a few days before departing for the halls of his forefathers.

His proper heir, Prince Beukak, was still a dwarfling, not yet growing his first whiskers when news of his father's death reached the mountain hall. His mother took the throne as regent until her son came of age, but there were many on the council who did not wish the foreign Queen to rule, making her sovereignty precarious. Conscious that the continuing embarrassment of her husband's bastard could be used to undermine not only her rule, but eventually her son's, she sought to have him sent away to help administer one of the mining colonies in the far southern edges of Ephel Dúath, the Mountains of Shadow."

"And was she successful in removing the threat?" Kíli asked, now completely caught up in the tale of political intrigue and betrayal.

Iór's eyes glittered in the bright light of the many lanterns. "On the eve of the caravan's departure, Sakakni, who had shown surprising aptitude at his new trade and was well grown past a young lad by this time, disappeared, along with the relic, Lady Dís' graven mithril marriage bead." Iór sat back, steepling his blunt fingers and resting his elbows on the arms of his chair. "The theft, of course, was never admitted to; the scandal of the old King's lesser son committing the blasphemous betrayal would have been enough to send the whole mountain into riots and civil unrest. Since then, Prince Beukak has become King Beukak, proving to be his mother's son in every way. The Queen Mother has managed to keep the theft quiet, though even years later, rumors about the King's bastard persist, and would still be highly humiliating to the Royal Family were the full extent of the truth to become known. After the recent battle, Gundabad will be the emptiest it's been in generations. We presume Sakakni has made his way to Ereboean halls, to try to gain the other bead, and so complete the map. This latest conflict with the orcs has likely been engineered to further reduce the numbers still residing in Gundabad."

"Now that the dragon's gone, and with all the dwarrows streaming back into the mountain, it
"Wouldn't be hard at all to blend in. We've picked up refugees from far and wide these last few months," Dori agreed morosely.

"And with almost two centuries having passed since the theft, I cannot guide you much in what Sakakni would look like now. Much could have been done to alter his appearance, beside what time would have done on its own."

"Honestly," Kíli interjected, baffled. "The Queen was transferring him into a position of some respect within the new colony—why would anyone risk this kind of censure and punishment? It doesn't make any sense."

"You're underestimating the need to prove yourself for one born in such disgrace," Dori said, and his voice sounded hollow to Kíli's ears, even ashamed.

Bifur's dark eyes were shadowed beneath his craggy brow as he watched Dori wordlessly. Humming slightly, he reached into his waist pouch and drew forth a small carven figure. Carefully, he regarded it, turning it this way and that, as if weighing its worth. His sigh was peculiarly gentle when he deposited the toy into Dori's astonished grasp, and with a companionable pat to the merchant's shoulder, he turned back to watching Iór suspiciously. Curious, Kíli leaned closer to see what Dori had been given.

It was a dragon, with a tiny clock face set in its chest. For reasons beyond Kíli's understanding, Dori looked ashen, and deeply thoughtful at the sight of it.

A little miffed that he was clearly missing something, Kíli turned back to the prisoner, choosing to accept Dori's assurance that there was motive enough for Sakakni to commit such desperate act, since Bifur clearly did. "So, to recap: the old King wasn't good at keeping it in his trousers, but was good at taking responsibility. His bastard son, though, was passing good at a lot of things, but found he could master none. Upon the old King's death, the intelligent, beautiful Queen—who incidentally was a Long Beard—arranged to place him in charge of a small settlement, far away from herself and her son."

"And on the eve of his departure, he managed to hair off, taking with him one of Lady Dís' carven mithril marriage beads." Dori paused to give Iór one of his best glares; the ones normally reserved for Nori at his worst. "Half of the greatest treasure in all the Seven Kingdoms, and this mud-born son is running around our mountain with it, hoping to get the other half."

Iór looked as though he was trying not to cringe.

Bifur growled at him, adding his own thoughts to Dori's, and Iór did cringe.

"Now really, I think that might be going a bit far—" he protested. Another rough comment and a wave of the boar spear cut him off decisively.

Kíli's lips twitched; wanting to smile, but quickly lost his levity. His eyes wandered, not seeing the neat little guardroom, but the whole of a kingdom, somehow, through courage and providence and sheer stupid luck, entrusted to his family's hands once again. He pushed out a deep breath that came from deep in his belly somewhere. It was time to get to work. "All right. We need a list of all those who have come to Erebor, who were not a part of our settlement in Erin Luín," Kíli said, knowing the impossibility of that task being accomplished with just the three of them, but also knowing Bifur and Dori would be just as determined as he to do it anyway.

Dori abandoned his heavy thoughts and resolutely drew his shoulders back. "The fact that there are only four hundred or so who have returned should make it easier than it might have been, at least."
"Have you not seen anything in all of your poking around these last few months? Even a vaguely familiar face?" Kíli asked Iór.

Iór shook his head. "As I said, a dwarf changes much between ninety-seven and two hundred and seventy-six. Sakakni was a youth in his early journeyman years when he left the mountains."

Bifur grunted and fingered his own greying locks. Kíli looked startled.

"You know, that's right. Sakakni wouldn't just be older by now, he would be old," he agreed. "How many of the dwarrows currently living in Erebor are aged enough to be our runaway mudborn son?"

Dori pursed his lips and quickly pulled out a small tally-slate from one of the many leather pouches about his person. "That should narrow things down nicely," he said, doing some quick calculations. "There can't be more than, oh, fifty or so that would fit."

Kíli felt his shoulders slump before he could stop himself. "Fifty?" he asked. "That's still a lot for just us."

Dori absently scratched his ear as he stared off in the distance. "Balin would have kept precise records of all who joined the mountain after our success, as well as where they claim to hail from."

"Of course!" Excitement surged through Kíli's veins, carrying with it enough adrenalin to combat some of his fatigue. Dwarves could go for long periods without rest, but even impulsive young princes had limits. Sleep had been in short supply since he and Fíli had stepped into their duties, and the last seven-day had been almost none-existent for either of them as they staged their coup and organized the mountain's mobilization. The infusion of energy that came with the prospect of finally putting an end to this threat was welcome indeed, as he knew they faced a long, tedious time of it going through the Hall of Records. Grimly, he glanced over to their visiting ambassador. "Up, Master Iór. Today, you get to be an official citizen of Erebor." Iór looked askance at Kíli as he shuffled slowly to his feet. Kíli felt himself grinning, but there was no real warmth in it, more like steely determination and a growing desire to hit something—or someone. "You helped hide this mess," he told Iór, "you can help clean it up. Consider it a gesture of restitution, from one kingdom to another." Iór had the good sense to not make an issue of it.

"And make sure we post a guard for grandfather's vault. I don't know what else may be in there, but this Sakakni fellow is likely looking for a way into it as we speak."

"...

Chapter End Notes

It has been a while, and I'm sorry. This chapter was a brute to write for some reason, despite knowing exactly what had to happen and where it had to go. *shrugs* I don't get it, but there you go.
I am so thrilled to see it finished at last. It took nearly two weeks to polish it, because it had been changed so many times. I think that may be some sort of record, honestly. And not necessarily one to be proud of *facepalm* But it is done! And while I was working on the polishing with my betas, I got most of the next chapter written - which is also some kind of record, and a much better one, methinks :D I continue to adore all the dwarves, but Bilbo is just something special, isn't he? 

This felt like a monumental chapter, despite Thorin and Bilbo being separated. We finally have some answers, and Ior is possibly wishing his King had less pride, and more sense. 

If I lack my usual eloquence, I'll have to beg your forgiveness. I have felt this illness coming on all day, and by the time I got home from work it had resolved itself into an honest-to-goodness flu, complete with teeth-rattling, whole-body shakes, nausea, and aches that makes my whole being feel like one giant bruise. 

And I have to go back to work in an hour. FML. 

But, I really, really wanted to get this up for everyone, because I've kept you waiting far too long. Please forgive any posting errors, and hopefully, this chapter was worth the wait. At least a little bit <3

I love and adore all of you - thank you so much for your time and support <3
"Fallen?" Bilbo heard his voice making the sounds, but it was separate, coming from someone else who wasn't lost in a hazy film of fear and oneness. The strange sucking at the back of his head, the feeling that had been plaguing him all day as if a door had been left open and his thoughts able to spill out, suddenly made sense. He must have stumbled, for he felt large hands gripping his arms and was surprised to notice he had surrendered his weight to them completely. He forced his sense of balance to cooperate, got his footing and hastily stepped back, straightening his waistcoat as he went, glaring indiscriminately at the dwarves who had seen his stumble.

"I'm sorry, we don't have any more information than that, I'm afraid," the fat council dwarf continued—Glólin, the name swam into focus belatedly. "The missive was quite singed and
"Damp?" Bilbo latched onto this seemingly incongruous detail, because it was easier to focus on than the impossible idea of anything having happened to Thorin—solid, stubborn and entirely too heroic for his own good that he was. "Has it been raining?" The question was inane, he acknowledged, but the look Glólin gave him was more serious than it deserved.

"No. We are puzzled by the condition of the missive, and its brevity."

"Probably penned by Thorin himself, from flat on his royal backside," Bilbo muttered. He concentrated on pulling his belly button into his spine, and pushing his shoulders back. He may never be able to loom effectively over his burly subjects, but he'd be damned if he would wilt like a milk-sop miss, either; though panic still churned in his gut, and his vision swam alarmingly. Deep in his head, in parts of it he hadn't even been aware of prior to Thorin's interference, sleep beckoned, trying to pull him under. Hastily, he tried to wall off that part of his mind, to focus on the here and now. "Thorin is not dead. If he was, I doubt I would be having this conversation with either of you; I'd be having it with a healer, or possibly Yavanna, depending on how quickly this bond of ours went septic." He fixed both councillors with a stern stare. "So. He. Is. Fine. And we shall not speak of him as if he were otherwise." Apparently, even burly council dwarves could be as susceptible to a scolding as a fauntling, for neither Glólin nor Jústi would meet Bilbo's hard stare.

"Right, then. What do we know?" he asked, putting his fists behind his back so that they couldn't see how tightly he had them clenched.

"Yes, Master Glólin, what information do we have?" Jústi asked, and there was a tiny edge to his otherwise mild voice that told Bilbo he didn't like the other dwarf very much. Bilbo wasn't entirely certain he actually heard that little edge with his ears, because try as he might, he couldn't drag up the memory of the actual sound, but the alternative that he hadn't actually physically heard it, but felt it instead, was not one he cared to think of. That way likely lay Thorin dying and eventual madness for himself, so he refused to even contemplate the idea that the hole in the back of his thoughts was wide enough now, and not-filled-with-Thorin enough to let things in, as well as out. Even the merest brush of those thoughts was enough to cause acute physical pain, and Bilbo quickly rejected it. Thorin was fine, dammit. Just, likely a bit damaged, and apparently damp.

Besides, it really didn't take the Great Thane himself to figure out that these two dwarves didn't trust each other, given that they were both involved in the political chicanery that ran a kingdom. Obviously, there was nothing wrong with his head. At All.

"...didn't contain much further information than the first missive gave us—"

"Hold on. Excuse me—first missive? As in, more than one?" Bilbo cut in.

Glólin frowned at him, bushy eyebrows curling wildly in his craggy face. "Er, yes, Your Majesty. The one that came in just after dawn this morning."

Bilbo took a deep breath and counted to ten, just like his father had taught him so many years ago when little Lobelia Sackville had accidentally-on-purpose trod all of his tomatoes before judging could begin in the May faire. It didn't help much this time, either. "And what exactly did this missive, that perhaps the Prince and I should have heard about, say?" And he was really proud of how even his voice sounded. Mostly.

Even-ish, anyway.

"We sent a runner down to you this morning, when we met in council to discuss matters," Glólin's
Twenty, then, Bilbo thought, before fixing both dwarves with the hardest stare he could muster. "Well, it didn't arrive. What did this missing missive say?"

"Only that there was a necessary change in tactics when the orcs forced the fighting from the south, instead of the north, as our forces originally anticipated," Glólin soothed.

"They were almost completely overrun, you mean," Jústi contradicted sharply.

Bilbo closed his eyes tight for a moment, and very deliberately reminded himself that they hadn't been overrun; they had, in fact, fought on long enough for Thorin to get injured. The pain was there, as soon as he thought it, threatening to over-take his thoughts again, and Bilbo screwed his eyes up tighter, and held on. Grimly, he forced himself to accept the pain, to let it into his tightly defended heart and mind, because he couldn't afford to let it keep looming up on him like this, or the next time, or the time after that, it would eventually succeed in sending him to the healing rooms, of no use to anyone. Thorin needed him here, and Bilbo would be thrice damned before he would leave this lot of sniping trolls in charge of protecting Thorin's mountain. So, Bilbo screwed up his eyes until spots appeared in the darkness behind his lids, and pinched his thigh savagely from his fist clenched tight in his pocket and let the pain in, because living with it was the only way to defend against being suddenly overwhelmed by it.

It felt like what he thought it might feel to have all of one's skin removed if you were to pull off a really giant scab, from all your skin at once; a sort of fiery, scraped-raw angry throb of every nerve, both psychic and physical, that he possessed. His vision, still tightly screwed up behind his closed lids, became a blaze of blinding white so bright he thought he might forget how to see anything but white ever again, and his ears felt both unable to hear and full of noise as his blood pounded through his veins. It lasted an age; that is to say, it lasted a few seconds that felt to Bilbo as though had grown old and died in them. When he finally felt that it might be safe to open his eyes, he could taste blood in his mouth, and realized he had bitten his tongue to keep from screaming.

"Right then," he rasped. "Right." He took another breath and blew it out as slowly as he could. His lungs burned in protest, but Bilbo decided it was bearable enough to do it again. Another breath, and he felt in control enough to try speech. "And did either missive mention the actual state of the battle now?" he asked, resisting the urge to shut his eyes again, though the lure was almost more than he could bear. "Or how Thorin was hurt? How many have been hurt? If they need supplies? Anything?"

Glólin shook his large head. "Only that His Highness, Prince Fíli is in command. I imagine we'll hear more by this evening."

His obvious pain was definitely making Glólin uncomfortable. Jústi just took everything in through sharp eyes that missed little and gave even less away. Of the two, Bilbo thought he would have found Jústi's efficiency easier to deal with, but in actuality found it strangely unsettling.

A plan. Action. That was what was needed. The kingdom was leaderless, reeling from the news of their fallen King, and while Kíli might seem like the logical choice of leader, Bilbo had to reluctantly accept that in the dwarves' eyes, he was already the King Consort. "All right, now this is what we're going to do--"

"I'm afraid, Your Majesty, that you won't be doing much of anything."

The voice of the aged councilor was different now, sounding strained around the edges, and for a
moment Bilbo was too distracted by the unexpected change to really take in the incongruent words. "I assure you, Lord Councillor, that I'm able to deal with the pain—if it becomes too much, I promise I will seek—"

"I don't really care all that much about your souring bond." Jústi's tone was clipped and aggressive. "I would have preferred to finish questioning you under other circumstances, but Glólin's arrival has forced you somewhat off topic, and I don't have the time to let you dither about, especially if that dwarf king of yours does hurry up and die."

Glólin's eyes appeared to be in danger of popping from his head as he stared, gobsmacked, at his peer. "What are you saying?"

"Shut up." Jústi didn't even bother to flick him a glance. He kept his pale blue eyes on Bilbo, watching intently.

Bilbo stared back at him. "What are you after?" he asked.

"Speaking to the ages? My birthright, and the honour that should have accompanied it." The words were as brittle as spun glass, and Jústi's eyes shone over-bright from his lean face. "Or at least, I'll be sure that is the way it is remembered."

"But what is it you think I have that belongs to you?" Bilbo asked, utterly confused, and wondering if this was another dwarf-thing that no one had bothered to tell him about.

Jústi's face contorted contemptuously. "You? You have nothing that I want, except information, and two hands able to help me dig, if it comes to that." He shrugged, a careless motion of little thought. "Your death will also be useful, should Thorin manage to survive his present difficulties. He will be in no condition to mount pursuit, and his death by bond-severance won't be instant. It should keep the rest of them busy if he were to suddenly go into septic shock."

Thorin was in danger. That much managed to cut through the haze of Bilbo's thoughts. He still felt entirely too slow and half-witted, but determination straightened his spine and gave steel to his voice. "Excuse me. What in Yavanna's Green Fields are you talking about?" he snapped irritably.

Rage flared white hot, and Jústi was suddenly shouting, "I was trained in everything! Every Craft! Just as a prince ought! My father was slowly building me up as heir, keeping me out of court to protect me. I would have been named his successor, if not for that stupid whore and her whelp."

Bilbo blinked slowly. "So, your father was—?"

"Yes! My father, King of the Orocarni Mountains! And yet I wallow here, dispensing advice to a disgraced figurehead and his ineffective protégés." Jústi paused, breathing deeply. When he spoke again, he had control of himself. His voice was even, with no trace of the impassioned rage of a moment ago. "And now here we are. I'm afraid things are going to go rather badly for the two of you, but if you assist me in getting what I want, quickly enough that I can still make a clean departure, I shall leave you alive for someone to find. The more time you waste, the greater the chance I will have to kill you." He shrugged. "The choice is yours, Master Baggins. I suggest you think carefully about how much you'd like to see your lover's face again."

Bilbo regarded him, resisting the urge to tap his foot as he thought. *What had Jústi said…?* "And what you want is a piece of jewelry?" he asked, feeling his way, but knowing as soon as it came out of his mouth that it was true. "Something with a maker's sigil, like a pair of crossed hammers, crowned by stars?"

"Not just any silly trinket. A mithril *Imûzim Mahâysîth Belhul*.

*[mûzîm mahâysîth belhul* is a fictional language in the Lord of the Rings universe, likely referring to a high quality of mithril. The exact translation or meaning is not provided in the text.]*
Beside him, Glólin gasped. "The greatest treasure of our people! Dís' marriage bead, crafted by Durin's own hand. Are you mad?"

Jústi's laugh came out like a bark, a harsh sound, more air than mirth. "Mad I may be, Glólin, but I'm not fat and useless. You had better hope that Master Baggins holds enough affection for his paramour to save your life, because I care not a whit for your survival. You're as useless to me as you are to Erebor as a councillor."

"That's quite enough of that, thank you," Bilbo found himself snapping. Though Jústi still had possession of the sword he'd been fondling during their abortive tea, he had yet to actively brandish it, instead letting it rest comfortably at his side, suggestive, certainly, but not an active threat. Bilbo was rather counting on this as a sign he could push his luck, just a little bit. "I'm afraid it's all rather moot. I know nothing of such an ornament, if one can even be found within the mountain. I'm sure you're welcome to check, but I highly doubt you have enough time before Thorin gets back—with a rather large army of irritated dwarrows at his back. I'm betting you don't want to be here when he arrives."

Jústi gave him a grim smile. "For your sake, and the sake of Thorin, whom you seem to hold more than a passing care, I sincerely hope you're lying. I will have that bead, and I will spend your life on it without a qualm. Have no doubt of it."

Bilbo smiled back with just as little warmth, and asked calmly, "And if I choose to sit here and watch while you search, what then?"

The expression that chased across the old dwarf's face was ugly, like the sea boiling right before the Kraken struck. "Perhaps I didn't make myself clear. I will continue to search for the bead until I find it. The longer my search takes, the more I risk being discovered, and if I am threatened with apprehension or pursuit, I will kill you to buy time."

"How will killing us help you evade capture?" Bilbo asked, hoping if he kept the old dwarf talking long enough, he might think of a way out of this mess. Beside him, Glólin stood rigidly, staring at his peer in shock and censure.

"Your death will be very useful. Since you and the King have stupidly left your Bond incomplete, the sudden loss of your end of the conduit should be enough to drive our good friend Thorin mad—if not outright kill him with shock. Either way, pursuit will be slow in coming. So really, if you would like your lover to die, by all means, sit there. I won't guarantee I won't kill you if you help; but I do guarantee that I will if you don't."

Glólin closed his mouth with an audible clack, and he seemed even larger in his slow-burning rage. "Even if you know of its whereabouts, Majesty, don't tell him," he said seriously. "Such a one as this deserves nothing from his ancestors."

Jústi snarled, his struggle to reign in his temper all too obvious. Bilbo let their argument wash over him, furiously trying to think of options. The door could be opened from the inside, if one had the trick of it. As a measure of his promise to Thorin, Bilbo had deliberately not tried to learn how it was done; a chivalrous act he was regretting now. There was no other way out of the chamber, and Kíli would likely be gone for hour, if the foreign ambassador was finally talking sense. Besides, letting Kíli walk in on what would swiftly be a hostage situation would accomplish nothing. Absently, Bilbo's fingers twitched, as if to rummage his tiny waistcoat pocket. The ring felt like a heavy, seductive weight, but donning it would not solve his basic problems of opening that door, or preventing Jústi from killing Glólin.

Strange. He hadn't really thought of his ring in weeks.
Not helpful right now, Bilbo-my-lad, and he relegated thoughts of the ring to the same walled-up corner of his mind as the wailing siren's call of sleep. He needed to get Jústi out of the Treasury and away from Glólin into a situation where he could use both his ring and his wits. The only way for that to happen was to ensure Jústi found what he sought, or at least think he had, and quickly enough he would still judge it safe to keep Bilbo as a hostage instead of killing him outright.

It was the best way to buy Thorin time to recover from...things Bilbo firmly wasn't thinking about.

"...refuse to be a part of this, frankly," Glólin was saying.

"Have a care, Glólin," Jústi sneered at him. "Remember, your last refusal made you a farmer. Care to wager what this one will cost you?"

"It won't cost him anything," Bilbo blurted, then glared at Glólin as sternly as he could manage. "I'm speaking to you now as your King Consort, Lord Glólin. We will assist Jústi in his search. We will speed him on his way to save lives, and we will let the orcs of Gundabad have joy of him when he reaches his destination." Bilbo turned to smile coolly at Jústi. "I'm sure they will have a warm reception for you, once they catch you."

"Oh dear, yes, the fearsome orcs of Gundabad. How could I have forgotten them?" Jústi's words were mocking rather than troubled.

What did he know about the orc attack? Before Bilbo could pursue it, Jústi was interrupting his thoughts. "Do be useful, Glólin, and go jam something in that door track. It won't do for that beardless brat to decide to come and check on his little uncle here, now would it?"

"No, I won't." Glólin finally seemed to have reached some kind of inner breaking point. He drew himself up even more, which was an impressive sight given his girth, and spoke scathingly. "Political games aside, my Lord," he said stiffly, "I know where my loyalties lie. There is a vast difference between our constant private contests and manoeuvrings, and treason. I am a dwarf of Erebor."

The strike was so unexpected and swift, Bilbo wasn't even sure it had happened, at first. He was staring at Glólin, watching as he faced his peer with rigid shoulders drawn back. He saw his flinch, and Glólin looked down mutely, watching as Jústi's blade withdrew, splashing bright crimson patterns on the polished floor. Bilbo saw him make an instinctual sort of curl, protecting something soft and vital. The sound he made was a faint whistle in his lungs, like the wind through the window panes in spring, and then his knees unhinged, and he was sliding to the floor. The dull thud his head made against the marble was enough to galvanize Bilbo into action. The pain in the back of Bilbo's head flared hot and bright in response to the sudden violence, and he viciously pushed it back with all his might. It was not helpful right now—though the pooling blood on the floor was making it questionable as to how much help Glólin would be able to accept.

"You dratted loyal fool," Bilbo muttered crossly, dropping to his knees and jamming his fist tight against the wound. Glólin didn't respond. He was already unconscious. Bilbo's questing fingers gingerly brushed a sizable goose egg forming at the back of his skull. Glólin moaned weakly, but didn't otherwise stir, and blood continued to seep out between Bilbo's clenched fingers.

"Bind him quickly," Jústi snapped.

Bilbo blinked. Well, that's a charitable reaction from a would-be killer.

"Hurry up. I told you I would not hesitate to kill either of you; at least now Glólin here may be
"I need something to bind him with," Bilbo pointed out, using the guise of aiding Glólin as an opportunity to look over the vast hall for inspiration.

Jústi snarled something in Khuzdul, and Bilbo would bet his diamond thrush it was something very rude, and drew a tiny dagger from his jerkin and proffered it to Bilbo impatiently. "Cut apart his clothing if you must, but for Mahal's sake, be quick."

Bilbo's hands were sweating as he took the blade and began shredding Glólin's outer robe into useable strips. The only sound besides the whisper of the sharp blade through the fabric was Jústi's harsh breathing, and after a moment, Bilbo asked, "What makes you think this treasure you seek is here?"

"Obviously Thorin couldn't have taken it with him when Smaug came," Jústi said. "Thror would have kept such a treasure closer than close, and he perished here, in this room. It must be here. Thorin obviously believes it to be—what better cover to look for it, undisturbed, than a bonding ceremony? Why else would a King bind himself to a halfling?"

"Oi!" The indignant squawk slipped out before Bilbo could catch it, but he didn't much care. How little this dwarf understood Thorin; but Bilbo had seen the great care he was capable of, the deep commitment and unmovable loyalty he offered, and pitied Jústi, who had obviously never experienced anything remotely like it. The cold act Jústi described, the act he could understand, was what Thror would have done, certainly, but not Thorin. "What makes you think Thorin hasn't already found it?" Bilbo asked. "You forget, my Lord—Thorin was out in the Upper Halls every day, with plenty of opportunity to move such a treasure once he found it."

Jústi glared at him. "Then I'm sure the first thing he would have done would be to end this farce of a Bonding Rite. Besides, I had him watched at all times. He never went to the Royal Family Vault. He rarely went anywhere that wasn't his study or open court, and I've had all his chambers searched thoroughly. It's still right here. It has to be."

As soon as Bilbo had the makeshift bandage knotted, Jústi had him by his left ear, dragging him up until he was struggling to stand on his toes and not hang from between Jústi's clenched fingers. Bilbo bit the inside of his cheeks to stop from yelling, but could do nothing to prevent the tears when Jústi gave him a shake. "Now, if you value Thorin's life at all—or your own, if you'd like to admit to being as selfish as the rest of us, you will tell me where to look."

"Why would I know?" Bilbo allowed a whimper to escape; better if Jústi thought him cowed.

"Bilbo Dragon-Riddler, who has just spent an entire afternoon showing me the contents of this hall, every nook and cranny, who has been industriously cataloguing his finds in some sort of effort to keep useful? Yes, I very much think you've either come across it, or have a very good guess as to where to start looking." Jústi hauled him up a little higher, until he was balanced on the toes of only one foot, and for a moment Bilbo twisted wildly, trying to regain his delicate balance. His eyes lit on the ancient thrones, where Fíli had presented his First Craft to his uncle, and where Bilbo had spent so many afternoons reading in the early summer sun. In his mind's eye, he could picture perfectly the edges of a raised shape in the overall pattern of the Queen's chair, and an idea began tickling his thoughts.

Hoping he was right, and before he could think better of it, he found the words bursting forth. "I think these thrones may be important after all, and not just as a relic to the past."

Jústi released his hold and stared at him suspiciously. "In what way?"
The blood rushing back to his abused ear was a new flare of hot, tingling pain, but Bilbo ignored it. *Weave the story; that's how you sell the lie.* "Thráin I wanted to show his worth to his bond mate, right?" Bilbo asked. "He was completely devoted to her for decades before she even considered to wed, and I have noticed a certain dwarven tendency to go overboard when it comes to the showering of loved ones with gifts." Jústi's sneer was perfunctory, and he was definitely listening.

"You told me a puzzle was built into Gylta's throne." Even as he spoke, Bilbo led the way to the thrones, trying to ignore the painful lump in his throat when he remembered sitting there with Thorin just a handful of days ago, enjoying a last quiet moment together. He knelt between them, and, given how neither throne was exactly what he would consider delicate, hoped against hope that the one with the raised design was actually Gylta's. He ran his nimble fingers over the intricate designs, searching for any sign of a hidden clasp or lever, and grinned when his fingers caught on a tiny catch all but invisible in the overall design. Of course, this didn't produce any dramatic results—it wouldn't be much of a puzzle if that were all there was to it, but he had confirmation now, and he set to work. For several long moments he worked in silence. Ten minutes? Fifteen? An hour? He had no way of knowing, except that the sucking pressure at the back of his head stayed fairly constant, which he tried to convince himself was a good sign. The lock was proving to be a multi-step process, were each new step he discovered set him back two more, until he slowly began to unravel the trick of it.

"If you're wasting time—"

"Just—be still for a moment," Bilbo snapped. "A hobbit can hardly think with you nattering away."

Surprisingly, Jústi obeyed, though Bilbo could feel his stare boring into his back, between his shoulders. It was a most uncomfortable sensation.

Seconds ticked by, with the only sound the faint rasp of skin over iron and stone and the rustle of his waistcoat and sleeves. Sweat began to bead on Bilbo's forehead and wrists, and he was acutely aware of the fact that if he was wrong about the shape he had seen in the throne, or if he couldn't get it free quickly, Jústi would likely flee, killing him to slow down pursuit. He'd loved puzzles and riddles back in the Shire—thankfully, with the Blue Mountains not that far distant, Dwarven puzzle boxes had found their way into Hobbiton often enough for Bilbo to have more than passing familiarity with the deft movements and twists required to work them—and the important fact that they required a key to open, one which Jústi wouldn't be able to take the time to find. Carefully, he twisted his fingers into tiny groves, feeling out the little latches hidden within the design. Unfortunately, hitting them in the wrong order seemed to reset the whole blasted thing. He blew a frustrated breath and rocked back on his heels, regarding the chair as fondly as he would his cousin Lobelia at finding her in his tomato patch. Behind him, he knew Jústi's patience was just about spent. The air almost seemed to crackle with his agitation, and Bilbo knew when he snapped, it would be explosively. He took a deep breath and forced himself to ignore the peril, and to really *look*, and in a moment, he had it.

Highly stylized pictures covered the entire surface of the throne, each woven into the whole until it looked like some vast pattern. It wasn't until one studied it closely that the eye was able to pick out the individual components, revealing a flowing narrative, like a story. The tale being told was not one he was familiar with, but he suspected it had something to do with Thráin and Gylta's own story. He quickly got to work, his fingers practically flying over the pieces. There were a few false starts, where he had to begin again, but finally, with a soft click, the knot at the centre of the design crowning the chair came free, and Bilbo only barely managed to catch it. For a moment he stood there, staring at the box blankly, relief being the only thing in his head. "There, you see?" he said quietly, knowing he had to make Jústi believe that he was indeed holding the marriage bead.
He'd already planted the story in Jústi's mind, now he just needed to gild it enough to appear irrefutable. "What greater tribute could a soppy dwarf pay to his intended, than to crown her throne with the most enduring symbol of love he had? Queen Dis' mithril bead would have been his most precious possession, and he, symbolically at least, crowned Gylta with love."

A disgusted noise let Bilbo know exactly what Jústi thought of that particular idea, but the hand that reached for the box shook slightly, like the bough in a summer wind. It was more than enough to tell Bilbo that the old dwarf was convinced the box contained what he sought.

"The key, of course, will be lost," Jústi murmured, his voice soft as he ran blunt fingertips over the patterned box as though in tribute. "But I can forge a new one once I reach the mountain." The moment passed quickly, and Jústi's hand shot out, grabbing Bilbo and forcing him to march ahead of him.

"What—ow! I can walk, you know," Bilbo grumbled waspishly as his toes scraped painfully on the stone floor.

"Take that binding off of him," Jústi said, shoving Bilbo so that he fell to his knees beside Glólin's prone body. The makeshift bandage had slowed the bleeding, of course, but it still seeped sluggishly. Glólin's breathing was worryingly shallow and slow, and Bilbo tried not to jostle him more than necessary as he worked at the knot. As soon as he was finished, Jústi grabbed him up again, then walked him over to the dolly and shoved him into one of the chairs at his little breakfast table. Deftly, he plucked the bloody bandage from Bilbo's hand, tore off a smaller strip and shoved the rest of it into the dolly chute, out of sight. He used the blood on the cloth to dab Bilbo's forehead, and then forced Bilbo's hands up to hold the cloth in place, like a compress. "Hold that there," he commanded. He stepped back, and surveyed the scene with a critical eye, but appeared appeased. "Now, it's not that I don't trust your desire to save your lover's life, or your acting abilities," he said, slowly walking around Bilbo, assessing him appraisingly. "But frankly, I just can't trust that you won't get some silly little heroic idea at the wrong moment. No offense."

Pain exploded from behind his poor abused ear, and Bilbo didn't even have time to feel annoyed before the darkness rushed in, and he knew no more.

*Annotation by Master Scribe Ori: Literally Imùzîm (the ornament) Mahâysîth (to marry) Belhul (binding). Ori further notes that perhaps this is not the best example of the poetic fluidity of Khuzdul in the hands of a master.

Chapter End Notes

See? It was a bit faster this time ;) I'm proud; are you guys proud? I feel like I've achieved something significant here *lol*
Some of you may have notice that I've added an end chapter again. I'm fairly sure this story will be 16 chapters. Mind you, the original plan was for 7. Then I thought it would be finished in 12, so I won't hold it against you if you don't believe me.

Frankly, I'm not sure if I dare believe myself, at this point.

I also changed the summary, or story blurb. Interesting side note, did you know it is actually called a blurb? I mean, that just sounds so unprofessional, like doohicky being used for something important. Maybe I'm the only one who didn't get the things-writers-should-totally-know memo, but this came as a surprise to me :p

Anyway, I tried to change the tone, because the original summary, while being really cool and something I love, had a rather dark tone to it, that I thought might scare people away - though obviously not all of them, because you guys are totes brave :D

Anyway, hopefully you agree it's a good change, though I am completely prepared to go back to the original if I change my mind about this one - I am just that indecisive some days :p

On another note, in this chapter I experimented with adding a mouse-over translation for the Khuzdul that I've used, so now I am on record for everyone to see just how much I suck at conjunctions and sentence structure in a foreign language. In my rather weak defense, I've always felt it was more about visual style, than technical accuracy.

That's my story, and I'm sticking to it, dammit.

In the next little while, when the next chapter refuses to cooperate, I may try to go back and add mouse-overs to the previous chapters, too, for consistency and style's sake - and also as an excuse to indulge my shiny new toy.

Nerd? Yeah, I think I have to own that one...

As always, thank you all so much for your continued support - you guys are fantastic. Your comments and interest mean the world to me, and I love you.
DECIDING THAT THE Royal Family Vault was Sakakni's most likely target, and therefore needed to be protected was all well and good, but necessitated a trip to the Hall of Records to find a map. Kíli had never actually lived in Erebor before now, and had no idea where such a thing might exist, and of course, neither would Dori or Bifur. As far as he had been able to tell, it hadn't been high on his uncle's mind since reclaiming the mountain, either. Forty minutes of furious searching through crabbed runic script and dusty scrolls finally got them the information they sought, but finding guards to watch it caused a heated discussion.

"They're the only guards left in Erebor we can use," Dori was saying.
Bifur spoke up, jabbing the table with one thick finger.

"Yes, but there are only a few guards left on the outer wall," Dori argued primly.

"And only two guarding Bilbo," Kíli pointed out glumly.

"And less than two dozen guards watching our walls and entrances," Dori repeated. "We're already relying on the ravens to cover all of our blind spots—they've been flying non-stop for four days now. Frankly, they're tired, but too proud to admit it. If we ask any more of them, we're going to have birds falling from the skies." Dori was practical, patient and brisk, and very, very difficult to disobey. It probably came from trying to raise Nori.

Kíli had to acknowledge what he said made sense—Bilbo was ensconced behind heavy stone and steel doors already, and hardly likely to be a target of some inter-Family squabble involving a century-old theft. His risk was relatively low, and Kíli did have a larger responsibility to the kingdom as a whole. Bilbo would twist his ears for him if he knew Kíli was considering keeping those guards there, at the kingdom's expense.

"Those two guards are likely the least risky to remove," Dori continued, an eerie echo of Kíli's thoughts. "Especially since we shall make sure that, as soon as we finish here, Master Baggins is with one of us at all times until this unfortunate situation is cleared up."

Bifur nearly howled his disagreement, and Dori ducked hastily as Bifur waved his boar spear about while trying to make his point.

Right though Dori may be, Bifur was a Master Cantor, even if a slightly crazy one. Sometimes, Kíli wondered if that wasn't actually an advantage, as a Holy person who talked to rocks and stone a lot of the time, listening for the voice of Mahal. If Bifur was so vehemently opposed to removing those guards, Kíli needed to give weight to those feelings. That this also coincided with his own misgivings? Completely irrelevant. "With this agânaz u ikminshulk* running around, I'm not sure we should be taking them away. Bilbo is probably completely safe, but with Uncle's sanity at stake, I don't want to take any chances. After everything he's sacrificed in his life, Erebor owes our King all the safeguards and reassurances we can give."

Dori, recognizing that this was now a decision from his Prince, and not a further rebuttal from Kíli, nodded once, and turned to the papers clutched in his hand to find where he was going to pull the guards from that would do the least damage to their defenses.

"Although, it probably isn't necessary leaving the guards there," Kíli joked weakly, wanting to lighten their mood. "Lord Jústi is with him. I'm sure he'll raise the mountain-side should anything happen to Bilbo."

Dori looked up from his parchment and frowned. "Lord Jústi, did you say?"

"Yeah. Fíli suggested that he stay behind, so that there was at least one member of our council here to keep the cogs turning." Kíli frowned back, feeling a faint pricking of unease dance along his spine, leaving tiny dots of gooseflesh in its wake. "He was discussing agriculture with Bilbo when I left."

"It's just that, there is a notation here by Balin that includes him—all the council members, actually—in the column that left with King Thorin."

Kíli waved him off. "I'm sure he just didn't get a chance to change it after Fíli made the decision. Things were pretty rushed there at the end. Fíli might not have even told him." He was still frowning, though; the feeling of unease was settling in along his spine, leaving a twitchy feeling in
its wake Kili didn't like. "As soon as we're finished here, I'll go and check on him, though."

Ior had been watching Bifur's growing agitation carefully, obviously still nervous of his boar spear. "Perhaps, Highness," he said, "you may want to go now."

Kili glanced at him, startled. "You might be ri–"

The sound of pounding boots cut him off, echoing in the hall and approaching fast. "Highness!" a voice was shouting. "Prince Kili!" A young lad burst into the Records Room, eyes rolling, and panting so hard there was spit in his fledgling beard.

Bifur and Dori sprang to their feet, only a fraction of a second behind Kili. "What is it?" he demanded.

But the guard was leaning over, hands on his knees as he tried to pull in enough air to answer. "Ra... the ravens...they..."

Kili tried not to grind his teeth in frustration. "In your own time, lad," he said, and was slightly ashamed of the sarcastic note in his tone.

The runner gulped and heaved himself upright again, and got out in a wheezing rush, "Ravens have reported in, Highness. Orcs have been spotted, marching for Erebor!"

"What?" Dori was aghast.

Kili said a word that would have got his tongue scrubbed with lye soap if his mother were here. "I'm sorry lad—what was your name?"

"Regi, Sir," the young dwarf answered, looking pleased to be recognized by the prince.

"Okay, Regi, be easy. Did Roac have any idea as to their numbers?" Kili privately wondered if he had ever been so young, and decided he probably shouldn't share that question anywhere his uncle could hear, unless he wanted to get laughed at.

The young runner was slowly getting his breath, though if he managed to stand any straighter, Kili thought it possible his spine might part company from his back. His hand twitched at his side, as if suppressing an urge to salute. "His son, Gudrun, flew the scouting wing, Sir. He estimates a few hundred, and they'll arrive before sundown."

It was a small force, most likely elite strikers meant to take down an undefended, unsuspecting mountain. Kili said another word that would have got him in even more trouble than the first.

"Our first priority is the Mountain's safety. We'll have to trust that the two guards outside the vault will be enough to keep Sakakni from accomplishing his purpose until we have a moment to spare for him." Beside him, Ior opened his mouth to protest, but Kili cut him off. "No. The safety of the people of Erebor comes before any treasure. Sakakni has waited this long to accomplish his goal. I don't think he will run away until he absolutely must."

"You risk the loss of the greatest treasures of all the Five Families," Ior pointed out.

"I don't see the other Five Families here, helping to defend it," Kili retorted, and Ior wisely let it drop. "Regi, take word to the Captain at the wall; all remaining dwarrows are to ready themselves for battle. Tell him to send runners out to every corner of the mountain, and have everyone at the gate before the next hour strikes. Go!" Regi gave him one last frightened look, all huge eyes and burning purpose, and took off.
Kíli turned to Dori and Bifur. "We're going to have to split our meager forces up. I don't think there are much more than thirty of us here in the mountain able to fight. We'll see if there are ravens with some energy left to fly, and have them check any other conceivable approach to the mountain. I don't want any surprises."

"First thing, I think there is still some rock rubble left over from what we sent down to the Men. We should see if we can shift some of it up to the gate," Dori said.

"If we have time, yes," Kíli agreed. "Otherwise, we'll pull down more statues. Bifur, I want you to find the weak spots in our defenses. Get the Engineers on those spots right away."

"And me, Your Highness? What can I do?" Íór asked, quietly.

Kíli turned to him with a start. "What--"

Two more guardsmen entering the small room, dragging a litter behind them, stopped him from giving Íór another thought. A grim-faced healer followed them.

"Why aren't you guarding the Khufdîn Juzurab?" Kíli demanded, recognizing them. "What's happened to Bilbo? Is that--?" Kíli gestured white-faced, towards the litter.

"No, Highness, we...don't currently know the whereabouts of the King Consort."

A hot band was constricting Kíli's heart; surely the rapid double beat was interfering with his hearing. "What! Where--?"

The one on the left must have been the senior rank, because he drew himself up smartly, and spoke for them. "We were summoned into the chamber by Lord Jústi, Your Highness," he said. "We found Lord Glólin wounded and unconscious, and Lord Jústi attending to His Majesty. He ordered Glólin to be taken into custody; said how he'd tried attacking the King Consort. "Jústi stopped him with a well-placed sword in his belly during the altercation."

Kíli was flabbergasted. Honestly, neither he nor Fíli'd had a spare thought for the disgraced dwarf since the confrontation in front of the Council, and he cursed himself for that oversight now. If Glólin had struck out at Bilbo in revenge, for his and Fíli's carefully contrived scene in front of his peers... "Thank Mahal Jústi was there," he breathed.

"Was Master Baggins harmed?" Dori demanded.

"His Majesty was also unconscious; a knock to the head, according to Lord Jústi. He had him sitting up, and was administering a compress to his forehead. Jústi was confident His Majesty would wake up shortly, and promised to see him to the Healers personally."

"So why aren't you with Bilbo?" Kíli demanded, turning on the healer who had been carefully attending to Glólin on the litter.

"Because he never arrived in the Halls of Healing," she said, with asperity. "Do be quiet, and listen, Your Highness."

The guard took up his tale again. "Once we had brought Lord Glólin to the healer, Fumler here stayed with Glólin while I went back down to the Treasury to offer assistance to Lord Jústi in escorting Master Baggins, but the Treasury was empty. I returned to the Healing Halls, but they hadn't arrived there, either. By that time, Glólin had regained consciousness and demanded he be brought to you."
"I'm really not interested in his posturing," Kíli said stonily.

"I would listen, Your Highness," the healer admonished, looking up from where she knelt by Glólin's side. Her expression was tight and pinched looking with fatigue and worry. "Speaking is going to be very painful for him, so I imagine it's important. I really don't know if you'll get another chance to hear what he has to say."

Kíli gave a tight nod, and moved to Glólin's other side. He looked awful; deflated and grey swaddled in the warm furs of the litter. His breathing was very shallow, and his lips had bled all their colour, leaving a faintly bluish tinge to the edges. An unexpected swell of pity rose in his breast, followed quickly by confused disgust for his own misplaced compassion. Still, he needed to know where Bilbo was, and something about this just didn't add up. "Speak, my Lord, before you go to the halls of our Father," Kíli intoned the comforting formula stiffly.

Glólin's grip, where he caught Kíli's wrist, was surprisingly desperate, and his eyes, when he managed to crack them open, blazed like the heart of a dying fire. "Jústi is not--" he tried, struggling to speak, to spit out some message bigger than his ability to articulate. "Is not--" He thumped the bed feebly with his free hand, enraged as he was left gasping.

"Easy, my Lord," Kíli soothed, despite wanting to shake him, to make him hurry up, because he was sure Glólin had something vital to tell him; the feeling welled up inside like a spreading pool of molten lead in his belly. "Water—Dori, bring me water, tea, whatever you have!"

Glólin watched him with his disturbing, glowing eyes as he continued to cough and pant on his pallet, and Kíli found he was desperately clutching his hand now, as if he could hold him there. It seemed a small age before a mug was pressed into his hand, and he could smell the heavy floral scent of honey as he held the tea carefully to Glólin's lips. "Now, gently, my Lord. Tell me what happened," Kíli urged after Glólin had managed to swallow.

"Jústi has Master—Master Baggins," Glólin squeezed out, before another painful cough locked his body in spasms that lasted several minutes.

More tea was given, but Kíli noticed there was flecks of blood dotting the dwarf's beard now, and knew he had likely torn his throat. "We know, my Lord. Did you attack him?" the question was asked deceptively gently, and Kíli went so far as to give Glólin's forearm a comforting clasp, as if commiserating.

"No!" Glólin forced out, rasping and spitting as he tried to sit up, struggling when the healer and Kíli both tried to force him to lie back down. "No," he choked again, with less force. "Baggins is... is going...to Gundabad...Dis' Imùzim..." he finally managed, collapsing back into the furs. "...dwarf of Erebor..." he muttered, his eyes drifting closed.

Kíli gazed down on him, thoughts whirling and ashamed of his disgust earlier. "A true son of the Mountain, indeed," Kíli murmured. "You're just going to have to pull through this, my Lord, so Fíli and I can officially cancel plans of making you Erebor's first farmer." He gave Glólin's arm one final pat, and stood up.

He looked at Glólin's prone body, and then the stunned faces of the others, before nodding to the guards to take Glólin back to the Halls of Healing. He waited for them to gather their heavy burden and depart before rounding on Iór. "You weren't really a diplomat back in the Red Mountains, were you?"

"I can understand how you might feel that way, given everything that has happened," Iór evaded, clearly startled.
"That's just it," Kíli said. "You were down in the tunnels investigating. You were interrogating Fíli. You were chasing your man, for years, from the sounds of things. If I had been in your king’s place, I know I wouldn't have sent a diplomat either. I would have sent Dwalin."

Dori was giving their guest a solid stare, pinning him in place and trying to strip the layers.

"You seem to have made up your mind about this, Highness." Iór's tone was mild, but there was an approving glint in his eyes.

"Well, it just so happens that I like you better as a Guard Captain than I do as an ambassador. Now, what say we go find your dwarf?" Kíli turned to his companions, members of his uncle's famous company and his truest brothers-in-arms. "Bifur, I need you to direct the building of our defenses. Collar whatever engineers are left to us, and put them to work until I get back with Bilbo. Dori, I'd like you with us, if you'll come."

Dori drew himself up with an indignant huff. "Of course I'll come!" he spluttered, looking highly offended. "But where shall we start?"

Kíli looked grim. "Where the digging was taking place, of course."

THE FIRST SENSATION Bilbo was aware of was the cool, hard surface beneath his bum. He wiggled experimentally, only to find that it felt as though he were grinding skin off in the process. His eyes felt gummy, and stuck shut, and in his foggy state, he wasn't inclined to try and force them open. He wasn't in bed, of that much he was certain, as Thorin had made sure the bag of down on his bed frame was thick as a cloudbank on a gloomy day. That left the possibility he'd fallen asleep over reports again. Still, he couldn't figure out why he would be stretched out on the floor. It was a strange incongruity, but he blearily set it aside for now. The faint whisper of...melody in his ear was lovely, to be sure, but high and thin; a sound of warning burrowing subtly into his brain somewhere like a tunneling garden pest, and making the hairs on his toes stand up in alarm. Bilbo scrunched up his nose in irritation. There was nothing to harm him here in the Treasury chamber, after all. Still, it didn't feel familiar, as his confinement chamber had begun to; the air touched his cheeks with a faint undercurrent of coolness that never seemed to permeate the protected heart of the mountain. Several moments of reluctant effort finally got his eyes unstuck, and even the dim light was a painful stab that momentarily made him wish he hadn't bothered. The faint whispering melody wavered and vanished, replaced by the quiet drip of water on stone. The distinctly mineral smell of damp granite invaded his awareness. It took a moment, but when the dark after-images cleared from his vision, it was to reveal not the comfortingly familiar warmth of the Treasury, but the dim outlines of a tunnel he had never seen before.

Bilbo had grown used to the polished stone construction of the Upper Halls during his time in Erebor. The smooth craftsmanship that left no hint of joints or courses except by design that was so awe-inspiring it almost seemed worshipful, like some vast cathedral dedicated to Mahal.

This tunnel? This tunnel spoke 'round the back' with such clearly stated purpose Bilbo supposed it would nod deferentially if it were able. This was a working tunnel. Its walls were square and businesslike, with less decoration and more buttressing. The roof did not soar up out of sight, nor was the roadway wide enough to drive a platoon of pony-drawn carts side by side, instead being sensibly proportioned. Other than a small abandoned handcart, it appeared empty. In the distance, he thought he could hear running water, but it was muffled, the way it had sounded from King
Thranduil's wine cellar. He could also make out rhythmic noises, like mechanical breathing. He pushed himself up from the smooth stone floor with difficulty, trying to peer further.

"Wakey, wakey, Master Hobbit," Jústi's voice came to him out of the gloom, and Bilbo realized with a start that there were small side tunnels branching off, dark doorways that seemed to disappear compared to the brighter main corridor. The old dwarf stepped out into the lamplight, his movements quick and jerky, as if barely contained by his frail body, and his pale eyes shone with a hungry light that Bilbo instinctively wanted to shy away from. For a moment, he was reminded of the creature in the depths of the Misty Mountains, and he shuddered.

"None of that now; you are for the moment unharmed, and with luck and cooperation, you may even see Thorin again before long," Jústi told him with false cheer and a nasty smile.

"I don't suppose you'll tell me where we are?" Bilbo asked, wriggling his toes and limbs against the residual stiffness. His ear throbbed in time to his racing heart, and he was glad he couldn't see the damage Jústi had likely inflicted.

"We're in the very basement of the mountain," Jústi told him, kneeling to bind Bilbo's wrists with a strip of cloth. "This is where the hydraulic and geothermal systems are; they tap into the River Running. To the East and below us lies the largest iron mine in Erebor." At Bilbo's blank look, Jústi rolled his eyes and spoke slowly and condescendingly, "The river runs beneath our feet here, and powers the mountain."

"This is where the flooding was," Bilbo guessed, realizing what the rhythmic noise likely was. Jústi nodded. "Yes, King Beukak's pumps are doing their job," he acknowledged stiffly. "How kind it was of my brother to speed me on my way." The expression on his face when he mentioned his half brother was sharp and bright like a blade. It made Bilbo's skin slither and creep along his bones at the sight of it, and he hurriedly looked away.

"What are we doing down here? I don't imagine we can tunnel our way out." Bilbo looked around, but there was no sign that anyone else was down here. Jústi roughly hauled him to his feet.

"I'm not pushing you any further, cart or no cart. There's nothing wrong with your legs for walking," he told him, shoving Bilbo to stumble along in front of him. As with most of the mountain, the lamps here were turned down to conserve fuel no one was using while the population defended Laketown, but Bilbo found the way was smooth, and his eyes quickly adjusted enough that he could make his way fairly well. Surreptitiously, he watched for an opportunity where he might be able to use his ring to slip away, though he wasn't confident that his bound hands would allow him to get his fingers into the tiny pocket at his waist to don it. He also needed to know what direction to point pursuit in after he escaped to raise the alarm. After a while Jústi spoke, answering the question Bilbo had almost forgotten he'd asked.

"The orcs will soon have those remaining far too busy to worry about us, but even so, we won't be able to waltz out the front gates. I had originally planned to exit the mountain the way your little company came in, but Thorin choosing to hold his little ritual where he did forced me to be a little more direct, if less symbolic."

Bilbo stopped abruptly, aghast. "The orcs are coming here?"

A quick jab in the soft flesh over his kidneys had him moving again, nearly tripping over his own feet in his distraction over the orcs. "Even filthy orcs can see the benefits of mutual alliance; if you spell it out for them, that is," Jústi told him gloatingly once he'd resumed moving. They'd turned off the main corridor now, and Jústi used a small, handheld lantern to light their way forward. On
either side of them, dark yawning doorways opened, but there wasn't time for more than the fleeting impression of large spaces beyond, filled with complicated devices before the pool of lantern light had moved on, and so had they. Sounds drifted into their corridor, and Bilbo could hear the soft trickle of water in pipes, the steady *whoosh* of giant bellows; it was the sounds of life returning Erebor.

"They'll never get in. King Thorin defended the mountain against Azog's forces with only the twelve of us, and Kíli has more than thrice that number at his disposal," Bilbo told him, worried, certainly, but more concerned still by Jústi's apparent nonchalance.

"One has to wonder how Thorin would have fared if Azog had been more clever in his assault," Jústi murmured, yanking Bilbo to a halt inside one of the large rooms. Bilbo was grateful for the opportunity to catch his breath. The tunnel here no longer looked as if it was in good condition. Stonework had slipped from the ceiling in places, and rubble littered the ground at their feet. Jústi was crouching, clearly looking for something in the mess.

Bilbo looked around. The room he was in disappeared beyond the circle of the lantern's light, but there was no doubting its size. There was none of the close feel of the corridors in the air in here, and sounds, instead of bouncing back to him off of nearby walls, seemed to dwindle instead. The feeble lamplight cast shadows over the hulking shapes of huge drums, cylinders and darkened crucibles, linked together by pipe work that was as thick as Bilbo's waist after a week of feasting. There likely wouldn't be a better place to give Jústi the slip. With his ring on, he could hopefully disappear into the warren of the waterworks.

Now, if he could just get a little more information about those orcs before he hared off to raise the general alarm... Experimentally, he gave his wrists a little wriggle. He was more along 'round the middle than he had been, thanks largely to Thorin and his desire to make sure he missed no more meals, which was going to leave him less room to maneuver his bound hands, and would make him awkward and slow if pressed to go for his ring in a hurry. Nervously, he pressed against his waistcoat pocket with his elbow, relieved to feel the solid press of the ring at his side. Jústi was fiddling with something he'd dug out of the detritus of the room; some kind of small cylinder, or phial, and was uncoiling a piece of thin wick from his belt pouch. The sword was sheathed over his shoulder, and looked fairly loose in its setting, like it would come to hand easily. On silent feet, Bilbo carefully took a half step back, getting him out of Jústi's direct sight, and tried to wriggle his wrists a little more, twisting and questing with his fingers for the knot. "You've given this some thought, it seems," Bilbo prodded gently. Jústi was still mostly ignoring him. Sweat tickled Bilbo's brow, and he moved carefully so as not to rustle as he worked.

"You could say that, yes." Jústi's reply was irritated. The old dwarf's fingers were stiff with age and gout, and whatever he was trying to do wasn't going well.

The fabric binding Bilbo's wrists was coarse between his fingers, with little give in the weft. "I can understand what you get out of the orcs attacking—I mean, it is a rather effective distraction; but I have to wonder, what could you have possibly offered the orcs to get them to go along with this?" Bilbo prodded him, keeping Jústi distracted and hopefully giving himself some useful information in the bargain. The knot remained stubbornly out of reach. "I mean, let's face it, this mountain is probably the least accessible place in Middle Earth, isn't it?"

Jústi paused in the brightest part of the pool of lantern light to examine the switch in his hand. "What indeed," he murmured smugly, and Bilbo knew there was something more to this plan. Desperation had him give his bonds a few painfully hard twists that felt as though he'd compressed the bones of his wrist, but the knot was finally in reach of his fingers. Jústi seemed to have worked out the kink in his little project, for he gave a satisfied snort, and began deftly twisting the pieces into place. "As I said, Master Baggins," he resumed, suddenly coming back to
the conversation with more than half his attention, "I wonder how Thorin would have fared if Azog had been a bit more...prepared. Locked outside, the orcs' ability to be threatening is laughably limited."

Bilbo's fingers stilled as the horrifying thought came to him. "You're going to let them in," he blurted.

Jústi half turned to him and grinned, a surprisingly boyish expression that he still managed to make nasty. "Already in place; while you were sleeping. Now it's time for our hasty exit, and the dwarves of Erebor may soon have joy of my little departing present."

The knot, damp with sweat, slipped, fractionally, but it was enough to give Bilbo the room he needed. Without pausing even a heartbeat, he was digging in his tiny pocket so hard he wasn't sure he wouldn't tear the seams. Jústi's expression was changing, suspicious and angry, and he was reaching for Bilbo just as he felt the comforting weight of the ring slide into place; there was a noise in his ears, like air rushing into a vacuum, and instantly Bilbo's world disappeared into the streaming grey void of the shadow-world. Hastily, he took a few steps back, getting out of range of Jústi's grasping hands and astonished gaze. He had to get out, but Jústi was now between him and the doorway to the corridor, so his only option was further into the waterworks.

Jústi showed deft thought and presence of mind; he had his sword out, drawing it and sweeping it through the space Bilbo had stood in one fluid motion. Bilbo jerked away, feeling the faint wind of its passage, and had to grudgingly admit the old dwarf thought fast on his feet. Jústi was advancing slowly, sweeping the sword before him, and Bilbo realized the crafty bugger was herding him, even as he was powerless to stop it.

"What a clever little trinket you have, Master Baggins," Jústi was murmuring, inch by slow inch forcing Bilbo into a tighter space between the giant drums. The debris in this room choked and littered the floor, making finding the kind of crawlspace Bilbo had counted on hiding in almost impossible. He concentrated on keeping his feet and not disturbing the gravel and dust to betray his presence. "Did you perhaps find this pretty toy in the Treasury? What other treasures have you helped yourself to, I wonder?"

Bilbo bit back his indignant ire at that accusation, even as he felt the slither of disgust that Jústi's tone was not accusing, but admiring. He had to get out of here, had to find this back door Jústi planned to open up for the orcs—had to warn Kíli, if he hadn't already spotted the forces marching for their gates. Most of all, he just heartily wished Jústi gone. Bilbo had thought the lord would be more likely to take his puzzle-box prize and flee once he lost his hostage; they must have been discovered as missing by now, and the threat of pursuit wouldn't be worth lingering in the mountain to re-capture him, not when Jústi thought he already had what he wanted.

Apparently, Bilbo had shown him an even better prize, and he cursed the ring anew. Being here, in the ring's world, seemed to be doing funny things to his head. It had never been comfortable, this harsh colourless place the ring inhabited, but this time seemed worse; pulling deep inside Bilbo's head at those already wounded places Thorin had opened within him, and that he had so desperately tried to wall off. Whenever the ring managed to penetrate those defenses, instead of pain, he now felt numbness, as though his connection to Thorin was no more than the phantom sensations of a lost limb, and the very thought of what that might mean terrified Bilbo right down to his curling toes. He longed to yank the ring off, to throw it from him as far as he could, even while he clutched at it, desperate to never let it leave his sight. He clamped a hand to his mouth, to muffle the sharp rasp of his breathing as he struggled with the warring impulses, and steadily and slowly crept backwards into an ever-narrowing trap.

"I think such trinkets were not meant for the likes of you," Jústi cajoled, still continuing his relentless, glacially-slow advance. "They are a King's treasure, and I shall take it from your body
ere I leave this place, unless you surrender it up to me."

Bilbo's vision swam; he was backed almost to a corner, the whisper-whirl of the constantly sweeping blade made unnaturally loud by the will of the ring. Without really knowing what he intended to do, he'd stooped to grab a rock, a heavy chunk of masonry crumbled from the wall, raising it high. He could strike down this Lord, hidden in the shadows as he was; like most hobbits, Bilbo was a deft hand with a stone or a sling. Jústi would never see the blow; never be able to take his ring, even as he longed to give it to him so that the cold, creeping emptiness would never touch those places inside him that were tied to Thorin, ever again.

For a long, endless second, his still-bound fists were raised high, awkward but still sure of his ability to deliver the blow. And then he wavered; he felt the wrongness of the action as though it came from outside himself. He shook, trying to hold the heavy stone steady, lips curled in anger, though he was unsure what precisely he was angry at. He was poised and warring and unable to act, when a tinkling sound echoed, suspended in air all around them, like the tiny rock before a landslide.

The sound of metal on stone, bell-like and delicate, and the rushing, sucking wind of the ring world fled from Bilbo's vision as everything swam into focus once more. "No!" Bilbo gasped. Despite his surprise at seeing Bilbo suddenly re-appear before him, Jústi was faster, diving for the ring before Bilbo had managed to process what had happened, and though this new situation was about as bad as things could go, Bilbo was secretly relieved that his shocked despair at losing the ring was less than his great relief at losing the creeping deadness. Jústi's sword was at Bilbo's neck in the same motion, and he let the brick slide from his fingers with a sullen thud. Neither of them paid it any mind as they stared at the golden ring cradled in Jústi's ancient palm.

The ring seemed to burn flame-bright in the gloom as Jústi held it up to examine, and the gleam seemed to illuminate his large pale eyes, like twin lamps in the darkness; the image disturbed Bilbo to his core. "What a precious little thing you are," he crooned softly, though his sword still pressed into Bilbo's flesh with deceptive strength. "What other treasures did Thror have locked away with him, I wonder? Perhaps this is what Thorin sought; a greater strength indeed than any gift from our maker."

"No," Bilbo rasped desperately, and ducked under the blade, to tackle the astonished dwarf to the ground. He twisted like an eel in Jústi's grasp, who was hampered both by his hold on the ring, which Bilbo was preventing him from donning, and by his sword, which was useless in such close quarters. With a snarl, he let the sword slide from his grasp to get a hand on the wiggling, furious hobbit who seemed to have his hands everywhere in his apparent determination to part Jústi's fingers from the company of his hand. It didn't take long for Jústi's greater strength to win out, and he hauled Bilbo up by his ear again, twisting cruelly as he shook him midair until Bilbo screamed.

"I don't need you, you little furry menace," Jústi wheezed furiously, nursing bitten fingers and wrists resentfully. "I have a better way to avoid pursuit, thanks to your sticky fingers." Jústi fumbled awkwardly for the sword, discarded in their frantic tussle, without letting go of his hold on Bilbo. "Know that Thorin will not live out the day, Master Baggins, and his death will be painful, unlike yours."

Bilbo stared disdainfully back at him, chin up and lips drawn tight in pain, sorrow weighing in his gut and filling his throat. "Then I shall see him in Mandos' Halls" he said with quiet dignity. "But not, I think, before he's managed to part your head from the company of your shoulders."

Rage distorted the dwarf's thin features horribly, and his whole arm vibrated as he hoisted Bilbo up as high as he could and shook him as though he could shake him apart. "I will have your head
on a spike!” he snarled, and his voice was unnaturally high and brittle-bright in his rage. "I will—"

"Let him go!"

The enraged shout echoed in the vaulted space, almost simultaneous with the heavy twang of Kíli’s bowstring, and Bilbo found himself dropped, breathless, into a painful heap on the floor. He heard Jústi’s agonized scream as a bolt ripped its way through his flesh, and clattered to the floor somewhere beyond them. Thinking fast, Bilbo made a desperate grab for him, but he’d already vanished from sight amidst the startled shouts of the others.

"Bilbo! Are you all right?” Kíli asked, rushing to his side. Gentle hands were picking him up from the floor, and Dori was carefully cutting away his bindings and examining his wrists for damage. Behind him, an unfamiliar dwarf lingered, frustration and disbelief twisting the expression on his swarthy face. Bilbo waved away Dori’s ministrations; they had more important things to worry about.

"Yes, yes," he grumbled with just the right touch of asperity to put them at ease. "I need you to listen, all of you. Jústi has made an alliance with the orcs; they’re marching here, now."

"We know," Kíli said grimly. "Ravens spotted them on the march not half an hour ago." He nodded to Dori, who gently forced Bilbo’s torn wrists into the circle of lamplight. He had a thick roll of linen bandage in hand and a familiar pot of one of Óin’s self-named ointments.

"Listen!” Bilbo batted them away again urgently. "Jústi has something planned; some way of getting the orcs into Erebor.” Dori’s hands stilled as the three dwarves stared at Bilbo in shock. "He said he already had it in place; had done while I was unconscious,” Bilbo told them.

Kíli and Dori looked to each other before glancing at the unfamiliar dwarf, who met their gaze and snapped, "Don't look at me; I know nothing about what Sakakni plans."

"Your Majesty," the strange dwarf then addressed Bilbo intently, "Forgive the intrusion, but I must ask: did he find what he sought? Does he have the bead?"

Bilbo shrugged, feeling inexplicably self-conscious. "I convinced him that it was in a box—a puzzle box from within Gylta’s throne."

Kíli whistled. "What an addition to their legend; the greatest treasure of Durin’s folk, given into her keeping. The scribes and historians will be in a flurry."

"Yes, well, we never actually opened it," Bilbo reminded him, amused that the mere hint of adding to the story had already about half-convincing these three that the bead was in there. Dwarves, Bilbo thought with exasperated fondness, were as bad as fauntlings at the promise of a good story.

That seemed to snap them back, and Dori asked, "You have no idea if it was actually in there? So Jústi may indeed have both halves of the map?"

Mirth bubbled up suddenly; a release of tension despite all the dangers still to face, and Bilbo found himself chuckling giddily. The dwarves looked concerned by his sudden amusement, which only made Bilbo laugh harder. Tension had been coiled so tightly he couldn't seem to get his breath back, and each gasp of laughter only prompted another one; soon he was hiccupsing, eyes streaming and nose running, but he felt too much like a cork escaping from under some great weight and bobbing to the surface of the water to care. "Good thing," he told them as he wheezed, "good thing I pinched it back from him while we struggled in the dirt," and he reached into his torn and ruined waistcoat to pull out an elaborately decorated box.
The collective look on their faces started him chortling again for several more minutes.

"NOW, JÚSTI HAS a head start, and the ring will make him impossible to track," Bilbo stated, trying to firmly define the problem. "We have to go get Bifur—he could use his abilities to track Jústi through the stone, couldn't he?"

"No time," Kíli argued, looking miserable.

"No help for it, lad. We need him," Bilbo pressed, tiredly. "I don't see how we have much choice. Jústi is invisible. I tested the ring's capabilities pretty thoroughly in Thranduil's dungeons. You won't find him without that extra help."

"Jústi will be long gone by the time Bifur gets down here. I'll go." The look on Kíli's face was such a curious mixture of determined and despondent that it took Bilbo aback.

The look of dawning understanding and pity on Dori's face only reinforced to Bilbo that there was definitely something greater going on here, and he felt all his protective instincts rising up. "Kíli, can you also hear things through the stone? I mean, more than just the usual vague impressions?" Bilbo probed, and he cursed for not having the time to be delicate, for this was obviously an uncomfortable topic for Kíli.

The young dwarf looked off in the distance for a moment, then straightened his shoulders as best he could and looked down to meet Bilbo's eyes. He looked resigned, as if he had made peace with a difficult choice, but the despair was gone, thankfully. "I'm not trained like Bifur," he said at last, and it was obvious he was still choosing his words with care, "but I can hear well enough to help me find that muck-dweller. The very mantel will cry out against such a faithless one as he."

Bilbo reached for his hand and held it tightly between his own. "Obviously, there is something going on here which a mere hobbit cannot fathom," he said with a ghost of a smile. "When this is over, you and I shall sit and have a long chat. It's not good to keep secrets from those who love us, and I think this is one you've been keeping for far too long."

That earned him a small, but grateful smile, and then Kíli was gently disentangling his hand from Bilbo's. With a jaunty wink, he said "Wish me luck then, Uncle!" and was off, Iór moving quickly to keep pace. Dori stayed with Bilbo.

Kíli was quickly lost to Bilbo's sight in the darkness of the tunnel, but Bilbo stared after him, pondering his mysterious plight. He didn't allow himself to woolgather long though, and he turned his thoughts to tasks to come. "Good luck," he murmured into the looming darkness, before turning around and heading up to the upper levels as fast as he could trot.

He had his own job to do, after all.

If only he wasn't so tired.

-..-

FAR AWAY, A dwarven king turned restlessly, dreaming fever-dreams of unfamiliar numbness and pain. Someone fingered sweaty hair from his forehead, taking no notice of the light brush of their aged fingers against their restless patient's ear—but the king's pained hiss caused a flurry of activity. Gently, he was propped up, and a new concoction eased down his throat until he was once more too deeply asleep for the reach of dreams or despair.
"I'm sure Bilbo is deep into healing sleep by now," the healer whispered reassurances to the king's kin, waiting tired and anxious from his position at the side of the patient's bed. "We should see improvement soon."

Their vigil was filled with the pricklings of unease, and the slowly dawning, and so far unspoken, question; if everything were indeed well, why hadn't they seen improvement yet?

"..."

*agânaz u ikminshulk: Annotation by Master Scribe Ori: Literally * (of) beginning origins of mud. The shakiness of the script somehow manages to convey the writer's embarrassment at the severity of the insult.

Chapter End Notes

I had to write this. Way back when I first began figuring out how Thorin would deal with Bilbo's possession of the ring, I knew in the back of my mind that the real battle wouldn't be Thorin figuring out how to overcome Bilbo's advantage, but in Bilbo learning to let the ring go - and the only thing, I think, that could counter something so possessing and addictive would be something as selfless as love for another soul. It would be the antithesis of the ring's philosophy of control and manipulation, and I don't think it could co-exist along side Thorin's bond inside of Bilbo's head. Being the ring of ultimate power, unfortunately, it would likely be too strong for even two individuals as strong as our favourite King and his gardener, and would wither their connection. The grey void of the ring's shadow world (a telling reflection of the ring and it's maker's philosophies) isn't compatible with the warmth and fullness of loving bonds. The ring abandoned Bilbo, because it sensed in Jústi a better host. Which is telling, really, when Tolkien tells us that the dwarves are largely immune to Sauron's rings, except for becoming greedier under their influence. But Bilbo was no longer a good host, given the power of his bond with Thorin, and was starting to overcome his dependency on the ring under the influence of that love.

It's late, and I'm not sure I'm wording this very well, but hopefully I managed to get it right when I wrote the chapter, and you all understand what I mean :p

Yes, Kíli is indeed a Cantor, though you will have to wait for an explanation as to exactly why this is a problem for him ;)
Thank you to everyone of you who reads this, posts comments, bookmarks, or otherwise enjoys my efforts in any way. You have all made the late nights and hard work completely worth it ♥
Beneath the Mountain, Music Woke

Chapter Summary

~In which Sakakni and Kíli have a merry chase, Dori embraces his Heartcraft, and Bilbo wants the Orcs out of the mountain~

Chapter Notes

My thanks and love to my betas hazel-3017 and krystal lazuli, even when you are so swamped that the most you can do is cheer me on - that support means the world to me.

Nepthysmoon, I think you may have the brain today, because I sure as hell don't ♥

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Forge of Origins:
The Legacy of Our Fathers

Beneath the Mountain, Music Woke

The steady drip of the tunnels in this section of the mountain was a painful reminder that they still had a long way to go in their repairs before the kingdom was the home they all dreamed of. He and Íór had followed the trail nearly to the foot of Erebor, with nothing below this level but the River Running on one side and mines on the other, delving deep into the hidden darkness. The flooding was under control, and for that, Kíli was grateful, even if it was largely thanks to the Ocarinan water pumps. Their rhythmic whir was the heartbeat of the mines now, imprinting slowly into the stone of the mountain beneath Kíli's trailing fingers. He closed his eyes, and tried to dig deep into his own psyche, and concentrate on senses he usually did his best to pretend he didn't have. Íór kindly said nothing during their infrequent pauses, simply letting Kíli work, though his expression was tight and his lips thinned to nearly non-existent.

Solid, staid granite grumbled beneath his touch, irritated by Sakakni's faithless passage and too disturbed to give localized direction. Cool, loyal chalcedony gave only outrage and betrayal, and Kíli forced himself to shut out his urgency and ignore Íór's palpable impatience, and try to dig a little deeper. The normally comforting song of the stone was a jangle of discordant melodies in his
thoughts and he followed the threads, looking for one that responded less passionately and with more sense for his limited abilities. Sweat trickled on his forehead, and behind his ears, and he squeezed his eyes a little tighter and ignored the faint tickle. He could almost see the various harmonies within the stones' song, and he concentrated as fiercely as he knew how.

There.

Faint traces of powerful diamond resonated with Sakakni's passage like whispering echoes of lost footfalls.

He had lost them precious time, but the sure sense of Sakakni's course was thrumming through his thoughts now, like an unwavering, painted line. In silence, he motioned Iór to follow, senses hyper-alert and wound tight.

Faint phosphorescence gave the walls and floor a yellowish hue, and picked out the flecks of mica and quartz as tiny pricks of luster in the darkness. It was more than enough to avoid the bits of fallen masonry and detritus left by the floodwaters as they hurried as best he could in Sakakni's wake. The hallway was narrow; a rarely used service corridor for the pipe work that supplied the mountain, and Kíli almost didn't see where it abruptly opened up beneath his feet before he'd plunged headlong into it. Skidding to a halt, he jammed his hand against the wall for balance as he teetered on the edge of the unexpected hole in the floor before he felt Iór grab a handful of his leather jerkin and wrenched him back.

"Careful, Bundushathur," he chastised, grunting a bit under Kíli's weight.

It seemed he'd found the ultimate goal of Jústi's excavations in their basement. He just didn't know why.

Caution forced him to take his time, despite wanting to tear off half-cocked. Kíli knelt down, and tried to peer into the inky darkness, but he could see nothing of what lay below. When he heard the muted sounds of the river, amplified by the narrow aperture of the hole, he suddenly understood—Sakakni had been excavating not for iron, or even treasure, but for a way out. Kíli banged the lip of the opening with his fist and muttered another less-than-polite word.

He was becoming more and more thankful his mother wasn't here to hear him showcase his miner's vocabulary.

The noise of the river hid any sounds their quarry might make, but it also provided them with some measure of cover, and so, after carefully assessing the distance, Kíli slid over the lip of the opening, dropped heavily to his feet on the smooth worn cavern floor below.

The shock of his landing jolted his ankles, but he ignored it. A moment later, Iór landed behind him. These caverns and tunnels had been carved by timeless ages of the River Running coursing beneath their mountain home, and the sound of the rushing water, much louder now, carried through the twisting passages from somewhere not-too distant. Kíli could feel Sakakni's passage, heading for the river, and nothing more. Seconds ticked by, buried in the deep dark of the mountain's roots, but Kíli could get no further sense from the stone's melody. He let his hand drop away from the smooth wall and he followed resolutely, ignoring the branching tunnels along his path and risked a loping jog, counting on the noise of the water to cover the noise of their passage. He was missing the comforting weight of his armour, and trying not to imagine Sakakni stepping out of some darkened corner to put a dagger between his unprotected shoulder blades. Privately, Kíli admitted was entrusting their lives to his completely untrained abilities, and he tried not to think about that too closely, either. He would do this, even if he had no reasonable right to expect that he could; Sakakni's path was there, in his mind, without wavering, and he would follow; he was fairly certain Iór had been doing the same for years now. Still, he shifted his bow so it sat a
little higher on his shoulder, easier to come to hand, and took some comfort in the weight of the short sword at his side as he hurried on as fast as he dared, and tried not to think about what would come after, because putting the genie back in the bottle was going to be next to impossible now that he’d deliberately called it forth.

It felt like an age. Impatience hammered at him, knowing that there was an orc army poised to enter their mountain, and that he’d left Bilbo alone to deal with it while he chased the scuttling bastard who’d brought down all this misery. Honestly, even if they caught him, he wasn’t sure what to do with him. The Codex of Law didn’t exactly have this situation in mind when it laid out the foundations of dwarven justice; such a crime was unthinkable. Thankfully, it would be Uncle’s problem of deciding a fit punishment, but Kíli knew how much it would hurt him to have to decree the kingdom’s first execution so soon after reclaiming it; or dealing with the political mess that would result in Sakakni’s original Orocarnian crime becoming known, which would make it extremely undesirable for Iór to take him back.

It would be better by far if Sakakni obliged them all by refusing to be taken alive, though the thought was so uncomfortable that Kíli pushed it away.

Fine mist began to cling to the surface of the stone beneath his fingers as he ran them over the cavern walls, and the grey rock beneath his feet was dark with accumulated water. Ahead, he could sense the widening of the passage into a mighty cavern, and the echoing sound of the river was loud enough to convince him of its nearness; he slowed, straining his limited senses, because locating his quarry wouldn’t do him any good if Sakakni found him first. Thankfully, the old dwarf had no reason to expect pursuit this quickly.

Rising high into the inky blackness, the vaulted ceiling dripped with stalactites that rained condensation down on the river below, creating the mist that clung to Kíli’s hair and clothes. He hoped it wasn’t collecting enough to make his bowstring damp under its waxcloth cover. The stone around him still resonated with Sakakni’s passage, but now the disturbed rock was drowning out the fainter, steadier voice of the diamond. Sakakni was here—but the rock's melody was so saturated with his presence, Kíli was no longer certain of his ability to find him first.

Think. He forced himself to shut out the ever-present apprehension of a throwing-knife coming out of the darkness. His only hope of eluding an invisible foe lay in his mind and heart, not with his straining eyes. Sakakni wasn’t planning on swimming out of here. This was probably the oldest part of the kingdom. The first colonists of the mountain would have cut shafts down here to channel the river to fuel their kingdom, ship out waste, bring in supplies; which meant there had to be—

Boats. The clever bastard.

He wouldn’t be able to just row his way. Not only was the water in the main channel wickedly fast and deep; in some places it ran through airless chutes of stone, finally fetching up against heavy iron grates before exiting the mountain under their Front Gate. This wasn’t the main channel, though; there were many smaller byways and tributaries forking off into the darkness and winding their way beneath the kingdom; smaller, darker waters that never broke the surface of Middle Earth, but still, would likely come close enough that a bit of determined digging could find a way through. There may even be natural openings, and Sakakni’d had months to explore and find his route. Kíli had heard that there were places in Middle Earth where the River Running formed huge subterranean seas in caverns so beautiful a dwarf could spend a lifetime just listening to the song of the crystal and metal deposits, growing and blooming like a vast untended garden. If ever dwarves were to set boot in such places, each tiny deposit would be carefully chiselled and shaped to open up its natural beauty to the heart and eye. It would be the work of a lifetime to shape and train just one tiny corner of that place, and khazad would come in pilgrimage from all
over, just to weep amongst such magnificence

If there were such places to be found along the river, Kíli had never seen them, and right here was only a dark cavern full of unseen menace. They pressed close to the wall of the passageway just shy of entering the open cavern, and carefully inchcd forward and peered around the edge. From this vantage point, he could see the river; the dark water was a faint reflective sheen, like an oil slick. The cavern floor was eroded smooth, sloping gently downward from where Kíli stood, before rising again towards the riverbank and the yawning darkness of the river's passage was an impenetrable void to his right and left. Crystalline deposits gleamed faintly in the muted glow of the plant life, and the occasional ghostly luminescent shapes of eyeless cavefish beneath the river's surface briefly changed its opaque surface to dark glass; a tiny still-life microcosm in the darkness. Here, the river gentled enough to kiss the bank, almost like an aboveground lakeshore. Shallow and calm, the wide break would make launching a boat a simple matter, even for a lone dwarf, and drawn up haphazardly on the cavern floor, not twenty yards hence, was a crude, flat-bottomed boat, little more than a raft with raised sides and a tapered bow.

And it was launching.

Whatever advantage they had from Kíli's abilities had would be lost on the water—the direct passage of Sakakni over the stone was only barely within his ability to hear. With little more thought than that, he stepped into the open and drew his bow, but his sense of the Sakakni's presence was already wavering like a guttering flame as the boat left the shore. Kíli snarled in frustration—bow-arm drawn tight as he sighted down the arrow shaft for any hint of a target, but there was nothing. Iór pushed past him, running for the shore, only to watch, bristling with ineffectual rage as the small ship slipped out of reach in the deep water.

Sound easily carried in the still air, and there was a brief thud of startled movement aboard the small dory at their sudden appearance.

"My, my. Is that Erebor's beardless princeling?" Sakakni's voice drifted across the river. There was more than a hint of strain beneath his nonchalance, though. "And look, it's the Queen's lapdog. How utterly useless you must feel; though I don't suppose that's a new sensation for you at all, is it?"

The shrill comment hung in the air for one, fractured instant. Kíli breathed in. Held it, and set his shoulders for the powerful draw of his bow. His fingers twitched minutely against the arrow shaft, launching it for his best approximation of Sakakni's voice. The arrow's fletching whistled as it cut the air, dividing the second of its flight neatly into split outcomes: success, or failure.

Failure. The arrow struck nothing, and splashed down into the river beyond the bobbing portside gunwale, and Sakakni's laughter was mocking. "Missed, my prince. I really must thank Master Baggins for his timely gift. Do you like it?"

Kíli ignored him. The vessel was catching the sluggish current now; soon it would be out of bow-range. Desperately, he closed his eyes, and tried to reach out to the stone for anything, any hint, but there was nothing there; the water obscured everything. Opening his eyes, he glared at the departing boat, carrying its unseen burden out of reach. Absently, he tracked the uneven progress of the waterlogged vessel, and tried to dig deep for a new idea. Iór had exhausted his supply of throwing daggers, and prowled the shore like an angry wildebeest, and the way he was eying the deceptive current of the river made Kíli think he was only a few short moments from throwing himself in after the escaping vessel.

Wait. If he couldn't stop Sakakni, maybe he could stop the boat.

Not over-thinking things was probably Kíli's strongest suit, and no sooner had the thought...
occurred to him, he was moving. He put down his bow and reached back to his quiver, pulling out one of his tiny hoard of naphtha-laden fire arrows. Grabbing his tinder from his belt, he lit the twisted wick and notched the arrow carefully into his bow. It was a fallacy held by the other races that dwarves only ever shot a bow from their hip, in their famous horizontal draw. True, theirs was a style unique to the Khazad, being one that left the archer with full sight and peripheral vision without a great ruddy bow getting in the way, but there were many occasions when the more traditional, vertical stance was called for; usually when the archer wanted less power, and more precision.

Like now.

The heat of the tiny flame was an uncomfortable pin-prick against his skin, and it was only long practice that kept him from singeing the whiskers of his close-cropped beard. Pulling smoothly with shoulder muscles developed by years of training, he drew the string taut, elbow cocked back past the line of his shoulder, sighting just ahead of the clumsy prow, leading his target and getting a feel for its movement in the current. A single heartbeat, and he released his breath, and his weapon, simultaneously.

The bowstring twanged with a muffled retort in the damp air, the sound somehow thinning in the hanging mist and low rumble given off by the river, but was still bright and sharp with purpose to Kíli's ears. The faintly sweet smell of the kerosene-soaked wick igniting tickled the hairs in Kíli's nostrils, made stronger by the fact he held his breath as he tracked the brightly burning arc of the arrow's path over the sluggish water. The sound it made as the steel arrowhead embedded itself in the wood of the prow was a solid, flat, and utterly satisfying.

Naphtha burst from the arrow's carrier, igniting as it spilled and quickly spread over the deck, carrying unquenchable flames over the tar-coated wood. Pouring water on it would only spread the flame, as naphtha, like most oils, was lighter than water and would not marry with it, instead floating on the surface. Kíli heard Sakakni as he cried out in frustration, and the sounds of heavy boots stamping on wood carried clearly as he tried vainly to stomp out the spreading fire and only succeeding in singeing the leather of his soles. He snarled unintelligible curses when he was forced to retreat. Frankly, with water all around, the danger of burning to death was laughably non-existent.

Except, the second the old bastard stepped foot off the boat, Kíli would have him. There was no way to disguise his movement in the water, ring or no ring. And Sakakni was quick to recognize his plight.

In one simple move, Kíli had rendered his stolen ring worthless.

"You elf-begot silt-sifter!" Sakakni seethed. "Smooth-chinned, useless-!"

"If that's all you can come up with, Jústi, I'm afraid I've rather over-estimated your cleverness over the years," Kíli told him calmly, keeping his bow cocked and ready to fire as he sighted down the arrow-shaft for the first hint of betraying movement in the water surrounding the distressed boat. "I mean, have you ever tried to fire a bow with that great bush growing under your nose? I bet it's an experience you wouldn't soon forget, especially as it would have taken you a full season to grown back all your pulled whiskers. You wouldn't have started any fashion trends, with great ruddy bald spots on your chin. Much worse than smooth-skinned, I can tell you."

Tar burned almost as well as naphtha, and flames were now licking at the hull, leaving less and less room for an aged dwarrow to stand. He didn't seem to be taking much notice. "I had the greatest treasure of the First Father in my grasp!" Sakakni ranted. "No force on Middle Earth would ever have displaced our people again. I would have ruled Gundabad—the greatest kingdom Durin never bothered to found, and it would have been mine, you stupid, interfering—"
"You were never fit to rule!" Iór's cold voice effectively cut through Jústi's diatribe. "You were a disgrace, and an affront to the throne."

"You're loyalty to that hag is touching," Sakakni mocked. "Do you dream of her, of her body, Iór, in the dark places of your soul? Do you—"

"My lord! Your vessel is burning up beneath you; you've lost your chance," Kíli cut him off, panic welling in his gut. Why wasn't he moving off the bloody boat? Even mad, surely the heat and smoke were enough to reinforce his danger. "Surrender, my lord, and come ashore." The prow of the little boat was swinging 'round, and for one moment Kíli thought Sakakni had listened to him, but the dory had merely caught an underwater rock shelf and was now drifting in currents closer to shore. With the oarlocks well and truly aflame, Sakakni had lost all ability to righten his course and was at the mercy of the river; and whatever stone was able to reach him through that water.

"My name would have been remembered through the ages! Greater than Thorin I, or even Dain!" Sakakni's voice, always so captivating and commanding, even in the dullest of council meetings, was now a shrill shriek of rage and pain. "Greater than my father, and certainly better than the usurper, Beukak. I would have been remembered."

The air was acrid with smoke and soot being driven up high into the drafts created by the fire's heat. Kíli concentrated on not squinting, not wanting to limit his vision even slightly as he silently urged his quarry to flee the fiery hulk. Precious seconds were ticking by as the flames spread rapidly as more and more of the tarred wood caught. Bile burned in Kíli's airways, mixing horribly with the soot and the blackened smell of burning leather and hair, as he slowly realized Sakakni had chosen his own end. There would be no one coming ashore, and Kíli would be forced to witness the old dwarrow's immolation. "Come ashore, Jústi!" he pleaded desperately, and the words stuck in his throat even as he spoke them. "You'll burn—and no one will remember you. Surrender, and come ashore!"

His only answer was silence, and the sound of booted feet. As he watched, slowly the outline of a figure took shape striding across the burning deck, wreathed in flame as hair and clothing caught fire. For one long moment, the burning outline paused, and Kíli hoped he'd reached him, because he knew the sight of him burning alive in the darkness of the river cavern was going to fuel his nightmares for a long time to come. A heartbeat he wavered in indecision, then two.

"You were never worthy, Sakakni. Not even to your own father," Iór said, and his usually quiet voice was hard. "But you knew that, didn't you? You killed him. Somehow, you arranged his death; the twisted tantrum of a spoiled boy, hardly worth remembering."

It was if all sound had been stripped from that place, except for the thud of the blood in his veins booming in Kíli's ears. Clearly, he could see Sakakni lighting up the darkness, and spurred by Iór's denouncement, there was no indecision in his movements, now. Nausea sucked at Kíli's stomach as the burning figure came to stand at the prow; a heat-forged, flaming effigy sacrificed to an idea that he would never realize. Slowly, in what must have been great agony, Sakakni raised his arms wide. His voice was horrible to hear, as if dragged from the very depths of pain. "Then let it be fire," he rasped, panting under the great effort. "I will go to the Maker—" but he was no longer breathing air, but plasma, and the power of speech was lost. With a silence that was going to haunt Kíli the rest of his years, the outline of Sakakni gave a violent shudder as his heart seized in his chest, and he pitched into the dark waters of the river.

Face slick with tears he hadn't even realized he'd been shedding, Kíli dropped his bow and knelt to the ground, desperately hoping he could get some sense of the ring once Sakakni's body came to rest on the rocky river bed. Roughly, he ripped off his gloves, and jammed both hands against
the granite shore, hoping that the contact would serve to bolster his lacking abilities, and he concentrated like never before. At first, all he could sense was the cool presence of the water above the rock bed and the muffled feel of the stone's complacency and contentment. *It will take time for the body to come to rest,* he tried to tell himself. But it was like trying to listen to a conversation happening across a great hall, with your head wrapped in three of Ori's thick scarves. Little flickers disturbed the stone, like the fleeting shiver of thought, but nothing Kili was able to grab hold of. Sweat was standing on his forehead, damp and clammy in the cool air of the cavern. It tickled the skin of his upper lip and his neck distractingly as he strained with everything he knew how. The disturbance, when he finally found it, was faint at first, but then the feeling of wrongness that Kili was beginning to associate with Uncle Bilbo's ring became stronger, and he reached out to it.

High, wavering and lovely; the ring, he found, had a song all its own. Like the most ancient seductress, with a voice that whispered of rewards and power and pleasures of the flesh never even dreamed of, and Kili shuddered in revulsion even as he hungered for it, and its myriad promises. Hastily, he jerked his mind back and withdrew, not sure just what he'd encountered, but deeply afraid that Bilbo's ring was something far more sinister than even the Arkenstone. Somehow he'd opened himself to it by seeking it, and instead this time he carefully sought the stone around it, like his leather gloves worn at the forge, preventing him from accidentally coming in contact with it again. The stone still felt disturbed by its presence, and Kili could now understand why.

There was a feeling of iron in the riverbed, loyal and unchanging. *Keep it for me,* he willed it, sending his thoughts to all the stone surrounding the body, but mostly speaking to the iron. A trained Cantor, like Bifur, could will the rock to bend its purpose to his needs, similar to the rune stone he'd carried at his mother's behest. A Cantor would have sung to the stone, imbuing it with the spells that made up Kili's promise, and would have carried the Cantor's voice over great distance, to manipulate Kili's surroundings in small ways, to help him achieve that promise of returning home; a small good luck charm.

But Kili was not trained to spell the rock like that, and he could only try, and hope the stone would to accede to his wishes. *Keep it safe until I come back,* he strained to hold the thought, pushing at the stone with all his might, willing it to change its purpose to match his. Sweat dripped down into the waistband of his trousers, and tiny shale was trying to embed itself in his knees where he knelt, but he ignored it, waiting to feel something, thought he had no idea what.

Slowly, the sense of the ring's presence diminished, muted and entombed by the voice of iron ore, and Kili sat back on his heels, panting. A wave of exhaustion washed over him, and he knew he'd likely strained himself too hard, but he had no time to give quarter to it now. There were still orcs coming to the mountain, and though Kili wouldn't be at all surprised if Bilbo had somehow managed to make them all very ashamed of themselves for being rude enough to attack the nearly empty mountain, Kili needed to see he was safe. Shakily, he pushed himself to his feet, grabbed his discarded bow. Strong brown hands reached out to steady him when he swayed, and Kili could feel the dark stare stripping him down, assessing him in the silence of Jústi's passing. For a moment, Kili closed his eyes, concentrating on keeping his feet, before pushing away.

He caught Iór's bicep in an iron grip, halting him as he stooped to retrieve his daggers. "You must never speak of the ring. You have never seen it, or what it can do; do you understand?" He thought back to that frightening seductive moment, when he had touched the ring directly with his thoughts and shuddered. "The peace of all dwarven nations may depend on it."

Iór looked at the way the normally gentle prince was gripping his arm, at the tight, intense expression clouding the face of someone he had come to respect. After a long moment, he felt himself nod stiffly. "What ring, my prince?"
Kíli stared at him, as if driving his point home, before his shoulders relaxed, and a small grin tugged at the corner of his lips. "Come, we need to see if Bilbo has finished scolding our uninvited guests," he said. He shoved his bow over his shoulder with unconscious ease, and set off, back down the dark passage.

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Thoughts like *The orcs are coming. The orcs are here.* Or, *Thorin is fine, and on his way,* and, more aggressively, *I'm going to bloody well take a vacation for a month when this is all over,* kept Bilbo company as he hastened through the service tunnels. His head was beginning to pound in counter-rhythm to his thoughts, making the idea of curling up and sleeping until this was all over a very appealing idea indeed. The small nagging ache left behind by the disappearance of his ring was surprisingly easy to ignore amidst the cacophony in his head, and though part of him was horrified by its absence, mostly what he felt was relief.

*The orcs are coming. The orcs are here.* It was a driving tattoo, and his feet unconsciously kept rhythm to it. It had almost lost meaning from the number of times Bilbo had repeated it, leaving behind only the driving sense of urgency that was throwing him headlong through the mountain, with little thought, only panic.

*The orcs are coming. The orcs are near.*

Bilbo stopped abruptly, and Dori only narrowly avoided colliding with him.

"Dori," he said urgently. "The orcs are on their way here—they must be close."

The burly dwarf eyed him worriedly. "Yes, Master Baggins, that's why we're headed to the battlements. Are you sure we shouldn't stop by the Healing Hall first—?"

Bilbo waved the question away indignantly. "I'm aware of where we're going and why, thank you. I mean, they're almost here. As in, arrival at our gates is imminent."

Dori eyed him worriedly, but answered gamely enough. "I'm not sure exactly how close they are, or if they've stopped to reconnoiter or forage, but yes, reports were that they could reach our gates as early as two hours past the midday bell."

*Thorin is fine. He's coming home.* Annoyingly, Bilbo's thoughts kept playing in a loop in the back of this head, even while he tried to focus on the current problem. "Jústi was going to let them in. He said that the means to do so are already in place. If the orcs are almost here, then figuring out what he has planned is more important than reaching the gates."

Bilbo's worry was catching, and Dori went very still as the thought of what orcs could do from *inside* the virtually undefended mountain. "Do you know anything about his plan?" he asked urgently. "Anything at all?"

Frustration wasn't a helpful response right now, and Bilbo struggled with it. He blew out a breath, trying to release the desire to say something biting, and tried to think, hard, about exactly what Jústi had said. "He said, 'imagine how Thorin would have fared if Azog had been more prepared; more clever in his assault,' and that, locked outside, the orcs ability to be threatening was laughably limited."

"That doesn't give us much of a hint, other than to say he planned on letting them in. Did he say
anything else at all?" Dori asked, anxiously.

Bilbo closed his eyes, and tried to recall those moments in the dark entrance of the waterworks.

Jústi had been gloating, bright as brass with his own cleverness. "He'd said he and I wouldn't be able to leave out of the front gates. He'd planned to exit the mountain the way the company came in, but Thorin's choice of confinement chamber forced him to be...a little more direct, if less symbolic."

"He must have planned to leave through the back door, through Durin's Door," Dori said, pondering. "The tunnels around there were blocked off when Smaug smote the side of the mountain."

"So, if he were forced to become a little more direct?" Bilbo encouraged.

"He's mad. The path from the Treasury is totally impassible," Dori mused. The colour drained from his cheeks, and he glanced at Bilbo with wide, horrified eyes.

Bilbo's stomach contracted at the look on the dwarf's face. "Dori?" he asked carefully.

"We didn't know," Dori murmured, and for a moment, Bilbo though it looked like the staid dwarf might cry. Before Bilbo could ask, he got himself under control. He straightened his spine, and when he spoke, his voice was practical once more, and had lost the distressed wobble. "Bofur and I, we helped clear out the Treasury before your Confinement. We came across...well we thought they were Thror's, you see. We didn't think it was right to drag that all up again, not when His Majesty had just recovered himself, and—"

Bilbo was equal parts touched at Dori's obvious loyalty and care for Thorin, and furiously impatient for him to get on with it. He only barely managed to keep his voice kind. "What did you find, Dori?"

Dori blinked at him, startled. "Flash charges. Rigged throughout the Treasury. Enough there to bring the roof down, or, if they were directed properly, to rip that path open."

Bilbo shuddered. "And if he could no longer go through the Treasury, what would be a more direct route?"

Dori turned a slow circle as he thought, as if sighting through the rock walls. "There's a few places were the debris sits loosely; easier to clear. There was a lot of unauthorized digging being reported here—it's how we knew where to come find you," he said, obviously thinking hard. He tapped on thick finger against his bearded chin, and then grinned excitedly. "But there were disturbances on the other side of the Treasury Chamber, too. At first, we were concerned someone was trying to break in, but there is no way into the Treasury from there. When they stopped, we assumed they'd given up."

"Could he open a path from there?" Bilbo asked, grinning in return.

"With the kind of charges we saw? Yes."

"Well, I guess without Jústi there to set them off, we needed worry about it until after we get the orcs dealt with," Bilbo declared with deep satisfaction. "They can jolly well sit outside our back door and rot, with my compliments."

"Well, that's not exactly true," Dori fidgeted uncomfortably, obviously not happy to break Bilbo's mood. "Jústi's got acidized paste; he actually brought it to us, trying to shift our attention to that Iór fellow. He can use that with a timing mechanism to blow the charges on a schedule."
Bilbo glared at him. "Who on earth decided that that was a good thing to invent? Far too clever, you lot." He waved him off when Dori drew himself up to protest. "Not important. Do you know anything about these timing whatsits?"

Dori hummed thoughtfully. "They're really just a clockwork mechanism, you know. I'm sure I could disarm it."

Bilbo looked at him aghast. "Muck with it? When it's rigged to explode we-don't-know-when? You most certainly are not!"

"But—"

"No!" Bilbo said sternly. "We don't know precisely where those explosives are, even, and we definitely don't have the time to waste in finding them. We need more dwarves down here. You've seen the charges; you can help direct them as to how much rubble we'll need to block off the tunnel to make them useless. But we have to do it quickly. Those charges won't be of any use before we're fully engaged and distracted by the orcs at the Front Gate, so they could be set to go off as soon as two hours past the midday bell."

"We've likely got less than an hour, then," Dori said grimly. He grabbed Bilbo's shoulder when he started up the tunnel again. "This way, Master Baggins," he said. "There's a faster way to get the dwarves down here than running up to get them."

It took five agonizing minutes at a very brisk trot, but the service tunnel Dori took him down eventually lead them to a large room at a crossroads of paths; obviously a high traffic point. What Bilbo found inside that room was unlike anything he'd ever seen before, and up until now, he'd thought he'd seen more than enough to ever be surprised again.

Surprised, no. Flabbergasted? Apparently so.

They pushed through a very official looking door, into a large chamber. An enormous wooden desk dominated the middle of the room, and shelves lined the wall behind it, full of record books. It looked less official than productive; likely the Mine Master's office. The wall on their left though, was covered in banks and banks of tubes, like open pipelines of some vast underground organ, all rising towards the ceiling before disappearing thought the rock wall. Row upon row of bellows connected to the tube system, waiting silently for some purpose Bilbo couldn't even begin to fathom. Tables of small cylinders stood at intervals between them.

"What in the name of Yavanna's Green Gardens is this mess?" Bilbo asked.

"Pneumatic Tube system," Dori replied absently, moving over to the desk and rooting around. A few seconds later, he held aloft his prize, a bit of parchment and a worn quill, and beckoned Bilbo over to one of the tables as he hastily scribbled a note on the parchment scrap and screwed it into one of the small cylinders. "These message tubes go all through the mountain—we can have our note to the Front Gate in a few minutes, if you would help me get the bellows going."

Bilbo didn't even bother with a dubious look at the unlikely looking contraption. He'd seen just how clever his dwarves could be with their devices and contrivances; if Dori said the air from the over-sized bellows cram was enough to send his message faster than even an energetic raven could fly, he was willing to let his only question be 'So, how hard do I pull, then?'.

And miraculously, it really was that easy. A few fretful minutes after they had sent off their strange cylinder, another, identical one came clanging down the tube and fell into Bilbo's hands. He was so startled by the whistle that went off announcing its arrival he nearly dropped the message case, and when they opened it, it was to receive assurances from Bifur that they would...
have a small team as fast as they could march down to them. Bilbo eyed the banks of pipes with
wonder, imagining such a system in use in his news-loving home. There would have to be hobbits
manning the system night and day as neighbours would send dozens of missives to all ends of the
Shire, sharing all the little inanities of their day with friends and distant relations. His lips quirked,
everthing one of the practical, and very sedentary, Proudfoots organising the whole thing,
sending out runners with the missives in each of the four quarters of the Shire. A warm wave of
contentment wrapped around his heart at the thought of the simplicity of his homeland, and the
peace that it exuded—despite cousin Lobelia living there. It would never again be his home, but
that would not take away theglowing warmth of knowing it existed out there in the world; a little
pocket of manners, where gardens and gossip and pipe weed could be enjoyed in equal measure.
He briefly thought that maybe Gandalf felt the same way, somehow, because the wizard seemed
to take unusual pains to look over such a small, insignificant place, but quickly dismissed it. The
Shire truly was a tiny concern in such a big world as Middle Earth, after all.

Before he'd even properly pulled his head out of his exhausted musings, five burly dwarrows had
clattered their way into the office, bristling with weapons and armour like group of aggressive iron
pots with legs, and Bilbo had to bite back a smile. Right then, there's work to be done. There was
no time to try and locate the devices. Less than half an hour remained to them before they could
reasonably expect the blasted things to go off. The best, and only real option Bilbo could see was
simply to wall off that section and walk away to excavate another day.

It took very little time for him to bring them up to speed, owing perhaps to Dwalin's determined
training that left them rather more willing to do as they were told than the average Took or
Brandybuck would be, and Bilbo made a mental note to speak to Thorin about having their Guard
Captain knighted when this was all over, for simply saving him the aggravation he wasn't sure his
fraying temper could have handled. "Don't try to save anything other than yourselves down
there," he told them sternly. "I don't care how valuable or important it might be; pull down
anything you can. Block up that tunnel, so that when the blast goes off, they can't get any further
in than your new wall." He stepped back, and caught Dori's eye. "I'm going to ask you to go with
them," he said, fighting hard not to let his worry show. "I need to know one of us is down there,
leading things, and I need to be at the gate when the orcs arrive."

"Of course!" Dori agreed, and looked terribly flattered by Bilbo's trust. Bilbo knew that if
anything happened to him, the merchant's pleased little smile would haunt him for the rest of his
life. He also knew he would ask him again in a heartbeat, because more lives would be lost if this
was done wrong.

All the same, Bilbo grabbed Dori's arm before he could leave the room with the others, and
murmured, "Make sure you come back safe, Master Dori. Afternoon tea will be terribly lonely
without your presence."

Dori smiled reassuringly, but didn't try to promise things he clearly couldn't. Instead, he reached
over to envelop Bilbo's slender hand with his own massive one, squeezing with gentle pressure
before heading off after the others.

One young lad had stayed behind, standing at attention just off Bilbo's left shoulder. He sighed
tiredly, and scrubbed his forehead with one filthy hand, and just knew he was only succeeding in
smudging the dirt on his face. "So, are you to be my official escort, then?" he asked, setting off for
the Upper Halls once more. The youth fell in step behind him without hesitation. "What's your
name, lad?"

"It's Regi, Sire." The lad's voice squeaked slightly in a way that a hobbit lad's would if he were
approaching a certain age, and Bilbo was suddenly fiercely glad the young dwarfling wasn't going
into the dangers of the mines with the others.
"Well, Regi," he said as kindly as he could manage, "let's go make sure the Front Gate is still standing, shall we?"

The boy shot him a startled look, not sure if he should take offense, or even if he was allowed to take offense to whatever the King Consort might say, and Bilbo made a mental note to take the lad under his wing a bit, before Dwalin had any more influence with him. If he could get them early enough, maybe he could counteract some of that unquestioning faith they had. It might save a whole other generation from further mad ideas of sending a dozen lunatics off to deal with a dragon. He chuckled quietly at the thought as he padded his way down the hall.

THEY MAY BE BOISTEROUS and sometimes terribly lacking in traditional manners, but Bilbo had to admit amidst all the shouting and banging, dwarves were incredibly efficient in their work. When he arrived at the Front Gate, it was to find that Bifur and his teams had hauled rock rubble up from the mines, reinforcing the gates and making a frontal assault a near-impossible and costly task. After conversing in rapid Iglishmêk, Regi was kind enough to inform Bilbo that Bifur had also sent teams to reinforce structurally weak areas left over from Smaug's habitation, deeper in the mountain. Despite protests about his safety, Bilbo insisted on climbing the rough steps to view the approach for himself, and the erratic Cantor trailed behind him, muttering mutinously.

This was not the first time Bilbo had visited the battlement after the unfortunate incident of being hung upside-down from it, but he still had to suppress a quavering in his stomach as he approached the edge to look out over the recovering Desolation. He knew that at least half of Bifur's grumbling was because the kind-hearted dwarf didn't like the idea of painful memories being stirred up, but the truth was that Bilbo had made peace with them during the long wait for Thorin to heal after his dreadful wounds from Raven Hill. Though being here now brought out some unfortunate and involuntary reactions, he had no difficulty in separating that Thorin; the one possessed by dragon fueled gold sickness, from the loyal and thoughtful dwarf he loved. He had well and truly moved on.

Looking out, from here Bilbo could see the walls of Dale looming to the south. Instinctively, his gaze turned to the west, where Thorin and Fíli lead their small army in defending Laketown. From this distance of course, he could see nothing, but it took supreme will to turn his eyes away nonetheless. For a long moment, he let his gaze linger there, wishing with all his heart that he had some word, some sign of Thorin. He truly believed what he had said to Glólin and Jústi—if Thorin were indeed at death's door, he would be showing some sign of it, but that didn't mean that he wasn't desperate to see the great soppy dwarf with his own eyes, to run his hands reassuringly over his skin and know that he was whole.

Of course, not being so blasted tired would also make thinking a lot easier right now.

He also wondered if anyone else knew of Thorin's injury, if the missive containing the information had gone astray once it left the hands of Jústi and Glólin in the Council Chambers. It would likely explain why he didn't have more dwarves hovering over him, tutting and fretting, and he thought he would keep that information to himself a little while longer.

Finally wrenching his gaze away from where Thorin likely lay convalescing, Bilbo forced himself to concentrate on the surrounding countryside, instead.

The Desolation was finally recovering from Smaug's sojourn in Erebor; wild grasses had once again begun to seed the mountainside, and tiny clusters of buttercups and phlox added splashes of colour. Dark patches of burnt earth were evident, like giant scars upon the terrain, but Bilbo had faith that within a few more seasons, even those would fade.
The road wound down from their gate to join the roads leading southeast to Dale, and southwest, to Laketown, with woods edging in tightly towards Mirkwood; and upon that road, a dark company was moving.

Eleven dwarrows stood at attention along the ramparts and crenellations lining the top of the gates, all bristling with heavy weapons and clad in steel armour. It looked like such a woefully inadequate force; Thorin had at least had thirteen. Still, they had fully repaired gates, and everyone kept hastening to assure Bilbo that they could hold the mountain for weeks, if necessary, even with such a small force.

Then why did every face Bilbo glance at look so edgy?

He hadn't realised he'd spoken aloud.

"Because the ravens tell us they march with siege weapons, Your Majesty," Regi spoke quietly, with a certain acceptance that immediately got Bilbo's hackles up. "They built a giant trebuchet and belfry towers within the bows of Mirkwood, just out of our sight. From there, it's easy for them to push them the remaining distance, for they care little if the pushers survive the journey."

Bilbo shuddered. He wasn't precisely certain what either of these two terrifying constructs were, but the bleakness of the lad's countenance struck him deeply. "What precisely do we have to defend against?" he asked evenly, being sure to give no hint to his inner unease. Regi was a good lad, but was young enough still to look to the courage of others to bolster his own. He was open and earnest and untried in almost every way, and something about him reminded Bilbo of his youngest Took and Brandybuck cousins. He didn't want Regi to be afraid if he could help it.

"The trebuchets are massive; it will take several of the beasts to push one here, likely be driven by whips. Orcs are the only ones who really build them, I think. They've only appeared in recent years, as though some foul hand were giving them even fouler ideas. Master Dwalin says that immense tension on the firing arm makes them very dangerous to construct, and no other race would be able to push them any distance, but the orcs are freakishly strong. They'll use them to hurl boulders at our walls and gates."

"Can we withstand their onslaught?" Bilbo asked, but it was a perfunctory question. No one would look edgy if the answer were 'yes', after all.

"Of course we can, Yer Majesty," a grizzled guard manning a nearby murder hole assured him. "There ain't nothin' these scum can throw at us that Erebor can't survive."

But his eyes looked resigned.

Bilbo turned to the young dwarf runner instead. "How long, Regi?" he asked quietly.

Darting a glance at the veteran who'd already turned his back on their conversation, he licked his lips before answering. "Not long. They can hurl boulders of a few hundreds of pounds. Even reinforced, they could take down our walls with only a little time."

Bilbo gave him a sharp look, and asked, "How long?" When Regi stuttered, Bilbo pressed urgently, "Guess, lad."

"A few hours? A day? At most, two. They can fire hundreds of loads in a single day."

This was it, of course; Jústi's plan set in motion. Once those engines rolled into place, the orcish siege was well and truly begun. It was the distraction Jústi had been counting on, for how in the world would they be able to pay attention to whatever he might be blowing up in their basement, when there were giant rocks falling out of the sky? He hoped Dori and his team were safe, and
that they had successfully entombed the devices, because Bilbo was sure they had just run out of time.

Chapter End Notes

I have to admit, this chapter was hard.

I mean, I made you guys wait for months while I wrote, hated, discarded and wrote again, until I had re-done this thing four freakin' times. Did I mention the original draft was 17,500 words?

Yeah, I sort of thought that was a bit much to post, too.

So it has been lovingly edited, and when that didn't work, it'd was hatefully sworn at, until it was finally in a state that it could be cut in half. I had to have extensive hand-holding, because I doubted pretty much everything about this chapter by the time it was done, because I don't usually have to touch a chapter more than twice; once to write it, and once to edit it. I think I spent every night with this beast, and if I wasn't writing it, I was dreaming about it ;p

Thank you to all of you for staying with me, despite the erratic update schedule. The good news is, of course, that there will be a chapter 16 out in a week or so, depending on how it polishes up. The bad news is that the chapter count has of course increased by one because of this *lol*

Also, it's worth noting a bit of my personal headcannon about this. A lot of my idea of dwarven Cantors sprung up from the scene between Kili and Tauriel in Mirkwood, where he shows her his stone - his promise to his mother that he would return, and I got to thinking, if this is some kind of charm, then there are dwarven spell-casters, and how would that work? From such questions Cantors were born *lol*

I adore you all - your comments and support are what keeps me up at night, wrestling with evil words until they cry for mercy ♥
SWEAT WAS SLOWLY dripping into Dori's eyes, and he shuddered to think how filthy he had gotten, *again*. Though the ventilation worked perfectly well down here the air still seemed close, and nerves made it feel stifling. The six of them crouched behind a makeshift barricade, not more than a rocky outcropping really, and waited tensely for the explosions to detonate. Faintly came the sounds of scraping, like nailed boots on rock.

Dori was sure their break-wall was strong enough to keep the invaders out.
Mostly sure.

Surish.

On further thought, he threw up a silent prayer to Mahal, figuring their Father didn't really want orcs in his mountain, either. It was several tense moments of waiting, hearing the sounds advancing closer, before they felt the explosions shake the mountainside, pushing clouds of debris and dust along the corridors. The thunderous noise seemed to last for an age, the sound amplified and cradled by the mountain's embrace, but eventually the dust settled as the reverberations slowed. The cries of unlucky orcs caught in the blast, and subsequent cave in were muffled through the new stone wall that now blocked the passage to Durin's Door. Dori swiped miserably at the new filth coating him. His braids were ratty in a way he never allowed, and there was even detritus in his beard. He looked down at his favourite plum tunic, and his eyes welled up.

He was simply going to have to burn these clothes, he supposed glumly, even as his small team rejoiced at their victory in keeping the orcish forces out of their mountain. For now, he focused on feeling proud, and tried not to cringe whenever the filthy cloth brushed his skin, or he caught a whiff of his own armour.

On second thought, he might need to burn the armour, too.

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THERE HAD BEEN considerable flap when Bilbo had outright refused to retreat into the inner mountain for safety, but he needed to see what was happening if he had any hope of doing anything useful. It wasn't bravery, whatever the others chose to believe, and he kept his vigil from the relative safety of the guard tower. The boom of falling rocks had long since taken Bilbo's minor headache, and made it a full-on Hobbiton party inside his skull. Regi had been right, the rocks were massive, and the stone face of their gates was beginning to show the scars of their defiance.

The three siege engines that eventually rolled their way towards the mountain were truly substantial. One enormous catapult the guards called a trebuchet was currently responsible for Bilbo's aching head, was set up almost three hundred yards distant. Hasty barricades were being erected, to give the crew manning it cover against dwarven archers; the engine itself was more than fifteen yards high, with posts and beams that looked to be the thickness of whole trees, and seemed about as vulnerable to attack as the moon. The two smaller belfry towers huddled under its long shadow at the base of the hill it perched on. Each tower could transport a couple of dozen enemies right up to their gates, he was told, and if they carried gangplanks long enough to bridge the sloping talus of Erebor's walls, they could gain access.

Bilbo was watching them with narrowed eyes. He was not having any of that nonsense, thank you very much.

Being a mountain stronghold, the gates were really the only place that was vulnerable to such things, but he had been assured that dripping hides kept the towers virtually fire-proof, and that ballistae mounted inside were enough of a distraction to make targeting them with their meager catapults difficult. The orcs had made several sallies, trying to trundle up into striking distance, but so far had been unable to assail Erebor's sloped defenses. Small forces of goblin engineers bearing portable armoured shelters scuttled out to work ahead of the towers, clearing the obstacles flung in their path and laying ramps over rough terrain to give passage to the wheeled horrors bearing the enemy to their walls. Bombardment had proven largely ineffective, until they had advanced close enough that rocks and masonry dropped from the battlements shattered on Erebor's hewn-granite...
talus, spreading shrapnel under the level of their protected shelters. Bilbo worried that the next sally, or even the next, would see the enemy at their walls. The campaign veteran did not agree, of course.

"We really need to be worrying more about the rocks falling on our heads, Yer Majesty," the gruff unit leader was trying to make Bilbo more focused on the bigger priority. "Orcs, we can deal with." Bilbo had left Bifur on the wall, wanting to know someone he trusted personally was keeping an eye on things while he tried to cobble together an idea, but right now he was missing the Cantor's strong presence.

"I thought Erebor could withstand whatever they hurled at us?" Bilbo asked, and was ashamed to admit he was snide about it. "Look, our walls will hold up for a while yet, while those silly tower things can cause us to be overrun with only one successful sally. I may not be terribly experienced, Master Tilys, but that sounds like persuasive maths to me."

"An' a great ruddy rock falling on your brain-pan migh' change yer mind." Tilys grumbled. "But have it yer own way. What do you propose we do abou' them towers, then? We can't set them on fire, and we don't have enough of us to charge them."

"And yet, we must stop them," Bilbo snapped, tired of hearing all the things they couldn't do. He scrubbed his tired eyes irritably and sighed. "I'm sorry, Master Tilys," he acknowledged wearily. "We must think of creative solutions, not plow over old garden rows that will bear no fruit."

"We've made it a costly endeavour fer them buggers," Tilys pointed out with grim pride.

Bilbo huffed a tired laugh at this crude, but still very welcome attempt to buoy his spirits. "I'm glad to hear it. Now let's see if we can't convince them to pack up and go home, and take those ugly abominations with them."

"I've always favoured a good big bang, meself."

"A flash charge of some kind?" Bilbo was shaking his head. "I didn't think something like that would be strong enough to take out those contraptions, is it?"

Tilys shook his head. "Not hardly, I suppose, at least from this distance," he admitted reluctantly.

"We need a way to get our forces out there. I've seen what dwarves can do against ridiculous odds."

Tilys's grin was positively nasty. "You figure a way t' get the lads out there, Yer Majesty, we'll make sure t' give 'em a love tap in the jambags."

Bilbo was faintly horrified to find himself grinning, too. "Yes, well, I think right now, I'd like to focus on how we're going to accomplish that. What you dwarves choose to do with the opportunity can remain between you and them."

"I think we can all live with that," Tilys smirked. "Whatcha have in mind, then?"

"A distraction," Bilbo admitted. "Last month, Thorin was in the Upper Levels, assessing the progress of rebuilding in the residential levels. I told him he shouldn't be pushing himself, but he was insistent that I should have properly appointed chambers." He sighed, still embarrassed by the gesture. Even though the mountain was no longer falling down around their ears, he still hardly felt that precious resources should be directed to something as unproductive as his own comfort. The fact that Thorin thought to do the work by his own hand, instead of diverting other teams was in equal parts exasperating and incredibly touching; though Bilbo tended to focus on the former, because Thorin was soppy enough without encouragement. "He managed to get a nasty burn on
his shoulder while working; it's remarkable how much he can pout. It was apparently caused by some kind of caustic powder used to set mortar, or some such?"

Tilys nodded slowly, looking vaguely uncomfortable at the frank details of his monarch's courtship. "Aye. Quick lime. It's made when you oxidize—"

Bilbo waved it away. "Not important, right now I should say. What is important, is that we obviously have some in our meager supplies, and I imagine orc hide is no more resistant to burning and blisters than Mahal's chosen fire-tenders. We could drop it over the battlements, into their midst—"

But Tilys was already shaking his head. "Won't work Yer Majesty. Stuff's fine as chalk and would as like blow back on the dwarves as is dropping it, an' as you say, we're not immune t' the blisters and burns it causes."

One step back for every two steps forward, and Bilbo was getting tired of thinking. A cup of tea, and a warm blanket to kip by the fire sounded like a gift from the Valar right about now, but instead he couldn't manage to get the bloody orcs from their doorstep. "Confound it!" Bilbo slammed his hands against the flat surface of a table. It made a satisfyingly loud noise in the close confines of the guardroom. His palms stung, and he felt slightly foolish, but he was able to push back the rising tide of frustration boiling away in his gut and try to think. Tilys gave him a knowing look that thankfully contained not a bit of sympathy, but a lot of gruff understanding, and Bilbo felt his ire ebb.

"We need to get the powder down to the orcs, then, instead of dropping it on them," Bilbo tried to focus his thoughts. "Powder that fine could be blown about in a light breeze, couldn't it?" His gaze drifted sightlessly around the small room as he thought, before snapping back to regard Tilys with a sharp little grin lifting the corners of his lips. "Do we still have that battle chariot, or the goats to pull it?"

The old vet grinned at him, his leathery skin flushed, pleased as he caught onto Bilbo's idea. "In the stables. We could mount a few bellows on it, and blow the powder directly at the buggers. The lad's armour will be enough t' protect them from any residual stuff hanging 'round, and the orcs'll be too busy trying to claw their own skin off to worry 'bout the lads moseying over an' chopping their silly war toys down."

"Order those modifications, and get the goats harnessed, Master Tilys. We may turn the tide yet," Bilbo said grimly.

Bilbo motioned for Tilys and Regi to follow, and headed up to the battlements. The noise of the battle immediately jumped to the fore; the cries of the wounded mixed with the shouts of those still standing; the clash of steel and the cutting whistle of arrows and spears. Thankfully, the wounded were entirely on the orcish side so far, picked off by dwarven archers. The walls and defences had proven better than their besiegers, and it looked like their enemy had pulled back to make ready for another sally with their wheeled towers. The guards endured the booming pounding of the trebuchet grimly, not able to do anything else while the enemy had withdrawn, and watched with interest as Bilbo and his small entourage joined them. Tilys didn't approve, of course, but Bilbo insisted on delivering his orders to the dwarves personally. He felt he owed the lads going outside the gates that much, to say the least.

The atmosphere on the battlements was anticipatory, to say the least. He was somewhat amused to find that there had been a few impromptu contests to determine who would be given the glorious opportunity to ride forth on the newly-dubbed Lime Chariots. It did nothing to lessen the sick feeling in his gut at the thought that he might be ordering some of them to their death, and wished he could provide some kind of distraction to aide them. He wiggled his nose unconsciously,
thinking. An idea was teasing away at the back of his thoughts.

Still feeling around the edges of his scheme Bilbo hastily set dwarves to mixing black powder with tar and lamp oil and pouring it into two casks. He sent two others scrambling to prime a catapult, and get their best crew manning it, and then ordered their few archers standing by; he wanted as much cover fire for their dwarves on the chariots as they could possibly muster. He sent Master Tilyes to prime the ballista, and find someone to fire it, even if he had to pull in one of the young runners. At the last moment, he sent another runner to make sure someone remembered some kind of breathing masks for the goats. The dwarves on the wall looked uncertain, but there was a surprising amount of hopeful obedience in their demeanor, and Bilbo, who had been expecting more resistance when he began issuing rapid commands, commented on it without thinking.

Tilyes laughed at him. "The hobbit that bested the Tree-shagging King, or outwitted a dragon? They'd do as you asked if you told them to build you a boat of blue cheese to sail us all to the moon. Can’ say as I wouldn't be helping 'em, neither!"

Bilbo flushed and waved him away. "Ridiculous sentimentality of dwarves!" he huffed, thoroughly embarrassed. Tilyes just laughed harder and slapped him on the back before wandering off to supervise.

And suddenly, Bilbo found himself on the periphery of activity after being in the thick of things for more than twenty-four hours straight, and he was surprised to find that he almost felt lonely. It wasn't an unwelcome feeling, actually, and Bilbo took a quiet moment to simply breath and let his thoughts drift to his dwarf king, miles away and yet so close he could almost make out the smudge that would have been Laketown, if a dragon hadn't leveled it last autumn. He imagined Thorin's blue eyes, crinkled in amusement when Bilbo had teased him, or the barely-there wisp of a smile that was Thorin at his most relaxed as they sat by the fire and talked long into the night; the gentle way he would ghost his fingers over the delicate skin of Bilbo's wrist, lingering over the pulse point as it fluttered helplessly beneath Thorin's calloused fingertips, and the knowing curve of his lips as he took in all of Bilbo's reactions. He remembered Thorin's kisses, of which there had been far too few by Bilbo's courtship standards, passionate and slow and reaching to places deep inside Bilbo that didn't frighten him anymore, and managed to feel like comfort and home and sensually filthy all at the same time. He concentrated on breathing deeply, building a slow rhythm as he let his conscious self get lost in the phantom sensations and he felt the lingering tension finally drain away, and he tried to release the hard ball of fear in his bowels. Deep inside, he fancied he felt an echoing throb, as though a distant soul was sharing his thoughts, and he smiled at his own whimsy.

It was almost a meditative state, and Bilbo was so deeply relaxed that it was a rude shock to open his eyes to the bustling sea of activity once more. A few paces behind him, he could feel Regi's quiet presence, keeping unobtrusive watch over his King Consort, and Bilbo was touched anew by the loyalty of dwarves.

"Ready, Your Majesty?" he asked softly. "I can hold them off a bit more, if you need another minute without all that noise."

Bilbo straightened his shoulders once more, and nodded. "I think you and I shall sit and have a long discussion about your future here in Erebor when this is all done, Regi. I imagine I am going to need a staff of some kind as I begin helping Thorin in the business of ruling, and I would very much like you to be on it."

The young dwarf flushed almost the colour of the red bee balm that once lined his walk at Bag End, and for a moment Bilbo was concerned the lad had forgotten how to breath, but his eyes were shining bright as copper pennies at the bottom of a pond so Bilbo grinned and patted him on
the bicep; that being as high as he could reach.

"Everything's ready, Yer Majesty. What are we hopin' to do here?" Tilys asked, giving Regi an amused glance.

"As they start their next sally, we're going to hurl those casks into the path of those towers. Make it look like we were aiming for them and missed; we want to make sure they don't have a chance to put on the brakes." He sighed apologetically. "This is going to require some excellent timing, I'm afraid. The archers need to ignite the oil just as the towers drive into it. I'm rather hoping that if anything is vulnerable on those things, it will be the underside."

Tilys looked at him nonplused. "I tol' you, those things ain't goin' to burn," he reminded Bilbo.

"We're not trying to burn them—the oil will ignite, and the black powder will explode. The tar is just to make things stick when it splashes along the underside of those towers. If tenant farmers in the Shire can use it to blast stumps and rocks from farm fields, I say it may slow down those contraptions, and add enough confusion to give our lads an advantage, don't you think?"

"I tol' you, I always like a nice big bang, meself," Tilys leered out at the enemy camped below.

“It will be mostly for show, mores the pity," Bilbo admitted, "but it should hopefully prove very—diverting."

Regi muffled a nervous giggle, and Tilys was kind enough to ignore it.

Bifur insisted on leading the chariot teams, heading down to the stables with a jaunty wink and a wave. For once, things went off as planned, and Bilbo's distraction worked beautifully; the catapults launched their loads, the archer's arrow's ignited the slick pools, and the resulting small explosions as the black powder caught sounded comfortingly like Gandalf's fireworks. The looming towers ponderously creaked to a forced halt as great chunks of turf were blown out beneath them, miring their wheels in the potholes. Small damage really that the goblin teams would quickly be able to right, but Bilbo didn't intend to give them the chance. Orcs and goblins milled around in confusion at the unexpected attack, though whips could be heard over the shouting as leaders tried to regain order.

It was chaos.

Bilbo signaled for the great horn to sound, and Erebor's heavy gates burst open in a booming roar. Two chariots thundered across the wooden bridge, goats screaming in defiance and the dwarven warriors shouting and whooping as they brandished their weapons. It took the assembled army a moment to gather themselves to this new threat, but the goblins closed first, their quick, scuttling movements distinctive even from up here. The encouraging cheer that erupted from atop battlements was no less enthusiastic for the lack of voices who uttered it, and Bilbo didn't even realize his voice was amongst them until the guard captain thumped him companionably on his shoulder, nearly sending the slighter hobbit to his knees. "Steady on," Bilbo admonished, winded, but the dwarf had already moved on, calling out orders as he went.

Great thick arms worked the modified bellows steadily, and the resulting screams could be heard even one hundred feet in the air as the orcish forces drew back, clawing at their exposed skin. Bilbo hardly knew where to look, as the chariots careened across the battlefield, leaving large swaths of destruction and writhing orcs in their wake. One team veered away, goats leaping nimbly as the chariot banged along behind them as they made their way up the hill to the monstrous trebuchet. The orc team manning it swarmed to protect their war engine, but the clouds of quick lime made them scatter despite the shrieks of their commanders. Dwarves leapt heavily to the ground, brandishing axes and torches. Moments later, thick smoke was billowing up, casting a
hazy pall over the field below.

The outriders on second chariot jumped off, and began hacking down the stranded belfry towers, destroying the axels that bore their great weight, and chopping determinedly at their support structures. The chariot teams continued to devastate the looming orcs, despite being unbelievably outnumbered, and thick clouds of lime hung in the air like localized fog. Bilbo held his breath as a particularly determined trio of goblins managed to clamber onto the trailing chariot. There was an intense scrum as the chariot crew tried to force them off, and Bilbo found it difficult to determine who, if anyone, was winning, when suddenly the cluster of dwarves broke apart to heave three greenish bodies into the mass of writhing orcs. The chariot careened wildly over the torn up battlefield as Bifur raised his boar spear above his head, calling out tauntingly at their retreating knot of enemies, and Bilbo felt his heart start again.

A few high-pitched screams were the first indication for those on the ground that the war towers were finally losing their battle with gravity. Slowly, they tipped over, dumping orcs and goblins forty and fifty feet to the ground below before the weight became too much for the broken beams. A loud Crack! split the air and the towers swayed sluggishly, before splitting in two, top halves smashing to the ground below in a tangle of splintered wood and torn bodies. The base halves lay slumped, leaning obscenely on broken struts and Bilbo frantically called for the horn to be blown to signal the chariots retreat back to safety. Bifur stood at the back of the retreating chariot, continuing to gleefully hurl out taunting strings of Khuzdul. Bilbo could practically see his familiar leer as the heavy gates crashed closed behind them.

The battlefield was chaos. The enemy milled around, clearly not entirely sure what had just happened, but authoritative shouts and cracking whips lent the idea that at least someone was trying to restore order, but without their massive siege engines, there was little they could do. The dwarves could hold the walls of Erebor until the River Running itself ran dry. Bilbo grinned, and waved Sting as high as he could to signal for his last surprise, hopefully a parting gift, and the dwarven team manning the tower-mounted ballista began cranking the handles, pivoting and rapidly firing off dozens of arrows a minute into the reeling army below.

For a moment, everything was screaming orcs and whistling arrows before the whips could no longer hold them, and the orcish army broke and scattered. A huge cheer rose up around Bilbo, and he felt Tilys slap him on the back as he chortled gleefully.

Bilbo stared out over the wall, too tired to take it in properly. The sun was beginning to creep down beyond the horizon, casting the warm orange hue of summer over the recovering landscape, and if it weren't for the circumstances, it would almost be pleasant. His eyes drifted aimlessly, not really focussing on anything, finally settling on a section of the road from Laketown, while Tilys squinted and cursed beside him as he tried to see what the hobbit was seeing. Dwarves, Bilbo had realized during their long journey, didn't see nearly so well when sighting into the bright glare of the sun as they did in the darkness of the earth, so it was a long moment before Tilys slapped his palm sharply against the battlement.

"No need t' send out the army just yet, Master Baggins," Tilys laughed. "Yer moving road is flying the King's banner!"
"Oh, good," Bilbo said vaguely, his knees giving way beneath him. Distantly, he heard Regi's startled exclamation, and felt strong hands reaching for him, but his eyes fluttered shut, and he slide into darkness.

"..-"

Bilbo woke to the sort of dream-like fuzziness that usually enveloped one when a midnight trip to the lavatory was in order, though as near as he could tell it wasn't his bladder that had awoken him. His internal clock was telling him that he had lost hours, perhaps even more, but his limbs felt comfortably heavy swaddled as he was, and the soft light of the distant moon filtered in from above to give his chamber a silvery glow that lent an unreality that made him not entirely sure if he wasn't still dreaming. He let his eyes drift closed again, thinking that maybe he would sleep a bit more before trying to sort it all out. They had driven off the orcs; that much was firmly planted in his mind, but the details were stubbornly out of reach. Something about goats, and a chariot—Bilbo's eyes shot open once more.

Thorin.

He'd seen Thorin's army on the road! Bilbo fumbled with desperate haste to unravel the covers with shaking hands, when thick fingers tangled with his own, stilling him.

"If you have any fondness for me at all, Beloved, have a care how you move." Though softly spoken, the familiarly deep voice was tinged with quiet amusement.

"Thorin!" Bilbo whispered fiercely, refusing to relinquish the dwarf's hand as he struggled to roll over. Thorin's laughter sounded suspiciously like a snicker, but he hardly cared. Bilbo noticed the great softly seemed no more inclined to relinquish his hold anyway, so he was hardly in any position to laugh. "Where are we?" he huffed out, once he'd managed to kick the covers away enough to wriggle around. Thorin looked worn and battered, but his eyes practically glowed with contentment as he gazed back at Bilbo. Cuts and bruises dotted his face and neck, and the hand under Bilbo's boasted evidence of torn knuckles, but Thorin was whole, and finally here, so Bilbo was willing to let that go for the moment. He was dressed simply in a linen tunic, without any of his normal outer trappings, and his hair was unbound and freshly washed. A white bandage could be seen peeking out beneath the deep vee of his shirt and Bilbo suddenly remembered Jústi's missing message. "They told me you were hurt."

Thorin had the grace to look apologetic at Bilbo's accusing tone. "We're in the Healing Halls," he admitted, and seemed unable to help himself as he began to gently trace nonsense patterns on the palm of Bilbo's hand with his calloused fingers. The familiar sensation seemed to ease some of the tension from Bilbo's body, and he felt himself slowly relaxing despite himself.

"And why are we in the Healing Halls, Thorin?" Bilbo pressed, certainly not letting this go without a full account of what the idiot dwarf had done to himself.

"I was struck from behind while fighting in Laketown," Thorin admitted reluctantly. At Bilbo's clearly unamused expression at this scanty explanation, he sighed. "Bard's son...fell, during the battle. Bard saw it happen, but was not close enough to reach him, but I...was." He looked down at their joined hands, frowning at the memory.

It still wasn't much. Bilbo paused, contemplating both what Thorin had said, and what he hadn't said. Thorin struggled so much with expressing things he was accustomed to not having to verbalize that Bilbo wondered if he would ever get more than a bare-bones account of anything
Thorin thought it might upset him. Bard's son being beset—Bain, wasn't it?—would be like watching Fíli, or Kíli being cut down. Thorin would sever his own arm to protect his nephews, without any thought at all. Bard, in many ways, had lost as much as Thorin; a King, driven into exile, fighting to better the lot of his people from a humble position. Granted, in Bard's case, it was his grandfather who had been driven from Dale, but Thorin would see the kinship, even if Bard didn't, and wouldn't be able to stand by as Bard lost his only remaining kin. It wouldn't be in Thorin to do, regardless of all the unpleasantness at the Gate, even if it meant his own life.

"And, what? I passed out from exhaustion, then?" Bilbo asked, trying to piece the hazy memory together. "And they were thoughtful enough to bring me here, to reassure me that you were whole and hale when I woke up?"

Fingers stilled against his hand as Thorin stared at him. "I was injured," he said slowly, watching Bilbo as if expecting this to fall into place for Bilbo somehow.

"And?" Bilbo asked, frowning.

"We were injured," Thorin repeated, his brow furrowing.

"You said that already, Thorin. Though I'm sure I wasn't hurt, just very, very tired. Not seriously hurt, anyway."

Mutely, Thorin reached up to lightly trace Bilbo's bandaged ear, and Bilbo huffed at him in annoyance.

"That is nothing serious, and we can table the wheres and whyfores of it until later." He took it as confirmation that he was indeed missing some larger picture when Thorin allowed him to brush it off.

Quietly, the dwarf regarded him in the semi-darkness. "I do not understand," he admitted finally. "Have you not been here since word came of our injury?" Thorin asked him, sounding highly irritated, as if he already suspected an answer he wasn't going to like.

Bilbo frowned. "That's the second time you've referred to us being injured, as in, we were *both* injured on that battlefield."

Thorin sighed, rubbing his face with his free hand. "In a way, we were." he began slowly, still obviously watching Bilbo for some sign of comprehension. Bilbo just set his jaw stubbornly and glared back, somehow giving the impression of a tapping foot despite kneeling on the bed. "We are bound; what one experiences, so does the other but because our connection is highly unstable, experiences can become twisted and magnified. When I fell unconscious, my spirit would have reached out for yours, almost as an extension of my own body as I tried to heal myself. The Healers in Erebor should have brought you here, so you could sleep as my body used both our energies to heal itself, and to step in if the unstable bond had caused more demands than your body could handle."

Bilbo stared off into the shadows lurking in the corners of the room as he digested this. It seems he had been lucky, or perhaps Yavanna kept a kindly eye on impulsive, stubborn hobbits. "I imagine they would have," he admitted, "if they had known. Suffice it to say, your message never reached anyone but me. I imagine Jústi felt I would make a more convenient hostage if I wasn't under the watchful eye of half the mountainside." He forestalled Thorin's outraged rebuttal with a *look.* "We can talk about specifics later; you need rest."

"I shall rest easier knowing you are here," Thorin murmured, still visibly upset but slowly relaxing once more, and resuming the slow, lazy patterns on Bilbo's skin.
Bilbo sighed softly, his breath hitching slightly. "You really are a great soppy thing, aren't you?"
The look Thorin gave him was highly offended, of course, but his touch remained gentle and sure,
so Bilbo simply burrowed a little more firmly into the warm furs, trying to bury the incessant
shivers that he couldn't seem to control.

Thorin saw his shudders, and obviously thinking the conversation closed, had other ideas. He
levered himself up, carefully, using the multitude of pillows to brace himself, before using his hold
on Bilbo's hand to tug him closer, clearly intending to warm him at his side. He stilled when Bilbo
resisted.

He blinked, frowning. Bilbo stared back, a stubborn tilt in his jaw that gave plenty of warnings.

"You were injured," Bilbo said.

Thorin nodded slowly, watching him carefully.

"You were injured," Bilbo repeated more forcefully, and found himself reaching for Thorin with
shaking hands that didn't seem to be responding to any directive of his own will. Thorin continued
to study him, uncertain of what he should do. Bilbo's fingers caught in the soft linen of his tunic
and began tugging—insistent and almost frenzied in his efforts to pull it from Thorin's chest. His
breath hitched again, then again, and before he knew it he was struggling to breath and trying very
hard not to sob until Thorin's arms encircled him, holding Bilbo's arms to his sides with gentle

Bilbo continued to struggle, and Thorin watched his growing distress with a furrowed brow,
before slowly releasing him, instead laying back and watching Bilbo carefully. Bilbo lost no time
in pushing Thorin's tunic up his torso, nimble fingers dancing lightly for fear of injuring him
further, but no less insistent for his gentleness. By the time Bilbo had managed to strip Thorin's
shirt from his body, his breathing whistled with each breath as he firmly clamped down on his
sobs, but the hysterical need to see Thorin whole was slowly abating.

For his part, Thorin allowed it, moving his body to accommodate Bilbo's removal of his clothing,
but doing nothing more to aid him, and when he was finally stripped to his skin, he settled back
against the pillows and watched Bilbo with concerned eyes.

Thorin's chest was massive, by hobbit standards of course. Broad and muscled in rippling waves,
furled with dark hair and spotted with scars, both old and fresh, but right now, Bilbo could
appreciate none of it. His eyes were drawn to the wide swath of bandages wrapped tight around
his lower sternum, down to his kidneys. There was a faint, wet tinge to the bandages that spoke of
the liberal use of Óin's ointments, but thankfully there was no sign of renewed bleeding. Bilbo
shuddered to realize that if Thorin was struck from behind, then salve visible at the front meant the
blow must have pierced right through Thorin's body.

"You could have died," Bilbo rasped, his hands fluttering uselessly over Thorin's mottled flesh,
unsure and afraid of causing more pain.

"But I didn't, Sanâzyung," Thorin whispered, taking Bilbo's hands in his much larger ones, and
slowly guiding them to splay gently against his bruised chest, so that Bilbo was forced to sit up on
his knees and shuffle close. Bilbo could feel the faint thump of Thorin's heart beneath his chilled
palms, and the dwarf's skin felt unnaturally warm when his hands felt so cold. For a long moment,
he simply stared at them, his fingers pale against the deeper tan of Thorin's skin and the black of
the hair on his chest, whole but damaged beneath his fingers. Headless to everything but his need
to feel, to reassure, he closed his eyes, and for the first time deliberately sought that place inside
himself that throbbed with life not his own.
It was hot, and uncomfortably intense while he was feeling this raw himself, but he deliberately pushed past the overwhelming sense of inviting even more emotion when he couldn't even handle his own, burrowing deeper, seeking to wrap his very soul in Thorin, that he might be surrounded from the inside out in his dwarf's solid presence. It was like pushing into molasses; hot and clinging and unbearably sweet. He knew he was gasping, likely babbling unheeded inanities as he welcomed the difficult intimacy of Thorin's being sliding against his own, and the deeper he pressed the more he became aware Thorin's skin tensing beneath his palms, until Thorin finally gasped.

"Please. Please Bilbo, no more unless you would have me lose my mind," he murmured, bringing his hands up to frame Bilbo's face between his large palms as if to stop him. His breath was very hot, and his eyes hooded as he hovered close enough that Bilbo could steal his breath. Vaguely, Bilbo was aware of the tension he'd created; Thorin did nothing to shield his erection at Bilbo's intimate invasion, and on some level he was aware of a similar reaction in his own body. He pushed both pieces of information away for the moment. "You could have died, Thorin," he whispered hoarsely, and he still wasn't sure what he wanted Thorin to say to make it better.

"But I cannot be other that what I am, Beloved," he replied hoarsely, and Bilbo could almost taste the regret of his words as his breath caressed his lips in the tiny cocoon they'd created.

Bilbo breathed deeply, letting his head fall back on his neck as he closed his eyes; regained some space. It didn't really work, but the tension was slowly bleeding from his frame. "No, I would not ask you to change that," he sighed.

Hesitantly, Thorin's fingers pushed through his riotous curls to massage his scalp, and Bilbo murmured appreciatively at the exquisite sensation without opening his eyes.

"Are you still wroth with me?" Thorin murmured, tugging gently at a knot in Bilbo's hair as he sought to re-do his tatty braid.

"No," Bilbo said. "I was never angry at you, Thorin. As you said, you cannot be other than true to who you are, and I can't fault you for saving Bard's son, but I also can't be other than what I am, which is squeamish and nervous about these things."

"You are the bravest, kindest being I have ever known," Thorin contradicted firmly.

Bilbo waved that away, or would have if that wouldn't have involved moving his hands from Thorin's chest, so he settled for ignoring the praise. "I just got you. Do me a favour, and don't do anything rash for a while?" he huffed, blinking as he opened his eyes and leaned forward to catch Thorin's gaze. "You..." he sighed, and blurted out "I've grown rather fond of you, dammit. See to it that you stay intact."

Thorin's low, rumbling laugh caused the muscles beneath Bilbo's fingers to bunch and ripple in distractingly interesting ways, and he was suddenly reminded that he was lying in a very large bed with a rather under-dressed and vulnerable dwarven king. "I feel now might be a good time as any to point out the fact that by hobbit standards, we'd hardly even qualify as walking out together, let alone far enough along to consider a life-long commitment," he said. His voice was breathy and teasing, but he was tense, not really sure what Thorin would do with his not-very subtle jab at the oliphant in the room. He tried very, very hard not to curl his fingers into the course hair of Thorin's chest beneath his palms.

He failed. In truth, he probably didn't really try that hard.

He could hear Thorin's breathing hitch, before resuming; noisier and deeper than before. "Bilbo —" he uttered, and it sounded like a warning and a plea all at once. Bilbo cut him off, not really
"I may be Bilbo, Dragon-Riddler, and Barrel Rider, and even Voice of Reason In All Things Elvish," and here Thorin snorted and got a sharp elbow to the only patch of unbruised skin Bilbo could reach, "But at the end of the day, Thorin, I'm just a hobbit. We are simple folk who value pleasure and good company over all the ceremonies, titles and honours you can bestow, and I am desperately in need of a bit of physical reassurance right now."

For a worrying ten seconds, Thorin seemed to stop breathing all together. He cocked his head slightly, regarding Bilbo with deep blue eyes that burned warmly in the moonlight, startled and considering. "Bilbo," he rasped, and it sounded like fine whiskey, good pipeweed and a hot banked fire all in one. "There are reasons we tend to discourage too much physical connection during the juzurab, during the ritual. We are connected, Beloved. It will not involve only our bodies."

The mirthful sound that Bilbo made was probably more exasperated than anything, but his fingers curled tighter into the heavy pelt of hair on Thorin's chest, and gave a wicked little tug that caused a satisfying stutter in Thorin's breathing. "Five months, Thorin. And you've kissed me as many times as I can count on one hand. I would say I'm going to start doubting my appeal soon." His voice was sharp, but his fingers were light as they began exploring the warm expanse of skin available to him to gently toy with the hard bud of Thorin's nipples and delighting in the quiet moan the dwarf didn't bother to check. The air was awash with heavy pressure, a warm, expectant need that seemed to originate both under his skin and in his heart, and realized he couldn't pick out what began within himself, and what Thorin was sharing with him. "I've realized something," he murmured, wondering if it would be entirely appropriate to close the remaining distance and simply straddle Thorin's thighs for better access.

Thorin's hand had left Bilbo's hair to wander his temple, down to his un-bandaged ear. He began tracing the outline of the pointed tip when Bilbo jerked, bucking into the mattress with a shuddering whine.

"Too much?" Thorin asked, startled.

"Not yet, if you please," Bilbo whimpered, canting his head after Thorin's retreating fingers in direct lie to his words.

Large hands caressed his cheek lightly, before withdrawing to trace light patterns over Bilbo's shoulder blades instead. "What did you realize, my clever hobbit?"

He was panting a little bit, and looked up at Thorin through his lashes and gave a wicked grin. "I've realized that it isn't just me that I'm feeling. It's always been more than physical, every time we've touched, even as far back as the dragon, hasn't it? You're needs are every bit as much a part of what I'm feeling as my own."

"My heart was lost to you the moment you opened your ridiculously round door," Thorin agreed, seeming sheepish but for the heated way he looked up at Bilbo through his short lashes.

Bilbo was amused to notice he blushed at this admission, despite knowing that Thorin claimed to have felt the first stirrings of the heart bond the moment he'd set foot in the Shire. "Soppy thing," he muttered affectionately. Thorin grinned, unrepentant.

"My point is," he continued, deciding he really didn't care about Thorin's thoughts on dwarven propriety as he clambered into Thorin's lap, straddling his thighs in a way that was threatening to distract him from their slowly building banter. "My point is, that if we choose to take this farther or
not changes nothing. It has never been merely our bodies involved, no matter how much I may
have resisted seeing the obvious. Though, in my defense, podgy hobbits are not usually highly
sought after by illustrious royalty."

"No?" Thorin mused, his eyes dark and his fingers dipping to trail under the collar of Bilbo's
buttoned shirt. The feeling of those thick fingers lightly tracing his collarbone was both too much
and not enough all at once; it was electric. "I think you'll find that brave, selfless, razor-witted
hobbits are widely in demand by brilliant dwarven monarchs."

"So, I should avoid Dain, then, should I?" Bilbo asked with feigned innocence.

Thorin laughed, pinching Bilbo's arse for his impertinence, and Bilbo was surprised to find
himself flushing at what he would normally consider innocent enough attentions he'd received
times too numerous to count at various hobbit parties and faires. It was Thorin's thick fingers this
time though, and Bilbo could hardly help himself from noticing the strength of them—or of
thinking of other things they would be equally dexterous at. How Thorin managed to make him
feel like a 'tween with his first fling, he would never know, but he hoped it at least came with the
benefit of youthful vigor to compensate, he mused mulishly.

"And what kind of physical reassurance did you have in mind?" Thorin asked, and Bilbo swore
his voice was a full octave lower. He couldn't be bothered to marvel at it, though. He was far too
focused on getting his groin slotted over Thorin's in a mutually satisfying way. Really, it was
multi-tasking at its finest, he reasoned with himself, as he assumed his actions would stand in for
an answer anyway.

The pressure along his skin tingled as he gave an experimental roll of his hips, and the resulting
hot flares that skittered along his frayed nerves were almost painful, except that he gloried in it—it
meant that Thorin was alive, and here, and with him and he gasped before clenching his teeth in a
unfettered little noise as he pushed down harder, just enjoying the frictionless press of the heavy
weight of Thorin's thick erection against his own.

"Bilbo—" Thorin gasped, using his grip on the hobbit's hips to encourage him close despite the
protest of his words. His hands held so tightly that Bilbo knew there would be bruises later, and
that earned his dwarf another pleased hiss, especially when it was accompanied by the feeling of
tightly controlled want welling deeply inside him.

"No," he gasped. "No more words." He reached for the laces holding up Thorin's lose sleep pants
and hoped to Yavanna that Óin didn't have his hearing trumpet close at hand tonight, or he'd get
an unfortunate earful.

"And what exactly is considered appropriate, in this hobbit courting of yours?" Thorin gasped,
allowing Bilbo to thrust the soft fabric from his hips and thighs, only to take advantage of his
distraction to return the favour. Bilbo glanced down with a huff. "It seems me bums' bare," he
hummed with mischievous innocence, scrambling to finish the job, before settling further back on
Thorin's lap this time, allowing his erection to rest snuggly between the crease of Thorin's thighs.
He did so with remarkably little self-consciousness, but rather a pleased sigh as he gave a soft
thrust full of teasing friction.

Two pairs of trousers now lay discarded on the floor. Thorin was regretting his wounds, which
were preventing him from taking an active role in Bilbo's seduction, but felt strangely thankful at
the same time, for it allowed Bilbo to take the lead and show him exactly what he wished. Thorin
had little experience in pleasing others, and none at all with hobbits. Bilbo whined impatiently
when Thorin failed to go any further, arching against his uncertain hands.

Hobbits, he was coming to appreciate with amusement, were a race of well-concealed hedonists.
His insides stretched, struggling to fit around this new shape of Bilbo's desire, to make room for it without surrendering to it completely, and he thought that if their passion burned this hotly, perhaps Bilbo was right to come at it in stages. He wasn't entirely certain he was thinking clearly, or merely rationalizing, with the heat of Mahal's own forge bringing his blood to a boil within his veins and driving all reason from his head, but trusted Bilbo enough—trusted this feeling between them enough to let Bilbo lead them where he would. His fingers caught in the creases of Bilbo's shirt. Someone had kindly removed waistcoat before laying him down, for which Thorin was thankful, he was fairly sure he was going to tear most of the delicate buttons from Bilbo's fine shirt as it was, and was glad he wouldn't be compounding his sins against Bilbo's wardrobe by destroying a waistcoat, too. Slowly he let his fingers glide down the tantalizing glimpse of exposed collarbone, flesh warm and soft beneath his fingers, and Thorin idly speculated if it was a hobbit thing to always carry that sun-kissed feeling beneath their skin. He wondered what it might taste like, and suddenly he was filled with the overwhelming idea of tasting Bilbo's cock—the firm ridge laying heavy against his tongue while his cheeks bulged in pleasant discomfort as he worked him with lips and teeth until they were both satisfied.

"Yes please," Bilbo groaned, breathless, catching the flavour of Thorin's fevered imaginings. "Now, please—off, get it off—" Small fingers, usually so nimble, fumbled to pull the buttons through their holes and hasten Thorin along. When he continued to get them tangled, becoming increasingly agitated, Thorin resigned himself to getting scolded later, but took hold of the offending garment and tugged, as gently as he could manage, sending buttons pinging in the semi-darkness. Bilbo gave a relieved sounding sigh, and wriggled to drop the ruined shirt beside their trousers.

The moon light paid nothing but homage to his exotic love. Silver-blue shadows somehow only seemed to highlight his high cheekbones and unusual ears, picking out lighter strands of silver-gold in his curls. Bilbo straddled Thorin's lap with some difficulty, his thighs barely bridging the distance, though he seemed to find no discomfort in his awkward perch. Despite the soft padding of his frame, Thorin though Bilbo looked strangely delicate in the moonlight. His shoulders, so much narrower than the bodies Thorin was used to seeing every day, heaved as he gulped in air. His neck, strangely vulnerable without trace of beard to hide the alluring arch of tendon and skin, fluttered faintly with his rapid pulse. Even his prick, plump and hard as it was, was curved almost gracefully to Thorin's eye. Narrow fingers stroked lightly against Thorin's thighs as Bilbo planted his small hands for stability before leaning forward, breath sweet in the air between them to slowly trace Thorin's lips with his oft-sharp, clever tongue.

No, there was definitely steel in Bilbo, too.

The fine strands of Bilbo's sleep-tousled hair brushed Thorin's cheek like silk, and he captured the braid he'd put there to run between his fingers as he sought deeper entry to Bilbo's mouth. Bilbo tasted like nothing Thorin could describe; like honey and sunshine and laughter all together, and yet like none of these things, and he licked as deeply as he could manage, chasing the elusive feeling of wholeness. Bilbo gave an approving murmur before pulling back for breath, nipping Thorin's lip lightly with sharp teeth as he went.

"I don't want to hurt you," Bilbo whispered, his eyes falling to Thorin's wrapped midsection and many bruises and stitches, and he realized with a start that the dull pain had been building for some time without him noticing, lost as he was in Bilbo's presence in his heart, though obviously Bilbo had felt it growing.

"We shall be cautious," Thorin deflected.

Bilbo gazed at him, wide hazel eyes dilated with lust but clearly worried as he tried to sort through their combined sensations to find the truth. Rather than let Bilbo worry himself over what couldn't
be helped, Thorin began cresting his fingers over his skin, unmarred by any battle save those they'd fought together on the road to Erebor. Bilbo shivered under his light touch, mouth opening to draw in more air as the mood shifted once more.

"Don't think I'll always let you get away with distracting me," Bilbo warned, his petulant tone ruined by the moan he gave when Thorin found a particularly sensitive place in the crease of his hip and thigh. Thorin tried to look as innocent as possible, but Bilbo only rolled his eyes affectionately at his efforts.

"I would spend hours simply mapping your skin, Beloved," Thorin murmured, reaching to continue his sensuous touches down past Bilbo's knees, enjoying the light traces of invisibly fine hair he found there.

"Another time I'll let you," Bilbo promised, a small smile curving his lips. "For tonight, though, I think something easier is in order." He shifted his weight forward slightly, and the damp tip of his cock nudged Thorin's own, a feather light touch that felt like a burning hot brand. Thorin bit down on his tongue, hard, at the exquisite and yet painfully teasing sensation. Bilbo's gaze was bright and assessing, and he kept his eyes locked with Thorin's as he slowly, carefully, rocked forward more firmly this time. Thorin swore viciously in Khuzdul before he could stop himself, wrapping his hand around their cocks and stretching his fingers wide to capture them both in the heat of his own palm before he realized he even intended it. Bilbo's length was like fire against his own skin, and he felt like he was slowly being incinerated from the inside out; a burning resonance between the point of contact, and Bilbo's presence in his soul. He though if he looked deeply enough into Bilbo's gaze, he would find him similarly engulfed. Harsh breathing was the only sound to be heard as Bilbo stilled beneath Thorin's touch, then reached to grab Thorin's shoulders in tightly clenched fists as he arched, trying to do the work for Thorin and push himself deeper into his grasp.

His free hand shot out, clutching Bilbo by the hip to steady him. His hand was large enough his fingers could curl against the smooth skin of Bilbo's back, and the feeling of the muscles flexing beneath his touch was mesmerizingly sweet. Perspiration trickled down his spine, making Thorin's fingers slick against his skin and his tongue burned with the aching desire to taste it. Bilbo used his new leverage to push back into Thorin's hand, the feeling of their cocks pressed so tightly together made rough by lack of lubrication, but neither one cared. He rolled his hips up experimentally, thrusting into his own grip and into Bilbo's sun-kissed heat. Abused muscles protested the movement, but the pleasure curling his spine made such considerations pointless and he twisted his wrist as he stroked them, rocking again and watching Bilbo as the hobbit tried not to writhe for fear of hurting him. Sweat was beginning to dampen Thorin's clenched fist, easing their glide just enough to make the passage bearable, and Thorin reveled in the fevered feel of it; of the rising pitch of Bilbo's lust, the impatient jerk to his thrusts and the glowing pink flush high on his cheeks. Bilbo was babbling again, words Thorin couldn't understand over the rush of his own blood pounding in his ears, and the strained, raspy whistle of his breathing.

He let his head fall forward into the crook of Bilbo's shoulder, giving in to his need to taste his damp skin, sucking deeply until a purple bruise blossomed beneath his lips and Bilbo gasped, urging him on.

"I want to see you come undone for me," Thorin panted, fighting for breath in air that seemed too thin; battling to keep his eyes open, to keep his pace steady and his grip lose enough despite the urge to hold tight, to squeeze and fuck up into his hand as hard as he could to chase the building heat sizzling flowing through his cock in and slowly melting his spine. He felt he was losing the battle when Bilbo gave a high-pitched whine, arching and pushing deeper into Thorin's grasp as he panted, demanding more, faster, tighter!
Molten gold burned in his veins; in the places where Bilbo's skin touched his, where their souls joined. He felt like he was being reforged in this new, frightening heat and he wondered if he would survive it, but before it could consume him utterly, the building pressure crested, and he was riding the edge of his orgasm, not quite pushed over the edge but held impossibly in its torturous grip. Bilbo twisted wildly against him, careful not to lean forward into Thorin's bruised torso, but only a breath apart as he stiffened and shuddered, his voice ragged and sweet in his pleasure, praising and demanding all at once. The hot, sticky splash of Bilbo's seed on his belly and thighs was the last push, and Thorin was falling, heavy contractions wracking his length as he came, painting a searing milky white strip up Bilbo's smooth chest that glistened wetly in the moonlight. He had no memory of himself - no idea if he roared Bilbo's name for all to hear, or if he saved his shouts for the depths of his soul, where only Bilbo would be wrapped in his cries.

He did know as he slumped bonelessly in the aftermath, that Bilbo's name was the only thought he possessed.

Chapter End Notes

I adore all of you guys; you know that, right?

I have been incredibly fortunate to have a great bunch of readers, many of which leave me helpful and tremendously thoughtful comments. I know how much effort it takes to click that button when you're reading on the run, and to actually come up with something unique and relevant to say. The fact that so many of you do it humbles and thrills me beyond words.

Okay, yeah, so there is a whole lot going on these last few chapters, and I probably owe you guys a bit of an explanation.

Originally chapter 15 and 16 were written as one, humongous chapter. I split them in the end, because I didn't feel that Kili's climactic moment and Bilbo's should be in the same chapter. It was just too much to emotionally invest in both scenes so close together.

*blinks* Why yes, I suppose I do overthink these things - perhaps I should take a leaf out of Kili's book :p

Dori understood the timing mechanism for the explosives because his Heartcraft, if you remember, is actually as a Horologist (someone who deals with and makes clocks), which is also why he suggested he might be able to disarm it. Somehow, it seems like a perfect craft for someone as precise and nit-picky as Dori :) 

The description given of the underground caverns - the 'underground seas leading to blooming crystal caverns never seen by dwarf or man' that, if found, would be 'tended like a delicate garden' - this whole bit was a nod to Gimli's caves in Helm's Deep. For those of you who have only seen the movie, you'll have to google this to know what I'm talking about, but it's one of those few revealing moments of dwarven culture and values in the trilogy, I think.

There actually were Lime Chariots, in ancient China, used by one of the Emperors to disperse crowds in cases of civil disobedience. Trebuchets were real too, being sort of the penultimate of Siege warfare before gunpowder and cannons came along and made castle walls a lot less effective as a defense. They were constructed on site,
being too massive to move, and if badly constructed, would be just as likely to kill the
crew manning it as to lob boulders at the enemy. Some were capable of launching
stones of over a tonne, with an extraordinarily quick re-fire rate; I've seen it claimed
to be as fast as once every thirty seconds, but I find that just a mind-blowingly fast re-
fire rate to believe. They would often be used to launch diseased livestock and human
corpses over the wall, in an early form of biological and psychological warfare.

So, smut. Obviously I went there *leers playfully* Truthfully, it just felt natural at this
point of the story, so I went with it ;) Hopefully, it came out as enjoyable to read as it
was for me to write.

I'm not sure what that says about me that I can say that about myself, but oh well. I
have far too much fun being me to change now :p

The plan it to tie everything off next chapter. I can't swear to that until it writes itself
out, so there is a possibility that there will be a small epilogue or something after that,
but the end is definitely in sight, at long last.

Thank you so much for reading, and sticking with me all this time ♥
SOMEWHERE DOWN THE mountain, an insect buzzed lazily in the warm night, the sound carrying clearly in the falling humidity. The air in the council chambers had long since become close with the stale odour of so many other bodies, none of whom had had any more chance for a bath since Laketown than Fíli. He’d slipped away from the others in the Great Hall, hoping the cooler air outside might serve in lieu of sleep for a while yet, because there were still tasks to accomplish before he would be able to seek his bed. The wind atop the battlements was welcome after the heat of the day, and it was a relief to be able to leave off his heavy armour and let the breeze ruffle his sweat-dampened hair. A lithe figure followed him, settling nonchalantly against the ramparts some distance away, content to let his prince alone to think, and Fíli was surprised to find he was glad of Nori’s undemanding presence.

It felt like he’d been in briefings since his feet had first touched Ereborian stone and his sour mood
could be entirely blamed on his weariness. Sleep had been in short supply since they’d marched for Laketown, and had only gotten more scarce since Thorin’s injury. Kíli’s wan face was evidence enough that he’d been no better off, but there was something more in his subdued presence than exhaustion, and Fíli resolved to find out what was troubling his brother as soon as he could get him alone. It would probably have to wait a bit, he knew; until Uncle or Bilbo were cleared to leave the Healer’s care, he and Kíli both still belonged to Erebor. He still couldn’t believe what they’d missed—while he had blindly marched the mountain off to war, a dwarf he’d grown up respecting had almost destroyed the kingdom.

The soft buzz of the beetle fell silent, and for now, nothing more disturbed the faint rustle of the breeze through the bracken. The moonlight hid the scars of this most recent battle; and Fíli was grateful, though his gaze still lingered to the south-east, wondering how the Men fared this night, and if perhaps he lingered in the thoughts of a certain Lady there. The thought was so unexpected that he startled, but was honestly too weary to flush despite the confusion in his breast. He snuck a sideways glance to where his unofficial escort lounged, but Nori was packing the bowl of his short pipe, hardly paying attention. Fíli breathed a quiet sigh of relief, feeling a little silly for his paranoia.

Still, it was always best to not underestimate Nori.

“Something on your mind, lad?” Nori’s voice held more than a hint of cynical amusement, and Fíli discovered he apparently wasn’t too tired to blush when his ears began to burn with embarrassment.

"Well, I…” he floundered, grasping for anything that would come to his tongue right then. “I worry a bit, about how everything transpired; was I was so set on proving a point that we almost lost Erebor—again?” He was deflecting, though in truth this had also been niggling at the back of his thoughts, and somewhere between taking the throne and coming home again, he had come to value Nori’s insights.

"You want to flagellate yourself, Your Highness?” Nori didn’t bother straightening from where he slouched against the stone wall, staring into the falling darkness. “Go ahead, but I think I can find something better to do with my evening.”

Despite himself, Fíli’s lips quirked at Nori’s dismissal. "I just...Were we too quick to decide? Were we too busy trying to prove something to our Council to make a truly good decision?"

Nori shook his head, and pushed back from the battlement just enough to loosely clasp his hands and let them dangle lazily over the edge. "Of course you were trying to prove something. That doesn’t make it wrong, you know," he said, still speaking out into the darkness of the empty wilderness beyond their walls. "The question you need to be asking yourself is, what was it you were trying to prove?"

The breeze picked up again tossing the leaves in the scrub trees clinging to the mountainside, their dry rustling sounding like rainfall as Fíli turned Nori’s words over in his mind. What had they been trying to prove? That they were able to rule? Well, yes, that was the rather obvious point, wasn’t it? But certainly not all they had been trying to accomplish. That they could make the decisions they felt were right, despite opposition? Well, maybe they hadn't set out to prove that one...Ultimately, they had been trying to prove what they stood for, and what Erebor should stand for. They had made their decision not to let Laketown be overrun; and yes, there had been consequences, but Nori was right; though not everything turned out as they’d wished, that didn't make it the wrong choice.

"Thanks," he said, feeling lighter than he had since learning of Jústi’s betrayal. Faint pinpricks of distant stars were peeking out from under the low cloud cover, and Fíli took a deep breath of night
air. The caustic bite of quick lime was still faintly detectable, as was the acrid tang of soot and smoke, but it was a battle won, and the coming rain would wash the earth clean again before long. He could hear the sound of boots on stone approaching, telling him his moment of serenity was almost over, and he closed his eyes, savouring this last little bit of peace.

Nori, of course, heard it too. "If it helps any, Highness," he said quietly, as he pushed back from the wall to face the stairs once more, "I'm proud to have been a part of it, and to have been there to see your rule, however brief."

The warm glowing stone in his heart these words gave him would last a lifetime, and Fíli grinned out into the darkness. "If you're nice, I won't ever tell anyone you said that."

Nori snorted amiably. "No fear here, Highness. No one would believe you."

"I'm sure whatever rubbish you're peddling, no one would believe," Dwalin's rough voice cut in, marching stiffly up the stairs to meet them.

Nori deliberately slouched in a way he knew offended the Guard Captain's military soul. "I'll have you know people find me highly believable. It must be me handsome face," he drawled lazily, and turned to give Fíli a slow wink.

Visibly restraining himself from Nori's provoking antics, Dwalin instead stepped aside, so Fíli could see he didn't come alone. The Orocarnian ambassador followed on his near-silent boots, and he looked tired.

"Lord Iór," Fíli said, stiffening. Though Kíli had obviously cleared the ambassador and set him free, Fíli still couldn't entirely reconcile the dwarf he had left in custody, and the one who had helped his brother stop Jústi. He could see by the way Dwalin stood tense at his elbow, that he didn't trust the dwarf, either. Nori, not surprisingly, looked completely comfortable, but Fíli knew he'd look that way even with his hand on a dagger up his sleeve.

Iór gave Fíli a bow and a sardonic smile. "It seems, Highness, that my presence is no longer required here."

Dwalin gave him a hard look that somehow conveyed his doubt that Iór had ever been needed, for any reason whatsoever. Fíli was more than a little inclined to agree; somehow, at every twisting turn, Iór seemed to be at the centre of all his frustrations these last few months. "Kíli told me of your mission" he acknowledged stiffly.

If he was expecting a reaction, he was disappointed. Dark glittering eyes stared back at him from Iór's carefully constructed expression of polite, disinterested interest.

"Why didn't you simply tell me?" Fíli finally asked, exasperated.

"Because I did not know if you were to be trusted," Iór shrugged. "You had been placed in charge under most peculiar circumstances—at best, you were unfavoured by your uncle, and he chose this method to display your own inadequacies; at worst, you had seized the throne and locked your uncle away. I saw no way of sharing any information with you until I knew which of these was true."

Fíli gaped at him, in disgust. He was never so thankful for Dwalin's abrupt nature as he was at that moment, before his fist finished deciding whether or not to simply smash the Lord’s nose across his tanned face, help provided to the throne or no.

"Well yer wrong on both counts," Dwalin said quietly, yet still managing to arrest conversation. Fíli had heard Mister Dwalin under many circumstances; from good to bad, and even worse, but
he had never, ever heard quite this level of cold fury in the tattooed warrior's voice. "An' if King Thorin were to ever hear about you speaking such tripe, he'll have your guts out with a rusty cart-wheel to string in his harp."

Iór stared at him for a long moment, before turning to Fíli. "A thousand apologies, my prince. It seems I have not been correct in very much since I arrived." He gave one of his strange, sinuous bows. Fíli could only manage a tight nod, not trusting that his voice wouldn't break and betray him. Dwalin, of course, continued to glare.

Iór cocked his head slightly as he took in Fíli's half-clenched fist, hanging twitching and still miraculously restrained at the prince’s side. His head tilted back slightly, taking in Dwalin’s towering stance, and his lips quirked as he slowly smiled. "Honestly, Highness, I hesitate to admit it in such company, but your King Consort makes a more frightening figure than even the oft-sung Prince Fíli Courageheart or Captain Dwalin Ironfist.” He gave a small nod to both of them, his almond-shaped eyes self-deprecating, even as the rest of his expression remained bland and humourless, and Fíli was reminded again of the complicated wit that had first drawn his admiration.

“But not, my Lord, more frightening than Nori Reiver,” a cool voice drawled from where the thief still lounged against the parapet. “And I’ll tell you this fer nothin’; while our noble King Consort will give you fair warning before he has you served up for Sunday supper, I am not hampered by any sort of good manners.”

Iór’s eyes flicked to Nori’s artfully rumpled appearance, his extravagant hair, and then to the smooth polish of his weapon handles, the kind that only comes from use, and came to the correct conclusion

He made sure to include the ginger dwarf in his next bow.

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ENERVATION SEEMED TO inhabit each of Bilbo’s limbs, making it a ridiculous effort just to pull himself from the soft linens to sit up long enough to have even a cup of tea. He couldn’t understand how he had managed to escape kidnapping, steal the puzzle box and direct the defences of the mountain, and yet now that all was over, he couldn’t seem to convince vitiated muscles to lift so much as his shoulders from the bed longer than it took for a shuffling trip to the lavatory.

The fact that he finally had Thorin back, and also in that soft bed may have added to his reluctance to leave it, he acknowledged privately. A rueful little huff forced itself past his lips, along with a few determined puffs as he struggled to at least manage to sit up long enough to have a civilized cuppa, and maybe a sop of soup, before another young healer saw him and suggested the indignity of being spoon fed.

Of course Bilbo hadn’t exactly let that insult pass quietly, so he wasn’t entirely certain there would be any more attempts at that nonsense, whether he managed to sit up for his meals or no. Another quiet chuff bubbled up at the ridiculousness of his situation—a blood-born Baggins of the Shire no less, being forced to defend what tiny little prides were left when taking a proper piss was almost more than his legs could stand up for.

“Something amuses you, Master Baggins?” Thorin’s voice was a low rumble, as befitted the late hour, inviting confidences and quiet whispers and heads bent close to murmur softly in upturned ears. He gave Bilbo a wounded look when the hobbit poked him for being flat on his back and
even less ambulatory than Bilbo, and still managing to sound seductive.

Bilbo ignored Thorin’s charming antics, too busy awkwardly struggling with the pillows until he could prop himself up with reasonable comfort. Thorin helped where he could, without actually lifting himself from his semi-reclining position; he too, had learned the hard way and by the sharp side of Bilbo’s tongue. Somehow, Bilbo was sure this was exactly where young Kíli had gotten his own charming abilities from, and the thought of the young prince brought him up short, finally able to identify the restlessness that had been plaguing him.

Thorin of course, noticed the change, and fumbled through their cover until he could grasp Bilbo’s hand gently in his, squeezing until Bilbo turned to him. “If you will not share your amusement with me, I would ask that you share what weighs you down just now,” he said when he had Bilbo’s attention.

For a long moment, Bilbo hesitated, because he wasn’t sure it was something he wanted to speak of yet, but the memory of Kíli’s distraught expression and stoic acceptance had been digging away at him, refusing to leave his thoughts. He sat there, watching his fingers weave through the heavy fur covering Thorin’s chest, leaving narrow little furrows in the dark hair, carefully avoiding the wide swath of bandages still holding Thorin’s middle together as he traced more slow paths. Slowly he curled his fingers as he went, to tug gently at the apex of each stroke, solely for the pleasure of feeling the perfect rhythm of Thorin’s breathing hitch beneath his fingertips.

“Actually, there is something on my mind, since you’re obviously awake anyway,” Bilbo murmured finally.

“What is it?” Thorin’s large hands twisted in the blanket, tugging gracelessly trying to free his torso enough to sit up. Hard muscles bunched and tensed beneath Bilbo’s fingers. “No! Thorin, what are you—!” As gently as he could, Bilbo pushed back, forcing the stubborn dwarf to give over and lie back into the thin feather-bed once more. Thorin settled with a grimace, stitches obviously pulling painfully, and he gave Bilbo an aggrieved look as though remonstrating him for worrying him. Bilbo raised an eyebrow at him, being the most threatening expression he could manage at the moment. “It’s no use looking at me like that, if you insist on going out and making war with the orcs every few months,” he grumbled.

It was Thorin’s turn to roll his eyes, but wisely chose not to give way to the response building up on his tongue, least they lose the thread of the conversation with their bickering; though he did heave a pointed sigh, to show his great restraint in not arguing the pert comment. Bilbo tugged at his chest hair again, this time with amusement. He lifted the slight pressure of his hand on Thorin’s broad chest, and instead used it to gently stroke the length of his sternum, from collar bone to hip bone, warming at the way Thorin’s eyes narrowed in pleasure at his touch, like one of old Gamgee’s cats curled up by in the sun. Slowly, obviously fighting it every step of the way, Thorin relaxed, weary and boneless beneath Bilbo’s touch. When he finally spoke, his words caused the skin beneath Bilbo’s palm to vibrate like hide stretched taut over a barrel.

“And what is it you wish to know, Master Baggins?”

What exactly did he want to know? ‘I want to know why your nephew is sad,’ seemed too insulting. ‘I want to know why Kíli obviously has talent he does not wish anyone to see,’ might be too blunt, especially if this was news to Thorin. Chewing his lip until the skin was chapping, Bilbo, well knowing that tact was likely beyond him at this hour, eventually settled on:

“Kíli’s not exactly...usual for a dwarf, is he?”

Thorin’s brow settled into a heavy, uneasy line, as he tried to shift to have Bilbo more fully in his line of sight as he obviously shored himself for a difficult discussion.
Well that was less diplomatic that it might have been, wasn’t it? “I need you to do something for me,” Bilbo hastened to say, forestalling Thorin’s interruption with a raised hand. Bilbo stared him in the eye so that Thorin might see just how earnest he was in this. “I would like to tell you something; to discuss something with you, actually.”

“Of course,” Thorin agreed. A frown deepened the lines of his face in the moonlight, and, distracted, Bilbo idly wondered if all of their important conversations would happen in the middle of the night.

“Only, I need to discuss it with Thorin, my Bondmate; not Thorin of the line of Durin and Fíli and Kíli’s uncle.”

Beneath his hand, the steady rumble of breath faltered once more, but when it resumed once more, the hand that sought Bilbo’s was steady and gentle.

Thorin looked up at him, and his expression was strained, but all he said was, “I...see,” and Bilbo’s heart warmed at the restraint he was struggling for, to allow Bilbo to come at this in his own way.

And with a deep breath, and a quick prayer for luck, Bilbo told him. Told him everything he could remember, even the parts of his captivity and rescue he would rather Thorin never know about. He talked, words coming unbidden to his lips with such rhythm as to almost set his fingers to twitching, to write it down as a tune began to suggest itself in the cadence of his observations, and he hoped he would remember later, when he would feel it more appropriate for song-crafting. One thing for certain, it would be a song of doing, of following a path, a course of action, wither or whether it went—yes, that’s it; the road that goes ever on and on—and in this way, began to untangle Kíli’s troubles enough to share.

When he finally ran out of steam the words simply dribbled away, like a water pipe being shut off. He fell silent and stared blankly out into the darkness beyond the narrow pools of moonlight, feeling rather in need of a strong cup of tea.

The warmth of Thorin’s chest continued to permeate Bilbo’s palm where it lay, as though measuring his breaths when thinking any further than the simple mechanics of in and out felt too heavy a task.

“Kíli never officially found his Heartcraft?” Bilbo asked, eventually. “Did he?”

Silent moments passed that contained no more answer than the soft rustle of bedclothes in the late-night quiet, Bilbo shook off his weary thoughts to peer quizzically at Thorin.

It was obvious from the deep furrows creasing his broad forehead and heavy cast of his eyes that Thorin was adding all the little pieces together much as Bilbo had, and was now pondering things he had never entertained before—perhaps, Bilbo suspected, had even deliberately ignored. Faint sounds could be heard as he unknowingly drummed the fingers against the feather mattress beneath them, the staccato beat betraying the speed of Thorin’s anxious thoughts even as the sound failed to penetrate farther than their small cocoon. Hundreds of little things now being examined in a new light—all of them hard things to ignore, with Kíli’s not-so-cryptic comments in the tunnels all but admitting to Bilbo’s guesses.

Bilbo was sensitive enough to behaviours to know that this wouldn’t be welcome news to Thorin. Kíli’s evasiveness was proof enough that there was some problem that made this an unwelcome truth, but he couldn’t really grasp the dwarven thought that made up the nature of the issue. He waited, letting Thorin work though his thoughts in peace.
“Thorin?” Bilbo prodded gently minutes later, when those fingers finally began to still.

Sighing, Thorin closed his eyes before taking a deep breath to answer. “No, Kíli has never admitted to a Heartcraft before now. The boys were busy enough at Ered Luin to be out of the public eye for the most part, and since Fíli spent so much extra time in weapons related training, in service of his Master, and Kíli has always tended to cleave to his brother…most of the kingdom just assumed that both boys had been Called to a weapons craft of some sort.”

“And his family?”

“Obviously, we were concerned at Kíli’s apparent lack of Calling—but there was nothing wrong with Kíli! He is a fine lad, as true as basalt and twice as enduring; I would not allow others to criticise him for what they would consider lacking.”

Bilbo remembered what he’d heard of the story of Sakakni, the craftless child who eventually became Lord Jústi—no, the populace might not be forgiving of a dwarf who seemed to have missed Mahal’s blessing. “What did you do?”

He grimaced, expression twisting and weary. “We allowed the perception that Kíli was training with his brother, though Dis and I were careful to never actually say so. It was enough.” Thorin’s eyes drifted until he was staring absently into the darkness, frowning. Bilbo let him; he had plenty to think on. Thorin’s hand still rested over Bilbo’s own, holding his palm to Thorin’s chest in a gentle grip. The occasional slight squeeze was enough to let Bilbo know Thorin was still with him, even as he thought. “To ignore your Heartcraft is an arduous and painful thing,” Thorin said eventually, and his voice was about as grave as Bilbo had ever heard it. “It would be very difficult for Kíli to refuse its call for so long.”

“So why would he do such a thing?” Bilbo asked, bemused. “If being craftless was considered so bad?”

Thorin looked down at his hands, a frown creating deep creases along his brow. “Because a Cantor’s calling supersedes everything. If Kíli is indeed chosen by Mahal to be the vessel of his voice, he would be a Cantor, with no room for aught else.”

“So if Kíli is a Cantor first…” Bilbo was frowning now, conscious that there was something deeper Thorin was reluctant to put into words. “If he is a Cantor first…then he is no longer a prince.” he realized, and the understanding washed over him like a wave. “And Fíli would be King alone, without his Melhekhur-dohyar whatsit—his Anvil.” And, of course, Kíli had grown up watching Thorin without his Anvil...

Thorin nodded gravely, looking both miserable and deeply resigned. “I am sure Kíli has sought to avoid putting Fíli into that position.”

“Well, yes, I can see how Kíli would prefer not to do that—But, you said to ignore his Calling was painful!” Bilbo's frown turned to a glare, demanding mutely that Thorin Fix This.

But Thorin looked away, and wouldn't meet his stare, and Bilbo’s heart turned to lead in his chest. “Aye. A Calling is the task of your heart, your deepest joy,” Thorin said, finally. “To ignore that, is to ignore your own soul.”

Bilbo shifted miserably, glaring sightlessly at his coverlet. Kíli would never want to leave his brother with the burdens of ruling alone, but leaving the lad to long for something he could never have for decades to come was not something Bilbo was going to accept, either. In all his training, to never have the joy of the one thing he most wanted to work with? "Hang on," Bilbo said, jerking forward in his rush of excitement. "Did you not tell me that heirs normally receive training
in a variety of crafts? To better understand their subjects?"

"More to be able to work within the intricacies of the Guilds, but yes," Thorin paused, obviously seeing where Bilbo was headed, and reluctant to continue. "There is no casual Cantor's training, though," he finally said.

"Perhaps it's time it was included in the Royal training; a new tradition," Bilbo answered pertly, wilfully ignoring Thorin's unspoken message. "Kíli needs to be trained. Have Bifur handle it—he would be discrete, and no one need ever know that Kíli's training is more than what it seems. Besides, you told me yourself that heirs rarely have the luxury of attaining their Mastery, so no one will think anything of it if Kíli never seems to go far with a weapon's craft."

But Thorin was shaking his head, slowly. His eyes, still hollowed by all that had happened recently, seemed even darker, and his shoulders stooped, as though Thorin were much older than his late-middle years. "It is a lovely thought, Ázyungel, and you are right about Kíli not needing his Mastery, but Canting it is not a thing my people pick up and put down again, like some casual fancy; it simply isn't a thing that can be done. They would be most offended if I were to add it to the rotation of royal training, as though anything but the deepest study could unlock such mysteries. It would be seen as a lack of respect for our Maker."

"Thorin," Bilbo demanded, managing to be both beseeching and warning all at once. "You are the deliverer of a lost kingdom, and your people are grateful. Find a reason. Make it happen."

Thorin stared at him helplessly. "Yes, Bilbo," he finally said, and it felt freeingly simple, in the face of Bilbo's determination. This was not a break in trust to his people: this was for family. And even if, in the back of his mind, he would never again be completely, totally sure he could trust himself to not make selfish decisions, he knew without a shadow of a doubt he could trust Bilbo. Always. His hobbit burglar had proven he would always keep him on the right track, no matter the odds, because his compassion was greater than his sense, and would even stretch to include a gaggle of rude dwarves who trod mud into his carpets.

They would make it happen—and what could his Council really do, anyway? If this was the worst stain against his rule, they would grumble, but it would be eventually accepted as eccentricity, and swept under the proverbial rug. He hoped. And he could trust, with Bilbo to guide him, that he would serve his people well enough in the years to come; that they would forgive him this transgression with time, and without significant unrest.

Thorin gathered Bilbo close, careful of the many assorted wounds they had accumulated between them, and laughed delightedly into his soft curls.

He could trust his soul.

The rest, would sort itself out.

"..."

"YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO be resting."

Bilbo's disapproving voice was tempered with fondness as it drifted down to where he worked at the forge.

It had taken days, but they had finally been released from the Healer’s care, with as many admonishments and restrictions as Óin could come up with. The soft bed in his chamber had been even more welcome for having Bilbo share it with him, and yet despite that incentive to stay, he
"Forgive me," Thorin murmured, eyeing the small object on his bench critically. He paused when he felt small arms struggle to encircle his waist, and Bilbo's welcome warmth at his back. Thorin reached down to ensnare Bilbo's hands in one of his, helping the hobbit to bridge the gap over his thick midsection, and gave a gentle squeeze. He felt Bilbo's cheek press briefly into the hollow of his spine in answer, a faintly audible indrawn breath telling Thorin that Bilbo was taking the moment to breathe in his scent, nose buried between Thorin's shoulder blades, as Thorin himself often did whenever he had Bilbo's curls beneath his nose. Faint tension Thorin hadn't even been aware of seemed to bleed from his shoulders at this further proof his effect on Bilbo was as strong as Bilbo's on him. Slowly, he rolled his neck, releasing some of his stiffness from working over his jeweller's bench for long hours after slipping out of their shared bed. Sleeplessness had left him restless, and instead of disturbing Bilbo and denying him much needed sleep, Thorin had padded down here, to his workshop. If he were entirely honest, it was the craft that kept him from sleep—the shape and image of this piece growing in his mind as it became time to forge it, until little else held sway in his thoughts, and he knew he would know no rest until it been made real. Important crafts formed this way for dwarves, sometimes, consuming all else until they were done. Like the First Craft. He had been about done with it, giving it a final polish when Bilbo had obviously been disturbed by his absence, and come looking for him.

"What is it?" Bilbo asked softly, respectful of the special silence that could only be found at this time of night; a sort of worshipful period when one felt closer to deeper thoughts and madness both; to one's maker and to one’s muse. His people had a saying that brilliance was found in the silences of life, and night-time, while the mountain slept was about as silent as it could ever get. He gazed down at the small work wrought of his hand, and thought that maybe, that silence had served his hand this night.

Instead of answering, Thorin reached out with his free hand, and scooped up his prize, holding it out on the flat of his palm so that it caught the best of the lantern-light to glow silver-white against his sooty skin, and Bilbo could see it as he peered around him.

"It's rhodium; it's scarce and difficult to work, and a bit brittle for thin applications like rings, but highly prized for sturdier decorations. It signifies a rare and resilient spirit: one who supports and lifts all those around them."

Bilbo swallowed slowly, before tugging one of his hands free of Thorin's grasp and reaching out with one hesitant finger, to trace along the smooth finish of the bead. "It's lovely," he whispered thickly.

"I had to finish it," Thorin told him in a hushed rush. He knew Bilbo might not understand, but he had to get it out—put it into words anyway, for his stone-deaf love. It would take enormous practice, but he would not forget the lessons he had learned. Bilbo needed words. "I had to have it done. The bond—I want to have this for you, to give you when we...to give you at least one proper thing, one proper step in all this." He held it up to the lamplight to eye it critically once more, before gently depositing it in a soft pouch on his work bench. Bilbo took advantage of his hands no longer being busy to settle himself into Thorin’s embrace with a soft sigh.

"The Bond will have to be addressed soon, wont’ it?" Bilbo asked, face pressed contentedly into Thorin’s chest. “Soon. We have a little time yet.”

Bilbo huffed, but decided it wasn’t worth actually moving from their comfortable embrace. “Not much, I’d say.”
Thorin hummed again, not really bothering to rouse himself either. Blunt fingers were exploring Bilbo’s sleep-tousled curls, gently teasing out tangles and massaging his scalp as they went. It took an embarrassingly short time for Bilbo to feel utterly boneless under such ministrations. Hovering somewhere between wakefulness and dreams, he didn’t immediately notice as Thorin’s attention wandered and his thoughts turned inwards, even as his fingers continued their gentle path. Subtle tension where before there had only been contentment in each other’s company finally permeated Bilbo’s haze. “I understand you were barred from your own Council chamber today?” Bilbo murmured, divining the likely direction of a worried king’s thoughts. He’d been informed earlier about the incident by Regi, who was proving to be far too valuable for him not to keep for his own personal staff—which he knew he would have to have, if he were going to be any use to Thorin in running this vast Kingdom.

An irritated noise escaped Thorin, though he made no other motion to disentangle himself from Bilbo, instead running his nose along the crown of his head, so that his breath stirred Bilbo’s hair as he finally spoke. “Fíli and Kíli, my own kin, turned me away,” he admitted.

“Remind me to thank the lads later, then,” Bilbo said, ignoring Thorin’s indignant protest. “What part of not resuming your duties yet did you misunderstand, then? I thought Óin was very clear.”

Thorin’s broad shoulders slumped almost imperceptibly. “The Council was set to discuss circumstances in Laketown—”

“And your nephews will do what is right. Have faith in them.” Above him, he could see a faint frown curl Thorin’s lips as his eyes stared sadly into the darkness beyond the dim light of the forge.

_This wouldn’t do._ “You know,” Bilbo started, working a finger free of where he’d wound it into the soft fabric of Thorin’s jerkin so he could jab him lightly as he spoke, “I’m fairly certain we were having a moment, before you began brooding.”

Thorin startled, and looked down, a slow smile beginning to curve his lips. “Forgive me, Beloved.” For a long moment, their mingled breathing was the only sound in the hall, as Thorin struggled with his thoughts. Bilbo gave him time, simply enjoying the uncomplicated pleasure of having Thorin close enough to touch once again. The angle of the moonlight drifting in through the ceiling vents had crawled along the floor by a degree or two before Thorin’s soft exhalation that wouldn’t quite dare to be a sigh roused him from his thoughts. “You are right, of course. Fíli and Kíli have my faith; they always have.”

“But?” Bilbo prompted when Thorin’s gaze drifted away again. His voice was barely a murmur in the still of the late hour.

“But, Laketown is… Laketown is still a weight around my neck. Much have I strove to put aside what happened during my madness, but I failed in my promises to them then, and I have spent long months trying to ensure that they suffer no more for it. But—after everything that has happened, everything we have fought to accomplish, it’s all been torn asunder. Two kingdoms again stripped bare.” Bilbo wanted to protest, but the hot words died on his lips with a pleading look from Thorin and a slight squeeze of his hand where it rested against Bilbo’s shoulder, and reluctantly, he swallowed his words and let Thorin get it out. “Erebor’s recovery depends on Laketown becoming a viable settlement again. And maybe…my honour does as well. But now, their fields have been trampled beneath goblin feet and burnt. The men will have precious little to eat come harvest, and will have to spend very freely indeed of whatever gold the Master left them to feed themselves through the winter. They will have nothing to spare for trade.”

"Why is it you can only see immediate solutions?" Bilbo asked, wanting to throw his hands up in
frustration. "You are seeing only one season—you said yourself that you have given them the resources to buy enough to get them through the winter, and Erebor has far more gold resources then Laketown, and can buy food with equal effort."

"Yes, but it will show our Kingdom as being weak. Prices will treble, for the perceived desperation of our people, and before long our treasuries will be bled dry for greedy merchants in southern climes. Not to mention what Laketown's suffering will be this season, when the prices climb in response to their need. The Merchants of men seem to be a greedy lot, with little loyalty, even for their own kind."

"One season, Thorin. Just one, and Laketown will be back on its feet again, and shall be grateful after your defence of their town. You have built a far better relationship with them then you ever could have almost any other way, short of marrying one of your nephews into their line."

Thorin couldn’t quite hide his shudder at the thought. "You are likely right, but it is not what I had hoped for them after all the suffering they have seen—to use the last of our largess to barter their survival this season. I think we may find that many chose to leave."

All traces of sleepy languor was gone as Bilbo thought, gently tapping his lip with one finger. "You know, it is still rather early—the time for planting early spring crops is long past, you’re right, but there are certain techniques that we use in the Shire, to get an early start on germination in the spring—we call them greenhouses. If you were able to get the materials, and get your engineers to help, we could likely use them to speed some of the late-summer yield crops, and possibly even extend the growing of some crops into late autumn."

Thorin stared at him, brow furrowed in burgeoning hope. "What kind of techniques? And could they really feed a town?"

"They, and we, will likely still have to supplement a bit, Thorin, and their diet may be depressingly unvaried this winter; but yes, they can plant all their fields now, if you can get the greenhouses built and some ploughshares turned out, and still have enough of a harvest to get them through the winter. With luck and good weather, there may even be some left over for us."

"And come next year, they will be in position to supply more of our needs?"

"We will barter for it now—our help doesn’t have to come free." Bilbo shook his head, exasperated. "Honestly, sometimes you take your guilt over things past a little too far. You have done more than enough to aid them. Our assistance now will come with dividends later. And they will pay it."

The emotion that shone in Thorin’s eyes when he looked down at him made Bilbo’s toes curl uncomfortably even as his stomach wriggled with faintly pleasant heat. “You big softy,” he muttered, burrowing once again into Thorin’s embrace. Thorin’s chest beneath his cheek rumbled with soft laughter, and Bilbo knew he wasn’t fooling him at all.

“I asked you once before, Åzyungel, the proper way to ask you to join me for Tea, and though you answered, recent events make me feel compelled to ask again, and I shall ask you plainly, since you delight to tell me that Hobbits approve of simplicity and honest intent.” And here, Thorin’s voice, which had been low, befitting the late hour, yet strong enough to thrum through Bilbo’s whole being, and full of a wonderful warmth of teasing, faltered. For a moment, Bilbo went completely still in Thorin’s arms, knowing what was on his tongue to ask, having, as Thorin said, already been asked once before, yet he still appreciated this gesture to somehow bridge the gap of before and after created by their separation; by Bilbo’s being blooded in battle—not his first, but the first time that other’s destinies had been his to command; and of his own realization of how far he would go in service of his heart’s bond with is dwarvish friends. Look at me now, so far from
his comfortable Bag End. Was he even the same hobbit? Not at all. But he was somehow better; comfortable with who he had become, and with the new-found edges and boundaries within himself.

He wriggled around so that he could look at Thorin’s face as the dwarf looked back at him, expression soft and tender and achingly unsure. A tiny shiver ran down Bilbo’s spine, raising the hairs on his arms and his toes as he met that dark gaze. Thorin’s voice, when he finally spoke again, was raspy, as though his throat were suddenly dry, and caused another tiny shudder in Bilbo’s high strung state.

“Will you, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, fierce defender of Erebor and possessor of more intelligence than the entirety of the Company combined, consent to join me, a humble dwarf who can only claim to be learning, day by day, new ways to be worthy, in the sampling a tea, crafted of mine own hand, for your enjoyment, and your enjoyment alone?”

Bilbo knew his eyes were a bit damp around the corners, but he smiled so wide his dry lips felt the strain. He had some vague notion that this is what it must be like to smile radiantly, as Elvish prose was wont to mention, but the thought was very, very far away when his whole body felt suffused with warmth too big to contain. Thorin grinned back at him, abashed and hopeful and yet with growing confidence. “You know—” and Bilbo’s voice faltered at first, but he cleared his throat and tried again, “you know, I hate to point out, Thorin, but that was hardly plainly asked.”

Their laughter and familiar teasing may have gotten a bit soppy and sentimental, lingering long in the quiet of Thorin’s workroom, but there was no one around to hear it.

Keeping a discrete and unseen watch, Dwalin made sure of it.

It was the least he could do for his shield brother.

And for his King.

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you guys so much for sticking with me, despite my horrendous update schedule. Things got unfortunately hectic in my life, and my writing schedule suffered for it, but the motivation I got from reading all of your comments and kind words definitely kept me on track and is directly responsible for this chapter, and the fact that I am more than halfway through writing the epilogue - currently sitting at about 7000 words.

I thought epilogues were supposed to be short? :D

There is probably a lot I should be saying, both about this chapter and about the difficulty in picking up the 'voice' of something after so much time has passed, but it's late, and I want to get this up for everyone before I crash, because you wonderful people have waited long enough - so I shall simply say a heartfelt thank you to all of you ♥
The Words of Mazurbul

Chapter Summary

OMG -we're finally here.

Many, many thanks to the amazing talents of some very special ladies - krystal lazuli and NepthysMoon. Without your help, this would never have come into being.

And WFT? I thought that Epilogues were supposed to be short? But even after 17,500 words, neither of my betas thought that this should be split into more manageable lengths, so without further ado, here it is; the end.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Epilogue

The Words of Mazurbul

And There Shall Be Shown a Token

~In which Thorin makes tea, Kili really wishes he hadn't and Dwalin's softer side is exposed ~

THEY HAD DECIDED on tonight to attempt the Bonding Rite, and Thorin had found that he felt as if he were going to crawl out of his skin between anxiety and nervous energy.

Sometime during their time in the Healing Halls—well, most likely during their tryst if Thorin wanted to be honest, the bond stretching between them had strengthened, lending much-needed stability and peace after the painful distending during their time apart. Thorin was really hoping that this was going to make the actual bonding process easier; in all the history of his people, no dwarrow had ever taken a hobbit as their Bondmate. Rationally, Thorin knew Bilbo was experiencing their Bond—he had seen evidence of it himself; had felt evidence of it himself. Still, he couldn’t quite calm his fears that when it came down to it, he would be unable to guide them through it, either down to his own inadequacies, or Bilbo simply being unable, because he was a hobbit.

And hobbits don’t have Bondmates.

Round and round his fears and thoughts chased each other until he was glad he had decided to surprise Bilbo with his Tea ceremony before they tried to consummate their Bond. Trying to remember all the myriad details was just the distraction he needed.

The candles had been Bofur's idea, and they threw a gentle flame that helped push back the gloom of a rainy afternoon, defining a warm nest within the empty space of his unadorned chamber in
which their small rite could take place. The scent of beeswax hung in the air, pure and fresh, tickling Thorin’s nose and reminding him of their time spent in Beorn’s house and how much he had admired the rosy glow being safe and warm and well-fed for a few nights had brought to Bilbo’s skin. He had longed then to run his finger over the roundness of Bilbo’s cheeks, and gauge the fine texture of his skin for himself—to take his warmth within his heart so that it might brand him in ways Thorin daren’t even dream about back then.

It had been a long journey from that place to this night. Tonight, though, he got to appreciate the shining russet gold of Bilbo’s curls, and the fact that he could finally brush the hobbit’s soft skin with his own and know that the small, heartfelt touches were welcome.

There was a table sitting in the centre of Thorin’s chamber where no table had stood previously; a relic from his grandfather’s time. It had been unearthed from a dusty corner somewhere in the kingdom, and patiently hand polished by Dwalin until it glowed in the flickering light as though new. The snowy white linen it was laid with was a gift from Balin, while Glóin’s wife donated the fine Belegostian china. A long narrow table sat by the door, placed for Thorin to throw his crown and other badges of office on when he came in after escaping the Guilds and their endless bickering. It was now adorned with an…unusual, and large, arrangement. Containing both flower stalks, with all the flowers removed, and an assortment of what looked to be leafy vegetables, he felt safe in assuming the amalgam was a gift from Bifur, though he was uncertain if it was supposed to be decorative, or if they were supposed to eat it. Thankfully, Fíli had arranged with the girl from Laketown—Bard’s eldest—to bring in fresh flowers, and they filled little vases scattered on every surface. Thorin wasn’t sure if he was more warmed by his company’s desire to help, or embarrassed that they obviously felt he couldn’t woo Bilbo without it.

Privately, he was forced to acknowledge that they were probably right. He focused on feeling pleased, instead, counting each small gesture of support amongst the treasures of his heart; even, reluctantly, Óin’s carefully prepared pot of scented oil that the aged healer had left for him, along with an embarrassingly detailed list of instructions and suggestions for its usage.

The penmanship looked suspiciously like Ori’s.

Ori, who was less than half of Thorin’s age, and who only barely qualified as an adult.

Little Ori, who it turned out, had some very creative suggestions.

A beautiful, and priceless, teapot of the rose-gold that only came from the old Firehalls of Nogrod crowned the table as a centrepiece, lined in hard-fired ceramic and inlaid with beautiful patterns in mother of pearl and opal. Beside it lay his original gift; the finely-wrought bird resting on a scrap of deep forest green velvet from Dori’s stores. A small gleaming wooden box adorned in platinum and peridot sat slightly apart, lid propped open to display Bilbo’s Tea, the final product of Dori’s patient tutelage.

Next to the table, on a delicate wheeled cart, which Dori had told him was specifically used for such, was his tea service—a brazier full of glowing coals, a small iron pot with a pouring lip, and various sundries he hoped he remembered the purpose of.

A deep breath; he could do this. He knew in his heart that Bilbo would forgive him any failures tonight, but Thorin wasn’t entirely sure how to forgive himself. This was important in Bilbo’s tradition, and Thorin was proud enough to want it to go perfectly. This was another craft of his hand, to show his care for his One, to show Bilbo his own worth. And Bilbo deserved that he spend a lifetime learning the intricacies of this ceremony, as hobbits no doubt began learning the needed skills as fauntlings, much as dwarf badgers did, perfecting and practicing as tweens until, finally coming of age, and sharing the summation of their skills with one worthy of their efforts. In the end, he hoped he could manage a credible apprentice effort with the time he’d been able to
Shortly after they’d breakfasted, Bilbo had been swept away by his nephews, begging advice and attention and giving Thorin time to smuggle in an ornately carved pastry board (the precise hand that carved was of course, very familiar, evident in the delicate turns and whorls that adorned it), bearing the fruits of Bombur’s patient lessons in the kitchens, but he knew the appointed time was drawing near, and his sister-sons would ensure Bilbo was back shortly.

And he’d run out of time. The door was opening, and Thorin could hear the teasing sounds of his nephews’ laughter as Bilbo was speaking; too indistinct to make out the actual words. Somewhere along the way, the little party had picked up Nori.

“Good evening, Master Baggins,” Thorin said, feeling all his nerves settle at the sight of Bilbo’s wide smile and bright eyes. He could feel his lips curl in response, a soft, involuntary smile.

Had he smiled, before Bilbo came into his life? Surely he must have, but he wasn’t positive anyone but the closest of kin would believe it.

“Thorin!” Bilbo smiled just a little bit wider, a little bit warmer as he turned. Thorin could see the exact moment when Bilbo stopped looking at him, and noticed the changes to the chamber.

“What’s all this?” he asked, but his voice was much softer now, obviously recognising Thorin’s preparations.

Fíli gave one glance around the room, as if noting that everything was ready, and turned to Bilbo, taking one of the hobbit’s hands in his. “Enjoy your afternoon, Uncle Bilbo,” he smiled, turning to leave. He gave a brief nod to Kíli and Nori, and slipped out the door before the stunned Bilbo could find his tongue.

Bilbo’s fingers were trembling, and Thorin knew he was desperately trying to maintain his composure. Since the traumatic events during their injured state, Bilbo had struggled, finding his emotions closer to the surface and harder to control. Progress was being made; moments where Thorin would find him and hold him through storms of uncontrollable weeping, or moments of targetless anger were growing fewer, and Bilbo no longer flinched when he felt overwhelmed in the presence of unfamiliar dwarves. He’d told Thorin in the dark hours they’d spent together healing in Óin’s infirmary that it had felt like where the back of his head should be, there was nothing but a gaping void, from which pieces of himself kept falling out. He’d talked about trying to build a wall, to quarantine that part of his mind so that he could think and deal with Jústi and the invasion of their mountain, and Thorin had struggled hard to contain his horror when he realized just how close they had come to Bilbo dying through septic shock, while he himself had been protected by the mediation rites and sigils cast by his family when he’d first fallen. The fact that Bilbo had somehow found the strength of will to function through it? The songs sung of his diminutive Consort would go down through the ages as Hero’s Ballads, and were destined to make Bilbo very uncomfortable with their popularity by season’s end.

A quiet word with his nephew, and Fíli had taken to spending time with Bilbo in the mornings, helping him learn the simpler runes, meditations and mysticism of everyday dwarven rites, and slowly, Bilbo was recovering from his psychic injury, though it was like watching someone learn to depend on a crutch, when before they’d had a whole and hale leg. Thorin longed to wrap him up, keep him safe and wait on him hand and foot for all his needs for the rest of his days. He had enough sense to realise that to do so would in a very real sense, smother his hobbit, and so he was learning the equally difficult task of not hovering and letting Bilbo stand on his own as much as he was able. Still, surrounded by the company’s unending support, Bilbo flourished, and it was only in private moments like this that Bilbo showed signs of his struggles.

He stepped forward, smoothly sliding one of Bilbo’s shaking hands into the crook of his arm as he
turned him to face the area he had so painstakingly prepared. “I hope I have everything right, Beloved,” he murmured softly, for Bilbo’s ears alone, “But if I perhaps failed utterly, please be kind enough to leave my pride intact before my nephew, or I will never hear the end of it.”

As intended, Bilbo let out a snort, relaxing infinitesimally. “Well, I suppose that depends on how much you manage to impress me, oh King,” he murmured back cheekily. Kíli peered suspiciously at their low conversation and poorly disguised snickers. But truly, Thorin felt giddy, with happiness and nerves bubbling in equal measure beneath his skin, and he was willing to wager, given the faint flush to his ears and heady warmth rising from his skin, that Bilbo was no better off than he; so was it any wonder they snickered like badgers released from lessons early?

“If you truly have to ask what this is, Bilbo, then perhaps Uncle Thorin didn’t do a credible job?” Kíli piped up, with all the mock censorship and sternness of a disapproving old Aunty. “We most certainly won’t be giving our approval, if he’s going to make such a poor showing!”

Bilbo turned, letting his hand slide from Thorin’s arm as he regarded Kíli and Nori, as if just remembering their presence. Nori just raised a brow and smirked. Thorin wasn’t quite sure how the company had decided who would have the honour of representing Bilbo’s family. Kíli wasn’t a surprising choice; he had been devoted to Bilbo during Thorin’s absence and Bilbo had become especially invested in Kíli’s welfare since learning of his supressed Heart Craft. There was also a kinship over shared possession of the gold ring; the evil feeling of which Kíli had shared during a private moment at their bedside. Bilbo, for his part, had been deeply shaken by his reactions to the ring during his escape, especially the way it had made certain parts of him and their bond numb and empty. He bade Kíli keep it secured in the rock for them, where no one could reach it. Something about both of their reactions and their tense expressions when they discussed it, disturbed Thorin deeply, and he vowed to speak to Gandalf when next he might about the dark thing now residing under his mansion. Kíli’s training had become of upmost importance if he were to make a solid contract with the rock that held it locked away; Thorin didn’t want to take any chances with something that might, on some level, think for itself. One thing Kíli shared with him, after Bilbo had fallen asleep, was that as Jústi burned, the ring had illuminated with its own light, glowing script of incantation visible upon its surface.

No, Thorin didn’t trust this at all and resolved to send a raven after the wandering wizard and try summoning the old codger, and he put his misgivings aside for now.

Nori’s inclusion in their rite? Well, that was a complete surprise. In a way thought, he supposed it was a message. Of all the company, Nori stood the most outside of Thorin’s influence; as much as any dwarf of the Kingdom could be. Nori’s presence was a statement that the company was taking the role of Bilbo’s family very seriously indeed, and it made Thorin’s heart glad.

“Well, you did ask me not to send Dwalin back for your relations…” Thorin couldn’t help but tease, and the look of consternation on Bilbo’s face was worth the scolding he knew he would get later.

“And I thought I said that Thranduil would be an acceptable substitute?” Bilbo replied pertly. Thankfully, before Thorin had to dignify that idea with a response, Kíli stepped forward and looped Bilbo’s other hand through the crook of his arm, tugging the hobbit companionably close.

“Are you saying Uncle Bilbo, that you will not have us as your family?”

Bilbo turned and slipped his arm from Thorin’s to snag Nori closer to him as they strolled to the set table. “Of course I will, my lad,” Bilbo grinned, and if there was a sheen in his eyes, no one was going to point it out. For one brief unguarded moment, honest pleasure graced Nori’s face, before a cheeky grin took its place.
THORIN SUPPOSED THAT he really should have known that, despite Dori’s increasingly meticulous instructions, things wouldn’t go entirely smoothly. Currently, he was stoically resisting the urge to suck on his burnt finger like a dwarfling. Honestly, he was so aware of Bilbo’s presence, both in his mind and sitting there at the table that the feeling of his tongue rasping on his ultra-sensitive skin would likely produce embarrassing results. In the back of his mind, he couldn’t help but wonder if he somehow played his cards right, if maybe Bilbo would suck on it for him, instead.

He was very, very glad that unsolicited thought hadn’t occurred to him until after their guests had left.

Watching off-boiling water intently to correctly gage the size of bubbles—was it sturgeon eyes? Lobster eyes? Why were all the blasted references aquatic in nature? He’d never been to sea, and certainly never looked a lobster in the eye; but watching the water had been nerve-wracking with the possibilities for potential failures, and the fact that more than half his awareness seemed to be centred on bronze curls and a pert, oft-ready smile. With hands that weren’t entirely steady, he splashed a little of the steaming water over a small clay figure, waiting for the whimsical fish statuette to spout the water from its mouth. The distance was supposed to indicate the temperature of the water—the hotter, the farther, as expanding air forced it outwards. At least this part was something that made sense to him; simply thermodynamics and air expansion principles within fired clay…

…and the inevitable had happened—his attention wandered; his small pot had begun to tip and Thorin scrambled to grab it, burning himself with hot, nearly-boiling-but-not-quite-making-the-fish-statue-spit-for-some-inexplicable-reason water. He’d have a fine blister along the inside of his finger to show for it come evening.

Kíli, bless him, had done his best to distract Bilbo from Thorin’s embarrassing fumble and Thorin made an executive decision that water that may or not be the correct temperature was a better bet than continuing to attempt to boil it in his current state of distraction, and filled the teapot to steep, or infuse or whatever it was tea did when married with water, and heaved a sigh of relief at a step successfully navigated.

Well, he’d call it a win, anyway.

His finger began to throb angrily, just to spite him.

His tea, or rather, Bilbo’s Tea, proved to be palatable—for which Thorin would be forever thankful. When the moment finally came for him to pour that important first cup, he had to concentrate on supressing the squirming feeling in his belly that made him want to leave the pot to steep a bit longer and delay the moment when he would have to present the fruits of his labour to Bilbo. Sensing his hesitance, Bilbo had reached for him, curling his fingers with Thorin’s to gently squeeze his hand in encouragement. He felt himself grinning again, completely unbidden, as the small gesture filled him with warmth. Bilbo took the dainty cup gravely. He tilted it, watching the play of liquid inside before swirling it gently in some kind of Hobbit ritual. Finally, he brought the cup to his lips, and sampled his tea slowly, closing his eyes and giving every indication of savouring it, while Thorin watched, breath caught in his throat and more than a little terrified. He was aware that across from him, his nephew stared him with growing delight, and Thorin knew his inability to hide his emotions was likely providing the lad with enough material to tease him well into the next age.

When Bilbo finally opened his eyes and turned to Thorin, his whole face glowed with happiness, and Thorin felt something uncoil in his gut as he finally, finally relaxed. Kíli and Nori made a
show of swirling the tea in their cups, examining it for worthiness of their hobbit; commenting on depth of flavour (like flowers), and colour (sort of garnet red-brown, like good mud) and bouquet (more flowers, apparently) and weediness (they were really reaching by this point) and just generally making unhelpful arses of themselves, but Bilbo smiled at their antics, so Thorin settled for ignoring them. They took the examining of Thorin’s first gift of the thrush with much more seriousness though; Nori holding it up to the light to examine it with a jeweller’s monocle for inclusions and flaws, and Kili assessing the worthiness of the carving itself, and Thorin’s skill in working with the gem’s voice to enhance its own natural beauty rather than obscuring it.

Apparently, his hand had not failed him in either endeavour. He took it as an especial sign of Nori’s respect for Bilbo that he made no attempt to pocket the gem, but handed it back reverently. Grandam Ur’s pastry recipe also served him well, though the feelings of enjoyment that were filtering back to him from Bilbo as he ate it bordered on sensual pleasure and had Thorin gazing at him with a sort of banked-fire in his eyes that made Kili squirm in his chair.

His nephew had been flushed by the end of the Tea rite, as Thorin’s gaze where it rested on Bilbo became heavier, and their flirting less light, but really who could fault him when all he could really focus on was how enticing Bilbo looked in his blue waistcoat—almost the exact shade of Durin blue, and his heart braid displayed so prominently over his exotically pointed ear? Thorin tried really hard to push down remembrances as to how sensitive those ears may be, especially after the intimacies they had already shared, least he embarrass himself.

Kili was looking even more uncomfortable now… Blast, the lad could likely pick up on Thorin’s imaginings, or at least the flavour of them, no matter how well he kept a calm outward face, which was not at all as calm as he would have liked, given how little control he seemed to have left this close to their Bonding. Even untrained, Kili wouldn’t have been able to help but pick up on the undercurrent between them, with the strength of some of Thorin’s emotions this afternoon.

It was likely a fact that only love of his Uncle and whatever good manners Bilbo had managed to instil in him had kept him in his seat. It was also a fact that he had bolted as soon as it was polite to do so, with Nori sauntering along in his wake, smirking in such a way as to make Thorin certain he had figured out the source of Kili’s discomfort before Thorin had.

And now their chaperones were gone. The knowledge that they would soon be attempting the Bonding rite was there, in the background, but the urgency was muted, a pleasant ache that they chose to savour. The heat that had risen up between then once before in the Healing Halls was simmering lowly under the surface of their thoughts; a presence they both were relaxed enough to be comfortable with as they idly enjoyed the last dregs of Bilbo’s Tea. The candlelight did alluring things to the hue of Bilbo’s skin, and Thorin was mesmerized watching the shifting colours brought out in his curly hair.

“So, it seems you managed to find a suitable teapot for our little party after all,” Bilbo said, the first conversation to break their silent game of grinning warmly back and forth for the last quarter hour.

"Ah, it actually belongs to Dwalin," Thorin admitted sheepishly.

Bilbo nearly choked his tea. "Dwalin?!”

"Yes, well, apparently Master Nori heard my attempts to locate a suitable vessel for this rite, and took it upon himself to procure one for me," he said, making a face.

"Surely, you knew better than to accept anything from Nori by now!" Bilbo laughed.

Thorin sighed. "Yes, which is why, I suspect, he passed it to me through his brother. Dori was only too happy to share his brother's acquisition, and didn't stop to ask too many questions."
"Poor Dori," Bilbo hummed, sympathetically. "I'm sure he's mortified. Nori does love to tweak Dwalin's beard, but somehow, I just can't see Dwalin as the type to enjoy a quiet cuppa."

Thorin gave a quick shake, as if trying to dispel the image of his Guard Captain, boots kicked off and holey stocking'd feet up on the coffee table, enjoying a steaming cup of tea and discussing with Dori the bouquet or liqueur or other nonsense. Frankly, Bilbo was wondering if Dwalin might not like a couple of his hand-crocheted doilies, since he obviously had some deeply hidden refined taste locked away. "I suspect he keeps it for his mother," Thorin admitted absently, still struggling to evict his mental picture.

"His mother?" Bilbo encouraged, obviously hoping to learn more about the uncommunicative warrior.

"She was considered a great beauty, both for her physical form and for her disposition. She was tough, but generous heart. I spent many an afternoon around their family workshop when I was supposed to be in lessons," and it was obvious Thorin was thinking back on fond memories from the soft curl of his lips. "She was one of those of my people most able to truly make the best of our situation, and still see beauty and possibility in ruin; she had great dignity and fierceness of spirit. When she was alive, she was a great lover of such things as this. Dwalin must have sent for it with the last caravan from Ered Luin."

Bilbo stared down at the lovingly polished teapot, and reached out to trace the mother of pearl inlay with one gentle finger. This was a cherished heirloom, as much as his mother's Westfarthing china or his father's prize tomato strains. "You must thank him for me," he said.

"Which one, Nori or Dwalin." Thorin asked, facetiously.

"Both," Bilbo replied, now tracing the line of the spout and belly as if testing the texture of the finish. "You could not have honoured me more if you had a hundred teapots made for me." And when he looked up, a bright, if watery, smile lit his whole expression with warmth.

Thorin felt himself smiling back, involuntarily. It was simply impossible not to respond to someone so good, who would value the gift of history shared over all else.

"Honestly, I do not believe there is a single member of our company or my family that has not tried to contribute to this tradition of yours,” Thorin said.

Bilbo stared up at him in confusion.

“None of them trusted me to be able to impress you in this endeavour on my own,” Thorin admitted.

“Really? What have they done?”

“Besides Nori with his teapot, Dori and Bombur's instruction and the rest of the company’s determined interference?” Thorin asked, raising an eyebrow inquiringly.

Hiding a snicker behind his hand, Bilbo nodded, eyes bright and cheeks flushed. In truth, Thorin probably looked no better; giddy and high on the emotion of the night. He couldn't remember the last time he had ever felt so weightless or free. Like there was happiness welling up inside of him in a warm tide, and it would soon pour out of his very skin when his body was no longer enough to contain it. It was humbling and electrifying all at once. And that his family had taken such pains to ensure this feeling could be his, would be his, for the rest of their days…he had no words for his feelings of gratitude for such loyalty and care.
He reached out to gently finger the decorative carving on the board that bore the remains of his pastry he’d painstakingly made. Angular designs done in an impossibly delicate hand that spoke of strength and beauty coexisting harmoniously. “I could recognise Dís’s hand were I blind,” he said finally.

“Your sister sent this?” Bilbo asked.

Thorin nodded, still gazing at the board with fondness. “It arrived last week.”

Bilbo was smiling again, watching Thorin’s fingers as they traced the designs along the edge of the board. It struck Thorin that what Bilbo looked most in this moment, was content; content to be here, with him, despite everything.

“Then I am twice honoured,” he said, reaching out to also trail his fingertips over the grain of the wood, stopping once he reached Thorin’s own, so that he could lace their fingers together. For a long, comfortable moment, Bilbo watched their clasped hands, and Thorin watched Bilbo, delighting in his contented smile as he wriggled is index finger back and forth slightly, just to feel the pleasurable rasp of Bilbo’s skin against his own. Enjoying the game, Bilbo slowly reached over with his unoccupied hand, to drag his fingers over their clasped ones, feather light and barely touching, over Thorin’s fingertips, dipping down to his sensitive inner wrist before ghosting up to trace his palms. Lighting sparked beneath Thorin’s skin, like lead scraping across slate yet somehow pleasurable, and his spine shivered from base to scull as he felt an echoing heat flare within. Thorin’s breath rasped; a sharp sound that made Bilbo look up, and his eyes were noticeably darker than before.

“Thorin?” he questioned, and the husky quality in his voice was lighting up things inside of Thorin that was making it much more difficult to think. “I feel… I mean…I can’t…”

“Can’t?” Thorin rasped, and the word was hard to get out amidst the sudden onslaught of emotion pulling at him, in the gaping places in his soul and promising to fill them, but that word was pushing through the pleasant warm, thick swirl of heady want.

“You majestic idiot,” Bilbo groused, feeling Thorin’s trepidation. “Can’t wait much longer to get some kind of control over all this—or to simply get you properly naked. Frankly I’m not too picky about which comes first at this point.”

Thorin laughed, and it was a rough with both relief and desperate tension. “It should be illegal for you to say such things at a time when I am trying to remind myself why it isn’t a good idea to simply take you to my bed and not let you leave it.”

The speculative gleam in Bilbo’s eyes was largely teasing, at least, that’s what Thorin firmly told himself.


“Thorin, I will thump you if you say that again,” Bilbo said, reaching up to pinch Thorin’s ear, hard. “Listen to me carefully: Take. Me. To. Bed. Let’s do this ritual of yours, whatever it takes, but for the love of the Green Lady, or Mahal or whomever it will take, stop doubting yourself, or I will definitely put nettles in your smallclothes.”

Thorin’s lips curled in amusement, and he reached to cradle Bilbo’s cheek in his palm. “Not doubt,” and Bilbo’s raised eyebrow made him amend, “not entirely doubt. Consider it… good manners, if you will. I know how you feel about me; about us and this connection between us, but I don’t ever want you to not take the time you need to be ready. These are not your ways, and you have been incredibly generous with me in your accommodation of them. If I must wait, then I will
find the patience to wait; whatever you need, whether it’s time or space or simply freedom, I will give it to you with a glad heart, to know that someone such as you has consented to receive and shelter my heart, till the end of days.”

“Good manners, indeed,” Bilbo grumbled, but his emotions were close to the surface again, and his eyes gleamed wetly. “Thorin, you say such things… I cannot tell you how much it means to know that you see me like that, and to know that you are willing to do all that, for me.” He took a deep breath, and slid of his chair to stand between Thorin’s knees, so that they were almost touching. “But I’m ready to see what happens next,” and he slid his fingers into the strands of Thorin’s hair, gently tangling them together to tug distractingly, “because I think what comes next is going to be brilliant.”

“Me, too,” Thorin said, and his voice was hoarse. He stood, and reached out to take Bilbo’s hand in his much larger one. “Then, shall we?” he murmured. Bilbo nodded mutely, and Thorin turned on unsteady legs to lead him through the door connecting to his bed chamber. At the last moment, he thought to scoop up Óin’s oil pot.

A large, high bed was opposite them was they entered, four posts rising a further dwarf-height above the carved head and food boards. The linens had been chosen carefully; deep rose for depth of feeling; the colour’s placement on the bed to enhance a union of love. Sigils specific to this rite, of blessing, of healing and of concepts of blending and duality Thorin had no words for in Westron had been painstakingly anointed onto the floor in oils crafted with powdered amethyst and chalcedony. Rowan wood burned in the fireplace, its smoky fragrance toy ing with Thorin’s senses; tugging at the open places in his soul and meant to smooth the way of their joining. He turned up the wicks of the lamps along the wall and at the bedside to give more than shadowed light, because whatever came next, he wanted to be able to see every detail.

Bilbo’s eyes seemed unnaturally dilated in this light, the black almost obliterating the shining green that ringed his pupils as he watched Thorin move about the room, and Thorin’s hands shook slightly under his scrutiny. Bilbo, of course saw it, and moved to squeeze Thorin’s hand in reassurance.

“I think,” he said, and his voice cracked slightly before he swallowed, “I think that maybe it’s time to undress. But I think, before that, you should kiss me. Before my nerves cut and run.” And Thorin could feel the fine tremors under Bilbo’s skin, but the heat was still there, too, licking at things inside of him, inside of both of them, and it was enough. Thorin reached for him, and it was more than enough.

Those strange ears—delicate like finely extruded wire filigree and twice as tempting now that he knew how sensitive they were, would always draw his eye and he saw no reason not to give in now. Gently, ever so gently, he trailed one thick finger over the pointed tip. Bilbo’s breath hitched, chin tilting up towards the ceiling as his throat worked visibly as he swallowed. Thorin waited until Bilbo mastered himself before slowly sliding his finger further along the outer ridge of cartilage, curling his fingertip slightly to dip behind the lobe, and Bilbo’s hands shot out, grabbing Thorin’s arms for balance as he brought his chin up even higher and tilted his head slightly to give better access. With his eyes closed, his delicate features reminded Thorin of the alabaster statues he’d seen long ago, when he’d visited the kingdom of Gondor on a trade mission with father, and he smiled a little at the memory.

With his pert mouth upturned so invitingly, Thorin hardly had to bend to brush his lips over Bilbo’s own. In truth, the height difference wasn’t as much as it seemed; the crown of Bilbo’s head just cleared Thorin’s chin when they stood together, but Bilbo was just so much slighter in build that Thorin sometimes thought of him as being smaller than he actually was.

That slightness was not frailty, though and Thorin would do well to remember it, especially as his
nerves surrounding this night tried to rise up once again. Nerves that were pointless, except to
make Bilbo look askance at him like that when his unruly thoughts threatened to unsettle the
hobbit, too.

*We will take our time,* he told himself firmly. *We will be sure of each step for Bilbo’s comfort both
physical and mental. The bond is a gift from Mahal, even as it passed through Kili’s hand. There
will be no problems that cannot be overcome.*

The strength of Bilbo’s spirit was enough to drive away any notions of frailty, though. As Thorin
withdrew from that first gentle glide of lips, Bilbo moved to follow, extending the kiss as he rose
up on his toes; his eyes still closed and fingers still firmly latched onto Thorin’s thick biceps. The
trembling had ceased, and only warmth and desire seemed to be present now; bravery and trust in
the face of the unknown. A faint curl of his lips, and Bilbo sighed softly, sounding very content,
and settled back on his heels again.

“I believe, that was a very nice start,” he said.

Thorin was startled enough to chuckle. “I’m glad you think so.”

Bilbo hummed, playfully thoughtful. “I’m fairly certain we can do better.”

“That is a high goal, indeed. Do you think we will need much practice?”

Bilbo snorted, finally opening his eyes. “I’m rather counting on it, frankly.”

“You are wise, indeed.” Thorin managed to keep a straight face, while his fingers drifted over the
buttons on Bilbo’s favourite waistcoat and began gently easing them from their closures. Bilbo
gave him a slow grin, and with his eyes half lidded like that, it was a sleepy-looking grin that
spoke of bedchambers and the things that happened in them, and Thorin fumbled with the button
between his fingers. Bilbo seemed to catch a hint of his thoughts, and only grinned more
temptingly.

His hands drifted from Thorin’s arms to slide under the edges of his jacket. It had been an intimate
gathering for Bilbo’s Tea ceremony, and Thorin had forgone his normal layers and finery, leaving
the light outer jacket as the only thing over his soft tunic. The heat from Bilbo’s skin bled
deliciously into Thorin’s chest beneath his hands, and Thorin fought to keep his eyes from closing
in sheer contentment, instead watching Bilbo as he strove to push the jacket off his shoulders. His
lovely hazel eyes were more brown than green tonight, bright and direct as he held Thorin’s gaze.
Slowly, Thorin shrugged, allowing the garment to fall to the floor to pool behind them.

The soft rustle it made was loud in the quiet of the chamber, and neither of them took any notice
of it. A moment later, it was joined by Bilbo’s second best waistcoat.

“I have dreamed of this,” Thorin admitted, running the fingers of both hands along Bilbo’s cheeks
and wanting to hold on to *this moment* in his memory forever. He allowed his thumbs to drift
along the angle of his jaw, until, with soft pressure he had Bilbo angling his mouth to him again
and leaned in to take another kiss. Soft lips beneath his own quickly parted and he slid his tongue
along the sensitive skin of them before reaching to taste deep inside that tempting mouth, see if he
could capture some of the hobbit’s words; his ability to say things that Thorin wished he had the
skill to say. Beneath his hands, Bilbo groaned, and the rough feel of his tongue against Thorin’s
own was like slick velvet as Bilbo pushed up on his toes, attempting to get even closer. Thorin
had his hands inside Bilbo’s crisp shirt, wanting to feel Bilbo’s heart beneath his hands, to run his
palms along his strangely hairless flesh and see if he could make his love *sing.* Obviously, Bilbo
felt the shirt was merely in the way and struggled to get out of it; Thorin was making it more
difficult as he kept following Bilbo’s movements, simply moving his mouth to new patches of
skin. Tomorrow there would be dark love-marks there, for which Thorin suspected he should feel repentant at some later point.

He didn’t think he would, though. The sensitive place in the hollow of Bilbo’s throat, just above his clavicle, had proven especially patience-testing; Bilbo had arched up and practically whined when Thorin had given more than gentle suction. His eyes kept being drawn to the bruise forming there, even as he fought to order his mind and calm his blood despite the tide of desire, of warmth and love and devotion that flooded through him. It was consuming him in the most pleasurable pyre imaginable, and felt like he were trying to stand on a rolling ship’s deck as the vessel plunged and bucked with the maelstrom. It was a long moment before he regained himself, and pulled back, just a fraction.

Bilbo slowly slid down, so that he was standing flat footed on the floor once more, though he still held onto Thorin tightly. His eyes, when he opened them, were so dilated as to have almost no whites left at all, and Thorin shuddered to see the open longing in Bilbo’s gaze as he started back at him, mouth open as he panted softly.

“Thorin?” he asked, though whether Bilbo was asking after Thorin’s withdrawal, or the overwhelming feeling that was rippling between them, he couldn’t say.

“I…I am not entirely sure how you will respond to this, and I want us to be very aware of what is happening.” Please, Mahal, don’t let us rush, be thoughtless in our haste, and end up hurting one another with our joining.

He could feel the flame inside of him, Bilbo’s ardour, still as he pondered what Thorin had said, before Bilbo looked up at him with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Believe me, Thorin, I think we will be completely aware of events tonight.”

As he was sure he was intended too, he chuckled and his tension relaxed somewhat. He appreciated Bilbo lightening the moment, though Thorin could feel the faint pulse that was Bilbo’s understanding of his anxieties. Leaning forward, he ran his nose along the soft skin behind Bilbo’s ear, nuzzling the curls as they tickled him. His fingers curled into the creases of Bilbo’s shirt, which he hadn’t managed to get off, and was hanging rather precariously with only two buttons remaining in place.

“Would it be too much for your sensibilities to at least finish with the shirts?” Bilbo’s teasing question seemed to be mirroring his thoughts, and his fingers were equally teasing as they eased his tunic up, and Thorin obliged him in quickly pulling it over his head. The remaining buttons of Bilbo’s shirt were hastily dealt with, and it joined the rest on the floor.

Bilbo’s skin was fair enough to almost glow in the lamp light, and it gave him an almost ethereal. His braces hung by his sides, no longer effective in holding his short-cropped trousers up, but thankfully Bilbo’s ample softness seemed to be adequate to the task of staying up unaided. Thorin wasn’t entirely sure their combined desire wouldn’t pull him under without the flimsy barrier they provided for the moment. Bilbo, he was disgusted to note, didn’t seem to be struggling nearly as much. He ignored the small voice in his head that pointed out that the hobbit didn’t appear to be trying all that hard for restraint, either.

Bilbo seemed just as entranced, taking a step back to take a better look. “Somehow, in all the turmoil and the moonlight the last time I had you without your shirt, I never noticed these,” he said, and reached out to trace one of Thorin’s tattoos.

“I suppose I shall take it as a compliment that I had you so suitably distracted,” Thorin murmured, letting his arms drop so that Bilbo could continue his examination. “I noticed that hobbits do not seem to adorn themselves in this way. Do they bother you?”
A rather impolite snort greeted his question, and when Thorin quirked his eyebrow at him, Bilbo flushed. “No, we certainly don’t mark ourselves like this…but…I rather like it. On you.” He took a brief moment to close his eye, as if thinking, or perhaps seeking something. The impressions Thorin was getting were too numerous to sort out. There may or may not have been a fleeting impression of Bilbo wanting to trace them with…his tongue, perhaps? Thorin fought hard not to shudder at the phantom sensation. The rowan certainly seemed to be doing its job.

“Do they mean something?”

“Most of them mark events in my life.” He took Bilbo’s hand, and gently guided it to the marks on his shoulder. “This I received at Fíli’s birth, and later added to it with Kíli’s, for they were hope for the future in a dark time.” Bilbo took a moment to explore the thick lines of the twinned motif, before his fingers reached out for another one, a tracing the heavy muscle of Thorin’s chest. It was a large design, partially obscured by the hair. He’d had to shave it to have the last part of the tattoo done, and it had itched horribly when it grew back in. Dwalin, the bastard, had laughed uproariously.

“And this one?”

“My Heartcraft; my joy at finding it, of attaining Journeyman and then Mastery of it.”

Bilbo’s eyes flicked to the braids in Thorin’s hair. “I thought you marked such things with breads and intricate braids. Like our courtship?”

“Public things, yes; meaningful facts. The fact that we enter a life union—that you Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, will be a part of my family, and I a part of your kin, will be proclaimed in braids tomorrow,” and Thorin guided the hand beneath his to the empty stretch over his ribs and abdomen, starting just beneath his heart. “The joy that you, Bilbo Baggins, amazing creature and keeper and inspirer of all the best that is in me, have consented to be my Bondmate—that will a personal mark on my skin.”

Bilbo swallowed, seeming unable to speak. His fingers curled gently against Thorin’s blank skin, caressing it, and Thorin hummed at the pleasurable sensation. “I would…like that. Quite a lot, actually.” He swallowed again, and his eyes drifted to where one of the tattoos scrolled down Thorin’s hip, to trail beneath his pants. Bilbo leaned forward slowly, eyes flicking up to Thorin’s before placing a soft open mouth kiss against the mark, and something inside Thorin shifted. He groaned. Bilbo pulled back to look at him again, taking in Thorin’s strained expression before going back to do it again, this time following his kiss with a hot slide of his tongue and teeth against Thorin’s hipbone, while his fingers worked the fastenings that quickly had Thorin kicking out of his trousers and remaining clothes. Bilbo watched his cock with interest as it came free of his smallclothes, already more than half erect. His lack of shyness pleased and reassured Thorin, given their physical differences. He definitely didn’t want Bilbo to be afraid.

Thorin threaded his fingers through Bilbo’s curls, gently pulling him up to press a hard, deep kiss to that enticing mouth. He could feel Bilbo removing his own trousers, but was far too busy exploring Bilbo’s mouth to help him. Thorin did manage to steady him as Bilbo wriggled maddeningly—while still somehow managing to suck Thorin’s tongue it a way that was threatening to make his knees buckle. Everything was filled with the bond’s presence, amplifying and pulsing their desire to the beat of their twinned heartbeat; it almost felt like something they could drown in. Bilbo closed his eyes and shook, a tight little noise escaping his lips. Thorin swallowed it, pressing to gentle their kiss even as he moved his hands to explore the perfect curve of Bilbo’s arse, and the enticing grip offered by his rounded hips. He tried to rein in the open feeling in the back of his head, and project feelings of reassurance instead.
It seemed to work; a good sign. Bilbo’s distress lessened as he stood in Thorin’s arms, trying to rein in his breathing and regain a feeling of self.

“Stages. Right,” Bilbo said wryly, once his breathing had become less laboured. “Don’t think I want to be standing for the rest of it, if it’s like that,” he admitted, and put both his palms on Thorin’s sternum, giving him a gentle push towards the bed, and Thorin went willingly.

They scrambled onto it; Bilbo had to give a bit of a hop to make the height, and Thorin lost no time following. The sheets were cool against his skin, and it was a welcome feeling. The rose colour paid nothing but compliment to Bilbo’s fair complexion, and Thorin couldn’t help but admire the beautiful sight before him. Lean muscles worked beneath the softness of Bilbo’s frame, where Thorin suspected none had been before. Bilbo was not the same soft hobbit he had been, in the Shire. Months of trekking, of growing and learning and following a prideful and foolish king across Arda had likely not changed his view on pocket handkerchiefs, but the eyes that looked up at him were alive with a spirit that had learned that politeness and propriety didn’t compare to true and generous heart. Hopefully, somewhere along the way, Thorin had learned a few things about patience, and humility and the gift of love shared. Right now, Thorin wanted to see how many different sounds of pleasure he might be able to elicit from his love while he helped him acclimatize to the feeling of their blending.

Instead, Bilbo seemed to have his own ideas about acclimatization, and gave Thorin a push so that he was lying back in the cushions while Bilbo knelt by him. He began running his fingers over Thorin’s body, starting with Thorin’s fingers, blunt-tipped and thick, before running up the inside of his wrists to curl along his biceps, and Thorin sighed under the lovely feeling of it. His shoulders received extra attention as Bilbo seemed to enjoy the rounded muscle and broadness there. Bilbo dipped down for a quick kiss as his fingers wandered downwards to toy with Thorin’s nipples until they were erect and no longer obscured in his chest hair. Groaning, Thorin felt like a white hot line was being drawn from those twin points, straight down to his groin, and his hips shifted restlessly. The feeling of Bilbo’s tongue, curling and sucking against one tight bud instead produced an embarrassing sound from somewhere in Thorin’s gut that he couldn’t have stopped if he tried, and he knew, if he looked, there would be pearly beads of fluid weeping from his cock.

Bilbo pulled back when the swell of emotion began to rise again, letting his hands wander and explore the creases of Thorin’s abdomen, thick muscles that had been earned by years of swinging a hammer. He didn’t pull back completely though, striving to adjust to the new intensity. When Thorin could sense it get easier he reached to caress Bilbo’s inner thigh, running his fingers along the smooth skin and seeking to get his hands on him and see if he could encourage Bilbo to make some embarrassing noises of his own. Before he could, Bilbo was shifting away, canting his hips to put his groin firmly out of Thorin’s reach.

Thorin frowned at the fond look Bilbo gave him. “I want to be taking care of you,” he complained.

“And you will, my king. Later. But I rather think that it’s going to…take some time before I’m ready for you. At least, this first time, I imagine that I will be the receiver…I think…I think I’m going to have enough to concentrate on, without that as well. So it’s probably best—”

“You do not need to justify your choices to me,” Thorin interrupted him. “And yes, I would…prefer that as well. This first time, as you say. After that, it will be up to our discretion and whim; though I certainly welcome the thought of giving such control to you then, should you want it.”

Bilbo shuddered, his hips pressing down into the mattress hard as he closed his eyes. “Yes, that. Definitely that. But for now,” and he reached out once again to take hold of Thorin, running a dexterous finger along the underside, from base to tip, swirling enticingly in the fluid gathered
there, “‘For now, I want to take this control; actually, I think it’s very possible I need to. To see you,” he leaned down to whisper in Thorin’s ear, even as his hand tightened and began to stroke more earnestly. “Want to see what it looks like when I’m inside your head, riding that wave with you,” he whispered, and Thorin groaned helplessly, knowing he was only a few strokes of Bilbo’s hand away from giving him exactly what he wanted.

“What happened to stages?” he managed to choke out, as Bilbo’s hand gave a firm stroke upwards that ended with a twist of his wrist and felt like he might be stripping Thorin’s mind out through the leaking head of his shaft while he was at it.

“This is stages,” Bilbo stuttered, seeming just as focused on the image of Thorin, flushed and swollen and moving within his grasp. “I want to have this, Thorin. Even if it’s so...so much; so amplified and out of control it sometimes hurts, but it’s still...incredible and honest, because it’s you, it’s us.” And it was them, Bilbo’s presence was in his head—his fearless and brave hobbit, burrowing in between the spaces until he almost fit, and Thorin felt himself mentally reaching for that place.

He was barely aware of the shuffling that had Bilbo nestled between his parted thighs, but he was very aware of the wet heat of Bilbo’s mouth as his cock slid along the silky valley of the hobbit’s tongue. Pushing himself up onto his elbows, he watched as Bilbo sunk down again, his lips red and slick as they worked to admit Thorin’s girth. Bilbo had closed his eyes, whether in concentration or enjoyment, Thorin couldn’t tell, but his dark lashes stood out starkly against the paleness of his cheeks; and though Thorin didn’t think himself heavily endowed, at least by dwarven standards, it was obvious it was a bit more than Bilbo was accustomed to. Still, those cheeks hollowed noticeably as Bilbo tried valiantly to apply more suction; an incredible feeling tightening the already close cavern of Bilbo’s mouth. He struggled for a few moments, obviously concentrating hard on maintaining the perfect seal of his lips. For several tight, tense moments, his mouth stroked along Thorin’s length in the most intimate way imaginable, before giving it up and settling for nestling the hard shaft inside his cheek, hot and wet and incredibly enticing as he moved around it, sucking gently and plying his tongue along the sensitive skin. Thorin felt unnaturally drawn to watching the sight of Bilbo’s cheeks distending, so that he could almost trace the shape of himself as he stretched the flesh there with each heated stroke, but it was Bilbo’s enjoyment of having him there, enjoyment that was right there in his heart to feel, that had him crying out and arching within moments.

This time he was sure he shouted out loud, even as his soul was filled with the sound of Bilbo’s name.

Grinning, and obviously pleased with himself, Bilbo straightened enough to kneel again, whipping stray drops from his chin with a finger, which he promptly popped in his mouth. Thorin groaned at the sight. “You, my Burglar, are sent straight from Morgoth to test me.”

“Here’s hoping you fail, then,” Bilbo said, his grin growing wider.

“Mahal’s forge,” Thorin groaned again throwing his head back into the cushions, but smiled too. “Am I allowed to touch you now, when I recover my wits?”

Bilbo giggled, moving out from between Thorin’s legs to curl into his side instead. “I look forward to it, my king. What day do you think that might be, so I can be sure to mark it on my calendar?”

Grousing back would take too much effort; energy Thorin didn’t feel like expending on it when he felt so boneless and relaxed. It wouldn’t last long, anyway. Already the feeling of need and unfulfilled want was teasing at his senses, and desire still simmered in his veins, despite his recently-spent state.
He enjoyed the feeling of Bilbo cuddled into his side, soft skin touching his from where his chin curled into the hollow of Thorin’s neck, all the way down to where his large toes tangled with the short hair of Thorin’s shin. His erection nestled just above the jut of Thorin’s hipbone, pressing pleasantly into the muscle there, and every now and then Bilbo would give a lazy little thrust and a soft groan as he enjoyed the friction. For long moments they lay there, grinning at each other whenever the whim struck and simply enjoying the moment.

When those thrusts started to become less lazy, and the quiet panting more laboured, Thorin swallowed hard, and made a quick decision, for as much as the idea of feeling Bilbo take such pleasure from Thorin’s body—of Bilbo finding his release this way, his seed splashing over Thorin’s skin as he cried out with Thorin’s encouraging words of praise and desire in his ears… and Thorin had to bite his cheek against the sudden hot surge of want that accompanied that thought—he wanted to touch Bilbo more.

Using his leverage from the arm he had wrapped around Bilbo, he pulled him up, until Bilbo was straddling his midsection, instead. Bilbo laughed, giving a little wriggle against Thorin’s skin, and grinning wider still at Thorin’s breathless moan. Finally getting his hands where he wanted them, Thorin cupped the ample curve of Bilbo’s arse in both palms, kneading the pliant flesh with deep strokes of his fingers until Bilbo arched for him, breathing deeply. The movement had Bilbo’s cock jutting forward, even as it pressed more firmly into Thorin’s belly, and his skin burned painlessly under the contact and made him pull Bilbo more tightly into his groin.

“So, tell me again why this super-sacred rite of yours happens over sex? Frankly, I’m beginning to suspect it’s all a bit of a line,” Bilbo gave him a speculative look, though Thorin could feel the teasing mirth in him.

“Cheeky,” Thorin muttered, rolling his eyes. “As I explained earlier, though you hadn’t been doing your best to distract me—”

“Yes, yes, minds more open, something, something less inhibited, something, something, finally naked,” Bilbo waved it away, though there was an impish gleam in his eyes.

Thorin huffed, but couldn’t completely supress his amusement. “Yes, well, it truly does help, Beloved. When else do such positive emotions run as high as during such an intimate act? Especially the first such act between two who come together out of love and desire?” Bilbo smiled at this, a dopey sort of smile that Thorin could honestly admit to sporting himself a time or ten since Bilbo’s acceptance of his courtship. “Emotions running that high are hard to contain, and being so focused on such strong feelings naturally breaks down barriers that might inhibit—”

“So, I was right,” Bilbo cut him off with a grin and a slow roll of his hips. “Something, something, finally have me naked.”

He was not going to blush. He was not going to blush. Damn. Thorin could feel his cheeks flushing as some of his less-than-innocent thoughts of his hobbit love crossed his mind. Bilbo gave a delighted hoot as he caught the flavour of Thorin’s embarrassment, but it quickly turned to a gasp when Thorin decided to make use of some of those thoughts, and changed his grip on Bilbo’s arse to slowly slide one questing finger past the tight ring of muscle guarding his anus. Just a brush, but Bilbo’s reaction was enough to arrest Thorin mid-stroke, and go back and do it again, much, much slower, and with firmer pressure. Steel blue eyes watched Bilbo closely as he wriggled, breath suddenly short and eyes half closed. A third pass had that careful finger pressing firmly enough to barely breach that tight ring; just enough to ease the muscle aside and admit the pad of Thorin’s finger, and Bilbo whined hoarsely. Truly, Thorin couldn’t remember ever seeming such a beautiful sight as Bilbo, pale skin flushed and eyes
bright, looking so ready for any pleasure that Thorin could give him. Truly, he would give him anything in his ability to give.

“More?” Thorin rasped.

“Yes,” Bilbo breathed, and reached out one hand blindly for the pot of oil Thorin had deposited.

Bilbo knew that Thorin had some concerns over this rite of his. He’d been nothing but confidence and ease and reassurances, but deep down, he couldn’t hide his worries from Bilbo completely, and Bilbo was glad. It made him feel able to be bold, knowing not only that Thorin needed him to be, in the face of his own concerns, but also that Thorin would never allow him to come to any harm; he would be more than careful enough for the both of them. And so, Bilbo focused lustfully on the beautiful ripple of muscle under Thorin’s chest as he carefully pried open the oil pot, or the way Thorin’s careful attention in making sure his fingers were well coated in oil made him feel—cherished and coddled both, like something precious, as opposed to the trepidation he might otherwise feel if he were to think too closely on the largeness of those fingers, or of everything about Thorin really, in comparison to hobbit-shaped bodies.

In the end, he knew he had nothing to worry about, after all.

But the feeling of those fingers, carefully spreading oil around his arsehole, going back for more until Thorin was satisfied with the slickness of his skin had Bilbo moaning softly and wishing for him to hurry it up, before he took himself in hand instead out of sheer impatience. He wriggled a few times, thrusting his shaft against the taut barrel that was Thorin’s belly, the friction enjoyable but largely frustrating—but seemed to interfere with Thorin’s concentration most satisfyingly. So naturally, Bilbo did it again, and grinned at the obvious effect he was having.

“Ready?” Thorin asked, catching and holding Bilbo’s gaze with his own, and Bilbo nodded.

Patiently, that thick finger stroked the sensitive skin, circling the rim of his anus, dipping in to push gently against the resisting entrance, only to retreat and circle soothingly again, but each time, pushing a little more firmly. Bilbo fell forward, giving Thorin more room to work and relieving himself of the need for balance as the breaching sensation grew. He braced with his palms flat to Thorin’s broad chest as he concentrated on staying relaxed and trying to ignore his desire to fall just a little bit further forward and start licking Thorin’s skin.

“Distractions like that are probably a good way of getting a finger in your bum much faster than you’d like, me lad,” he reminded himself firmly.

Still, the play of muscle beneath his palms was lovely, and the intense desire it was causing was doing wonderful things for what Bilbo was projecting, he was sure. The puckered skin around his hole was incredibly sensitive under Thorin’s exploring fingers, and Bilbo was startled when he became aware that the guarding ring of muscle was slightly less focused on keeping out, contracting slightly in the wake of each of Thorin’s passes, as if trying to grasp the retreating digit and draw it in. Thorin seemed to be aware of it as well, if his satisfied smile were any indication. Bilbo huffed at him, a thin sound without any air as he was panting embarrassingly for someone who’d had only tantalizing tastes of what he wanted. Thorin released Bilbo’s hip with the hand that had been holding him steady, to slide it up his spine, pushing Bilbo down flat against his chest as he seemed intent on finding Bilbo’s tonsils as Bilbo got his hands free from between them to tangle in Thorin’s thick mane, burrowing in deep until his fingers could caress his scalp as he tugged that glorious wealth of dark hair to his satisfaction. For the shortest eternal moment, everything was wet heat, shared breath and the rasp of whiskers and skin as they both fought to get closer. Bilbo moaned, wriggling against Thorin’s pressing, hovering finger, and the dwarf finally increased the pressure, pushing his way through the resistance until he was sunk knuckle-deep inside.
Bilbo pulled away, to drop his forehead into the crook of Thorin’s neck, drawing deep breaths as he fought to stay relaxed. The feeling burned, a stretching sensation not unlike the one he’d felt in his…soul, he guessed, twice before when they’d achieved new levels of intimacy together. This was mostly physical, though Thorin’s presence inside of him could definitely be felt, too, and Bilbo grasped at that, focusing on that expectant and pleasurable stretching inside of him, despite the strange and slightly uncomfortable feeling of being full in a way he’d never been before.

He had been right, though. Thorin’s finger felt huge. A small tremor shook him, and Bilbo instinctively shook his head, trying to assuage Thorin’s worries.

“’s fine,” he muttered, eyes still closed. “Just, move gently, if you please.”

Thorin hummed reassuring noises softly in his ear as he began gently rocking with is wrist, fractionally at first, building a slow rhythm inside of Bilbo that seemed to entice his body to finally relinquish his tension. The hand still splayed over his back began stroking down his spine, from neck down to his bum as Thorin continued to murmur praise in the guttural tongue of his people. By the time he had worked his finger in all the way to his hand, Bilbo was laying boneless along the length of his body, moaning softly as he twisted against the invasion.

Then Thorin stroked something spectacular, and he felt like he was on fire.

Carefully, deliberately, he did it again, and Bilbo yelled. Full throated and entirely uninhibited, the sound seemed to be pulled out of him without Bilbo giving it even a second’s thought. He wondered distractedly if it was something in the stuff used to anoint the floors or the incense maybe that just brushed aside any barriers to restraint and decorous behaviour.

He’d blame them, anyway, if he thought to be embarrassed about it later.

Struggling, he pushed himself up on shaking arms, bracing himself on Thorin’s chest once again. Thorin’s eyes were dark, more midnight than steel now, and his expression was hungry as he watched, and took in Bilbo’s every reaction as he withdrew, and slid his finger back over that place a third time. Wracked with shudders, Bilbo ground down against Thorin’s hard abdomen, desperate for friction. A fourth pass, and he thought he might see stars. He was gasping now, the air felt thin in his lungs, like he couldn’t draw in enough. He pressed down hard, harder when his cock slotted perfectly against the ridges of muscle, and he whined, feeling reckless, knowing it wouldn’t take much, one more stroke, maybe—

With a desperate sounding groan, Thorin had his hand wrapped tight against the base of Bilbo’s cock, squeezing firmly, but with gentle mindfulness of his strength as he took control of Bilbo’s attempts at masturbation, enduring Bilbo’s cross glare.

“As you said, Beloved, it will take much work to make you ready for me, and I would like to keep your…anticipation to ease our way,” he finally managed, though the flush high on his cheeks, and his red swollen lips nearly distracted Bilbo from making sense of the words. When they did finally penetrate the haze surrounding his thoughts, he bit his lip and groaned.

“You’re right,” he agreed. But oh, it was so much harder to think clearly in the haze that still surrounded them—Heat, Thorin had called it once, or something like that, and Bilbo was conscious as never before of how much he wanted this, wanted Thorin in every way imaginable. The finger was still inside him, moving languorously, but making no more ventures towards that spot and Bilbo felt his pulse slowing just enough to be able to think again. He spent a long moment, head hanging down between his arms as he simply enjoyed the feel of Thorin sliding within him. The sensitive ring of Bilbo’s arsehole was being stimulated by the larger swell of Thorin’s knuckle every time he made another pass, while the rest of his passage made way,
stretching pleasantly to accommodate the steady push forward, followed by Thorin’s glacial retreat, though Bilbo found he liked it best when Thorin simply keep his finger deep, rocking firmly but staying almost totally within the grasp of Bilbo’s body. And Thorin was there with him for all of it. Deep inside places he never had before all this; like panting breath, desperate groans and hot, coaxing fingers inside his very being as they experienced it all together.

And it felt amazing.

“Say that I may give you more, Beloved. Tell me when you are ready,” Thorin rumbled beneath him, and oh, to be responsible for that absolutely destroyed look on the dwarf’s face; eyes half closed in concentration as he rocked into the air in time with the finger he moved within Bilbo, totally caught up in the phantom feelings Bilbo was likely sharing. Clenching around that finger, enjoying the even greater feeling of fullness this produced, Bilbo nodded. “Another,” he agreed, hoarsely. And shuddered as Thorin slowly withdrew his hand, and reached for the oil pot once more. This time, of course, he didn’t have to coax Bilbo to open for him; he used his free hand to stroke the soft skin inside Bilbo’s thighs as he pushed slowly, but inexorably, with two slicked fingers against Bilbo’s entrance. It didn’t take long before it was no longer against, but in as his body contracted around those thick digits, pulling them further inside, and Bilbo gasped at the sensation; the uncomfortable burning as he stretched even more, the thickness of those two fingers a little bit disconcerting to think about in relation to parts of his body that normally didn’t have fingers in it of any thickness whatsoever, the deep feeling of fullness—too full, when they finally came to rest as deep as they would go, and Thorin’s heart inside his head, crowding him with his hopes and fears. Bilbo was aware that he was gasping, almost hyperventilating at the overwhelming strangeness of it all as Thorin tried to soothe him.

“I can’t… I…Thorin…” he struggled to articulate half formed fears as Thorin’s presence in him felt…looming inside of him. Hesitantly, those fingers rocked, fractions of an inch, maybe, stoking the walls of Bilbo’s passage as he continued to quake and gasp, his head still hanging between his arms, and his hands still firmly planted on Thorin’s furred chest. Dimly he took in Thorin’s concerned expression as his panic continued to escalate, and clenched tight around his fingers to prevent his large Mother Hen from simply removing them and retreating in the face of Bilbo’s distress. After a brief moment of this silent standoff, Thorin relaxed fractionally, and gave a terse nod. Instead of his planned withdrawal, he searched gently as Bilbo quivered around him, until his fingers alighted on that gloriously sensitive spot from earlier and gave one firm circular caress, and Bilbo broke.

He yelled, possibly even screamed as everything inside of him turned to so much white light—burning everything in its wake; doubts and fears alike, and leaving behind the kind clarity that comes when nothing else is left in your heart…and Bilbo could breathe again.

The orgasm had been unsatisfying, in sexual terms; a sharp thin stab of pleasure, barely registered even as he’d spent himself over Thorin’s skin, but the moment had managed to halt his panic attack, and he felt Thorin’s presence within, no longer so threatening now, seemingly slotted into the gaps created once his fear left him. Strangely, it only made him aware of all the gaps that still needed to be stretched and filled, of how their shape still wasn’t quite Thorin-shaped, and he suddenly wanted it even more than he feared it a moment before. Blearily, he raised his head and looked around for something to wipe up the sticky mess of his release, but Thorin halted his movements. “Leave it,” he murmured. “I rather enjoy the evidence of my pleasing you upon my skin, and we can bathe each other when we are finished.”

Bilbo groaned at that image. “It’s really not fair how good you make that sound. It’s rather indecent to be so stimulated by something so…messy.”

“How do you feel now, though?”
“Aroused,” Bilbo grumped, reaching forward to swipe at one of Thorin’s nipples with the sharp point of his tongue. The groan he earned was wickedly gratifying.

“Are you sure, zyungel?” And the question sounded more like a plea than it probably had any right to.

“Thorin,” Bilbo said, leaning forward to run his tongue more thoroughly over that nipple, until the hand still resting against his thigh tightened and Thorin whimpered. “Thorin, give me a third.”

This time, it took very little struggle to get passed the muscular ring of Bilbo’s entrance, though Thorin still worked him with a slowness and patience matched only by stone being weathered and worn. Bilbo groaned and panted as he struggled to stay relaxed against this larger invasion, and Thorin pushed the fingers of his free hand into Bilbo’s curls, angling the hobbit’s his head to his satisfaction, until he could watch each expression as it passed over Bilbo’s face. The burn was incredible, but underneath was the promise of pleasure and the want that came whenever he thought of the fact that soon it would be Thorin’s cock inside of him, instead of Thorin’s fingers. His cock did not have three bony knuckles pushing for entrance, for one thing.

Moist breath fanned over his skin as Thorin leaned up, arching inwards slightly as he stretched to press open mouthed kisses along Bilbo’s collarbone, swirling his tongue over Bilbo’s flushed skin and pausing every so often to suck until more faint bruises started to rise. Bilbo groaned, long and low and utterly without care for how he sounded, and rocked back on Thorin’s hand, pushing his fingers a bit deeper inside.

“That’s it. You’re nearly there,” Thorin praised, sounding breathless and needy in the close air between them.

“So why don’t you see if you can help me,” Bilbo challenged, shaking his curls loose from Thorin’s lax grip to dart down and swipe his tongue along Thorin’s lips, and was immediately pulled into a messy, bruising sort of kiss, one that had tongues and teeth and no small amount of heat as they both seemed determined to lick inside of one another’s skin. When Bilbo felt the rough pad of one of Thorin’s fingers trailing along the underside of his shaft, a soft, almost feather-light sensation, he bit Thorin’s tongue, hard, and quickly rocked into his hand. The unexpected response had Thorin pulling away and chuckling in surprise, even as he used his hand to cup Bilbo, and the reach of his fingers was so great as to have the weight of Bilbo’s sack and part of his shaft within his easy grasp. Fingers and palm worked in tandem, carefully rolling and kneading his stones tenderly and with full consideration for his almost-painful state. The feeling was marvellous, and tantalizing and far too bloody teasing after a delightfully shuddering moment for Bilbo’s remaining patience.

Bilbo dropped his forehead to Thorin’s and whined, twisting and thrusting his hips as he did. “I think we’re about as prepared as we’re going to get,” he panted softly, sharing breath with the dwarf below him, who didn’t seem to have any more air than he did. For a time, they both simply stayed there and breathed together, small tremors passing from one to the other and back again to be soothed by gentle kisses and even gentler words. Even in the very, very back of his mind, Bilbo was firmly not allowing himself to think about all the reasons to fear right now, because the Green Lady knew Thorin had enough doubts for the both of them. He’d allowed himself a nice long panic two days ago, when they had discussed the how of Bonding, and decided on the when. It had been lengthy, and involved a lot more things than merely size differences (which of course could be overcome, as they were doing now), but the fact that he was leaving behind the land of his youth for good, a confirmed bachelor chasing halfway across Arda, to marry a dwarf king in some kind of foreign ceremony that would open up the back of his head in ways he probably had only begun to understand.
So yes, much panicking had been had, followed by a strong cup of tea and a biscuit or two.

Alright, three biscuits.

What he had discovered, after having that long conversation with himself alone in his room, was that he would do it all again if it led him here, in the arms and heart and, if Dwarven mysticism was to believed, soul of Thorin Oakenshield, Reformed King Under The Mountain.

So right now, there was no fear in him. No panic for Thorin to find as he searched Bilbo’s face for doubt or hesitation. What there was, was a good dose of impatience and a whole lot of arrested desire. And confidence, in them, together.

The smile that lifted Thorin’s lips lit up his whole face. “Ready?” he asked.

“Finally,” Bilbo’s answering grin was wicked, and he made sure to squirm a bit against Thorin as he sat up to give the dwarf more room.

“Pert,” Thorin muttered, smiling fondly. He released Bilbo, and reached for a cloth at the bedside to wipe oil and fluids from his hands. Reaching for the braid that hung in Bilbo’s hair, Thorin wound it around his finger, running his thumb over its length as he did so. He looked so tender in this moment, and Bilbo could feel the warmth swelling up inside of him, loved and cherished and in awe, and he honestly didn’t know if it was him or Thorin, only that it rose so fast and so strong it felt like he might burst from it, and yet it was such a lovely feeling; overstuffed like eating too much lunch but so, so happy to be so. Thorin only smiled wider, and Bilbo would be damned, but his eyes were misty.

He reached once more for the oil pot, before they both dissolved into mushy puddles, and Bilbo was still left wanting come morning. “Enough of that for now, I think,” he said briskly, but smiled as he said it.

“As you wish,” Thorin rumbled, and lay back with his hands behind his head as he watched Bilbo astride him work the oil pot open once more. Bilbo hummed, appreciating the view. “That’s all nice and everything, but have you decided how you want to do this, oh Illustrious King?”

“Brat,” Thorin gave him a lazy swat in the arm. “I think the question should be, what would be comfortable for you?”

Bilbo bit his lip, considering, but an image had already surfaced; an image of fingers tangled, silken hair spilling over his cheek…

“On your side, please,” Bilbo instructed softly, but he blushed, feeling unaccountably shy as he said it.

Thorin of course, saw his reaction. He reached up to caress Bilbo’s cheek, trailing his fingers down the length of his jaw, before silently shifting to lay on his side, arms open and inviting. Bilbo took another second to simply look, then filled his palm with oil. Clenching his fingers, he twisted his closed fist over Thorin’s cock and allowed the oil to trickle down in a thin drizzle, watching mesmerized as it slid over the flushed head and mixed with his own fluids leaking there, to slowly gather and spill down the shaft. When there stream had slowed to drops, and then not even that, Bilbo finally opened his hand, and used his oil soaked fingers to spread the moisture, trailing along creases and tucking to tickle sensitive indents until he enclosed the whole head in his palm and stroked, slowly and firmly, eyes never leaving Thorin’s face.

Thorin for his part, threw back his head and groaned, long and low, mouth hanging open as he took in great draughts of air. After a second, he reached out and caught Bilbo’s wrist. “As much
as I would love you to continue, I think it’s in both of our best interests if you do not,” he said wryly.

Bilbo huffed a little, laughing at the truth of the statement and discarded the oil pot once more, before crawling into the circle of Thorin’s arms, and feeling the dwarf curl around him. That great smith’s chest lay at his back, completely surrounding him in heat and a solid wall of furred muscle and Bilbo gave a happy little sigh as he wriggled just a little bit closer. The top of Bilbo’s head only came to somewhere around Thorin’s lips, while his toes would be hard pressed to stretch further than the dwarf’s shins, and yet Bilbo didn’t feel overwhelmed or intimidated in any way by such encompassing presence, but rather comforted by it, as if they had a cocoon, in which nothing of the outside world could penetrate.

Thorin was murmuring words over him all harsh consonants smoothed by his low rumble and incomprehensible chanting that made Bilbo’s skin tingle. Then Thorin reached around him to trace patterns over his heart, murmuring something so long and sweet sounding, Bilbo was determined to ask after its meaning. Later. Much later.

“Is there anything else?” Bilbo asked when his incantation or prayer or whatever finished, reaching with some difficulty to grasp Thorin’s other hand where in lay stretched out on the bed above them. Thorin drew it back within reach for him, once he realized what Bilbo was up to, and squeezed his hand.

He could feel Thorin rest his forehead against the crown of his head; could feel him breathe deeply, stirring the curls beneath his nose. “Only, allow the rowan, and runes to do their work. Accept me into yourself, and try to reach out for me as well, and whatever happens, do not fear the wave, for I shall be there with you. Even if we are unsuccessful, know that I love you.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo whispered, and there was that warm swell again, the one that threatened to make him all teary-eyed. “I am the luckiest…I love you, too, you know. More than handkerchiefs, even.”

As intended, Thorin laughed, and trailed his fingers down Bilbo’s side, exploring all the dips and ripples in the flesh there. He rolled his hips against Bilbo’s backside suggestively, making Bilbo shudder. Again, that deliberate roll, like a mountain moving, unstoppable and brain-meltingly slow, and Bilbo wriggled looking for more, and he threw one leg up, until his ankle was hooked behind Thorin’s leg to give himself some leverage. Then the hand that had been exploring his skin was guiding Thorin’s cock until he was pressing firm and snug, right where they both wanted it to be.

“Don’t forget to breath,” Thorin warned tightly, and his fingers squeezed Bilbo’s again as he began whispering more Khuzdûl, rough and warm in his ear as he pressed forward, slowly pushing until the head of Thorin’s shaft rested inside of him, and his passage was slowed until Bilbo could relax against the intrusion.

And Thorin had been right; his presence inside Bilbo was unmistakable now, and the stretching feeling was back, too, though mostly a background ache as opposed to the bright flare of their sliding into one another. Another slow push, and Thorin was buried deeper, rocking gently as Bilbo breathed deeply. The hand on his hip was giving Thorin enough control to prevent any accidental penetration, and Bilbo reached up blindly above him with his free hand to caress Thorin’s jaw and the back of his scalp, tugging lightly on his locks as he went. Thorin sighed into the contact, angling his jaw and head further into Bilbo’s palm. This time when Thorin gathered himself to push, Bilbo carefully pushed back, groaning in contentment as Thorin was finally seated fully inside his body, and his arse pressed against Thorin’s powerful thighs.

The feeling was…considerably more than he had words for, even in his own head. The
discomfort was there, but so minor and fading all the time in the wake of the sensations wracking
his body as Thorin began to move within him—slowly, gently, with one hand pressed to Bilbo’s
breast and the other still tangled with Bilbo’s fingers. Once he’d caught on to the rhythm, Bilbo
began pushing back, adding a short twist of his hips, a bit of a grinding motion as their bodies met
that had Thorin breathing harshly and nipping the tips of his ear. His fingers began playing with
Bilbo’s nipples, circling around the outside edge before tugging on the tight tips and rolling them
between fingers and thumb, learning which seemed to inflame Bilbo, to drive his passion-soaked
noises until they became full-out cries of pleasure.

Sounds filled the room: of rustling bedclothes, gasps and moans, slaps and rasps of skin on skin
and even breathless endearments as Bilbo spilled out his heart—though the Hobbitish words
would mean nothing to Thorin, somehow it felt more...real, more intimate and closer to the heart
spoken in the language of his homeland, what little of those old words remained. The bright flare
of Thorin’s pleasure as he spoke them told him that he understood enough, and Bilbo reached
again, sliding himself along that place inside of him that was struggling to accommodate more than
he had ever been before.

This time, though, it reached back.

Before, he’d received hints of Thorin in his mind, a presence, a shape, a wellspring of emotions
and sensations not his own, but muted and hazy, and until this very moment he hadn’t realized
how much it had been diluted, because now it was like looking at something in the light that you
had only ever seen before as a shadow in the dark. Something opened; some door, some
passageway, and Thorin had stepped through to brush against his soul, only it wasn’t like
physical, fleeting caresses; everywhere they touched, they seemed to melt, and Bilbo had to clamp
his jaw hard, and take a few breath deeps, to keep from jerking away from the alien sensation.
Thorin’s earlier words came back to him and he held on, and Thorin gasped as he did so, his
breath harsh in Bilbo’s ear and tension obvious in every line of his body. Thorin positively
trembled behind him, hips stilling and holding his cock pushed deep inside; as deep as he’d dared
to go, and Bilbo concentrated on that feeling inside him—inside them both, until it seemed less
alien and intrusive. Hesitantly, he tried to touch that place again; it came alight like one of
Gandalf’s whiz poppers, but Bilbo was determined to be bold, and kept himself there, even as
Thorin’s hips rolled behind him. He had to struggle to find their rhythm again. Thorin whispered
words to him calling him beautiful and clever and brave, and Bilbo cried out as Thorin began to
stroke the ridged line of his cock with soft, teasing touches.

Foreplay had gone on entirely too long, and Bilbo was so close, so close, and everything felt
throbbing and alive around and within him, like a living heartbeat; blood pounding in his ears,
breathing harsh and breathless as they struggled for more than the air seemed able to provide.
Thorin was inside of him, rocking, moving steadily, brushing against that sensitive bundle of
nerves more frequently now and it felt like he was on fire, burning along every pathway; in his
mind, a sea of sensation and feelings and Thorin, threatening to wash him away, and everywhere
pleasure rising up as if a tide until he wasn’t sure if he would be able to survive it when the dam
finally broke.

And if he did, would he even still be him?

Muscles behind him bunched and stretched as Thorin moved, powerful long strokes that left both
of them gasping and Bilbo thrust back into each one, both of them striving for that height that had
become so interconnected as to make no difference as to whose pleasure was whose; there was
only them, and theirs, and Bilbo was almost afraid when he realized he wasn’t sure what was him
anymore.

“I’m drowning!” Bilbo stuttered, trembling. His panic was real now, and he fought desperately to
keep his thoughts with Thorin’s when everything seemed to be rising around them, and he felt like a small craft on vast waves being tossed in a storm; any minute, he would let go and be pulled beneath the surface.

Thorin could feel Bilbo’s mounting distress as the moment of joining neared, and he stoically banished his own worries because he had to be grounded enough for both of them now; his doubts would only fuel Bilbo’s own. And in this moment, he found that it was as easy as breathing; all of his concerns from earlier fell away, because this was Bilbo, and he loved him, and even if they were somehow not able to keep hold of each other through what was to come, he would still love him, and that would always be more than enough. He tried to focus on feelings of acceptance—calmness being beyond either of them in this moment—and feelings of strength. “Stay with it—surrender to it, so that we may be subsumed together,” he told him. But the oncoming heat, the sticky-thick warmth of it inside him felt like madness and salvation both, and as his climax grew, so too did that well inside of him, of them, threatening to swallow them whole, consumed and consuming as he spent himself inside his love’s physical body, and he could feel Bilbo’s panic growing even as their pleasure mounted. “Make room for me, zyungel,” he urged, almost beyond speech. “Let your soul stretch to fit this new shape. Feel the ways you have changed me, and know that you are tumûnel malel—home.”

He gentled his hand on Bilbo’s cock even more, but stayed focused on the very tip where pleasure was greatest, coaxing, coaxing. He could feel his sack clamped tight to his body, knew all it would take would be the slightest movement and he would be lost to that storm inside them, and he needed to know he would find Bilbo there with him.

Another thrust, and he stilled, holding himself deeply inside the perfect heat of Bilbo’s body, letting Bilbo direct their union as he would. Instead, he concentrated on his hand, and what pleasure he could bring with it, gently squeezing the very tip of his shaft as he stroked, then swirling his finger through the fluid weeping there. He let his finger map along that sensitive slit, gliding effortlessly in the thick fluid before filling his palm with Bilbo’s shaft once again, and giving one firm stroke, from base to shining, crowned tip.

Light exploded, and for a moment he, they, felt like they might never see again, like they may never hear, or touch any earthly thing ever again; senses and sense burned out in this explosion. Bilbo howled, or maybe Thorin did—or they both did, and everything was pleasure intensified by the feelings of shared solidarity and oneness, an endless echo, like fractured crystal, bouncing pleasure between them until there was only…them.

Sense was slow in returning, so altered did they feel, and it was several short eternities as they disentangled from this new state, leaving behind a glowing core of shining mithril, a connection that would last through all the ages of this world, and perhaps beyond if there was mercy to be found beyond this life, and Thorin marvelled at this blessing. He was determined to believe his great panting and heaving afterwards was due to the extreme experience, not his not-quite-seventy-anymore reality.

Content, and totally loath to move, still Thorin found the energy to heave himself from their tangled limbs. Bilbo made a sound of displeasure as cooler air replaced Thorin’s body at his back, and Thorin pressed a kiss to his brow. “I would clean us up, before we lay here until it is our pleasure to move again.”

“Brilliant,” Bilbo murmured. “I swear, you must have a magic fire, to be so perfect right now without either of us lifting a bloody finger for the last I don’t even know how many hours.” Thorin laughed softly, and when to heat some water for the wash basin.

Afterwards, Thorin crawled back into the bed, pulling a coverlet to wrap around them both. Bilbo had twisted round, so that he was now facing him, and was idly running his fingers along Thorin’s
“So, were we supposed to be married, before we went ahead and had our wicked way with each other?” he asked.

Thorin squinted at him, but no, Bilbo appeared to be in earnest. “We are married, are we not?” he answered, perplexed.

It was Bilbo’s turn to look confused. He frowned when he stared up at Thorin. “Are we?”

“Married—that is to be joined to one another in a life-union, yes?” Thorin tried to clarify, because heaven help him when it came to fathoming the uselessness of Westron, but he had thought that this was a concept that he understood.

“Well, yes, I suppose at its core that is what married means,” Bilbo laughed, bemused.

“Then yes, we are married,” Thorin stated with some satisfaction. “We are Yâsithâlh—Bondmates.”

Shaking his head, Bilbo relaxed against Thorin’s chest, and arms curled around Bilbo automatically. “I have to say, in the Shire there is usually a ceremony involved,” he mused. “You know, when you get up in front of your friends and relations and swear to love each other and build a home and maybe a garden together, and let your relations tell embarrassing stories about you that you hope to never hear again while everyone eats too much and drinks too much and dances? I thought that other races did things rather similarly. I know the Men in Bree do, for they send to the Shire for foodstuffs and find fabrics. Do dwarves not do anything like that?”

“There will be a feast, were you are presented to our people as their King Consort, and you will make official promises to lead to the best of your ability and to serve Erebor—though after your defence at the Gates, it will be even more of a formality than usual—and all will celebrate our successful union. I imagine Balin is arranging it as we speak,” he admitted ruefully. “And I’m sure you can get your fill of embarrassing stories about me from Dís, at some point.”

“She’s staying in Ered Luin for now, then?”

Thorin nodded. “It is beneficial to keep our Blue Mountain kingdom running. There is much advantage in having another safe haven, should we ever need it again, and there is much mineral there to be mined. Dís is an excellent administrator—I think she rules in times of peace better than I do.”

He could feel Bilbo nod against his skin, and he continued to trace nonsensical patterns with one finger as he thought. “It’s not exactly the same thing, to what you are used to, is it?” Thorin murmured.

A sigh, warm and moist across his collar. “Well, I don’t think that we have time to grow our own Party Tree, nor do I think we need one. What we have is fine—more than fine, really.”

Thorin hummed, running his nose along Bilbo’s crown, wondering.

“We will have different braids in the morning, won’t we?” Bilbo asked, changing the subject.

Thorin nodded, enjoying the feel of Bilbo’s hair under his chin. Maybe Bilbo was right, and he was part cat. “Braids of our union, yes.”

Bilbo wriggled around to hop off the bed, and Thorin watched him, bemused, as he found his discarded waistcoat and rummaged through the tiny pocket, before re-joining him, with his prize
clutched in his fist.

“I…well, I have something. For you, I mean.” He paused to swallow before continuing. “Fíli told me, well told me that I didn’t have to make it with my own hand for it to be acceptable,” he said, slowly opening his hand.

The bead was luminous shining rose-gold, and the trust and forgiveness implied in that choice was humbling. Tiny flowers tooled in sapphire and blue diamond were inlaid in a woven wreath around the circumference, banded by simple scrollwork in clean lines that only highlighted the beauty of the delicate work. There was a lump in Thorin’s throat as he answered. “More than acceptable—it the intent behind it that matters. Did you design it?”

Bilbo nodded, looking suddenly shy. “I well, I wanted something of the Shire in it, for if we had been there, I would have woven you a crown of blue salvia and myrtle, and crowned you with it on our wedding day. Nori was kind enough to make it, when I asked.”

“He has a fine hand,” Thorin managed, still caught up in the sight of the precious piece he held.

THERE WAS INDEED a coronation a few days later, where Bilbo faced all the assembled peoples of Erebor for the first time and was presented as their King Consort. Balin had outdone himself, arranging a stirring grand ceremony, with the promise of an even grander feast to follow. At Bilbo’s insistence, the ceremony itself was held in Erebor’s only garden. A recent addition, the memorial garden was a protected basin that had been beautifully cultivated to honour the fallen Master Merchant Glólin. Bilbo’s new subjects, those who could not be included in the garden itself, had been able to witness everything from balconies ringing the shining spot of growing beauty. Thank goodness Erebor’s population was still small enough that they could all be accommodated, but it was a fact that it was crowded.

Between them, Bifur and Balin seemed to be in charge of the ceremony; Bifur chanting softly, a melody that seemed to wind through the space, audible by all without distracting from Balin’s oration as he spoke to the assembled, detailing an embarrassing list of accomplishments that somehow proved that he would be a worthy match of their King, and ruler of Erebor. Bilbo just knew his ears were red by this point, and he glared at Balin, since his back was turned to the crowd anyway. The crowd was cheering and stamping by the time Balin wound things up, and made Bilbo duck for Thorin to place his crown, a delicate circlet of filigree and leaves incorporating acorns carved of brown diamonds, upon his head. Despite its fragile appearance, it was heavy.

More stamping, and the noise had grown to levels that were beyond his ability to hear anymore, just a wall of sound assaulting his ears, and Bifur stepped forward, gripping both Bilbo’s shoulders as he stared hard into the hobbit’s eyes. The noise lessened as the assembled waited for whatever blessing the Cantor would bestow, and Bilbo smiled gently, willing Bifur to know that he appreciated it, even if he would never understand the words.

For a long moment, Bifur continued to stare, as if looking for the right thing to say, and when he finally spoke, Bilbo could not have been more flabbergasted.

The words were halting, and the accent would have made them entirely unrecognizable to the Hobbits of the Shire at large, but they were intended for the ears of only one Hobbit, and to that hobbit the voice was dear and utterly familiar. Hesitantly, and with much pausing Bifur struggled around one of the few phrases of old Hobbitish that still graced their ceremonies: a leftover mathom of their wandering days, a benediction for warm hearts and green hills and love found in the pleasures of finding a place you belonged. Bifur’s wide dark eyes stared even more fiercely than usual, searching Bilbo’s reaction, anxious for some sign that he’d done it right—that his King Consort understood him for the first time since they had met. Bilbo could honestly think of no
gesture more lovely, or more heartfelt. When Bilbo’s lips turned up into a wide, suspiciously damp grin, Bifur’s answering one was kind and gentle.

Bilbo wondered who had helped him learn it—Hobbits weren’t quite as secretive as dwarrow, but certainly didn’t go around sharing their blessings with other folks lightly, and as far as he knew, this was the first phrase of anything other than Khuzdul the toymaker had uttered since his injury a half century before. The idea that the Cantor had felt the need to learn it as far back as their initial meeting had implications that were just too overwhelming to consider. Bilbo was glad when his eyes lit on Ori, for of course the scholarly dwarf was the one who would have helped him…and the fact that this still would mean that Bifur would have foreseen this outcome as far back as their night in Hobbiton before they’d even met Bilbo was carefully ignored.

After all, who could have predicted that a staid, comfortable hobbit would have been reckless enough to chase after a company of mad dwarves, let alone marry one?

For his part, Bifur just tried to look innocent.

IT WAS HALF a year later when they had their first truly serious fight.

“Surely, you do not have to go! We have guards for this, Bilbo—” Thorin was past the bellowing stage, at least, and merely sounded weary. Bilbo was no less weary; they’d been ‘round and ‘round this argument for three quarters of an hour now, and he was hoping that maybe this time, his husband would see reason.

“Yes, I do have to go—I made it here in one piece, I can stick to the main roads and make it back in a few months. Regi is coming with me, as are Bombur and Dori.”

“I could send Dwalin, in your stead—” Thorin offered, but it was a useless offer, and he knew it.

Bilbo stared at him, foot tapping and head cocked as he tried once again to reach into that place they both shared, and try to puzzle out what the devil was going on. Ever since Bilbo had received word from Hobbiton with the last caravan from the Blue Mountains—word that had admittedly left him in a foul mood and stomping around like a thundercloud—he began making plans to return to the Shire and Thorin had been withdrawing from that place, trying to shield his thoughts. Unfortunately, the bugger had proven to be quite good at it, much to Bilbo’s surprise. A suspicion began to dawn on him.

“I will be coming back, you know. I have no plans on staying there.”

Thorin only looked miserable, and suddenly all the fight seemed to leave him. “No, no plans now. But what of when you are again in your comfortable home, surrounded by peace and growing things? Will you find reasons to delay your return?”

Bilbo threw up his hands. “You’re right, I have all of those things there. So why don’t you come along, and make sure I remember my reason to return? Let Fíli play at being King for a while. Besides, Bag End is my home, Thorin, and Lobelia Sackville-Baggins in my dragon. I will be twice damned before I allow her to continue to roost there with my Stirling spoons and my mother’s Westfarthing china.”

Thorin looked startled for a moment, then spun on his heel, heading for the hall, summoning Regi even before he’d opened the door fully, barking “Regi! Send for a company of guards!”

Bilbo watched, amused as Thorin marched off, apparently seeing to the siege of Bag-End, should Lobelia have already taken it. He thought briefly of putting a halt to Thorin’s ridiculously
excessive plans, but stopped. Let Thorin make his grand gestures—the fact that he would defend Bilbo's home with the same fervour he tried take back his mountain with left a warm and pleasant ache in his heart that the king really didn't need to know about. Thorin definitely didn't need any more encouragement when it came to these soppy, romantic gestures.

But it would be nice, after all, should they ever decide they were done playing Kings, to have a place to retire that valued all the right things.

With a contented smile, Bilbo shoved his hands in his pockets, and slowly strolled in Thorin's wake, letting his husband's determined commands buzz comfortingly in his ears. This was home now, after all, and that left a warm glow in his heart, too.

And twenty years later, when a young faunt became tragically orphaned, of course Regi was the one who went to fetch him to his new home, under the mountain.

Though, Bilbo did allow Thorin to send Dwalin along that time. He really was surprisingly good with children, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Many, many thanks to everyone who had stuck with me throughout this long journey - you have been amazing companions; I would remind you that tea is at 4, and please, don't bother knocking.

I wish I had been able to post this right away, but NaNo got in the way again, both for me and for one of my betas. Thank you for being so patient as I worked through this.

Speaking of NaNo, I think it was fairly obvious that I have set up a side story here, one which I fully planned to write when I sat down to it this November - only, much to my surprise, when I sat down to write my Fili/Sigrid side story...

It turned out to be a Kili/Tilda story instead.

I have no idea what happened, only that the characters had other ideas, and when I tried to impose my own ideas, I quickly found that this was the story that was begging to be told.

I can't promise when it will be posted, as it's still missing the last two chapters, and I do a lot of holiday baking during December that limits the amount of time I can focus on writing, so I imagine it will be January or February before it sees the light of day.

Would anyone be interested in reading such a story?

I sincerely hope to meet you all again, in the next adventure, but for now, thank you all for reading, reviewing and just generally being awesome <3
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!