The Kitchen Thief

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The Kitchen Thief

by mordelle

Summary

There are pests.
At first, Thorin thought one of his assistants was stealing from him. And that may have been why he was a bit harsher on them than what was deemed necessary. But one by one, the workers were replaced only for the goods to keep vanishing into thin air. It was driving him to madness. And when Thorin wasn't at peace, everyone knew it. So, it had to be pests, right? Pixies, brownies, rats, something was pilfering his hard work and it was happening more often as time went by.

Notes

Okay, look. I know I spoiled everyone with the quick updates last time. That will probably not happen with this story because I am currently writing chapter 3. And although I wrote pretty quick last time, I cannot guarantee that I will this time. In fact, I am racing to post this first chapter because I know I have caught my husbands stomach flu and I wanted everyone to be able to subscribe for alerts after I finish posting chapter 10 of A King's Bond (my other Bagginshield fic). So, I probably won't be writing for 24-48 hours..... someone save me.

Anyway, this will hopefully be lighter than the last one. Let me know what you think!

Thank you Danypooh80 for your beta skills and awesome feedback!

Chapter 1

The leaves are beginning to turn, their lush, deep green seeping from them a little bit at a time. The chill hasn't set in yet, however–there's still some weeks away. It can still get stiflingly warm in the afternoon, especially when one toils near an oven all day. But Thorin is used to the heat. His ancestors were forge masters, smiths of all types, and the old beliefs say they were forged by the hands of Mahal, The Great Smith, Himself. But those beliefs and talents of old have all but fallen to the wayside.

He's nowhere near his ancestral home–never even seen it. His people were forced to leave the mountains and join the lands of men ages ago. His dwarven blood is no longer pure, his bloodline having mixed and merged with the 'Big Folk' through, thankfully, loving unions. No one even knows dwarrow blood runs in his veins–his features give nothing away and he's tall enough to pass for a shorter than average man. And he accepts this. He may not be a master smith, but he is a master of his craft.

Instead of the blistering heat from a forge, it's the all-encompassing warmth of an oven. Instead of hard steel resisting the bending of his will, it's pliant and soft dough that squeeze through his deft fingers easily. Times change and needs must. A new trade handed down to him by his father and grandfather before him had saved his family from the devastating Fell Winter that had ravaged the land. And Thorin is grateful and content with his work. He's old enough to let go of his former ancestral pride and instead be proud that the painful pangs of hunger will never graze him or his loved ones again.

Thorin is a baker, the best on this side of Bree and everyone knows it. He's done well since his move earlier in the year. A new start is always hard, but he's used to it from his slightly nomadic upbringing. Though he hopes he sticks around this time. He's tired of starting over and he doesn't want to be too far from where his sister, Dis, has settled.

His business has been very profitable despite his lackluster assistants. The turnover rate of his employees is still as bad as ever, though. His family says it's because Thorin is a nightmare to work for. It boggles his mind–all he wants is utter perfection. He doesn't run his bakery much different than how his grandfather did, in fact, he'd say he is more lax than the obsessive old man had ever been.

Life has been good here… save for *one* thing.

There are *pests.*

At first, Thorin thought one of his assistants was stealing from him. And that may have been why he was a bit harsher on them than what was deemed necessary. But he couldn't tolerate thievery! If one of his employees was going hungry, then he'd do his best to help, but *stealing* could not be condoned! But one by one, the workers were replaced only for the goods to keep vanishing into thin air.

So, it had to be pests, right? Pixies, brownies, rats, *something* , was pilfering his hard work and it was happening more often as time went by. Either the pests had grown bolder or grown

in number.

Usually, his work granted him a fulfilling peace. The scent of baking bread, the warm glow of fire, the constant and tactile movements of his hands–it was almost meditative.

That peace was shattered every time he turned around and found that his freshly baked goods, *that* were *definitely there on the counter a moment ago,* were suddenly gone! And the thievery wasn't relegated to just nights. It happened at any given moment of the day right under his very nose! It was driving him to madness. And when Thorin wasn't at peace, *everyone* knew it.

"Ori," he grouses at his temporary assistant, "where are the pies?"

The young man was always distracted, more of a scholar than anything else–he really wasn't meant for this line of work, but Thorin needs the help.

"Hm? What pies?" Ori asks distractedly as he finishes with a customer and quickly greets the next.

Thorin closes his eyes, his nostrils flaring as he takes a deep breath in an effort to keep his voice even. "There were *three blueberry pies* -right-there!" He hisses and points to the empty spots on the cooling shelf. He's panting and glaring daggers at nothing as if the pies will magically reappear if he just wills it hard enough.

Ori does a double take and *pales* when he realizes he's closest to where Thorin is pointing. "They-they were *right* there…"

A sudden roar shakes the bakery as Thorin rages and throws his rolling pin across the room and out of the open window. There's a loud thunk followed shortly by a bellowed curse, a crash, and then the high pitched cackling of Thorin's nephews. The bakery is abnormally silent for how full it is with patrons when the back door is kicked in by a tall man with tattoos crowning his bald head that is now sporting a large bleeding lump. Rolling pin in hand, the man snarls and stomps his way into the bakery heading right for Thorin.

"I should shove this so far up yer hairy arse that ye spit out whittled *figurines* , you goblin fucker!" Just as he's about to throw the rolling pin back at Thorin, Ori jumps and catches his arm.

"Dwalin! He didn't mean to!"

Dwalin rears his arm back again threateningly but gives in to Ori's pleas. He throws the rolling pin to the ground with a growl and sends a rude gesture to Thorin that he replies in kind to.

Ori pats Dwalin's arm and pulls him down to inspect the lump on his head. "Oh, dear. I'll take care of you, love, don't worry."

Thorin's nephews are gasping, completely in stitches as they teeter inside, holding on to each other for balance.

“Oh, uncle!” Cries Kili.

“That was priceless!” Adds Fili.

Thorin stalks to the two troublemakers and catches each by the ear. “Was it you two?! Huh?” They yelp and squirm in their uncle’s merciless grip. “It couldn’t have been a customer because it was behind the counter and I’ve never seen *rats* pick up *three* blessed *whole* pies and prance away!”

“What?!”

“It wasn’t us!”

“We swear!”

“We just got here with Dwalin!”

Thorin sends his scowl to Dwalin to confirm. “Aye! You mad fu–”

“Customers!” Ori warns through gritted teeth.

Dwalin growls again but loses some steam. “Aye, we arrived just in time for yer temper tantrum, your *highness.* ”

Thorin lets go of his nephews and throws his hands up in the air in pure exasperation. “ *Three* pies! Three!” He curses up a storm in Khuzdul as he paces before his ovens.

“We heard ye the first time.” Dwalin sits down as Ori grabs a rag to clean his wound. He hisses when it makes contact then smacks Fili’s arm. “Help yer daft uncle with the customers before they all run screaming.”

Fili jumps into action and pulls his brother along with him to the front.

“So help me,” Thorin grates through his clenched jaw, “whoever, *whatever* is responsible for this blatant *thievery* is going to regret the day they were brought into this world!”

Dwalin scoffs. “You’ve been saying that for months.”

Ori nods, face grim. “It has to be a person. A good thief too. Oh!” His eyes widen with excitement. “Do you think there are people who can turn invisible? Maybe it’s a wizard!”

Thorin gives him a withering look that goes unnoticed. “This *thief* grows bolder by the day.”

Dwalin chuckles. “Maybe it’s been Nori this whole time.”

Ori’s smile vanishes and he swats Dwalin’s arm. “My brother wouldn’t steal from family!”

Dwalin sends a sneer towards Thorin. “Not even to see this big oaf lose his hammer over it?”

“No,” Ori defends with a sniff but then seems to doubt himself. “Well, maybe–but he’d have given them back!”

“I will flatten his skull,” Thorin threatens.

“He’s not even back from his travels yet,” Ori quickly adds. “It’s not Nori.”

Thorin slams a hand down on the counter. “One of his friends then!”

“He doesn’t have any friends!”

Dwalin nods in agreement. “Anyway, he wouldnae send one of his ilk to our doors.”

“Exactly,” Ori adds with a decisive nod and a grateful smile to his lover.

Thorin reluctantly grunts in agreement. “Fine! Fine. I need to think of something. None of the traps have turned up anything and I’ve searched every nook and cranny for any signs of pests. This *kitchen thief* has to be a person. But I don’t have time to be watching my wares at all given hours! I can barely make the demand as it is.”

“Ye need more hands,” Dwalin agrees. “If ye would just reign in that temper–”

“As if yours is any better,” Thorin grumbles as he unloads loaves of bread into a basket.”

“Mine doesnae get in the way of my work!”

Ori purses his lips and raises his eyebrows. “Thorin, about more, um, helping hands–”

Thorin stands to attention and levels Ori with narrowed eyes. “You’re leaving too?!”

“Well…”

“Mahal wept, not you too!”

Ori raises his hands in supplication. “I only just submitted my application to the library and you know it’s been my *dream–”*

Thorin groans and closes his eyes. “Fine. Yes. I know. How long do I have to find a replacement?”

“A couple of weeks, I think.”

He pinches the bridge of his nose and nods. There’s nothing for it. He’ll need to start looking and maybe even place an advert. “Fine,” he says again, composure finally reached. Ori is a good lad and makes his oaf of a cousin happy. He was only here temporarily. He knew he’d lose him soon enough. It’s fine. It’s all fine. He places the basket at the front. “Ori,” he calls back, “can you grab the second batch?”

“Yes, of course… um… second batch of what?”

“Bread rolls!”

“Right!”

Ori isn’t fast enough and Thorin is afraid the rolls will burn at this rate so he marches to the back and finds both Ori and Dwalin looking into the oven with furrowed brows.

Thorin freezes and his face goes unnaturally blank. “... No.” He lunges towards the oven and finds exactly what he fears. The oven that had half a dozen bread rolls baking is as empty as his well of patience and sanity. “NOOOO!”

A musical giggle is drowned out in the roars of Thorin’s renewed rage.

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> If the bakery ever failed, Thorin could be a royal guard with the way he protected his apple pie. Everywhere he went, so did the pie. He carried it and cooed to it like a child in between tasks. He did not eat or drink the entire day so as to not have to relieve himself. He did not tire or go hungry. Thorin had a clear purpose, and every moment that passed filled him with eager anticipation.

Chapter Notes

> Well, that was the fastest I've ever gotten over a stomach bug. I suppose it helped that it all went to the circus overnight. (TMI) STill dehydrated though. Working on it!
>
> Anyway! I will post whenever I finish a chapter, I think... Currently writing chapter 3!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the thievery continues, Thorin is glad to find out he’s not the only victim.

While treating his family to dinner at Bombur’s tavern, the chef comes out to greet them, but he’s not his usual cheerful self. Thorin doesn’t think he’s ever seen his friend so frustrated.

“What’s got your beard in a nest?” Dis says, as if reading Thorin’s mind.

“Ach!” Bombar waves a flustered hand. “Things keep disappearing around here! First it was scraps, ingredients, herbs, some vegetables, and then desserts, then whole meals!”

Fili and Kili shriek with laughter. “You too?! The kitchen thief strikes again!”

“Hilarious,” Thorin deadpans. “Our hard earned coin disappearing right from under our noses and the two clowns here think it’s a wee little *joke* .”

The two brats have the decency to look ashamed.

“Well, they never steal the coin, actually,” Bombur admits with a frown. “They’ve had every opportunity to make off with actual money, but never have. Just food.”

Dis’ eyes widen and turn to Thorin. “Is it the same with you?”

Thorin begrudgingly admits that the burglar has never taken a single coin or items of value–save for the food, of course. “I suppose.”

“Fascinating,” says Dis. “It seems we’re dealing with a thief with a conscience!”

Thorin scoffs and crosses his arms. “A thief has no conscience!”

“Well, then why does he never take the coin?” Asks Kili as he crosses his arms in defiance..

“Or the silver?” Adds Fili with a serious frown that tells Thorin he’s growing up way too fast.

Bombur scratches his head and hums. “Poor bugger is just hungry…”

Thorin glares at everyone at the table who now have pitying frowns on their faces. “Oh no,” he says, “no, no, *no* ! There will be no sympathy for this burglar! Not from me!”

“But Thorin,” whines Dis with big doe eyes. “It could be a child!”

“A very talented child,” Bombur mutters.

“Ach,” Thorin snarls. She just *had* to put that image in his head, didn’t she? A poor starving kid going around stealing whole pies and dozens of rolls at a time–a whole wedding cake once! “No,” Thorin growls again. “No child could have stolen Mrs. Bracegirdle’s seven-tier wedding cake. Impossible!” He ends by slapping his hand hard on the table.

“Seven?!” Bombur looks like he’s about to faint with the way he clutches at his chest.

Bofur has obviously overheard because he sidles up next to his brother and adds. “There’s a few men lookin’ for ‘em. The sheriffs haven’t been able to do anything, and the Rangers don’t care about it. So some men put some money together to have the thief caught. Alfrid’s men.”

“Oh no,” Dis says. “The poor thing doesn’t deserve that! They’ll kill whoever it is without a care! You *know* Alfrid has connections with the law.”

“Maggot,” grumbles Kili.

“Yeah,” cries Fili, “he gets away with everything!”

Bofur sighs. “Aye, I think they’ll hurt ‘em bad, whoever it is.”

“Not if I catch him first,” Thorin hears himself say. Everyone turns to stare at Thorin, and he fights not to shrink away or take back what he says. “That thief owes me, and I won’t let those orc fuckers take away my claim.”

There. That sounded less protective and more menacing. But his sister grins at him with pride and a knowing twinkle in her eye.

“That’s my big brother,” she whispers and pats his shoulder.

“I just want justice,” Thorin defends himself, glowering down at his food.

He’s seen Alfrid’s louts milling about the alleyways, bullying whoever they suspect is the thief, which seems to be just about everyone. They show up at his bakery and demand to speak with him. The maggots threaten to stink up the whole bakery with their reek that Thorin decides to lead them out back as quickly as possible.

“What do you want?” He rumbles, adding just a hint of threat to his voice.

Maggot number one plays with his dagger as his yellow smile splits his face. “We heard you were having problems with your wares. There’s a thief around these parts targeting establishments like yours. We can help catch him if you add to the pot.”

Thorin purses his lips to keep from cursing outright . “I heard about the bounty. I don’t need help from the likes of you.”

The three men loom closer. They’re not much taller than Thorin, and he thinks he can take all three easily. But he has his famous apple pie in the oven that needs his attention, so he decides that violence will have to wait for another day.

“Sorry, boys,” Thorin drawls, “just a bit frustrated. This thief has been a nuisance for business.”

This seems to appease the men who relax some. “That’s what I’m sayin’. So, add to the bounty, and we can get more hands on this case.”

Thorin nods. “I’ll meet you at the Pony tomorrow evening.” He doesn’t wait for them to agree and heads back inside.

“Ori?”

“Still guarding it, Thorin! I’ve barely blinked!”

Thorin sneers and claps a hand on Ori’s shoulder. “This pie is very important, Ori.” His voice is loud and full of pride. “This is my best work yet. This recipe has been passed down for generations. Many have come to pay handsomely for my secret. None have succeeded in prying it from me.”

The crowd behind him looks intrigued and starts asking to purchase it.

“Sorry, everyone,” Thorin announces. “This last one has been sold to a very rich lord. I’m sorry to say I won’t have more apples in some time, so this was the only chance to try it until… well,” he shrugs dramatically, “who knows?”

He stands next to Ori, who leans towards him and whispers.

“Do you really think the thief will fall for it?”

Thorin grinned. “If he heard any of that, then yes. Yes, I do.”

If the bakery ever failed, Thorin could be a royal guard with the way he protected his apple pie. Everywhere he went, so did the pie. He carried it and cooed to it like a child in between tasks. He did not eat or drink the entire day so as to not have to relieve himself. He did not tire or go hungry. Thorin had a clear purpose, and every moment that passed filled him with eager anticipation.

The pie was not important because it was bought by some lord, no. The pie was the key–nay, the *solution* to all of Thorin’s problems. The pie was the *bait* . He was going to catch the burglar. Today.

“Ori,” Thorin calls.

Ori yawns and drags his feet over to his employer. “Yes?”

“I need to shit. Guard this pie with your life. Do you understand me?”

Ori’s eyes widen, and he nods quickly. “Of course.”

Thorin sets the pie down. Things have slowed down enough to enact his plan. He’s giddy with excitement because this plan is genius. It’s going to work. It’s so insane that it *has* to work, and Thorin is practically dancing a jig on his way to his secret hiding place.

Ori knows the plan. He’s to set the pie on the new shelf Thorin installed the previous day right under a portrait of Thorin himself (Ori painted it. It's a shame it was done for this purpose, because it’s really good. Very life-like. It's a life-sized bust of Thorin looking very regal despite wearing an apron and holding a rolling pin like a sword.) Thorin has carved a hidey-hole out of the wall behind it. In fact, he’s carved out the whole wall. But no one on the other side would ever be able to tell the piece of wall is false. Thorin takes his place behind the portrait and peers through the eyes where it’s sheer enough to see through to the other side.

And he waits.

And he watches.

He doesn’t even breathe.

Ori yawns loudly, making sure to keep his eyes on the pie as he kneads dough.

Dwalin enters the shop. He goes behind the counter and wraps Ori in his arms, not caring about the flour that covers Ori nearly head to toe.

“It’s getting late, love,” Dwalin purrs. “Let’s go home.”

“I can’t yet,” Ori says with a shy smile and a blush. “Thorin needs me to guard the pie.”

“There’s no one here. We can lock up behind us so no one can get in.”

Ori shakes his head. “Thorin will kill me…”

Dwalin gets a bit handsy than Thorin is comfortable watching, but he will not look away. They’ve turned their backs on the pie. There is plenty of opportunity for someone to nab it. He concentrates on watching their surroundings instead.

After some disgusting squeaks and grunts from Dwalin, Ori finally gives in. “Okay, okay!” Ori removes his apron and covers the dough with a towel, then packs some things away. He makes a show of checking to see if anyone is left in the shop before Dwalin tugs him out the door.

Thorin hears them lock up.

And he waits.

And waits.

The air is so thick with tension, and Thorin’s lungs burn as he holds his breath again. There’s still no one. The pie is still there, lovely enticing smells wafting up Thorin’s nose–

A soft thud from afar.

Thorin’s ears are near ringing with the effort to hear every nuance in the shop. He doesn’t hear any footsteps when a dull brown blur moves abruptly in the distance. Thorin tries not to give himself away too soon. His eyes are frantically shifting from side to side, looking for the thief. And then the pie is being lifted right in his eyeline. He can only see hands, because the thief is so *short* ! Thorin can see the top of his hood. He would have thought it was a man kneeling but the hands are too small to be a grown man’s! It’s a child! A child all along, like Dis had said!

But it’s too late.

Thorin has been wound up like a spring, and he’s ready to strike.

He lets out a battle cry as he puts all his force into bursting through the wall. His fists come out first as he snatches up the thief’s arms. Thorin is still roaring when the thief starts screaming his little head off.

The kid is flailing and kicking, somehow still holding onto the pie. Thorin’s head and legs come out next, eyes blazing, mouth coughing up pieces of clay and dust as he growls out, “GOT YOU!”

There is one quick quiet moment where the only thing that can be heard is falling chunks of wall and hard breathing from the pair. The cloud of dust and flour clears enough for Thorin to see the thief’s shocked face. He would have laughed at the outright horror on his countenance had the sight of the burglar not surprised him as well.

This was no child's face…

It was a middle-aged man! A very *tiny* middle-aged man!

"What the…? Thorin trailed off.

"Yep. Yeah, you caught me. Very clever. Crashing through a wall like a rabid oliphaunt! You *maniac* !"

Thorin was so thrown off by the thief's words, voice, age, and size, that he was not prepared for the hard kick to his jewels. He went down hard, letting go of the burglar with a gasp. A quick patter of huge bare feet ran past his sight as Thorin keeled over onto his side and groaned.

The front and back door opened, the sound of Ori's yelp and fall, and then Dwalin was lifting Thorin up, dusting him off.

"Ori," Dwalin shouts toward the back. "Did ye catch him?!"

Ori limps into view, eyes cats down in shame. "No. He kicked me in the shins *really* hard. Goodness, the wee thing is fast!"

Dwalin let go of Thorin who nearly toppled over again from the throbbing pain between his legs. "So, t'was a child?" Dwalin asked, looking from his partner to his cousin.

Thorin shook his head. "No," he gasped out. "Grown," he heaved in another breath as deep as he could manage. "Halfling!"

"A Hobbit?!" Ori cries with a disbelieving smile. "I thought there weren't any left after the Fell Winter!"

Dwalin nods. "Aye. All but wiped out, but I've seen one or two in my day. Ye sure it wasn't a dwarfling?"

The pain was receding as Thorin shook his head and he finally caught his breath. "No. Looked middle-aged. Pointy ears. No beard. Saw his feet. Big, hairy. It was definitely a halfling."

Dwalin barked out a laugh and slapped his knee. "Ye should see yerself!" He reared back and guffawed. "All this," he wheezed and splayed his arms wide, "and the halfling still made off with the *fecking pie! BAHAHAHA!"*

Thorin nodded. "That he did," he contended with an impressed smirk. "That he did."

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I made Thorin go full on Kool Aid Man.
Check out my other works if you have the inclination!

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Thorin has a half-baked plan, and considering how well his last schemes went, he isn't too confident it will work out. The tricky part is figuring out a way to find the blasted hobbit. No amount of leaving baked goods unattended made him come back.

The halfling is either lying low or… Alfrid's maggots have found him.

Chapter Notes

cw: near drowning but nothing too crazy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The thieving has finally ceased, and Thorin is inexplicably morose about it. Well, maybe not inexplicably–his sister has made sure to scold him for his mistreatment of the halfling, which made Thorin's brooding increase exponentially.

"You *know* they need more meals a day than most!" Dis had said with a disappointed shake of her head. "What if he has a family? Even if he were just stealing for himself, you *know* how hard it is out here for the wee folk! If we were just a bit shorter, we'd be having to resort to all *kinds* of things to make it in this world. Our ancestors lost their homes and toiled in the world of men, you know this, and you still–"

"I didn't know!" Thorin yelled back, then immediately cowered when she threw a shoe at him.

Dis almost went for her other shoe, but pointed an angry finger at him instead. "Well, you do now! *Find* him, Thorin. Show him we're better than the men who trample all over those whom they look down upon!"

She didn't need to tell him to find the halfling. He's already been planning on it. At least now, he can pretend to do it begrudgingly. Truly, Thorin felt the little bastard deserved the scare of his life, but he also knew first-hand what it was like to have nothing. He'd only been barely older than a stripling, but *everyone* had felt the blow of that disaster of a season–every race.

The halflings weren't the only ones who begged for help during the trials of the Fell Winter, but no one had gone, not even the pureblooded Khazad of the Blue Mountains. The Khazad were too busy helping their own dying race. The scant dwarrow-men were too concerned with forcibly fitting into the world of the Big Folk. Thorin always thought that had been a failure in his people's history. Hobbits weren't *that* much smaller than Khazad, but they were certainly weaker in strength and not used to hardships. The men cared too little for other races, and the elves had all but left for the Undying Lands by that time. The poor halflings that had survived starvation had been picked off by wolves and orcs.

Before that tragic year, there had been Hobbits aplenty populating the Shire. And Thorin remembered they were blessed with large families–probably to do with how short their lifespans were compared to dwarves. The hills had been rolling and green with life. Now, the Shire was overrun by towns of men. What were left of the halflings were scattered amongst a race too big to notice them, let alone *care* about them.

So, this burglar–this hobbit, has most likely found it near impossible to work amongst the Big Folk. And what if he did have a family? Ori had confirmed that hobbits ate about seven meals a day. Feeding more than one mouth on such a diet was just unfathomable to Thorin. The burglar has most likely been cheated out of fair wages, degraded, and snubbed just for being small and different.

Yes, Thorin knew what that felt like. Whenever anyone found out he was part dwarf, he was looked on with suspicion. Thorin and his family were all worried for Kili, who bore the closest features to their smaller ancestors with how slow he was growing, how big his ears were, and how stocky he was. Thorin has also witnessed his Khazad cousins berated and cheated–their looks and customs mocked and belittled. So, it is no surprise that Thorin feels a sort of kinship with the halfling. And that means, to Thorin's chagrin, that his protective instincts were nagging at him to find a way to help the little burglar.

Thorin has a half-baked plan, and considering how well his last schemes went, he isn't too confident it will work out. The tricky part is figuring out a way to find the blasted hobbit. No amount of leaving baked goods unattended made him come back. And Bombur hadn't been burgled of his meals or ingredients either.

The halfling is either lying low or… Alfrid's maggots have found him.

Either way, time is running short. The weather is finally turning. A chill fills the air that threatens an early winter.

It is some days later that Thorin goes to the Prancing Pony. He takes a steadying breath as he steps into the establishment. It wasn't the best of places to be at. Miscreants and all kinds of foul folk liked to use the place as a trading ground for unlawful goods. He just hoped the halfling wasn't one of those goods.

He scans the dank place quickly, opting to buy himself a pint while he waits for the lurking scum-buckets to come to him. They eventually do, lurking in the shadows a bit as they size

him up before finally closing in on Thorin. It's the same three orc shaggers from before that surround him.

"We don't like being stood up," growls the leader.

"Sorry about that," he says casually. "Had emergency renovations to do at the shop." Thorin turns from the bar and motions to an empty table. "Shall we?"

They still flank Thorin as they head over and take their seats. The leader spits on the floor and straddles the bench. "The deal's expired," the man drawls."

"So, you caught him?" Thorin asks and sips at his ale.

"Maybe," the man shrugs and sneers, "maybe not. Why? Trying to collect your dues?"

Thorin studies the man before him with a neutral expression he's perfected over the years. He's disgusting. A filthy, lanky, diseased lackey that thinks too highly of himself. "I am," he finally admits with a grave nod.

The leader looks at the other two, who give a curt nod of their own, before looking back to Thorin with an evil, nearly toothless grin. "Come with us."

Of course, they lead him to Alfrid's.

"Well, it's the famous baker of Bree!" Alfrid hails from the top of the stairs. His home is the biggest and nicest in this part of town, which isn't saying very much, really. Thorin can tell he has enough wealth to splurge, but it's clear the former street urchin has no idea what to do with his riches. There is finery scattered throughout the place, but you can cover shit with sugar and spices, and it's still shit. Things are dirty and dusty. The silver isn't polished. The art is horrendous, and the extravagant carpeting has frayed edges and questionable stains. Even the man's fine clothes don't fit him well and probably haven't been through a wash since they've been purchased.

Thorin tries to smile politely, but he's certain it looks more like a grimace. "Hello, Master Lickspittle," he greets with a slight, reluctant bow.

Alfrid waves a dismissive hand and stomps down the stairs. "You're the first to show up for recompense," he replies with a smirk. "I thought more would come with all the fuss he caused, but oh well." He brushes past Thorin, who tries hard not to breathe in his stink, but his nose hairs burn anyway. "Follow me, then."

He leads Thorin out to the stables, where a small group of hollering men surrounds a pond. They're trading coins and throwing things toward the water as they laugh and jeer.

"So," Alfrid says as they approach the commotion, "one silver per throw. He's a Shire rat–halfling. They say they can't swim." Alfrid laughed. "He put up quite the fight, but we got him tired out for you already. Should be easy pickings now."

Thorin fears the worst as they get closer. He notices the men are throwing rocks, and when he finally nears the water's edge, his blood turns cold. Out in the water is the presumed burglar hanging on desperately to a barrel. He is fully dressed, wholly drenched and half-drowned by the looks of it.

"By the Maker!" Thorin shouts, eyes wide. Without another thought, Thorin grabs Alfrid by his stained cravat and growls. "Get him out of there this instant!"

All Alfrid has to do is laugh in his face for Thorin to recoil just from his foul breath. "Aw, not your kinda fun? Boring." Two men grab Thorin by the arms. "If you want him so bad, you could pay for him."

"He's not a thing to be sold!" Thorin roars.

"Well," Alfrid drawls. "How about this? Since you didn't get a chance to add to the pot, why don't you pay double now, and you can do whatever you want with the little rat?"

Thorin hears a worrying garbled yelp and a splash before the men cheer. "Fine." He rips one of his arms out of a captor's hold and digs for his coin purse. He doesn't even open it, just throws the thing at Alfrid's feet.

The lout grins and waves to one of his men to pick it up and count it while Thorin hurriedly turns as much as he can to see the hobbit barely hanging on by his fingers.

"Right," saysAlfrid, with a happy clap of his hands. "Do what you will. Let's go, boys! Let Mr. Righteous take his pet." With no further fanfare, Alfrid strides away and his grumbling men behind him.

Thorin spins on his heel just in time to see the hobbit finally go under. "Oh, shit!" He runs while shedding his coat and boots into the murky, frigid water and swims as fast as he can. The hobbit is easy to find–as the water isn't deep, Thorin can still stand and keep his chin above it. A stunned face looks up at him from just beneath the surface, arms floating up to him as if reaching out. Thorin grabs under those arms and hoists up the smaller being, who thrashes weakly.

"I've got you!"

"Get off me!" The halfling slurs out and tries to punch him.

"I'm trying to save you!"

But the hobbit either can't hear or doesn't want to be saved because in a last-ditch effort, he tries to headbutt Thorin. And, well, as mentioned previously, Thorin *is* part dwarf. The tiny bastard would have had better luck against solid stone. There's a loud clunk when their heads meet, and the hobbit goes cross-eyed before going completely limp.

"Serves you right," Thorin grumbles as he lugs the hobbit back to shore.

Apparently, even the drenched dead weight of a grown hobbit still hardly weighs more than a bag of marbles, Thorin muses as he hurries into his home with the small creature in his arms. He kicks the door closed and rushes to his bedroom, then sits the burglar on his chair by the fire and strips the hobbit down while his own teeth clack together from how hard he's shivering. Once he wraps the naked hobbit up in furs and tosses him on the bed, Thorin rips his own clothes off and prances to the fireplace.

The sight Bilbo wakes up to is absurd. A naked man is dancing on his tiptoes across the room with long, frizzy hair that looks like it has been air-dried while riding a war-ram at full gallop. Bilbo's vision is fuzzy, but so is the man's bare arse, as it jiggles obscenely while the man squats and fails multiple times at lighting the kindling.

At least, he's pretty sure that is what the man is trying to do while he struggles through shuddering curses in a language foreign to Bilbo. *Great* , he thinks, *I've been abducted by a naked lunatic who is going to do who knows what with me.* He tries to move, but he can't. He's smothered in some kind of furry bindings, and he barely has the strength to keep his eyes open, anyway. The man seems to finally succeed, and Bilbo tries to squirm out of his confines before the nudist finishes his task.

Bilbo unintentionally lets out a pained sound when he feels his head throb from where one of the rocks had landed.

Unfortunately, this also catches the attention of the man.

Still very much naked and crouched like a wild animal about to pounce, the man's head snaps up with the new flames dancing in the man's angry eyes.

"Oh, no," Bilbo laments weakly, "it's the nutty baker." His own unintentional pun makes him laugh a little hysterically–the man's shriveled package is entirely on display, after all.

The baker growls viciously and lunges to stand. He crosses the room in taught, jerky movements. "Mahal's frozen hairy balls, halfling. You owe me a mighty debt, and you will pay!"

Bilbo can't bring himself to scream when the man launches himself at the bed. Before the mattress even dips with the weight, Bilbo is out cold.

Chapter End Notes

I think it's safe to say these two are getting off to a rocky start.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

A visual aid.

Chapter Notes

Happy holidays! XD
A visual aid for the previous chapter ending. Next chapter is coming up right now so don't miss it!



Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

A small, needy whimper graces his ears, and Thorin stiffens in more ways than one. The halfling is still in his arms, naked. And it also seems his small guest is taking certain… liberties.

Chapter Notes

I updated twice, yes. One is the drawing I did of Thorin for chapter 3 and the other is this one! So check out the previous chapter for a giggle.
CW: Mature themes/a little unintentionally(?) handsy Bilbo.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo whimpers and squirms, feeling trapped and much too warm. His eyes burn, his brain feels foggy, and his body aches all over. There's movement beside him, but he can't bring himself to open his eyes to see who it is.

"Fro-do," he rasps out hoarsely, his throat burning with the effort. "Too… hot…"

Immediately, whatever is confining him is ripped away, and cool air rushes onto his skin, making him shudder violently. "C-c-cold!" his teeth clack together. His whole body spasms uncontrollably, and his toes feel like they are about to freeze over and break off his feet. "Too cold!" Then blankets came, but they're drenched in his sweat and even colder than before. "N-n-no, no! "Cold, cold, too cold." he stammers through clenched teeth. There is a grumble and a curse that he thinks about scolding Frodo for, but doesn't have the strength.

Then something heavy, and hot lands on his chest and wraps around him. *What is it? Is it a big slab of volcanic rock? A heated fuzzy blanket? Perhaps a collection of hot water bottles pressed up against his bare skin? A combination of these?* He doesn't know, but he mumbles anyway, "Th-thank y-you, Fr-Frodo." *That's so much better* , he can't say, but sighs out the sentiment instead. And it really is so much better. He wraps his arms around whatever it is and snuggles closer, burying his face in something soft and scratchy at the same time. *Oh yes, so much better.*

It's been years since Bilbo has felt so warm and safe, and he gives into the helplessness of a fever he barely registers is happening. But he can still concentrate just enough to revel and take advantage of this rare comfort because he has no idea when he'll feel this way again. He can barely remember the last time as it is.

It's an ever-darkening memory that has faded with time. A brilliant, easy-going smile on a beautiful face. Green eyes full of life and a thirst for adventure. His mother's hugs were always the best. Bilbo at least remembered that as a fact if not in the memory of his muscles or skin. So, even as he shivers sporadically and his bones ache, Bilbo hums happily and slips into a lovely dream.

He's in a bed. It's mid-afternoon and the sun is shining in through the window, past the open curtains, rays spilling onto the carpet. Bilbo knows he's in Bag End, even though he couldn't tell anyone if what he's seeing is accurate to how things actually looked. He was nothing but a fauntling the last time he'd been in the home of his birth. The home that was lost too soon after that. Maybe this is another life–one where the Fell Winter never happened, and his parents lived long, happy lives, and he inherited Bag End–and-and-and he got married…

He's in a nightgown and looking through his lashes at a handsome face half-draped in long black and silver hair. He knows this face too well, but right now, he can't remember exactly how he went from stealing this man's pies to suddenly, stupidly, happily married. Thorin is too handsome for his own good, it's too bad it would never work out… except somehow it has? He shouldn't question his luck. He should just reach out and tuck those dark tresses behind his big, rounded ear and kiss him silly.

So, he does.

Thorin's moan sings in his blood, and Bilbo is giddy with it. He kisses him again, soft as you please, right on those lips he's been dreaming of. It feels so real, so it must be. A smile finally pulls on those whispered lips until a bit of teeth show. Bilbo melts at the sight.--Thorin smiles so rarely.

When Thorin opens his eyes, Bilbo nearly weeps at how much adoration is in them as he abruptly realizes… This is a dream, he smiles wryly . Of course, it's a dream. *He's never looked at me like that. He doesn't even know me. I'm just the pest burgling his puff pastries. But it doesn't matter. It's a very good dream, and he plans on taking full advantage of it before real life threatens to suck his very soul out of his being.*

With a blink, Bilbo's nightgown is gone, and so are the blankets. Instead of a bed, they're in a green meadow surrounded by wildflowers as far as the eye can see. Thorin's long, huge body is laid languidly on the soft grass that feels like soft sheets.

"Well," says Bilbo as he bites his lip and ogles as the finest specimen of masculinity in Arda is displayed before his greedy eyes. His hand hovers over that barreled hard chest, and he makes grabby fingers before he smirks lecherously and giggles. "Don't mind if I do!"

Thorin is standing in the Sacred Halls of Mahal. He knows this because the knowledge has been poured into him by Mahal Himself. He feels tiny in comparison to the gargantuan silhouette of his Maker standing next to him. Everything is almost too bright, this place is not meant for living eyes.

He's never been overly religious, but he believes in the Valar, and he's always had a deep respect for his Khazad culture. Thorin's father and grandfather instilled their love for their ancestors in him, and he's nurtured it ever since. At one point, it had become an obsession he had to learn to subdue so as not to lose what his family had fought for.

But he still knew the secret language as if he'd been born speaking it. He still knew the secrets his bloodline contained. He still held that secret hope that Mahal was somewhere, listening.

"My Maker," Thorin says in awe. "How may I serve you?"

"Dusthar," Mahal calls him by his True Name. "I have come to you with good tidings."

Thorin bows his head. "My ears are open to your wise words, O Maker."

"You have found your One."

Thorin's soul sings, but his mind panics. "Who, my Maker?"

"You know who."

Thorin does know. There was no way he couldn't have known. He'd watched the small, hypothermic creature snuffle and snore into his chest, and Thorin's teeth nearly fell out. Even the drool that dripped down his ribs made Thorin's eyes weep out rainbows. But somehow, playing dumb under the all-knowing gaze of a deity sounds like a better plan than accepting the unfortunate truth. So, Thorin furrows his brow and shrugs. "Can't say that I do."

"Dusthar…" the Vala says none too patiently.

"Please, Mahal, have I done something to upset you?"

Mahal sighs. "This is a good *thing, Dusthar."*

"Have I not done my best with the lot I've been cast in life?"

"And as a reward, I have given you the other half of your soul, my child."

"Please, don't do this to me."

Thorin can't see it, but he feels *an epic Eye Roll. "Don't be so dramatic."*

Without warning, Thorin's eyes snap open, and he's blinking at his ceiling with a pout. It could all have been some fever-induced dream, but other than some aches and an insistent tugging sensation on his braid, Thorin knows he's escaped any real consequences from his impromptu swim in dangerously cold water.

Plus, that annoying warm, glowy feeling is still overflowing from his heart. He should be happy to know that Mahal thinks him dwarrow enough to merit a One. And, make no

mistake, Thorin really doesn't have a choice but to feel drunk with joy that feeling Whole comes with. The inconvenience of it all still makes him curse under his breath. What in Doom is he supposed to do now?

A small, needy whimper graces his ears, and Thorin stiffens in more ways than one. The halfling is still in his arms, naked. And it also seems his small guest is taking certain… liberties.

As much as Thorin would love to let those small hands continue petting him… or continue to allow the rhythmic bruising of his hip bone, Thorin knows it would lead to more headaches than he's ready to deal with in one day.

"Burglar," he croaks and arrests the hobbit's wrist, "wake up."

"Oh, I'm up, alrigh'," the hobbit mumbles sleepily.

Thorin cringes. "Yes, I can tell," he replies dryly. He struggles to wrangle the searing hot, wandering hands. The halfling is so sweaty, his grip slips, and the hobbit finally finds his intended target. Thorin nearly levitates off the bed and groans so loud that the hobbit finally freezes.

There's a pregnant pause before the hobbit half shoots up and blearily blinks down at Thorin. "You." He takes a moment and seems to come to some conclusion. "You're real."

Thorin can't do much else but gurgle and hope it confirms the Hobbit's statement.

It seems to work because then the hobbit's eyes slowly trail over Thorin's chest and down to where his hand is under the tented blanket. The hobbit yelps but strangely doesn't let go.

Thorin grunts, which brings the hobbit's gaze back to his eyes. "I can't believe I'm going to say this, but…" he sighs. "Can you please release my penis–?"

The hobbit repeats his yelp on a higher octave and scrabbles back so fast he falls off the bed and crashes to the floor, taking the sheet with him.

Thorin takes a moment to breathe and hopes the blood that's dropped south decides to redistribute itself to the rest of him as soon as possible without causing him to black out. He counts to ten and then tries to listen to the unhappy muttering from the hobbit beneath the bed.

"... fool of a Baggins… can't *believe* … you *touched* it… nude… hair… so much hair…"

The bed makes a creaking sound as Thorin shifts to sitting. Looking at the floor confirms the hobbit had rolled under the bed, he thinks unwittingly about what horrors might be under there since he hasn't cleaned it in a long while. He clears his throat, it's time to get things moving before the hobbit decides to escape. After all, what reason does he have to stay at a place he's stolen from? He's probably terrified of what Thorin plans to do with him now that he's caught.

“Right,” he barks, the sound quieting the hobbit beneath him, “once we’ve managed to regather the burning pieces of our dignities back, I have a *proposition* for you–no, wait–I mean… I have an *arrangement* I’d like to–that sounds worse–There’s something I want to talk to you about that can benefit us both! There. That. Now…”

With just a little concern for his nudity, Thorin stands and walks to his wardrobe. He opens the doors and begins to dress, putting on trousers first and then throwing a shirt on the floor by the bed. “Put that on for now. I’ll have your things sent to wash. Meet me in the kitchen.” Just as he pulled his tunic over, he thought to add, “Oh, and don’t think of vanishing again. I can promise you Alfrid’s men will be keeping an eye on us for a while. You’re… safe here.” That may have come out a bit too earnest, but nothing for it now.

He didn’t wait for the hobbit to answer and left the room after slipping his feet into thick socks.

The door to the room clicked shut, and Bilbo let out a groan that was mixed with both shame and relief. There was *so* much to think about, but he knew he had to focus if he was to get out of this predicament. Bilbo was always good with prioritizing in a pinch, especially when it involved the self-preservation of his life–which happens a lot, to be honest.

First thing’s first , he thinks, *what do you know?*

He knows he’s humiliated himself, but that’s not important right now. He knows that the baker is telling the truth–he’s in no danger from him. At least not any fatal kind of danger. He’s definitely in danger of adding to his debts now that he’s been found out. But he’s watched the baker. He knows where he works, where he lives, where his sister and nephews live. He knows how he takes tea and what his favorite meals are. He knows he has very little patience when it comes to dealing with people in general and knows that it’s mostly because he has social anxiety rather than disliking them. In fact, Bilbo knows for certain that the baker likes people for the most part, but also doesn’t easily trust them.

With his own eyes, he’s seen the baker slyly slip extra pastries into baskets of children and give back too much change to those obviously experiencing trying times. He’s witnessed the way he dotes on his nephews and helps support them and his sister, who is a single mother. Thorin might be a terrible employer and practically militant in his approach to owning a business, but the baker also exhibits guilt after his chastisements and overly rigid management. Damn him, but the baker has a broody heart of gold that just *does things* to Bilbo.

Bilbo has watched the ins and outs of everyone he’s stolen from. He’s only a thief because life forced him down that path. He’s tried his best to keep to a code.

Never steal from those who are struggling with feeding themselves or their family. Only take coin from the rich (which he’s tried to avoid as well since adopting Frodo). Try to only steal from those who won’t maim or kill you if you get caught. Never make it personal.

Following the last rule has never been so difficult, which is why he tries not to think of the baker by name but has failed more times than he can count. *Thorin.* He was in *Thorin's* house. Under *Thorin's* bed. Had been *in* Thorin's bed *with Thorin in it–naked!* Bilbo thunks his head on the floor three times to wipe the memory of what it felt like to hold Thorin's *penis* in his *hands.* He slaps himself when not only does the memory persist, but a suggestion to do something about his own penis tags along with it.

Bilbo has been inconveniently besotted with this man for months, so much so, that even Frodo has noticed something is up with him. And everything was *fine* because a very important line had not been crossed–he'd avoided discovery.

But now Thorin has seen him and Bilbo only has two choices. Either he disappears from Thorin's life forever and moves *again* , or he hears out what Thorin has to say and, well, decides what to do after. He doesn't want to have to explain to Frodo why they have to leave town again… and to be honest, he doesn't want to lose Thorin. He's being colossally stupid–he knows this. But he also knows he doesn't have the willpower to do anything different.

He has to go out there and confront the fact that whatever fantasies he's harbored safely behind anonymity has absolutely come to an end. Tho–The baker must despise him. The baker will surely demand recompense. The baker will *never* see more than just a burglar in Bilbo Baggins. He's not looking forward to seeing those searing blue eyes again. He'd never feared those eyes before getting caught, as they'd never looked right at him before.

There has never been any emotion directed at Bilbo, but that was *before* . What would those eyes hold now? Hate? Disappointment? Pity? Contempt? Indifference? Definitely a lack of anything Bilbo has secretly dreamed of.

So, Bilbo sighs and crawls out from under the bed. He sneezes from all the dust he pats off his arms and legs– *someone really needs to clean under there.* He grabs the garment off the floor and shakes it out, moving it in his hands so that he can finally see it's a simple blue shirt–a shirt he's seen Thorin wear before. He feels the tips of his ears flame as he slides it on.

Of course, it's huge on him–dragging on the floor and everything, but at least it hides his erection. He rolls up the sleeves and tries to flatten his curls. Once his mortification dies down, Bilbo notices how tired he is and how much his body aches–his eyes burn too. He's definitely ill, and Frodo is going to kill him when he finally gets back home.

Bilbo doesn't bother looking for a mirror and sighs heavily before finally nodding his head with determination. "Time to face the music."

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Let me know!

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It’s too early for an existential crisis–it’s just past dawn for Mahal’s sake! It’s a good thing his shop happens to be closed today, at the very least, because Thorin cannot handle much more. His brain threatens to overflow with everything he is trying to suppress–number one being the fact he has a soulmate, and he is literally down the hall from him.

Chapter Notes

The holiday's are fast approaching and I hope it won't slow down my writing too much! I still feel pretty inspired to continue this story even though I don't have an outline.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s too early for an existential crisis–it’s just past dawn for Mahal’s sake! It’s a good thing his shop happens to be closed today, at the very least, because Thorin cannot handle much more. His brain threatens to overflow with everything he is trying to suppress–number one being the fact he has a soulmate, and he is literally down the hall from him. He feels like he’s wrangling angry, feral cats in his mind while he puts together a quick breakfast of cold cuts and eggs for himself and his guest. His *One* .

Oh, Mahal, help me. You did this to me, so you better help me. His hands tremble as he works and thinks. His One is a hobbit. Thorin’s not even sure exactly how small he is but knows he’s tiny enough to be mistaken for a child. The way the hobbit had fit in his arms and tucked himself into his side… Thorin shudders, and he shakes his head in an attempt to clear his thoughts. He cannot start thinking about how fucking adorable his One is right now, or he’ll ruin everything. *Mahal, why did he have to be so cute?*

Again, Thorin fights his urge to daydream about a soft and happy future. So, he replays the one word that has made him feel like a bucket of fresh piss had been dumped on his head. “Frodo,” he murmurs to himself. His One had uttered that name in his fevered state. His One had believed that someone named Frodo had been caring for him. Maybe it was the name of a lover.

Abruptly, Thorin sways a hard left and nearly drops the plate of potatoes. He catches himself just in time but ambles to a chair anyway to sit down and breathe through his sudden dizziness. He drops his face into his hands and groans. He knew he would be the jealous type, but that was a too violent reaction, even for his liking. This is not good. He digs his fingers

into his hair and tugs until he feels the first prickles of pain. It doesn't matter. He can't just act on his knowledge. Thorin's distrust in strangers is too deep-seated, even in the face of finding his One. The hobbit had been stealing from him, for Mahal's sake!

And, even if he could just tear his walls down for his One, what could he possibly do about it? Tell the hobbit he was the other half of his soul and demand they marry at once?

Tying himself to a hobbit of all creatures could undo everything he's worked for in Bree. It could expose him and the many he's responsible for to danger. It could uproot all their lives. No, no. Best to take things slow–one step at a time. He needs a plan before he can even think about trying to woo the hobbit. He needs to put down some boundaries quickly.

At that resolution, the hobbit in question finally makes an appearance.

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Bilbo approaches the despondent-looking baker with purposefully loud steps to announce his arrival. The man stares at him between his fingers before finally lifting his head and nodding at him.

"Come sit," the man rumbles. "There's food."

It's not stealing anymore, it's so much worse… It's *charity.*

Bilbo sighs and climbs onto the chair with a well-practiced jump. He lands a little ungracefully because of his current state of weakness, but he's already monumentally embarrassed himself in worse ways–so be it. He knows he looks like a faunt with the table's edge so close to his shoulders, so he takes the plate into his lap instead. No reason to continue chipping away at his dignity–if there is anything left of it.

"Thank you," he mumbles down at his plate as he picks at it with a fork.

"What's your name," the baker asks, ignoring his own food.

Bilbo considers giving him a false name, but what's the use? "Bilbo Baggins."

"Right, then," the baker clears his throat, "Burglar."

Bilbo snaps his head up to retort at the baker's rudeness but stops short at the stony-cold look in those blue eyes. One of the looks he's dreaded. He ducks his head again and nods curtly. "Baker," he replies instead, knowing he sounds bitter instead of contrite.

"I have an offer for you," the baker continues.

Bilbo looks at him briefly and shrugs. "So you said. I'm all ears." He takes a bite of some sweet roll and chokes back a groan at the mouthwatering taste. This man is the best baker he's ever had the pleasure of stealing from.

He sees the baker raise an eyebrow, but there is no humor in his gaze. “You owe me and others recompense. I’ve paid Alfrid’s bounty and saved your life. The fact of the matter is, you owe me a great deal.”

“I owe a lot of people a lot of things,” Bilbo mutters with an eye roll. “Just skip to the part about how much I owe you, and then you can get in line with the rest of them.” He quickly shovels some eggs into his mouth and chases them with a sip of tea.

“I don’t want your money. I want to hire you.”

Bilbo scoffs, but the baker doesn’t say anything else, so he’s forced to look at his face to gauge how much of that is true. The same stony expression is there, so Bilbo takes his time to eat as he contemplates what to say next. “You need a thief?” He didn’t think Thorin was the type to engage in theft or even hire someone to do it in his stead.

“I need an assistant.”

And now Bilbo’s eyes nearly fall out of his head, and he needs to concentrate on swallowing down the dry scramble or he’ll choke. His throat nearly clogs up, but he manages to push it down with the rest of his drink. “Excuse me?”

There’s finally a small, amused smirk on Thorin’s face, and Bilbo blinks several times to believe that he’s actually seeing it. “My current assistant is leaving–”

“Ori,” Bilbo says and winces when Thorin’s eyes narrow with wariness.

“Yes, Ori will be pursuing other endeavors, and my sister-sons will only be available to help part-time. Not to generalize, but I’ve been told that most hobbits know their way around food. And you seem to have… a broad and *refined* palette.” He arches a brow and gives Bilbo a pointed, hooded glare. “So, do you?”

All Bilbo can do is gape for a moment. “Do I know how to bake because of my race?”

Thorin somehow glares harder.

“I’m a bit rusty,” Bilbo admits. “But,” and this is embarrassing to admit, “I’ve picked up a few tips from a very capable baker in the area…” He wonders if Thorin is picking up on his blatant flirting, but the baker’s face is as stoic as ever. “I meant you–”

“Yes, I know who you meant,” Thorin says dryly. “Because I’m the only capable baker in the area, and I’d say capable is a *drastic* understatement.”

“Ego as big as you, eh?” Bilbo chuckles, then trails off at Thorin’s grave expression. He decides to bring the conversation to the oliphaunt in the room. “You’d employ a thief in your shop?”

“Only if you answer one question honestly.”

Bilbo has a bad feeling but pushes forward. “And what might that be?”

Thorin stays silent a moment as his eyes shift before landing piercingly back on Bilbo's. "Who is Frodo?"

The hobbit, who had been flush with fever, suddenly pales, and Thorin almost carries Bilbo (his *One's* name is *Bilbo* !) back to bed right then and there. But he sees Bilbo grab onto the chair's edge before he falls over. Thorin feels guilty for bringing it up–it's clear this is a touchy subject.

His One closes his eyes hard and appears to wrestle with what to say, but he finally looks at Thorin again and nods resolutely. "Frodo is my son."

That one statement folds over in Thorin's head like one of his apple turnovers, sealing the edges of his head for it to bake in his brain as he sits there like a statue.

His One… has a *son.*

This is worse than expected, and Thorin is reeling in silent and frozen panic. "You're married," he hears his voice say, though he has no memory of opening his mouth to speak.

His One frowns and then hesitantly replies, "Is that really any of your business?"

"It is," Thorin growls out unintentionally.

There's a look of defiance in Bilbo as he straightens in his seat. "How is my personal life *any* of your business?"

Thorin shoots forward, looming menacingly over Bilbo, who shrinks back immediately. "I practically *own* you–"

"No one *owns* me!" His One hisses even as he continues to shrink in on himself.

"Have you no honor?" Thorin yells. "I paid for your life to be spared and still had to fish your half-drowned arse out of freezing filth myself!"

"Pardon me," Bilbo shoots back, "but I don't remember being asked to be rescued by some self-righteous, pigheaded baker who fancies himself a hero!"

They are nose to nose now as Thorin sneers. "I'm sure your son would have thanked me for letting you perish so pathetically, then?"

Bilbo gapes and pales again. All his previous fight dissipates, and he suddenly looks gravely ill. "No," the hobbit says softly. He watches Bilbo slump and cast his eyes away shamefully. "No, he wouldn't have."

Thorin knows he's hit a very raw nerve, and he hates himself for puting that expression on his One's face. But the boundary is carefully being drawn in the sand between them. "It's my

business because," Thorin says more sedately, "because I need to know how many mouths I'm to feed. I need to know that employing you will be worth it."

Bilbo frowns in obvious confusion. "Mouths to feed?"

Thorin slowly sits back and tries to curb his possessiveness. There's no way he'll be able to see his One with his wife and son living and working under his own roof, but he can't seem to shut his mouth. "I can offer you shelter and food and even pay you a fair wage, but thirty percent of your earnings must go to paying off your debt to me and Bombur on a monthly basis. If your… *wife* and son are capable, then they can work here too. We can begin with a thirty-day trial period. A proper contract can be drawn up."

The hobbit looks completely flummoxed as he sits there and blinks owlishly back at Thorin. Then he narrows his eyes. "Why are you doing this?" Bilbo asks quietly.

Thorin throws up his walls and hardens his resolve. "You've been stealing from me long enough to know how difficult it is to find decent help these days."

His One has enough cheek to scoff. "You're an absolute orc to work with, but your choices in employees have been utter scrap, I'll give you that." Bilbo gnaws on his lip for a moment before coming to a decision, but he still looks wary. "Where will we live? This is a one-room dwelling."

Thorin closes his eyes briefly at the abrupt feelings of relief and dread. Relief that his One is taking his offer seriously and dread for the exact same reason. Thorin points to his ceiling. "The attic extends from my dwelling space to the bakery. Should be the perfect size for a… family of hobbits."

Bilbo nods slowly, then contemplates a little longer. "I'll need to discuss this with my son before I agree…" Thorin feels himself tense at noticing that Bilbo mentions his son but nothing about a wife. "But," the hobbit continues, "There's no, um, wife. It's just me and Frodo."

Thorin tries not to show his elation at finding out there is a lack of a wife. There could be plenty of reasons for that–some more temporary than others. He can tell Bilbo has more to say, so he stays quiet and waits. "I can start right away, but I won't move in unless Frodo agrees and the trial period is over. I don't need us to be homeless again just because you find me less than *capable* in thirty days time."

Thorin doesn't know whether to bristle at being seen as so fickle or feel horror at learning his One has been homeless before, even though he expected as much before even meeting him. He reminds himself to be patient. This is more progress than he anticipated. He thought the hobbit would be harder to convince.

"Very well," he says finally, and he watches Bilbo let out a held breath. Thorin stands, leaving his untouched food on the table as he turns towards the door that connects to his shop. "My sister will be here soon to collect the laundry–"

"I can do that–"

Thorin turns sharply and barks out, “No!” Then inwardly cringes when he sees Bilbo flinch and shrink. *Mahal's beard but he is so small,* he thinks, regretful of his own imposing stature compared to his One. He tries to soften his appearance with a tiny, wry smile. “Your body suffered quite a trauma, and you need more rest, or you’ll make yourself ill. My cousin, Oin, is a healer. I’ll send for him to check on you.” He dons his coat and makes to exit before he turns back to Bilbo with concern. “Your… son. Will he be alright on his own?”

“What? Oh! He’s old enough to take care of himself in a pinch, but he’ll be worried sick if I don’t get back soon.”

Thorin grunts and nods. “Then give me your address so I can send Oin there instead.” He waits for Bilbo to acquiesce, but the hobbit grimaces. “What is it?”

His One fidgets and wrings his hands. “Look, I appreciate the concern, but I’d rather not have strangers know where my son and I live. You seem decent enough, but I haven’t survived this long by trusting people all willy-nilly.”

Thorin purses his lips and growls. “Stubborn hobbit,” he grumbles as he goes and fetches a piece of paper and pencil. He writes down the address of Oin’s apothecary and slams it on the table in front of Bilbo, who jumps. “Go to him as soon as you're able and tell him I sent you. Until my sister gets here, you are to stay in bed and rest. Do not disappoint me, burglar. You are useless to me ill. Do you understand?”

He doesn’t think Bilbo will follow his orders without some kind of threat, as much as Thorin hates to use them on him.

He watches Bilbo slump in defeat and nods sadly at the floor. “Understood.”

Thorin swallows back any reassurances that are on the tip of his tongue. “If I’m not back by the time you leave, then I expect to see you before dawn in three days' time. That should be enough time for you to recover. Eat as much as you want while you’re here and stay warm,” he says instead, then puts a few coins on the table next to the paper. “Consider that sick leave pay and consider yourself employed.” He stomps to the door and opens it.

Just as he’s about to leave, Bilbo calls out.“How do you know I won’t just rob you blind and leave town?”

He casts one last unimpressed glance at Bilbo and nearly laughs at the sight the tiny creature makes at his large kitchen table. Bilbo’s legs are actually swinging, big hairy feet at least two inches off the ground, and giving away his secret eagerness. He scoffs and bites his cheek to keep from smiling. “See you in three days.” Thorin finally leaves and shuts the door behind him.

Quickly, he goes through his inventory while in the bakery and makes a shopping list. He tries to forget that his One is probably climbing back into his bed without him. The shopping won’t take very long, but he has two hobbits to fend for now. The first thing he has to do is fill in his kin with what’s happened. They might all be a secretive bunch, but never amongst themselves. Plus, he’ll need help to keep his charges safe from Alfrid and Bilbo’s debtors, whoever they may be.

There's a lot of work to be done and many obstacles to face, but Thorin feels bolstered and somewhat… *hopeful* . That's a rare thing, so he tries to hang on to that while he locks up the bakery behind him and heads to face his sister first. Dis is going to be ecstatic when she hears the news. *Oh, she is going to be even more impossible to be around now,* he thinks with dismay.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Let me know what you think!

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> Sorry for the delay! Got sick and had a minor accident (always grab the handrail on the stairs). I'm a bit stuck on the next chapter but I'm hacking away at it little by little.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo has become somewhat of an expert at compartmentalizing over the years. He's had to develop this special skill much like his others because the complicated life of a small person doesn't stop for tragedies. Bilbo's feet are quick, and his mind is quicker, not just because he's a hobbit but because it's the only way to survive. The world doesn't just magically slow down during hardships.

He's tried to teach Frodo this, and the boy really shows promise, but he's not even a tween yet and still exhibits certain naive beliefs about the world. And Bilbo has no desire to strip the innocence from the poor boy, but he must also prepare him for a life without Bilbo. Someday, sooner or later, Bilbo won't be around to guide his charge through the tricky world they live in.

What if Bilbo had truly met his end in that pond? Drowned, just like Frodo's parents. What would have become of Frodo then? At least the boy has managed to endear himself to Mrs. Whitlock, the innkeeper's wife, and continues to be of use to them. It's only odd jobs and errands here and there. He wouldn't be able to pay their landlord, but maybe they would have taken pity on him and given him a broom closet to sleep in.

This is no time to think about such things, so Bilbo packs them away in a box for later. Instead, he brings his thoughts to his current situation. He looks around to make sure this still isn't a dream. He knocks his knuckles on the hard wood of the table and sniffs the air. The smell of the food is appetizing, so he decides to keep eating. He might have a mild concussion, but absolutely nothing can steer away a hungry hobbit when free food is on offer. He stuffs his face, cleaning out both his and Thorin's plates and he lets his appreciative moans fly.

"Great Gardens," Bilbo breathes after washing down his meal with drink, "how does he manage it?" He wonders if Thorin's secret ingredient all along has been shooting threatening glowers at anything he makes. He clears the table and decides to wash the dishes lest he be seen as a bad guest along with being a *burglar* .

Bilbo cringes at remembering how Thorin had spit that word out like it tasted of dung. The baker certainly isn't making what he thinks of Bilbo a secret. Maybe things were better this way. If there was no hope of something more with the baker, then there was no use pining about it.

By the time he was done cleaning up, he felt faint with fatigue, so Bilbo went back to Thorin's bed. There was no time to agonizingly replay every minuscule mistake in his life that eventually led him to this moment. In no time at all, Bilbo fell asleep.

It felt like no time at all had passed when Bilbo was awoken by a knocking sound, but the light in the room suggested it was early afternoon. He blinked sluggishly at the door when the knock came again. He looked down to find he was still wearing Thorin's shirt, so he adjusted it a little before calling out, "Come in?"

The door nearly burst off its hinges when Thorin's sister threw it open, revealing a beaming grin on her face that nearly blinded Bilbo with its brilliance.

"Good afternoon, Master *Hobbit* , I am Dis, Thorin's sister!" she boomed with laughter. She swept into the room in long billowy skirts and a crate. "You have had us all quite entertained! You know we'd started making bets as to what you might take next!"

Bilbo did, in fact, know, and sometimes he rigged it so Dis would come out winning. He couldn't help but smile back at her, she was so genuine in her mirth. "Your brother wasn't as amused with me," he chuckles back.

"Bah!" She waves a dismissive hand after setting the crate on the foot of the bed. "My brother is too serious for his own good."

Bilbo knows this too. He shakes his head and looks into Dis' eyes. "I'm sorry if stealing from your family brought on any hardships. I try not to… do too much damage, but I know I can't predict everything."

The lady's eyes soften with warmth and amusement. "The only thing we suffered from was Thorin's temper, but nothing new there."

Tears well up in Bilbo's eyes as he laughs breathily. He can't believe how this day is turning out. The people he's wronged have never come close to being this kind and he doesn't know what to do about any of these emotions. "Thank you," he whispers honestly.

Dis tuts and begins pulling out clothes from the crate. "I brought some of my son's old clothes. I didn't know your exact size, but Thorin gave me an estimate. I think Fili's clothes from when he was eleven will fit best, but you go ahead and take a look." She leans down and places a hand to Bilbo's forehead. "I'm going to prepare some stew and bring you tea to help bring down your fever." Without waiting for an answer, she leaves and shuts the door.

"What a strange family," Bilbo muses with a smile.

It's getting late, and as much as Bilbo has enjoyed snuggling in Thorin's bed all day, he has to get back to Frodo–the poor boy is probably in a state. Dis has fed him up and packed a basket

of who knows what for him and his charge.

She shakes her head with a frown as she looks Bilbo up and down. “You still don’t look fit to walk out that door, Master Baggins.”

“Please, just Bilbo. And I really must insist on leaving.”

Dis sighs and then nods. “Yes, your son needs you. But please see our cousin Oin tomorrow. Oh!” She hurries into the kitchen and comes back out with the coins Thorin left behind. “Don’t you dare think of this as charity,” she says with a faux glare. “Merely a loan.”

Bilbo stares at it and chews on his lip before finally inhaling sharply and taking the offered money. “Right. A loan. Thank you.”

He takes a deep breath as he looks up at the darkening sky before he finally knocks. Bilbo can tell by the light flickering through the cracks in the door their landlord has failed to fill that the lamp is on inside the shed. Looks like the chill will be getting in tonight again. Quick and quiet footsteps reach the door. “Who is it?”

“It’s me, Frodo.”

“Bilbo!” There’s a clanging of chains from the locks, and Frodo wrenches open the door, immediately pulling Bilbo inside and shutting the door again quickly behind them. Frodo rounds on him as soon as he’s locked the door. “Where have you been? What happened?” Bilbo walks to the rickety table where they take their meals and drops the basket on it. “Ran into Alfrid’s men,” he explains as he removes the ties on the bag that smells like food.

Frodo stands next to him and eyes the basket with eagerness but turns back to Bilbo with full-on concern after he registers what has been said. “Are you alright? You look ill.”

“The cheek! I’d like to see you look half as handsome when you’re my age!” Bilbo smirks and winks at the boy, but Frodo’s frown deepens. “I’ll be fine with some rest.” He opens the other bag while Frodo digs into the food and chooses a sweet roll.

Frodo gasps. “You went to the bakery again? You said never to risk going back to a dry well! You said—!”

“I’ve been offered work there,” Bilbo heads off the argument successfully. “ *Real* work,” he adds belatedly at Frodo’s puffing cheeks. “You’re looking at the new assistant baker!” He grins and snaps his braces with exaggerated pride.

Frodo narrows his eyes at him suspiciously. “And does the baker know his assistant was stealing from him?”

Bilbo drops the smile and rolls his eyes. “Indeed he does.”

Frodo’s shoulder slumps and his eyes show he’s resigned himself to some unfortunate truth. “So, back to indentured servitude.”

“Mhm. A bit, yeah,” Bilbo admits. “But,” he pulls out clothes from the second bag and separates what will go to Frodo, “he has agreed to thirty percent.”

Frodo’s eyes widen. “That’s not so bad!”

Bilbo nods and holds up a light blue tunic over Frodo’s shoulders. “Trial basis, though. Thirty days and then…” he folds the tunic back up and tries to say the next part casually, “if he wants to keep me on, he’ll extend a job to you as well.”

Frodo absolutely beams as he jumps and claps. “I’ll get to bake?!”

“You’ll get to *work* at a bakery.”

“Same thing!”

“It really isn’t.”

“Oh, this is wonderful news, Bilbo!” Frodo grabs him by the hands and pulls him into a hug as he jumps some more.

Bilbo chuckles and ruffles the boy’s hair. “I hope it works out.” He really does. This could be the start of better days, but he’s always kept his feet firmly on the ground. As much as he wants to keep hoping, he brings his attention to the clothes. “Try these on, and let’s see if I can work with them to fit you better, yes?”

“Yes! I’ve been needing new clothes for ages!”

Bilbo tries not to wince at that statement and looks for his sewing kit.

Of course, the burglar doesn’t arrive on the third day. Thorin really should have known better, and now he’s pacing in his bakery, wondering why his One has not come. Dis had seemed certain that Bilbo would keep his word. Maybe he’s changed his mind? Perhaps he ran into trouble with Alfrid’s men again? Maybe he’s ill? Thorin wasn’t sure how long his One had been submerged in that water. He’s almost put his coat on to search the entire city for Bilbo when there is a knock at the door.

There’s hardly a thought before Thorin rips the door open and sees no one at first. A soft cough turns Thorin’s attention downwards, and there is the hooded figure of the hobbit in question. *Mahal, I forgot how small he is!* Bilbo’s expression tells Thorin he knows what just went through his head. There’s an awkward moment where Thorin has absolutely no idea what to say or do. Bilbo shifts on his bare feet and makes a health-hearted wave without raising his arm.

“Burglar,” Thorin rumbles finally.

Bilbo’s shoulder slump but nods decisively. “Baker.”

“That’s Master Baker to you,” he scolds as he stands his ground, not letting Bilbo in until this boundary is set.

Bilbo sighs. “ *Master* Baker,” he says with an exaggerated bow, as if greeting royalty. *If he only knew…*

Thorin pulls the door open further and motions for Bilbo to enter. “Ori should be here soon. He will train you on your duties. I expect excellence in all things, and I appreciate fast learners who take responsibility for their errors.” He gives Bilbo a pointed look at that, and Bilbo rolls his eyes.

“I’m well, thank you, much recovered now. How are you?” Bilbo raises his eyebrows expectantly, but Thorin only glares at him harder. His One scoffs as he shakes his head and shrugs. “I’m here, aren’t I? Taking responsibility for my actions and all that...” Bilbo obviously waves away the word *nonsense* .

The cheek of the hobbit wants to make Thorin smile, but he reins it in. “You obviously know your way around, so I won’t give you a tour, save for the attic. He stalks to the back, expecting Bilbo to follow and then points to a lever. “Pull that.”

Bilbo has to tiptoe on one foot to reach the object but pulls it easily. When he does, the attic door slides open, and a ladder unfolds before them. The hobbit’s jaw drops, and he looks from the ladder to Thorin. “Well, that’s nifty!” Bilbo cries out with an awed smile.

Thorin can’t help but preen under the reaction–he built the contraption himself. “Go on.”

Bilbo points questioningly before chewing on his lip and climbing the ladder warily. “Not going to murder me up here, are you?”

Thorin follows and realizes his error in letting the hobbit go first–his pert little ass is in his face for a moment, and Thorin can’t help but continue to stare at it as Bilbo climbs. He shakes his head and follows. Bilbo is standing in the already-lit attic space, gawking, when Thorin climbs the last steps and stands carefully. The height is more than enough for a hobbit, which means Thorin has to crouch a bit so as not to crack his head open on a beam.

“It’s… furnished,” Bilbo utters with confusion.

“Not completely, but it has all the necessities.”

Bilbo lets out a disbelieving noise and begins to explore. He runs his hands over the counter space, the table and chairs, and the brick of the chimneys. “This will be the warmest space as it’s just above the bakery. There’s a small wood-burning stove over there,” he points, “more for warmth and maybe brewing tea than for cooking. There’s a dumbwaiter, so you can prepare meals below and send them up.”

“Who was this made for?” Bilbo asks quietly as he turns to Thorin.

They stare at each other. Thorin knows Bilbo has noticed the furniture and dimensions of the place are not exactly man-sized. Nothing is brand new either, and there’s a layer of dust over

most things–it gives off a sense others may have used the space, but it's also been dormant for quite some time. Thorin has anticipated this moment, and he doesn't want to lie to his One, but he can't tell the complete truth either.

"Bedrolls in the chest there," he nods to the chest instead of answering Bilbo's question. He points to another one. "Linens and pillows in there. If things work out, I can build some beds in the future." Thorin turns and makes his way back down to the main floor. "You'll be taking over Ori's duties completely," he says as he waits for Bilbo to climb down and clear away.

"Really? Even seeing to the customers?"

Thorin makes sure that Bilbo is watching when he pushes the lever back into place. He waits until the mechanism is done shutting the attic up. "Especially seeing to the customers. I have no patience for such things."

Bilbo chuckles, and Thorin thinks he hears him mutter "No kidding" under his breath. "Previous employers had rather I stay out of sight," Bilbo explains.

Thorin cocks a brow and crosses his arms. "I expect that is the primary job description for a burglar."

Bilbo opens his mouth to retort but then closes it again with a shake of his head. "I mean," he clears his throat and waves down to his feet. "I'm a hobbit. Don't you think it will hurt your business…?"

Tightening his arms across his chest, Thorin inhales slowly. He's thought of this and even discussed the possibility with Dis, but if there is any hope for a future with his One, Thorin knows he can't keep him hidden in the shadows. He's established himself enough in this city to take a few risks, and his family agrees–except for Dwalin, who is still wary of this whole new development. But he doesn't say any of this to Bilbo.

"You're adorable," Thorin drawls and smirks when he sees Bilbo's cheeks puff and blush with indignation. He moves closer with the aim of getting his One's exact height. "A hobbit is a rare sight these days." He looms over Bilbo and clocks his head at his chest level. Thorin is five feet and six inches, which makes Bilbo a mere four feet tall. He notices the hobbit's ears are also red. "People might just pay to see those pointy ears up close."

"Glad to be the local tourist attraction," Bilbo deadpans, leaning back to meet Thorin's gaze with a withering glare.

Thorin meets it with a hooded scowl. "Fire up the ovens, burglar." He knows he's being a prick, but hopefully not enough of one to chase his Bilbo away. He also hopes that Bilbo puts more stock in Thorin's actions than his words, and there is a shrewdness to his One's eyes that might mean he does.

Just in case, Thorin winks at him before turning abruptly and heading for the pantry.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your kudos and comments! They really helped me through some difficult days!

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the delay! I hope to post the next chapter by next week!

On some level, Bilbo recognizes he is being treated a lot better than the other poor fools before him, but the more the days went on, the less Bilbo was certain of whether the baker had honest-to-goodness winked at him that first morning after calling him adorable. It must have been a tick or some kind of fit. Maybe Bilbo had just hallucinated it entirely because why would the baker wink at him only to bully him the rest of the time? Well, maybe not bullying. Oh, but Thorin is taciturn at best!

And every time he barks an order, he never even looks at Bilbo, and he never acknowledges Bilbo's hard work no matter what.

He's jumped on every command like a well-seasoned soldier. He's charmed the pants off every customer, playing his role of the cute little halfling so well he thinks he should have joined an acting troupe in his youth. Bilbo has exemplified his quick reflexes, impeccable timing, and his almost psychic foresight on countless occasions already.

If Bilbo is lucky, Thorin gives him a raised eyebrow… or two if he does something particularly clever.

Ori chats with Bilbo all the time, constantly asking him questions about Bilbo and Frodo both. When Bilbo knows that Thorin is within earshot, he divulges more about himself than he probably should, secretly hoping that Thorin will thaw a bit and join the conversation.

But no. Thorin ignores him unless it's to growl orders.

Burglar, the ovens aren't hot enough.

Burglar, the ovens are too hot.

Burglar, measure the butter.

Burglar, remeasure the butter.

Burglar, package this order.

Burglar, repackage the order.

Burglar, arrange the display.

Burglar, rearrange the display.

Burglar.

Burglar.

Burglar.

A week later, at precisely midday, Bilbo has had enough.

“Burglar–”

“My name is not– *Burglar* !” Bilbo shoots back, mocking Thorin’s deep barking rumble horribly. “It’s Bilbo Baggins! At the very least, I think I should be granted the courtesy of adding a *Master* somewhere in there!”

There’s dead silence, and Ori takes a cautious step back when he finds himself between the baker and his new assistant in training.

Thorin arches one eyebrow as he crosses his arms and leans down very slowly to meet Bilbo’s gaze head-on. “ *Master* Burglar.”

“Thank you–wait.”

“You may take your lunch break now,” Thorin pronounces, clipped and low and still managing a growl underneath it all. He leans back up just as slowly, and once he’s at his full height, he turns and stalks away.

Bilbo lets out a gust of air through puffed cheeks and turns to Ori, who looks endlessly amused. “Oh, stop your smirking!”

Ori chuckles and shrugs. “He likes you.”

“The man *hates* me!”

Ori chuckles and shrugs. “He *likes* you!”

“Ori,” Bilbo huffs, “I’m concerned that your standards for expressing affability lie somewhere beneath the mines of Moria.”

Ori lets out a nervous giggle, but shakes his head. “I’m serious, Bilbo. Believe me, he’s impressed with how quickly you’ve picked up on your duties.”

Bilbo does not mention why he’s learned so quickly because it’s a combination of already knowing his baked goods and basically discreetly stalking almost everyone who’s worked at bakeries for his previous thievery.

“Really,” Bilbo drawls instead, making sure his sarcasm is dripping profusely. “Did he say that?”

“No…”

And immediately, Bilbo scoffs and turns away to hide his hurt.

Because it *does* hurt. It hurts more than it should. All he’s done is try to impress Thorin, to hopefully change the baker’s perception of him, to make him stop calling him *burglar* . He’s done everything Thorin has asked of him. It’s only been a week, and even Ori is astounded by his work ethic and knowledge.

Ori hands Bilbo a basket that presumably contains his lunch and Frodo’s. At least *that’s* a perk that has been worth every suspicious glance and snide comment–can’t complain about delicious free food.

“Thorin doesn’t really *say* stuff like that,” Ori admits with a rueful smile. “He shows his appreciation in other ways.” He looks pointedly at the basket full of treats, then gives Bilbo a knowing smile.

Bilbo looks down at the overflowing basket and back up at Ori. *Oh* . His jaw drops open a moment and pulls back the cover to see an overabundance of Bilbo and Frodo’s favorite pastries, along with some meat pies. Well, Bilbo obviously needs to rethink some things.

Ori chuckles when he sees Bilbo understand what he means. “Go on. Get your boy fed. Think you’ll bring him around soon? We’re all eager to meet him!”

Bilbo smiles nervously and shrugs. “Yes, of course. Soon. When I feel more secure here, maybe.”

That is only partially true. He honestly would love to hide Frodo away from the whole of middle-earth and protect him from every danger, but the boy has different plans. Still, the longer Bilbo can prolong his disappointments, the better. Eventually, he knows Frodo will tire of waiting out his precautions and just show up, anyway. Which will probably be for the best, to be honest. Frodo has a way of charming the birds out of trees, so maybe Thorin will finally thaw around Bilbo a bit.

It helps to know how readily Thorin’s family has accepted Bilbo, save for Thorin himself, of course. Fili and Kili are thrilled to have finally met The Burglar, and endlessly egg him on to lift all kinds of things from them like it’s some parlor trick. Bilbo, of course, indulges them because they’re gobsmacked faces every time he pickpockets them blind strokes his endangered ego. They might be taller than Bilbo but they’re still kids, and Bilbo has always had a soft spot for children. Frodo could use some friends his age, and Fili and Kili would no doubt embrace his ward with no reservations.

He’s wondering whether he’s doing Frodo any favors by keeping him away from the Bakery when he finally arrives at the inn. He slips in through the service entrance and waves at the innkeeper, who sighs and nods his head tiredly.

“Your boy’s lending a hand in the stables.”

Bilbo blinks and tries to cool his boiling blood at the news. “Mr. Whitlock, I told you I wasn’t comfortable with my son working with horses–”

“Yes, yes, but we have more guests than we know what to do with today, and the stable lad is out with a cold, and no power on middle-earth can stop the beasts from shitting and pissing about all day long–”

With a barely suppressed growl, Bilbo rushes out to the stables. “Frodo! Frodo, my boy, are you–”

Frodo practically runs into Bilbo, panting and failing to hide a proud smile. “Now, don’t be angry, Bilbo…”

Bilbo holds him out at arm's length to check for any injuries and to keep from smelling the worst of him. “Blech! You've got a foul stink on you now!”

Frodo scoffs and places his hands on his hips after batting Bilbo away. “You’ve come home smelling far worse in the past! Anyway,” he beams, “I learned to saddle a pony today!”

“I’ve told you horses are dang–a pony?” A pony is much smaller than a horse but Frodo is still quite small in comparison. “Ponies kick and bite too, you know,” he grumbles uncertainly. “Just *please* tell me you’re being safe.”

Frodo rolls his eyes. “Don’t worry. Just helping out where I can. Mostly cleaning out the stalls,” he admits with a frown. He looks up at Bilbo with a helpless gaze. “I can handle the dung, but the *urine*... Great Gardens, Bilbo, it’s *pungent* !” Bilbo can’t help but chuckle at the boy’s disgusted expression. “When can I work at the bakery with you?”

The older hobbit sighs and feels a pinch of guilt. It’s his fault that his young ward has to work at all. Frodo should be taking lessons with others his age instead of worrying about money. “Hopefully soon. Now, wash your hands at least before you touch your lunch.”

They munch happily on the meat pies first, humming and hawing and rolling their eyes in bliss. They try not to choke while laughing and stealing more bites from each other. And then Frodo grows a quiet and contemplative frown between his eyes. Bilbo’s nose twitches in anticipation, because he knows what’s coming.

Frodo has always been frightfully perceptive.

“Bilbo,” the boy says once he’s politely swallowed and dabbed a napkin to his lips. “Not that lunch has been meager since you started working at the bakery, but doesn’t it seem like we’re getting the best of the bunch lately? Even here at the inn, I only get scraps. And you always bring enough for two!”

Bilbo keeps his gaze locked on his pastry as he finally gives himself permission to analyze all the strange tidbits of knowledge he’s gathered since meeting Thorin Oakenshield. He’s

hesitated to do so before now because he needs an outsider's perspective so as not to give himself false hope.

“They are the best of the bunch,” he admits to Frodo, “I would know better than anyone. Most of these were straight from the oven, too–always the freshest batch. Not to mention usually the most expensive and all our favorites. And… I didn’t steal them.”

He’s almost forgotten Frodo is even there when he looks up and finds the boy smirking and looking far too smug for someone his age. “Don’t you dare say it–”

“The baker *fancies* you!” Frodo exclaims with mischievous delight.

Bilbo grins despite himself but quickly schools his features, turning his smile into a scolding frown. “The man hardly speaks to me unless he’s barking orders. He keeps calling me Burglar in front of everyone! He’s always glaring at me! He doesn’t fancy me, no matter what you all say!”

“You *all* ? Who else?!”

“Well,” Bilbo says hesitantly with a sheepish smile, “you and Ori–but…” he says quickly before Frodo can cheer again, “Ori said he *likes* me, not fancies. So. Not the same, is it?”

Frodo is clearly not amused when he arches a brow. “Oh, I’d bet the hair on my feet it’s *exactly* the same.”

Bilbo scoffs and pointedly takes the last bite of his food.

“Aw, Bilbo,” Frodo coos as he shifts closer. “You’ve been mooning over the baker for ages. And…” the boy’s voice loses its playfulness. “I know I’m the reason why you haven’t…”

Shaking his head vehemently, Bilbo places a hand on Frodo’s shoulders. “No, my boy, no. Look, even if I’d stayed on my own, I’d have nothing to offer anyone–”

“That’s not true!”

“Oh, Frodo, it is.” He held up a hand to keep them from arguing the point. “I just want to say that the love you’ve gifted me with, after all the pain you’ve been through, has always been enough for me.”

Frodo takes a moment to process his words and then gives Bilbo a sad smile. “I think it *used* to be. I see you, you know? When you think I’m not paying attention. You get this look on your face… not sad, not really… more like… resigned. Like you’ve given up on something you’ve always wished for. And I want you to know that you don’t have to worry about me anymore when it comes to things like this. If you really like him, I think you should try to see where it goes. I know my parents are gone, but you're my *dad* , Bilbo. And I want my dad to be happy.”

Bilbo doesn’t know he’s crying until Frodo pulls him in for a hug. He holds on to his son tight and sniffs. He’s so damn proud of Frodo and loves him more than anything in the world.

“Why’d you have to say something like that when you know I have to go back to work, incorrigible boy!”

They chuckle wetly as they separate. Bilbo pulls out his handkerchief and cleans himself up while Frodo packs away the remnants of their lunch.

“You should court the baker,” Frodo says resolutely with a decisive nod that Bilbo has to bark out a laugh.

“How on middle-earth am I to do that?” Bilbo chuckles with amusement but secretly hopes Frodo has some good ideas.

“The Hobbit way, of course! You still have your mother’s journal and she wrote everything down on how your dad courted her. Do the same!”

Bilbo shakes his head, but a pleasant warmth fills his cheeks and belly at the thought. “Even if I did, he wouldn’t know what any of it meant, not really. And anyway, the races of men don’t typically condone courting between males.”

Frodo waves a dismissive hand and rolls his eyes. “Well, you’re not a man, you’re a hobbit. There’s nothing wrong with properly courting someone you love.”

Bilbo sputters and nearly drops the empty basket. “I never said anything about love!”

“You don’t have to,” is Frodo’s muttered reply. “Anyway, you should start with flowers–and oh! You *must* bake him something! Yes! Your mother’s famous seed cake!”

Bilbo grumbles half-heartedly because it *is* a good idea. Not only will it show his esteem, but it will also show his own talent for baking. Courting Thorin without his explicit knowledge may not gain Bilbo reciprocated feelings, but they may just put him in the baker’s good graces.

If he’s really lucky, he might even gain a friend.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

> Little cliffhanger at the end... sorry. Just a little one. Oh, and I made up a flower. Oh, and beware this chapter has not been beta-ed.

The blue autumn pipsy hiding in Bilbo's patched coat weighs too much on his mind. He had been hopeful, he truly had, for a few elusive and blissful moments. Somehow, Bilbo had fallen headfirst into a spiral of beatific visions of a future where romance was possible. He blames Frodo and his rainbow tinted view of life. Humming like a lovesick teen, Bilbo had gone and picked a flower to start his make-believe courtship with his employer. Once he'd locked onto the smooth blue petals that reminded him of Thorin's eyes, he knew he'd found the perfect one.

But now… now all the hope just seeps out as he stands on the threshold of the bakery and it takes away whatever warmth Bilbo's managed to hold on to. He shivers as the world loses just a bit more color. He's on solid ground now as he stares at the door. It was a simple plan. Walk in, smile and bid Thorin a good morning and present him with the flower and give Thorin a dashing wink, and then wait for Thorin to lift him into his arms and twirl around, giggling like besotted fools in between kisses.

When he walks into the bakery, he sees the tall, broad figure of his employer and his heart flips around in his chest. The man is unfairly gorgeous. Hair in a bun save for the two braids on either side. Sleeves rolled up. Flour on his nose. Gorgeous. Too good for the likes of Bilbo. How could he even allow himself to think that for one moment he could have a future, or even anything in the present with Thorin Oakenshield?

He watches the baker work, watches how the muscles in his arms flex, relaxing and contracting as he kneads dough, and sees the easy flicking of flour. Everything in the Baker's movements declares the amount of years this man has been perfecting his craft are numerous and plenty.

And suddenly Bilbo doesn't feel like he's enough. Granted, it's an old feeling. He never thought he was ever enough for Frodo. But he didn't have a choice before. He took on the role required of him and blast it whether he was good enough or not. Here, in the bakery, he has a choice.

And, *of course* , Frodo thinks this will end in a Happily Ever After–he's a *child* ! And Bilbo should know better! He cannot risk his employment! He cannot risk the offer of housing and fair pay and the opportunity to give Frodo a better life! He cannot lose the tentative friendships he's made here. He cannot give this stupid flower to Thorin!

“Is that for me, Master Burglar?” Thorin’s rumble startles Bilbo out of his reverie, and he realizes he’s holding the stupid flower in question in his hand, staring at it like a half-wit.

“Um…” Bilbo looks from the flower to Thorin, who is leaning his hip against the counter with those stupidly muscular arms crossed over his chest and an absurdly handsome smirk on his face. “If you like.” And he can’t believe he said that or how insecure he sounded when he’d said it.

Thorin’s smirk vanishes, and his eyes grow dark. He’s too terribly serious when he pushes off the counter and takes slow long strides towards Bilbo. And now Bilbo wishes he hadn’t come into work today. This is a mistake. Thorin doesn’t like him–not like *that.* The man probably doesn’t like males!

The baker holds his gaze as he reaches out and pinches his fingers on the stem of the flower while also grazing Bilbo’s fingers and takes it. Thorin finally brings the pipsy to eye level and inspects it. “It’s pretty,” Thorin murmurs. “Does it have a meaning?”

Bilbo swallows thickly and nods. “Gratitude… among other things.” *Like, you have beautiful blue eyes.*

Thorin pierces him with those stunning eyes. “And what are you grateful for?”

He should lie. He should at least tell a *partial* truth. But he doesn’t. He can’t. “You.”

Thorin is quiet for a long moment and he finally licks his lips and says, “Thank you for the flower.” And then *tucks* it behind his own *ear* . “Now get to work.” But there is no bite in the command. In fact, it was said with a shy smile and a light blush.

Now Bilbo is confused. What did all that mean? He’d given Thorin the flower. And Thorin had accepted. Does Thorin know what Bilbo meant by giving him that gift? Does Bilbo? He’s not sure anymore. Thorin took his flower. Thorin thanked him for it and put it on his person… for everyone to see.

And people *do* see. Ori’s eyes nearly pop out of his head when he sees it. Dwalin stops dead in his tracks and the wrinkles on his head multiply by five from how high his eyebrows raise. Fili and Kili tease for all of two seconds before Thorin’s glare shuts them up. *Customers* notice too…

“Why, Mr. Oakenshield, is it possible you’ve finally met a nice lady?”

“Oh, don’t tell me you’re off the market! I wanted you to meet my daughter!”

“Who is the lucky lady? Anyone I know?”

“What a shame. Another handsome, hardworking man unavailable.”

Thorin says nothing in reply to those comments. He just smiles politely and changes the subject by offering free samples of his pastries. And it works every time. So, Bilbo has no idea what Thorin thinks about all this. It seems to be a step in a direction that Bilbo dreads and hopes for with all his heart. Thorin could actually be open to the idea of seeing Bilbo as a romantic prospect. And that just baffles Bilbo to no end because why would Thorin choose him, a hobbit, a thief with no name or money? Thorin is so handsome, a successful businessman, a loving brother and uncle, a kind man, a loyal friend, a charitable soul–he could have *anyone* he wants!

The day goes on with Bilbo in a haze of doubt and hope and he's surprised he can already do his job without a working brain. Ori has given no direction or corrections and Thorin hasn't barked at him all day. Anytime Thorin says anything to Bilbo, it's in a softer tone than Bilbo has ever heard from the man while at work. He's certainly never spoken to Bilbo this way before. Then he receives two lunch baskets for lunch. And Frodo convinces Bilbo for a second time that the baker *definitely* fancies him.

"He accepted your courting gift, Bilbo! What more can you ask for?"

"But he doesn't know it's a courting gift!"

"Who doesn't know what it means to receive flowers from someone?"

When Bilbo arrives back from his lunch break, he tries to pay more attention to Thorin. He's making constant mental notes about the tone in his voice, the grazes when they pass each other by, the micro expressions beneath Thorin's stoic mask, the way their eyes meet. He's obsessing, and he knows this. When he gets a wink after being caught staring, Bilbo finally grins. *He did wink. He did.*

And this gives him the courage to shuffle his feet towards Thorin at the end of the day, when they are closed and everyone else has left. It's just the two of them now. Thorin is counting the profits for the day and Bilbo waits patiently for Thorin to write down his findings.

He clears his throat. Time for the next step. "I was thinking," Bilbo hedges, "that I'd like to bake for you."

Thorin side eyes him before turning to him and crossing his arms over his chest. "You want to bake for the shop?"

"Oh, well, I mean that would be great too, but I meant… I mean, I'd like to bake you something. Just for you." Bilbo's stomach is threatening to revolt with how nervous he feels. This shouldn't be so difficult. He's a grown hobbit! But he's not used to this. He's not used to giving himself permission to talk to someone this way, or to want something like this. He

knows how the characters in books do this sort of thing, but he's never had a chance to put it into practice and see if any of it was muck to begin with.

Thorin arches a brow, and that damnable smirk is back. "And what will you bake just for me?"

Bilbo is pretty sure there is a fifty-fifty chance that when he opens his mouth, the contents of his stomach will end up on the floor, but he has to answer the man. "That is, erm, a surprise… yes. A surprise." He nods decisively and gives a weak smile. He now knows for certain he's awful at this whole flirting business with people he actually fancies.

"When?"

"Oh, ah… how about tomorrow morning? I can, um, be here earlier and I… I can bake. For you."

"Just for me."

Bilbo blushes and smiles shyly. "Yes. Just for you."

Thorin bends down, never uncrossing his arms, and his smile grows. "I'd like that."

Bilbo suddenly feels drunk. His legs are losing the fight with gravity as his dopey grin spreads and his ears burn. He takes an unsteady step back and waves. "Okay, I'll see you then." Bilbo is in so much trouble and he doesn't give a flying Nazgul right now. All he wants is this feeling of walking on air to continue. It's better than any ale or pipe weed and it fizzles in his blood like nothing else has in all his life. He giggles like an idiot and ducks his head before dashing out the door.

Bilbo doesn't remember arriving home but Frodo brings him back to reality with a jovial laugh and a pat to his back.

"Is your courting going well then, Bilbo?"

"Hm?" His eyelids flutter as he lands back on the proverbial ground. "I offered to bake him something. He accepted."

Frodo jumps and cheers. "I told you so!"

"Oh, stop that!" But there is no bite to his words because Bilbo is too damned happy that Frodo was right all along. Maybe. There is a good possibility that Thorin feels the same way or is at least open to feeling the same way at some point. He thinks, anyway. It's a big Maybe leaning precariously towards a Yes.

He's so deeply rooted in his fantasies that he almost fails to notice Frodo winces and lets out a small cry of pain. Bilbo gives him a mildly concerned glance but Frodo turns away and flips open one of the few books they own. *Maybe the poor boy is sore from working in the stables* , Bilbo muses, *they don't have hobbit-sized pitchforks after all.* After that, he thinks

no more of it and fetches his mother's journal. He knows the seed cake recipe by rote, but reads it over several times, anyway.

Bilbo falls asleep that night with a smile on his face and wondering what flower to get Thorin next.

Thorin should not be encouraging the burglar–he knows this. It is much too soon to start this sort of thing. There is, of course, still a chance that Thorin has misread the situation, but he's pretty certain he's absolutely right. He's seen the hobbit staring at his backside, seen his eyes fixed on his exposed arms, watched how the hobbit seemed to gravitate toward him all day long until Bilbo basically put Thorin's shadow out of a job.

And the blushing…

Great Valar All Powerful, but the hobbit was at his most fetching when his cheeks, the tip of his nose and ears tinted pink. On a couple of occasions, Bilbo slapped himself after getting caught ogling, which made Thorin chuckle quietly. His One is somehow even less subtle in his affections than Thorin is–a reminder here that one of them is a *burglar* .

Thorin smiles when he catches a flash of blue from the reflective surface of his pan. It was not hard to guess how important the gesture from this morning was to Bilbo. The hobbit had looked so terrified when he walked into the bakery, his small hand clutching a blue flower trembling in his grip. The poor creature hadn't even noticed that Thorin was watching him. And he just couldn't take Bilbo's terror-filled face, let alone the dead look of resignation, as if reaching the worst plausible conclusion. So, he'd interrupted Bilbo's thoughts with a sorry joke of, " *Is that for me, Master Burglar?"* But Bilbo had not laughed.

He should have kissed him then. He'd wanted to. But no. What if he does have it all wrong, after all? Maybe it all was just a thank you. Gratitude on the verge of something more… admiration? Not that those sentiments were unwanted, but Thorin longed for more, and he did not know whether Bilbo was ready for that. So, no kiss had been taken.

Still, Thorin's mind whirrs as he lays in his bed waiting for sleep to claim him. If Bilbo is ready for more, then is Thorin? He was still getting used to being so close to Bilbo for so many hours of the day. He was still memorizing his expressions and barely catching up with his wits. The hobbit was funny and kind and too charming for his own good. It was no wonder Bilbo had been snatched up by someone already, a small lady hobbit, no doubt. Probably shorter than Bilbo. *That would be so small, though.*

Thorin shakes his head. He huffs with annoyance at himself. He'd been drifting off and his vulnerable mind landed on jealousy again. He both wants and dreads the idea of meeting Frodo. It's inevitable, of course. How is he going to deal with a child of his One, and *someone else,* parading right under his nose every day? Or worse yet, what if the mother came back for them?

“It doesn’t matter,” he reminds himself. Bilbo has been showing an interest right from the start with his awful flirting, gawking, and blushing. That’s what matters. Bilbo has promised to bake for him. Not for the shop. For Thorin. To a baker, that means something and he has a feeling that it has a special meaning to the hobbit too.

Well, he can’t make any promises that there will be no kissing. He was able to restrain himself the one time, but he’s not sure he can survive Bilbo’s attentions much longer without planting one on him.

But tomorrow comes… and goes… with no Bilbo.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Thorin finds Bilbo.

Chapter Notes

We find out what happened to Bilbo and we get a little more world building.

Bilbo doesn't show up to bake for Thorin, and he doesn't appear for work.

His presence is still absent by lunch time.

The bakery suffers the lack of an assistant just as much as Thorin does.

Nothing tastes right.

Nothing *feels* right.

Everything is wrong! Why is he just going about his day like everything is fine when it's far from it? His *One* is missing! For less than twenty-four hours, yes, but still missing! He can't think of a good enough reason for Bilbo not to be right by his side, and when scenarios do pop up to explain the hobbit's absence, it's only to torture Thorin's poor mind with catastrophic imaginings.

He knows the fruits of his labor for the day will be subpar–he's burned or undercooked so many batches of things he thinks he should just close up the shop…

So he does.

"Thorin?" Ori says gently. "My brother is out back waiting for you."

Finally. Thorin takes a moment to breathe, but he still can't think past *where is my soulmate* when he thanks Ori and makes his way outside to the back alley, and Nori is there leaning on the wall with a smirk.

Nori looks nothing like his brothers. Like most of their kind fear, Nori was born with too much dwarrow in his blood. He's short, but he's taller than Bilbo and definitely broader, but his stocky build isn't proportioned like a man's–his nose and ears are too big. He's never been able to find decent work, and much like Bilbo, he has spent more time surviving than

thriving in the world of men. Instead of dissuading Nori from his less-than-honorable trade of sneaking about and thievery, Thorin thought it was best for him to hone those skills and be of service to his kin. He's able to go mostly unnoticed wherever he goes and is accepted by most Khazad because of his features.

Thus, Nori has become an essential member of his company as a messenger mostly, but sometimes as a spymaster as well.

"Your Highness," Nori says with a small bow and an amused tilt to his lips.

"Stop that," Thorin warns. "Any news?"

Nori straightens and nods. "I've found out where they've been staying, but it isn't pretty."

He never thought it would be. "Take me there."

"We should bring Oin," Nori says with a deep frown.

If Thorin was worried before, now he's terrified. His blood runs cold as he grips Nori's shoulder, eyes wide and frantic. "Is he–"

Nori raises a hand to silence him. "He's fine. It's his boy. He's ill, but I don't know how serious just yet."

Thorin sighs, but the relief he feels is only momentary. Bilbo's son was ill. How ill? Was he on death's door? Just a mild cold? These and many more questions plague him as he saddles his horse and loads the wagon with blankets, a healing kit, and food. They quickly retrieve Oin, who brings his own supplies, and finally rush to Bilbo's.

On the way there, Nori talks as he steers through the roads. "There are other things we should discuss."

Right. Nori had taken more time than usual on his travels and only arrived the evening prior. It was bad news, Thorin could tell. He really didn't want to think about anything else, but this was important. But Thorin was the head of his family, the leader of his company, and… of his clan. *What's left of it, anyhow.* "How bad is it?" he finally asks, trying to put thoughts of Bilbo in a separate box of worries but still closest to his heart.

Nori purses his lips and keeps his eyes ahead. "Bad. The Khazad have all but fled the eastern cities or have joined the Beacons to sniff out our kind."

Oin, deaf as a stone wall, lifts his ear horn and cramps himself closer. "So, we're officially being hunted? I told you it was only a matter of time," the healer hisses. "Our own kind, no less!"

Nori shakes his head. "Still unofficial. And *these* clans of Khazad do *not* see us as their *kind* ." Nori grumbles some curses under his breath at the traitorous dwarves. "There are still those who oppose the movement, but our allies with other races continue to dwindle. Instead of standing together, they hide. Too afraid of getting pointed at next."

Thorin is not surprised. Even in a city as diverse as Bree, there have already been a few Beacons spreading their bile on the streets to all who will listen. Dwarrow-men are few in number despite what the Guiding Light preaches to the public. Their loud hailers, more like fanatic purists, are called Beacons–illuminating the correct path in the Age of Men. The emphasis on *Men* and no one else. The Guiding Light was once a piss-poor cult that gained momentum when the Elves left for their precious undying lands. With the favored children of Eru gone, Men took control of the lands and blamed the Elves for keeping them from flourishing.

Khazad and Dwarrow-men understood the sentiment, and some even backed the movement at the time. But now, the Guiding Light shone on Thorin's people, calling them greedy deceivers who try to pose as men to take their jobs and lands. Worse still are the pure dwarves, the Khazad, who see Thorin's kind as half-breed traitors who shared their secrets with the race of Men and forsook Mahal and their ways. And when a Khazad holds a grudge…

Well, there's a reason they say it's easier to move a mountain than a dwarf.

Thorin shakes his head to ward off his meaner thoughts on the subject. "We must call a meeting." His two companions nod in agreement and know the conversation is over… for now.

It turns out Bilbo lives far–at least an hour's walk from the bakery! And the neighborhood is dank and poorly monitored. The smells are a bouquet of foulness that Thorin thinks will stay in his nose forever. A group of women who are scantily dressed, winking and cooing his way and blowing kisses. Not much further into the area, Thorin witnesses a robbery out of the corner of his eye. Then he spies a pair of drunks fighting, drawing a jeering crowd. This was no place for his gentle and small hobbit… or his son.

Especially not his son.

Thorin swears he won't take no for an answer. They are coming home with him tonight, if circumstances allow. And if not, then Thorin was going to stay with them until they could be moved, even if he had to sleep on their doorstep.

But there was hardly a doorstep to begin with.

They finally arrive at what he can only describe as a hovel, where an old, thin man with maybe three teeth sneers at them.

"Wa'cha wan'?" The man growls and grunts as he backs away, ready to run but knowing he wouldn't get far. He settles as he seems to realize this.

Thorin, Nori, and Oin descend, but they let Thorin lead, leaving the man with nowhere to go.

Thorin approaches, his face a cold sheet of steel. “I’m looking for a hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins.”

The man jerks his head quickly in the direction of a rackety wooden fence with its posts rotting at their base. “In the back. I don’ wan’ no trouble.”

Thorin only nods but promises nothing. Nori leads the way, and they come upon a small wooden shack that is *leaning* and trembling in the mild breeze. Thorin nearly faints with impotent rage. His eyes flutter shut as he tries to get his breathing under control, and his fists clench and unclench in a steady rhythm. Oin’s knock on that sorry excuse for a door is what banishes the red from his eyes long enough to gather himself.

A wide eye appears in a crack of the door, and Thorin hears scrambling and the sound of a chain. Bilbo throws the door open, and it’s all Thorin can do to keep from snatching the hobbit into his arms and running away from this awful place.

“Healer Oin! Thorin!” Bilbo looks at each of them, blinking with relief and desperation. “Oh, thank Yavannah, you’ve come! Please help me–my son–”

Oin pushes past Bilbo with a nod. “Aye, that’s why we’re here, lad. Tell me what happened.”

Bilbo dashes after the healer. There really isn’t much room inside, so Nori stations himself at the door while Thorin takes wary steps into this… Anyone could tell that they tried to make this *place* into a home. There are plants, the walls are painted a dull yellow. The mismatched furniture is sized for children and adult men alike. Everything is neat and in its place. But it is freezing, and their little fire was almost out. He notices there aren’t any proper logs in the fireplace, just scraps of wood from a broken chair and twigs.

That one vein on his forehead pulses in warning.

The sound of a moan cut off his violent thoughts. There is a tiny hobbit on a pallet on the ground. His eyes are closed and his brow pinched in pain. His face is pale and has a sheen of sweat on his exposed skin. His shoulder is bandaged quite well, but whatever wound the boy has suffered is probably infected.

“He said he got caught on a nail in the stables yesterday,” Bilbo said with a shuddery breath. “He didn’t tell me. It festered overnight. I’ve been treating it as well as I can. Thank Yavannah you got my message!”

“Message?” Thorin had received nothing of the sort from Bilbo.

Bilbo finally casts him a glance. The hobbit’s worry vanishes to be replaced by a blank look of resignation. “You didn’t get my message.” It wasn’t a question. Bilbo’s nostrils flare, and his eyes flash with a hate that Thorin didn’t think him capable of. But there it was– *Hate.* The look is suddenly gone, and Bilbo looks to his son. “I wondered why you hadn’t arrived sooner…” he mutters.

Thorin is going to find whoever failed to get the message to him and demand his life. “Oin, what can be done?”

The healer tsks and shakes his head. “It’s infected. Are you sure this happened only yesterday?”

Bilbo nods. “We have fast metabolisms. We heal quickly, but we also sicken just as fast.” He drags a hand through his messy curls and sobs. “Please,” he gasps, “I can’t lose him too. Please!”

Before he understands what he’s doing, Thorin kneels before Bilbo and takes his freezing, small hands in his own. “All will be well. You’ll see. Oin?” They both look at the healer, who is rummaging through his medicinal bag. “I will save him or die trying.”

Thorin cups Bilbo’s cheek and makes him meet his eyes. His One’s eyes are bloodshot, and there are tear stains on pale cheeks. Those eyes hold too much sadness and too much loss. “He’s as good as his words, I swear it. I trust him with my life and those of my family.”

Bilbo takes in a shuddering breath and he seems to droop with relief and exhaustion, but places his own hand over Thorin’s that’s still holding his cheek. The pads of those trembling fingers are calloused and firm. “I trust *you* ,” Bilbo replies in a harsh whisper. “I *trust* you,” he repeats to no doubt emphasize that Bilbo does not trust easily.

And what in Doom is Thorin to do with that? The only thing he can say is, “I’m honored.”

Oin unwraps the bandages while little Frodo whimpers. Every sound uttered from the tiny creature makes Thorin’s heart clench. This was an innocent here in pain–in a cold, dank hole because Thorin hadn’t pushed the issue of having Bilbo move in. And why hadn’t he? Because part of him didn’t want to accept a part of Bilbo that frightened him. What a coward he’d been, and now his hobbits were in pain.

His hobbits.

The thought felt so right. If Bilbo is his, then so is Frodo, and he wonders how he ever could have seen it any other way.

Oin waves Thorin over. “I’ll need you to hold him down while I drain the wound.”

Thorin moves into position to hold down his wrists when Bilbo grabs his sleeve.

“Don’t use too much strength, he’s a hobbit… remember.”

Thorin nods. “I’ll keep that in mind.” He’s glad Bilbo mentioned something–not that Thorin would have been rough, but now that he’s holding Frodo’s wrists, he’s worried about breaking his seemingly frail bones. He has no idea how old Frodo is. He stares down at the boy, trying to figure it out and finding it impossible to guess. He could be anywhere from eight to eighteen, and he looks nothing like his father. He has black curly hair instead of the lighter brown of Bilbo. He wonders if their eye color is the same because they don’t share their shape. Bilbo has more rounded features, his nose and cheeks having a soft quality to them.

Frodo is the opposite. Where Bilbo is soft, Frodo is sharp. His nose is smaller, his cheeks shallower, his lips fuller–he almost has an elven look to him. The one thing that Frodo seems to have inherited from his father is the small dimple on his chin.

Frodo's scream of pain cuts off when he swoons immediately–there'd barely been a struggle. Oin makes quick work of draining the wound, cleaning it and then puts a slave with a heavy medicinal scent to it before wrapping it up again in fresh bandages. "That will help fight the infection and numb the area a little. But ye both can't stay here. At least for the boy's sake, he needs to be somewhere warm and clean."

Bilbo's face flushes with obvious shame as he ducks his head and takes a quick glance around, as if to see it through their eyes. He sniffs and nods. "Anything."

Thorin lets go of Frodo and reaches for Bilbo's shoulder. He gives it a gentle but reassuring squeeze. "You and Frodo will take my room."

Bilbo's mouth opens and quickly shuts again. He doesn't look Thorin in the eye when he nods haltingly. "Alright," he whispers.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Bilbo and Frodo move into Thorin's.

Chapter Notes

Longest chapter yet, I think! I was gonna go with a more angsty ending but the boys didn't want that, I guess. lol Enjoy!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin stays the whole time with them until they are ready to transport Frodo. He feels helpless as he watches his One hold back tears and pace the small abode as Oin continues to monitor the boy. He might as well be invisible, sitting there, just watching and waiting for instructions. There's nothing he can do for Frodo, but maybe there is something he can do for Bilbo. He grabs Bilbo by the hand when he passes him once more. Bilbo winces and hisses in pain, and Thorin almost lets him go, wondering if he'd used too much strength. Instead, he looks at Bilbo's hand for any injuries and to his dismay, he finds some blood.

"It's nothing," Bilbo murmurs, his gaze askance.

Thorin brings the small hand closer and inspects the cause of the bleeding. After being picked and bit in his anxiety, Bilbo's left thumb is bleeding slightly. His other fingers are red around the cuticles too. Thorin knows his other hand is in a similar state without having to look. His nephew, Kili, has the same bad habit when he's anxious. Thorin wants to kiss each digit and tell Bilbo everything will be okay. He keeps the hobbit's hand hostage as he rummages through Oin's medical bag for a salve he's used on scraped knees and his own burns over the years.

For some reason, Bilbo still won't look him in the eyes, so he keeps his own gaze locked on what he's doing. Thorin uses a clean applicator to scoop out a small bead's worth of ointment and dabs it gently on each and every fingertip of Bilbo's tiny calloused hands. He's gentle with his ministrations and almost doesn't realize it when he spreads the salve up Bilbo's fingers, massaging the stuff into the skin until he hears a soft, barely audible moan. But it was definitely a moan, stopping Thorin in his tracks.

Thorin sits on a man-sized chair while Bilbo stands before him at eye level. Bilbo's eyes are closed in unmasked bliss, and Thorin feels a tug at his heart so strong that he almost closes the very little distance between them before a small cough breaks the moment's spell.

Bilbo's eyes snap open wide and lock with Thorin's for only a second before they both turn to Oin, who is staring at them with an arched brow and a twinkle in his eye. "I think it's safe to move the lad now. His fever is finally down, and it should stay that way for a while yet."

Bilbo nearly rips his hand out of Thorin's grasp and rubs away his touch on his trousers. Thorin can't help but feel a twinge of disappointment at that.

"Yes, of course." The hobbit's voice is rough and Bilbo clears his throat before he speaks again. "I've already packed some essentials. Ready to go when you are."

Thorin is the one to carefully wrap the boy in thick furs and carry the weightless, young hobbit out of the dilapidated shack, past the landlord, and to the wagon, which Nori and he already prepared.

On the way out, the landlord tries to bark at Bilbo about bringing trouble to his doorstep or something. Thorin doesn't hear what else the landlord says because Bilbo whirls around and points an angry finger at him. "I *paid* you to deliver a message for me," Bilbo hisses with pure venom. "I'd tell you to give me back my coin if I didn't know you already spent it on drink, you selfish orc-son!" Bilbo's landlord looks like he's about to grab him, and Thorin panics only a moment when Bilbo does the unexpected and kicks the landlord with his bare foot right in the shin.

The man goes down with a choked-off scream.

Nori chuckles with a delighted grin, and Oin nods his head in approval as he passes. Thorin would find it humorous, too, if he didn't know what it felt like to be the target of those hobbit feet. The look on Bilbo's face is thunderous as he spins around and stalks to the wagon, ignoring Thorin's helping hand and climbing inside. He still doesn't look at Thorin when he sits and makes an impatient motion with his hands.

"Give me my son," the hobbit demands. Thorin nods silently as he moves the boy from the cradle of his arm into Bilbo's waiting ones.

The ride back to the bakery is mostly silent, with Oin yelling at people to move out of the way and Nori steering the horse through the congested roads. The whole while, Bilbo stares at nothing with only an occasional glance at Frodo's barely visible face to make sure he's still asleep. Bilbo reluctantly gives Frodo back to Thorin when they arrive, knowing Thorin will be gentle but firm with his hold. Bilbo hasn't been able to really think about the baker properly today, his attention completely focused on the wellbeing of his son and the increasing sense of guilt welling up inside him.

He blames himself, of course he does. If Bilbo hadn't been daydreaming like an infatuated tween and acted more like a concerned father should, he would have pestered Frodo about his shoulder as soon as he'd witnessed that first flinch of pain. Bilbo knows that on any other day, he would have fussed about it until Frodo admitted to the injury. But no. He'd ignored the warning signs that something was wrong in favor of thinking about the baker.

The baker, who was not to blame as much as Bilbo, wanted to rage at him for simply existing.

The baker, whom he'd thought had abandoned him like every other person in Bilbo's life.

The baker, who came prepared with a wagon and healer even though he should have been working despite never even receiving Bilbo's plea to help his boy.

The baker, who was giving up his own bed to two beggar-hobbits whom the entire world deemed unfit to exist.

Bilbo laments on how undeserving he is of this man, but again, he doesn't have much room for that kind of thing. He pushes it aside easily once Frodo begins to squirm and moan when Thorin has already placed him in the giant bed. He sees Frodo open his eyes and meet Thorin's gaze. His eyes widen and shift with obvious fear, and Bilbo climbs on the bed quickly to catch Frodo's panicking face.

"It's alright, dear boy," he says quickly with what he hopes is a reassuring smile. "We're safe."

Frodo pants for a moment as the words register. The boy swallows thickly, which prompts Bilbo to ask for water. Oin already has some at hand as he passes the cup to Bilbo, who helps Frodo drink. After a few sips, Frodo settles and falls asleep once more.

Bilbo barely pays attention to the men, who are a flurry of quiet activity, well, as quiet as men can be anyway, while they stomp around in their boots. Still, Bilbo appreciates their attempt at it as they clean and prepare the room. Thorin packs up some things for himself and leaves the door cracked open when he leaves.

Bilbo hears Thorin giving orders to the dwarf that had traveled with them. He hasn't seen a dwarf in years, but he isn't surprised this Nori fellow is in Thorin's employ. Bilbo has some suspicions he'd like confirmed, but it isn't the time to question his savior about the company he keeps.

Thorin orders Nori to move "the hobbit's things out of that shit-hole and bring everything here." Bilbo doesn't interfere. He will do what's best for Frodo, even if blames himself for Frodo's state because he was too in the clouds to notice something was very wrong. And now Bilbo's living with the man he's in love with, who is also his employer and rescuer.

He sits there, staring at the pale face of his boy, his heart heavy with insecurities and just plain foreboding.

This can't end well…

Thorin has seen parts of him he's tried to keep hidden, the parts that fill Bilbo with shame. The poverty and the patheticness that he's tried so hard to escape. But now it was all out in the open. And he worries, now that Thorin has seen how he's been living and has seen Frodo, the man's feelings have changed– *if he felt anything at all to begin with, that is. This* Baggins *has too much* baggage .

He snorts at his silent pun in self-deprecation.

Bilbo sighs. He hasn't been able to meet Thorin's gaze because of this mixture of anger, shame, and fear. But he knows he at least has to thank the baker for everything he's done. He should also, probably, talk to Thorin about whatever it is that's going on between them.

Bilbo decides to wait as long as possible for *that* conversation and see if Thorin brings it up.

The healer gives Bilbo instructions and tells him that Frodo should recover faster now and that he will be staying with Dis should they need to fetch him for any reason. With some last instructions to take care of himself as well, Oin leaves, and Bilbo finds himself breathing just a bit easier.

He takes some time to think about how to face Thorin later.

It's much later, when Frodo is in a deeper sleep, that Bilbo gathers his courage and stands in front of the bedroom door. He knows that he needs to find Thorin, but the thought of leaving the safety of this room fills him with anxiety. Taking a deep breath, he reaches for the handle and slowly opens the door, stepping out into the hallway and carefully listening for any hint of Thorin's whereabouts.

As Bilbo makes his way down the hallway, he hears movement from the living room. He follows the sound, his heart pounding in his chest for reasons he'd rather not think about. However, when he reaches the living room, he is struck by the warm and welcoming ambiance of the room. The living room is adorned with comfortable furniture, plush rugs, and tapestries that cover the walls. The fireplace, the focal point of the room, casts a warm glow on the surroundings. Thorn is making himself a place to sleep on the ground in front of the fireplace, which only adds to the cozy atmosphere of the room. The flames from the fire dance and flicker, illuminating Thorin's face in a warm and inviting glow.

As Bilbo stands there, his gaze fixated on Thorin, he finds himself wondering how he is supposed to deny himself the temptation before him. Thorin's beauty, coupled with the intoxicating heat from the fire, creates an almost irresistible pull toward him. But it doesn't take much to remind Bilbo that his son is ill in the other room. Frodo's happiness and well-being take precedence over his own desires.

He knows that trying to court Thorin could potentially ruin Frodo's best chances at a happy life, and with a heavy heart, he knows that he must make it clear to Thorin that they can only be friends.

Bilbo takes a deep breath and steels himself for the difficult conversation that lies ahead. He knows that it won't be easy, but he also knows that it is the right thing to do for everyone's sake, even Thorin's. Bilbo doesn't deserve half the kindness this man has shown him–he

doesn't deserve him at all. He approaches Thorin and clears his throat, finally catching his attention. And then he grins at Bilbo before schooling his expression. It's too late, though– he's shot Bilbo with it like an expert bowman, and the hobbit stumbles over his suddenly sluggish feet. "Hi," he begins, throat dry and stomach twisting.

"How is Frodo?"

Too kind. This man was much too kind. The sincere concern cracks Bilbo's resolve a bit. "Better. Much better." Bilbo inhales deeply, chest puffing before he lets all his air out in a whoosh. He rocks on his feet and ducks his head– *this is hard. Why is this so hard?* "I have absolutely no idea how I will ever be able to repay you for everything you've done for us."

Thorin shakes his head. "You owe me nothing."

Bilbo huffs. "I'm quite sure I signed a contract that says otherwise."

Thorin looks like he's about to argue as he opens his mouth and closes it several times, until he growls something unintelligible at himself. "You don't owe me anything else outside of that contract. Alright?"

"No. Not at all," Bilbo says with a shrug and shake of his head. "It's far from alright, but what else can I do about it?" He doesn't notice his voice is dripping with increasing resentment. Because Bilbo hates the situation he's in, and he can't lay blame on anyone but himself. Thorin isn't at fault, and Frodo certainly is not at fault–it's Bilbo.

It has to be Bilbo's shortcomings that have led him into this mess of a situation he was just not prepared for.

"You're upset with me," Thorin murmurs, and Bilbo now sees the hurt on his beautiful face. "You have every right to be."

"No, Thorin," he protests. He groans and clenches his fists. "I am grateful to you. I really am."

"But I didn't ask if you wanted to move in…"

Bilbo nods. "Yes, well, I suppose it would have been nice to be included in that decision, but it's the best thing for Frodo. It's just… it's been a long time since I've had to rely on so much charity. But I'll never let *anything* , least of all pride, get in the way of a better future for my son." The floodgates have opened now, and Bilbo straightens his shoulders. "Which brings me to my main concern." He clears his throat and narrows his eyes at Thorin. "I can't bake for you."

Thorin's eyes widen, and his face pales. "Oh Valar, no. Please don't leave me. I need you," the man rasps desperately. "I'll do anything."

"Goodness gracious," Bilbo breathes out harshly. He didn't expect such a romantic plea! His little hobbit heart fills to the brim with love, and he quickly forgets why he was denying them both a happy future together!

“If I have to train yet another piss-poor assistant, I’ll go mad.”

A heavy silence fills the room, save for the fireplace's crackling. Bilbo blinks slowly. “What?”

Thorin rubs the back of his neck and looks away, and big, pleading eyes land on Bilbo.

“Look, I know I can be difficult to work with, but you are the best assistant I’ve ever had. I’ll give you a raise or even settle your debt if you stay.”

“You right ass of a man.” Bilbo wants to slap him or slap himself–he isn’t too sure.

“What?”

Bilbo throws up his hands. “I can’t believe–of *course* I’m not leaving!”

“You're not?”

“No, you troll! I mean that I can’t bake for *you*… ” He trails off as he loses some of his nerve. “ *Just* for you. Like I said I would?” And why does he sound so small all of a sudden?

Thorin’s brow furrows as he thinks, and then smiles with relief. “Oh, *that* . Don’t worry about it. Another time is fine.”

And now *Bilbo* feels like an ass. He dips his gaze to the ground. “No, Thorin,” he says softly. “I mean… ever. We shouldn’t…” he motions between them and then drops his hand limply by his side again. “I shouldn’t–“

“It’s alright, Bilbo,” Thorin says softly and takes a step back. “I understand. It doesn’t matter.”

Bilbo sighs as he feels his eyes begin to burn. It matters. It matters to *Bilbo* . And Thorin being so accepting, almost as if he doesn’t really care if Bilbo could or couldn’t bake for him–that cuts Bilbo too deeply.

“I’ll just have to bake for you instead,” Thorin rumbles low. “If you’ll accept.”

Bilbo whips his gaze up to see a mischievous but somehow also shy smirk on Thorin’s lovely face. His heart skips a beat before it picks up its pace. “I don’t think you understand, um, what-what that means…”

Thorin’s smile widens, and he walks over to Bilbo, who freezes on the spot. The man places a large, warm hand on the hobbit’s shoulder and steers him to the sofa. His touch sends Bilbo’s heart into a dangerous rhythm, he thinks, because now he feels short of breath and the room seems darker around the edges. Then Thorin sits, leaving Bilbo standing just a bit taller than eye level.

Seeing Thorin this close is even more devastating. He can see all the details that make this man so beautiful and dear to him. The gray streaks in his hair, and the crow’s feet at the

corners of his lovely eyes. That big, heavy hand burns straight through his shirt, and Bilbo's knees nearly buckle when Thorin pulls him closer.

When Thorin speaks next, Bilbo is left speechless. "A single flower is the first courting gift among hobbits, to show their regard. Offering food is the second to show they can provide."

Bilbo feels like his eyes are going to pop out of his head. "How…did you…?"

But Thorin continues talking, and his hands travel down Bilbo's arms until he's holding both his hands. "The third is a gift to be worn to show their commitment to the world."

Bilbo shakes his head and huffs. "It was Ori, wasn't it?"

Thorin chuckles. "It was."

He nods back dumbly. "We shouldn't…" he whispers.

"I will court you, Bilbo Baggins." Bilbo has no idea what to say, none, zero, zilch. It's the first time Thorin has used his name. "But not yet."

Blinking dumbly, Bilbo frowns. He has questions. He knows he has questions, but there are too many to choose from at the moment. He swallows hard and hopes something coherent comes out of his mouth when he opens it. "I have a son." *Tremendous* , he thinks with an inward roll of his eyes, *a wordsmith, you are, Bilbo Baggins.*

But Thorin seems to gain some insight into his cluttered mind anyway because he nods gravely. "Then I will have to court you both when the time comes." He straightens and gives Bilbo's hands a gentle squeeze. "He is your priority, as he should be. And I will try my best to show you both that I am sincere in my intentions and that you have nothing to fear."

"Oh," Bilbo replies softly, in a complete daze. "Okay, um, thank you? I should…" he nods in the direction of the bedroom. "I should…"

Thorin smiles again and lets Bilbo go. "Yes, you should. Get some rest… Burglar."

Hearing that moniker again after being called by his name, for once, should bother Bilbo, but it doesn't, not when Thorin has uttered it with that much fondness in his voice. He nearly trips over his feet as he rushes backward to make his escape before his dopey grin can be witnessed. He's successful in keeping it hidden, but when the door to the bedroom closes and Bilbo sees Frodo, so tiny in that enormous bed, his fluttering heart drops into his stomach.

So much can go wrong. So, so much.

Bilbo sags against the door and slides down until his bottom plops on the ground. "Fool of a Baggins," he chides himself, "what have you done now?" It's disheartening, but his lips turn up again without his permission as he thinks about the fact that Thorin Oakenshield wishes to court him sometime in the future. But, he supposes fear and worry can drive him mad later.

For now, he'll revel in the knowledge that the very handsome man he is in love with harbors some romantic feelings for him as well.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your support! If you wanted to check out my other fics or original work, that would be AWESOME and would make my day!

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Frodo is on the mend. Bilbo and Thorin flirt. And Bilbo's suspicions about Thorin and his company are confirmed.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There is an extraordinary flurry of activity at the bakery, as all hands were on deck. Bilbo wakes with a start when the noise reaches its peak. His sensitive ears twitch at the racket going on not too far from the door. He checks in on Frodo who is still warm to the touch and a bit fitful before sluggishly sitting up in the bed.

Thorin's bed, he remembers suddenly with a jolt. A grin splits his face too quickly for him to curb. He closes his eyes and takes a long, slow inhale. It smells like the baker, his nose is happy to catalog a blend of sweet scents that remind him of his favorite pastries and sweet rolls with just a hint of earthy spices that may or may not come from Thorin's hair oil.

A burst of longing makes Bilbo's gut clench, but the sadness that usually comes along with it does not come on as strong as it has before. Because now, Bilbo remembers the evening prior with giddy clarity.

Thorin wishes to *court* him!

ME! Bilbo Baggins. He wishes to court me *!*

A small whimper from Frodo is enough to snap Bilbo out of his warm musings. The boy is still far too pale, and his recent missed meals are starting to show again even though they've been eating proper hobbit meals since Bilbo started working at the bakery. Bilbo sighs and shakes his head. *It's too irresponsible to be thinking of what Thorin smells like, for Yavannas' sake!*

"Good gracious," he whispers suddenly. "What time is it?" The sun was out and there was so much noise. Had Thorin opened the bakery without him?

At that thought, Bilbo rushes to get dressed and cracks the door open.

A peek into the hall shows a stout and short man rummaging about in the kitchen. His back is turned but Bilbo is pretty sure he's never met him before. Bilbo gnaws on his lip nervously before finally braving to exit the bedroom and meet whoever it is that is brewing tea and cooking up a delicious smelling breakfast for a small army.

The front door is suddenly flung open to reveal a very grumpy looking Dwalin who mutters a vague greeting without even looking at Bilbo. Nori enters next and then Ori who show better manners when they nod and smile at Bilbo with a soft spoken “Good morning.” They walk right by him too, however, and enter the kitchen as if it were their own home.

Looking between the bedroom door and the ever-crowding kitchen, Bilbo makes up his mind and follows the guests.

“Hello,” he greets with a timid smile and wave.

The stout fellow looks over his shoulder and Bilbo is only a little surprised at the bright smile of not a man, but another dwarf. “Ah, Master Baggins! Good morning. I made some chamomile tea and breakfast is nearly done.” The dwarf turns back to his cooking–omelets, bacon, potatoes, beans, and an assortment of Thorin’s best pastries are also nearby. “Better get at it before the rest come.”

“His name is Dori,” Ori supplies when Bilbo looks at him for some reassurance. “And this is Nori. They’re my older brothers,” he announces proudly.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you all properly,” Bilbo replies with a small bow and flushed cheeks. “Thank you for your help yesterday, Master Nori.”

Dwalin stares at him hard and Bilbo shuffles uncomfortably under the scrutinizing gaze. “Don’t mind him,” Ori says with a chipper smile. “He’s just wondering how you'll react to knowing my brothers are dwarrows.” He chuckles good naturedly and begins setting the table.

Bilbo smiles and nods. “Well, I’m a bit surprised. Don’t see many dwarrows in Bree much anymore since the Blue Mountains shut its doors, but it’s not entirely uncommon since there’s still some trade between here and there. It really is a pleasure to be getting more acquainted with your family, Ori.”

Dwalin scoffs but nods his head as if accepting Bilbo’s words as true enough. “Can’t be too careful,” he mutters. “You seem alright though,” he looks up to take his tea from Dori but gives Bilbo a pointed glare, “for now.”

Bilbo gulps and gladly accepts his tea.

Dori tsks. “Oh don’t listen to Dwalin. Anyway, it’s quite a surprise to us to see a Hobbit around in a city of Men. I thought Ori said your people migrated to their river folk cousins. The Stirs?”

“Stoors,” Bilbo corrects kindly with a nod and a sad smile. “Um, yes, we did…” he trails off with uncertainty. He’s not ready to talk about that whole nightmare with them just yet. It’s not exactly polite to dump all your trauma on near strangers at the breakfast table. So, he changes the topic. “Bree wasn’t always a city just of men.” They all take it in stride, it seems, which relieves Bilbo just a bit.

“Too true,” Dori replies as he sets plates down full of delicious smelling food for everyone. “I remember seeing more of just about every race here, even passing elves!”

He tries not to stare at the elaborate braids in their hair, beards, and *eyebrows* because Bilbo hates being stared at like he’s part Orc or something, but it’s hard not to. It’s been some time since he’s had any words with a dwarf up close. Plus, he’s a hobbit and so naturally, exceedingly curious about how Ori ended up with two dwarrow brothers.

There’s a bit of chitchat and mentions of the weather before Ori asks about how Frodo is doing.

“Oin and Dis should be here soon to check on yer lad,” Nori says as he helps his older brother with the dishes.

As if on cue, the door bursts open again, this time revealing Oin and Dis.

“How’s my patient?!” Oin all but screams making them all jump.

“Probably dead of a heart attack now,” Dwalin growls back loudly just as Oin puts in his ear trumpet.

“WHAT?!” Oin roars and starts to rush to Frodo’s room when Bilbo intercepts him, arms outstretched as wide as possible. Poor Frodo *would* have a heart attack if someone he didn’t know suddenly showed up trying to resuscitate him.

“He’s fine!”

Oin stops abruptly and narrows his eyes at Dwalin. “Thick headed idiot!” Dwalin grins and then Oin looks back to Bilbo. “Fine, eh?”

“Well,” Bilbo amends haltingly, “still running warm but definitely better than yesterday.”

“Good. Has he woken at all?”

Just as Bilbo tries to reply, Dwalin interrupts. “Well, if he ain’t dead of shock from all that hollering you’ve been doing since ye arrived, he’s certainly awake now!”

Oin tuts and sends a quick glare to Dwalin and finally pushes Bilbo aside, which makes the hobbit yelp. Dis follows but stops to smile at Bilbo. “Don’t you worry. We will take care of him now. You should go see Thorin before the rush.”

“But,” Bilbo protests, “what if Frodo wakes up? He won’t recognize any of you and–”

“We’re in the same building, Bilbo,” she says gently. “We will come get you as soon as Frodo shows signs of waking. I promise.”

Guilt and worry chews on Bilbo’s nerves as he lingers near the now open bedroom door. Inside, amidst the organized chaos, Dis and Oin, with gentle hands and kind hearts, take care of his injured boy. They tend to his wound and make sure he is as comfortable as possible,

given the circumstances. Dis finally shoos him away and so does Dori when Bilbo tries to help clean.

To be quite honest, it's not just worry for Frodo that makes him hesitate at the threshold of the bakery. He's nervous about seeing Thorin. He's not sure how he should approach or act now that Thorin has shown interest in, *goodness me,* courting him. Bilbo tries to tame his curls and wipes his sweaty palms on his trousers and finally braves entering.

Out in the main area of the bakery, Fili and Kili, Ori, and even the formidable Thorin, are kneading dough, shaping loaves, and coordinating the baking process. Each one has their own unique skill to bring to the table, making the bakery a symphony of collaboration and skillful craftsmanship. Bilbo is surprised to see Fili and Kili actually working diligently instead of trying to shuck off duties or play pranks as is their usual prerogative.

To Bilbo's utmost horror, he sees Thorin, with his imposing presence, is simply *assaulting* the dough! The man punches and grabs with vigorous fury and Bilbo has *never* seen him this stressed, not even when he'd stolen that seven tier cake!

"Thorin, what *are* you *doing* ?!" He cries, aghast, and runs to grab onto Thorin's arm.

"Bilbo?" Thorin pants out his name in surprise when Bilbo finally gets a good grip on Thorin's wide wrist. And Bilbo needs a second to recuperate from the way his name is said because it sounds too close to how he's heard it in his filthiest dreams.

"Thorin! I can't believe you!" He glares at Thorin and shakes a scolding finger at him. "You should know better, Thorin Oakenshield! How could you! Don't you know that over-kneading the dough will ruin the bread! It will lose its light and airy crumb! Uneven crumb structure, Thorin! This is a disaster, you cannot in good conscience use this. For shame!"

Thorin huffs and stops brutalizing the innocent dough but doesn't move away, in fact, he twists and pulls his hand so that they are now palm to palm. "Why are you up, amral? You should be resting."

Bilbo sputters at the gentle touch and the endearment. He wants to know what *amral* means so badly. He knows it isn't Westron or any kind of Elvish he's familiar with. He does have a theory of what language it is though. It's most likely a term of endearment but he's not sure he's ready to know its exact translation. *Maybe it means burglar in whatever language that is. Yeah, that's probably it.*

"Why should I be the one resting?" Bilbo questions instead. "I'm not the one that's hurt."

Thorin raises his other hand, still dusted with flour and lays it over Bilbo's–trapped between Thorin and wholly encompassed by his warmth. His eyes go wide when he realizes, again, just how much bigger Thorin's hands are compared to his. This man could *break* him in two so easily and Bilbo would thank him for it.

“Yesterday was quite the trial you went through, and you must be worried sick over your boy. Go be with him.”

Bilbo finally feels courageous enough to gaze into his eyes. The look Thorin is giving him is so fond and worried that it melts Bilbo's heart. “Um, Th-thank you for your concern, Master Baker, but I was hired to work here and that’s what I intend to do.” Dis was right, he needs something to do with his hands. He knows that merely waiting and worrying about Frodo's condition will drive him to the brink of despair, so he sees this as a way to channel his restless energy into something productive. That or spiral from one intrusive thought to the next. Those buggers breed like rabbits and then Bilbo would *really* get into a state.

He sighs and nods his head to the table. “And I really can’t let you ruin that. You’re in one of *those* moods and that means I need to watch over you like a hawk because we both know you’ll regret the batches and just throw them out before they touch a customer's lips. And that is *wasteful!* A hobbit has a duty to not waste a single scrap!”

Thorin lowers his head and smiles sadly. After a long stare that rakes Bilbo’s form from toes to curly head, Thorin shrugs. “Are you saying you can do this better than I?”

Bilbo is reminded they are not alone here but he refuses to witness the other’s reactions to his horrid flirting skills. “Maybe I am.” He juts his chin out and bounces on his toes with a sniff.

“Then by all means,” Thorin nearly sings, and bows away gracefully while extending his hand to the table. “Teach me how it’s done.”

Bilbo’s eyes flutter with confusion. Was this Thorin actually flirting back? “Uh-heh, well, I mean… alright.” And that’s how Bilbo ends up on a stool with Thorin pressed behind him, looking over his shoulder as Bilbo *teaches* him how to properly knead dough, which Bilbo *knows* the Master Baker has plenty of experience with.

Just before he is about to proceed, he notices three other sets of eyes staring at them and Bilbo freezes. A small growl from behind him is enough for the rest of the company to mind their own work, which they do with smirks and batting eyelashes.

Bilbo chuckles nervously. *So they know.* Somehow, his coworkers know there is *something* going on between them and they seem, well, *pleased* about it. Bilbo isn’t sure how to feel about that. It leaves him exposed and embarrassed, but it also leaves him with a fuzzy, warm gratitude knowing that it is actually okay. It makes him feel even more accepted. Makes his hope flare that this thing between him and Thorin is real. A little too real.

With determination, Bilbo pulls on his apron, hastily correcting the twists that had formed in the fabric. His heart aches for his unconscious boy, and the only way he can keep the panic at bay is by immersing himself in the rhythmic kneading of dough. But it's hard to concentrate on that or Frodo because Thorin is moving in right behind him, so close he is dragging his apron across Bilbo’s shoulders and his entire back. Thorin looms over his shoulder and stares at his work.

“It’s a bit unnerving having you back there waiting for me to make a mistake, you know,” Bilbo snarks.

The warmth on his back intensifies when Thorin draws ever-closer. The man snickers right by the point of Bilbo's ear, which makes a shiver travel down his spine. "And how am I supposed to learn if I can't see what you're doing?"

Bilbo can smell the cinnamon on Thorin's sweet breath, and when his nose decides to chase the scent he goes cross eyed at seeing how close Thorin's lips actually are. He feels suddenly dizzy and has to turn away again before he swoons face first into the dough. Never, he's *never* been so affected by anyone before. And, damn it all, Thorin is still a head taller even when Bilbo is on a stool! *How is that fair?*

He stutters nervously. "You, um, do you really want me to, erm, teach you? I mean, you know how to do it. Obviously." He barks out a laugh that sounds too forced and loud. "I mean," he clears his throat. "You *do* know what you're doing."

"Yes," Thorin almost purrs, "I do. But I'd like to see your other skills at work, Master Burglar. I don't just let anyone near my ovens, you know."

For a moment, Bilbo wants to giggle because it *almost* seems like Thorin is referring to something other than ovens, but then his breath catches. *Oh.* Thorin is letting him in. Bilbo goes momentarily breathless at this incredible turn of events. This man with so many walls, who doesn't trust easily, is inviting Bilbo - *who's burgled him* - in!

"Thorin, are you actually going to let me bake properly? Not just measure, Burglar, light the fires, Burglar–"

"Hush you." A large warm hand rests on Bilbo's shoulder and squeezes. "Walk me through it as if I know nothing at all. From start to finish."

"Ooo," Kili jeers, "Bilbo is getting tested!"

A small cloud of flour appears when Fili smacks the back of his brother's head.

Right. They were not alone.

"Fili, Kili!" Thorin barks. "Go out back and wait for our delivery."

Kili begins to protest. "But it's not delivery day–"

Another plume of flour appears after a smacking sound and a muttered "Let's go," from Fili.

Ori coughs into his fist to hide a laugh. "I've got the front!"

Thorin nods. "Thank you, Ori."

And Ori leaves as well.

And *now*. They *are* alone.

Bilbo takes a deep breath, feeling a mix of excitement and nervousness as he stands before the counter.

“At your convenience, Master Burglar.”

Bilbo gulps.

"Alright, Thorin, just watch and learn," he says, trying to sound confident despite the fluttering in his chest. "Kneading dough is an art, you see? You want to start with a nice, soft dough, like this one." He gestures to the dough resting on the table, its surface slightly sticky to the touch. “"You push away with the heels of your hands, just like this. And then fold it back over itself."

“Show me.”

“I just did.”

“No,” Thorin emphasizes and offers his hands on either side of Bilbo. “ *Show* me.”

Bilbo gulps again.

Thorin leans in, his presence overwhelming. He guides Thorin's hands to the dough, showing him the proper technique and Thorin goes willingly, hands pliant and large, and warm, and rough, and, *and* Bilbo is enjoying this *immensely* .

Thorin follows Bilbo's guidance, their hands moving together in rhythm. Bilbo tries to concentrate on the dough, but he can't ignore the closeness of Thorin, the way his breath brushes against Bilbo's ear as he kneads.

"And how do I know when it's ready?" Thorin's voice is now a soft murmur, so close that it sends a shiver down Bilbo's spine.

"Well, you want it to be smooth and elastic," Bilbo manages to reply, his heart pounding in his chest. "Like a soft, pillowy cloud. You want it to feel alive and responsive under your touch."

"Responsive, you say?" Thorin's tone is playful, and Bilbo knows he's teasing–flirting even. And it’s working because Bilbo is sweating and it has nothing to do with the heat of the ovens.

"Yes, um, responsive to the kneading... the love and care you put into it, you know?" Bilbo stammers, trying to regain composure. *Why am I like this?*

"Love and care, hmm. Yes." Thorin's words send a rush of emotions through Bilbo, and he can't help but blush even more.

Are they even talking about dough anymore?

“Exactly,” Bilbo breathes out. “You’re, um, a very good student.”

A throat clears and they both look up to find Dis smirking at them with a raised brow. “Frodo is–”

She doesn’t have to finish her sentence. Bilbo slips off the stool, right through Thorin’s arms and tosses his apron aside, rushing out with a muttered, awkward apology. He tries his best to hide the tumultuous feelings within but he doesn't think that he’s doing a great job because Thorin seems to want to follow, but he nods and says a soft “Of course,” instead.

Bilbo's heart is thumping at an impressive speed with excitement from what just happened and relief as he rushes into the room. There, he sees Frodo sitting up and eating soup, a weak but genuine smile on his face. "Frodo!" Bilbo exclaims, trying to contain his emotions, but tears of happiness well up in his eyes. "Oh, my dear boy, I'm so glad you're awake. How do you feel?"

Frodo's voice is soft and frail as he greets Bilbo with affection. “Much better now.” His smile falters a little. “Are you going to scold me?”

Bilbo huffs. He should scold the boy. He should! But he looks so pale and hungry that he truly doesn’t have the heart for it. “Maybe later. When you’re better and feeling at your happiest, then, I will scold you until I turn as blue as a berry.” He sighs and his shoulders sag because, damn it all, he was so scared he’d lose Frodo too. It was too much to take, to even *think* about. “Just promise me that you’ll *say* something to me next time.” He looks at Frodo, and he knows his eyes are misting over because Frodo’s are too. “Please,” he whispers.

“I promise. Really.”

And Bilbo believes him.

It’s after Frodo’s third helping that he starts to truly look healthier, and the boy's curiosity is back in full. “So, we’re in the baker’s house?! Oh, I can smell the bakery from here! Can I go see it?”

“Absolutely not.”

“But Bilbo!”

“Maybe tomorrow.”

Frodo pouts but relents, then a mischievous smirk appears. “ *So* , how are things going with *Thorin?* ”

“Oh don’t start. Do you think I have time to flirt when my boy is on Death’s door?!” Apparently he does and this knowledge helps his guilty conscience *none-at-all* . But he doesn’t want to think about that right now because the flirting has been so damn nice. He doesn’t want to lose it. He doesn’t want to lose Frodo. He doesn’t want to lose his chance at being with Thorin some day. He doesn’t know how long Thorin will wait. And for the millionth time, he shouldn’t be thinking of this at all because he has a *son* who comes first.

“I’m fine,” Frodo complains.

“But you were *not* fine,” Bilbo snaps. “Could have been so much worse! It was a miracle help came, Frodo. You could have died. All because–”

“I thought you weren’t going to scold me yet?” Frodo widens his big blue eyes and pouts.

Bilbo holds his hands up in surrender and sighs. “Fine.” And with that, both topics are evaded successfully.

Not long after, Frodo falls asleep again but this time peacefully and Bilbo finds solace in the bakery once more with menial tasks like cleaning the counters, arranging display trays, and fetching ingredients. He tries extra hard to be pleasant and use his hobbit conversation skills to gossip with the regulars. He works diligently, trying to keep himself composed, muttering under his breath about handsome bakers who can’t seem to understand how deep Bilbo is in and how frightening daydreaming a happy life can be.

Most importantly, Bilbo keeps away from Thorin, which tears his heart to shreds every time he turns away from the baker. And it scares him, Yavanna, it scares him to death every time he looks away from every smile Thorin keeps trying to throw at him. Thorin will lose interest at this rate. He shouldn't care. He shouldn't. But he *does*.

In the midst of the work day, Dwalin, Nori, and Bofur help move Bilbo and Frodo’s belongings to the attic space of the bakery. As the day wears on, the bakery becomes a hub of camaraderie and purpose. The boisterous bunch work with a newfound sense of determination, not just for the success of their business but also to lift the spirits of Bilbo, to his immense surprise. It is so touching. They hardly know him to be more than ‘the kitchen thief’ and they *just* met Frodo who, to his healer’s dismay, had woken up from his nap only to jump out of bed and begin introducing himself to each and every person and of course charming them in the process. Bilbo has no idea what he’s done to deserve such acceptance and good luck, but he thanks the Vallar for it anyway.

Throughout the day, Thorin observes Bilbo from afar, his stern demeanor softened by a mix of admiration and concern. He realizes that Bilbo needs the outlet, and while he still worries about the hobbit, he also sees the strength and resilience that lay beneath Bilbo's gentle exterior. He grows more in love with Bilbo everyday and he doesn’t know what to do about it.

First, Thorin hadn’t felt ready. Then they both seemed ready. And yesterday Bilbo had practically told him he didn’t think they should even *try* being together, which was a blow but understandable under the circumstances.

It isn’t like Bilbo seems averse to the idea entirely. His One just seems apprehensive because he doesn’t trust Thorin yet. As much as it hurts to think about, it’s exactly what Thorin would do if their circumstances were reversed. When Vili, Dis’ husband died, Thorin had put a stop

to his own selfish desires, including shoving all thoughts of finding a One or his ancestral home.

Thorin had said he'd court Bilbo when the time was right, *but when will that be? When Frodo gets better? When they move into the attic? When Frodo starts to work here?*

It doesn't matter, Thorin will wait. But he doesn't want things to go back to how they'd been. With him ignoring Bilbo and being only his *employer* . It is all a tangled mess. Bilbo is wary of mixing work and romance. The power distribution is all in Thorin's favor. So, Thorin knows… he knows he has to wait. But in the meantime, he wants Bilbo to treat him as a friend and hopefully come to know that he is safe with Thorin. That Thorin would never leave him, that they were One, that it didn't matter any more whether he paid his debt or not because Thorin would care for him and his son, and provide like he's always provided for his family and his people.

In all honesty, Thorin is a bit disappointed with himself for this morning's attempt to get Bilbo's mind off his worries… he'd obviously come on too strong. Because Bilbo was now keeping his distance and avoiding his gaze.

Thorin sighs and inwardly calls himself an idiot. He must be patient with Bilbo. Patient but persistent, was what Dis had advised.

"He's worth waiting for, yes, but he is also worth fighting for. Keep that balance, and you'll have your hobbit in your arms in no time at all."

Thorin agrees. It would be painful, already was painful, but the reward would be Bilbo's feelings returned some day… in theory.

As the sun begins to set, they sit down together in the closed bakery, sharing a meal, and raising their mugs in a toast to Frodo's swift recovery. Bilbo feels a mix of gratitude and exhaustion as he gazes around the table. Bombur has arrived as well with more food to feed the growing number of people that just seem to keep coming. The kind chef forgives Bilbo on the spot when he tries to apologize.

Bilbo, regardless of a quick forgiveness, tells Bombur, "Now that I am employed, I'll be paying you back, of course. I just need a rough estimate of the, um, value that I, erm, took from you."

"Ach," Bombur waves a hand dismissively, "Thorin took care of that already." The man excuses himself to continue working in the kitchen and leaves Bilbo to just blink at a bare wall for a few stunned minutes.

Thorin had paid his debt already? But he does not remember Bombur's debt being added to their contract. He resolves to talk to Thorin about it later and instead tries to get to know everyone. The rush of activity, and merry mood, and Frodo's quick healing has given him a temporary reprieve from his worries, but it has also taken a toll on his emotions. He's exhausted, a bit confused, but overall Bilbo is grateful.

He thinks about the new camaraderie and support that surrounded him today. Could it be they've stumbled into a new found family among these people? Maybe it was too soon to tell, and maybe it would all be taken away soon, as things tended to go in Bilbo's life, but he knows he will try his best to make it last.

Regardless, Bilbo knows he can finally find some solace and purpose in the lovingly kneaded dough and the warmth of the bakery's ovens–and a baker's kind, blue eyes. Handsome man with a heart of gold. A man who was so respected by his community and friendly with all races. And that man wanted *him,* Bilbo? It did seem like a prank, but it got a sad chuckle out of him anyway. Because it was funny, wasn't it?

A good man, fancying a tiny, weak, poor, little halfling–

"Bilbo!" Frodo's voice rings out with excitement from beside him. "Did you hear that? They're all related!"

Bilbo nods, as if he'd been fully attentive the entire time, though his attention had momentarily wandered to darker musings. Then, a sudden realization dawns upon him, and he comes to an abrupt halt. "Wait. All of you?" His gaze sweeps across the assembled faces, taking in the subtle resemblances and the more pronounced differences. The pieces finally fall into place, and he confirms his suspicion. "You're dwarrow-men."

"And dwarrow-women," Dis and Gloin's wife, Unn, say simultaneously and then cackle as they throw back their ales.

Bilbo's eyes meet Thorin's gaze, the man's expression expectant, waiting for Bilbo's response. Bilbo takes a moment to take in Thorin's features again. His nose is a bit larger than most. His ears are quite round and big as well. The braids. The stocky stature. He's shorter than average for a man as well. And he does not snub his nose at those smaller than himself. The muttered curses in Khuzdul. All the signs were there and Bilbo had been piecing the puzzle that was Thorin Oakenshield for some time. If Thorin thinks that Bilbo is put off by the knowledge then he is very mistaken. A warm smile creeps across Bilbo's features, mirrored by Thorin's own relieved grin.

"It is not widely known," Thorin begins, his tone serious and measured, "which is why I ask that you keep this information a closely guarded secret."

Bilbo's nod is accompanied by a subdued understanding. Yet, it is Frodo who vocalizes their commitment, his voice firm but compassionate. "We promise. We understand the weight of secrets, especially those tied to the Beacons." Frodo slumps on his stool, his hand finding Bilbo's to offer a reassuring squeeze. "We've faced challenges that demanded silence, too."

Thorin nods gravely at Frodo but Bilbo notices he won't meet Frodo's eyes. Thorin's acknowledgment is solemn, and though he avoids Frodo's gaze, there's a profound respect in his stance. "This is why I believe you will uphold your word. We want *both* of you to know," he pauses, glancing at Dis who nods in encouragement, "that you are now safe within these walls. You have my protection, my assurance." He extends his arms in a sweeping gesture that encompasses the entire gathering. Their eyes meet, and Bilbo senses a newfound connection to this group, a sense of belonging he hadn't anticipated.

A chorus of smiles, nods, and uplifted cups follows Thorin's words, an unspoken affirmation of unity and acceptance. "We look after our own," Thorin's voice is strong, unwavering, echoed by the murmurs of agreement that ripple through the room. "And it is my hope that, in time, you will come to see us all as family."

A hearty cheer rings out, and the air is charged with a shared sense of purpose. "Cheers! Hear, hear!" the voices blend in harmony, a joyful tribute to the bonds being forged. Bilbo raises his mug, his heart full, his eyes meeting Frodo's with a silent promise to embrace the newfound family that has opened its arms to them both. This truly was a new beginning for Frodo, and for Bilbo too. He just wishes he can believe that it will last. Whatever Thorin may feel for Bilbo, this could all come crashing down around them, again. All he can do is wait for Thorin to make the next move. If he never did, then all could stay the same–all could be safe. But if Thorin made true on his promise to court him, Bilbo knows he will not have the fortitude to say no. If he snubs the baker, he could ruin everything regardless.

Thorin's gaze, soft yet intent, finds Bilbo. A smile plays upon his lips, a tender expression that brings forth a blush on his nose. Bilbo returns the smile, his heart fluttering with a mixture of affection and trepidation as his ears burn. He then looks at his son beside him who, despite his wound, looks the happiest Bilbo has ever seen him.

Yes. Bilbo will definitely accept his courting. No doubt about it now. And he's going to damn well try his best to make it *last.* Decision finally made, Bilbo was suddenly hoping Thorin would start courting him sooner rather than later.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience! I hope you enjoyed the chapter!
A special thanks to all of you who have shared my original works as well!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Four days breeze by after Frodo's injury in the stables, leaving him nursing a troublesome shoulder. But being a sprightly fifteen-year-old hobbit meant quick healing, thanks to his fast hobbit metabolism. He's ready to work, no matter how hard Bilbo tries to delay it.

"You're still healing," Bilbo frets, trying to fix his unruly curls in the mirror.

Despite Bilbo's attempts to avoid talking about the baker, it is as obvious as an oliphant that he is smitten beyond help. But Frodo knows Bilbo doubts himself a lot. Even though his dad is brave and adventurous, those doubts linger around him.

Frodo tests his arm, feeling only a bit of soreness. "Healer Oin said I can start working, just not to lift anything too heavy. And I've got to learn, right? I won't be a bother, I promise!"

Eventually Bilbo sighs and catches Frodo's gaze in the mirror. "Oh, not that face! Fine! Alright, I guess it's time to show you the ropes."

"Yes!"

"But promise me not to push yourself, Frodo."

"I promise."

"I mean it."

"Yes, dad!" That always brought a smile to Bilbo's face.

The idea of working in a proper kitchen, with proper supplies and loads of ingredients, feels like stepping into a whole new world of endless possibilities. And now that they aren't scraping by or doing dodgy stuff for a living, Frodo feels relieved. No more worrying about Bilbo resorting to shady work or getting into trouble that he couldn't shake off. That fear of Bilbo vanishing from his life, leaving him all alone, doesn't sting as much now.

They finally have a safe place, a place where they can build a steady life without constant hunger and danger around every corner.

And then there is the baker.

Frodo is itching to get to know the man who has turned Bilbo's head and heart to mush. Thorin has already earned points aplenty, especially for saving his life. Frodo reminds himself that he still needs to thank Thorin personally for all his help.

As they head towards breakfast, Bilbo walks with a hint of paranoia. There is a twitchiness to him that makes Frodo narrow his eyes. Breakfast is already laid out for them, but the one who prepared it is absent, as usual. The baker is always up before them and generously makes enough food for them as well.

Bilbo tuts, and serves Frodo while muttering about stone-headed, handsome bakers. “I keep telling the stubborn man we can cook for ourselves. I should be the one cooking breakfast for him.”

It’s obvious that the baker is equally gone on Bilbo, no matter how stoic and reserved he acts. Thorin is a man of few words, and he certainly keeps his emotions closely guarded, but his actions speak volumes. They have few friends in the world left, he and Bilbo. Those friends had been hard won through adversity and shared grief. These new friends, however, they had no reason to take them in and show them kindness, yet they continued to do so.

Really, they are the luckiest Hobbits in Arda to have found themselves with such honorable and loyal folk. The bakery is a far nicer place to work in than the inn, and Frodo won’t be stuck working in the stables anymore. Most of all, there’s room for Frodo to work his way up and become a baker, himself!

After cleaning the dishes, they make their way to the bakery. However, at the door, Bilbo noticeably hesitates, clearly nervous. Frodo doesn’t have the heart to tease him about it.

Bilbo takes a deep breath and opens the door, leading Frodo into the aromatic embrace of the bakery. The warm, fragrant air envelopes them, filled with a variety of sweet scents that make Frodo’s stomach rumble even though his belly is full from his recent meal.

As they step further in, Frodo’s eyes land on the baker, hard at work with the morning preparations. Thorin stands at a big wooden table, sleeves rolled up, spreading flour across it. Bilbo doesn’t rush to announce their arrival. Instead, he watches Thorin for a moment with a small appreciative smile curling his lips.

Thorin’s face is serious, his jaw sharp, but his blue eyes carry a welcoming warmth. Frodo knows the baker is not much for chit-chat, and the man exudes a confident, almost regal vibe. He nudges Bilbo’s arm and raises his eyebrows playfully. Bilbo startles and gives Frodo a look, clearing his throat, and inadvertently catching Thorin’s attention.

“Good morning,” Bilbo offers, a touch of pink creeping into his cheeks.

“Morning,” Thorin replies with a polite smile, setting down the rolling pin and wiping his hands. He glances towards Frodo and nods. "You seem well today, Master Frodo," he notes, directing a polite smile at the young hobbit.

“Much better,” Frodo agrees with a grin. “I’m ready to learn, Mister Oakenshield. I promise to do my best!”

“Glad to hear it,” Thorin says with a warmer smile and then looks at Bilbo again. “You will oversee his training, Bilbo?”

Bilbo actually shuffles his feet. “Are you sure? I know you like things done a certain way.”

Frodo can’t help but smirk as he notices the faint blush creeping up the tips of Bilbo’s ears. It’s rare he sees his dad so flustered, and Frodo finds it rather amusing.

Thorin shrugs. “I trust you,” he says simply and then continues working without another word.

Frodo hears his dad’s breath hitch, and he watches as Bilbo stands there utterly stumped. He stares at Thorin, his lips parted, and he’s not sure what to do with his hands. It’s pretty hilarious. Frodo tries to suppress a grin and nudges Bilbo again.

“Um, th-thank you. I’ll get right to training him then.”

Thorin doesn’t look up again, but nods his approval. “Very well.”

Frodo grins, and Bilbo takes a deep breath to compose himself before shifting his focus to Frodo. “Alright, my boy, let’s get started.”

Training is simple enough, with Frodo assisting in any way he can, and helping behind the counter during peak hours. The bakery’s rhythm turns out to be fast and energizing. Frodo loves it. Amid his assigned duties, Frodo seizes every chance to observe Thorin. Whether it’s while replenishing the flour or arranging the display of freshly baked pastries, he watches the baker with an almost studious gaze. The way Thorin tends to his creations, a methodical approach tinged with tenderness. It’s so obvious that the man enjoys and is proud of his work. He truly is a master and Frodo longs to learn from him.

Occasionally, Thorin catches Frodo observing but chooses not to comment, responding instead with a raised eyebrow or a weak attempt at a smile. Frodo senses the baker’s discomfort with his presence, though he can’t fathom the reason behind it. His best guess is that Thorin feels awkward around those he doesn’t know well. Determined to change this perception, Frodo silently resolves to bridge the gap.

Midday arrives, offering an opportune moment as Thorin steps outside the back door for a breath of fresh air. Frodo seizes the chance, assisting Bilbo and then slipping outside through the back door, careful to avoid his dad’s notice, aiming directly for the spot where Thorin sits.

Thorin is perched on a barrel, an untouched sandwich and ale resting on his lap. Frodo approaches, perhaps a bit too quiet.

Thorin leaps off the barrel, his lunch and drink tumbling to the ground, a cacophony of clattering noises echoing in the air. They share a moment of awkward silence, both stunned—Frodo with wide-eyed horror and Thorin with a forlorn pout.

“Sorry!” Frodo rushes to apologize. “Hey, at least part of it is still on the plate! It might still be good–”

Before Frodo can finish, a flock of ravens swiftly descends upon the fallen feast, their loud caws and flapping wings resonating in the sudden chaos. They peck and thrash around, then fly away with everything but the plate and mug, leaving the Thorin and Frodo staring at the now barren ground.

Thorin glances at Frodo with an arched brow. “You were saying?”

“… Hmm. That’s unfortunate,” Frodo murmurs, his enthusiasm deflating. “I’m so sorry, Mister Oakenshield. I’ll make you a new sandwich!” A ruined meal is one of the worst things a Hobbit can experience! What a waste! But Frodo senses the baker’s reluctance to cause any inconvenience, and it weighs heavily on him.

“It’s all right,” Thorin sighs, though his expression betrays his true feelings. He looks really sad when he adds, “That was the last of the ham.” Thorin brushes off his trousers, turning his focus to Frodo. Despite his fly-away lunch, he offers Frodo a reserved smile. “How have you been settling in?”

A wave of relief floods Frodo as he realizes Thorin is not furious about the lunchtime mishap. “Thank you for not being upset, Mister Oakenshield,” Frodo mumbles.

Thorin’s gaze goes from confused to concern and then finally softens to Frodo’s growing relief, and he nods, shifting the topic again. “How’s your first day going?”

Frodo grins, thankful for the change in conversation. He doesn’t enjoy recalling how previous employers treated him and his dad for causing trouble. “It’s been really great! Dad’s showing me everything, and the bakery is amazing! Though...” He hesitates, a hint of discomfort clear. “We do feel awful about taking your room.”

Thorin’s response is immediate, accompanied by a reassuring smile. “Nonsense. It was my pleasure to offer it. Don’t worry about that. Besides, there’s a solution in the works.”

"Oh, that's very kind of you to say," Frodo responds with a bright grin. “We appreciate all your help, truly, Mister Oakenshield. Thank you for this opportunity. I’m already learning so much.”

Thorin looks away but nods, awkwardly shuffling his feet and offering no immediate response. Frodo can't be sure, but he thinks the baker is embarrassed, which solidifies Frodo’s impression of the dwarrow-man. A guarded individual with a kind heart, just like his dad.

The silence hangs heavy, and Frodo senses Thorin’s continued discomfort. “I wish we could make it up to you somehow,” Frodo tries again, his tone soft and genuine.

“Please don’t worry yourself,” Thorin mutters with a dismissive wave, his gaze flickering uneasily towards Frodo.

A sudden spark of an idea sends Frodo jumping in with an excited shout, startling the baker with wide eyes. “I know what I can do!”

“Oh, no, like I said, it’s fine, really–” Thorin begins, trying to dissuade Frodo’s enthusiasm.

“I could help you with courting my dad!” Frodo interjects with unrestrained zeal, his eyes shining with newfound purpose.

Thorin blinks, obviously caught off guard, and his eyes widen slowly. “That would actually be very welcomed,” he admits with a shy smile.

Frodo can barely contain his enthusiasm. His eyes sparkle with newfound determination, and a wide grin spreads across his face. This was going to be great!

Chapter End Notes

I know it's a small chapter but I just wanted to show proof that this story is not abandoned. But it is slow moving for me! I'm trying!

Comments are very motivating... just saying! XD

And I wouldn't mind a co-writer!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bakery's usual symphony of buzz and chatter fades into silence, catching Bilbo off guard. As he wraps up a cheerful exchange with a customer, his glance sweeps the familiar space, expecting the usual hubbub, but it's eerily deserted—no Thorin's confident baritone or Frodo's never-ending questions.

With a puzzled furrow creasing his brow, Bilbo strides through the bakery, eyes darting around in search of his elusive son. Spotting Fili, meticulously arranging flour bags, Bilbo diverts toward him, a tinge of worry shadowing his expression.

"Fili, sorry to butt in. Have you seen Frodo around? Can't seem to find him," Bilbo asks, a touch of concern coloring his voice.

"Ah, yeah! Saw him tailing Thorin out back," Fili responds, returning to his task with a knowing grin, as if privy to a secret."

"Thanks, Fili," Bilbo responds, a knot of worry tightening in his stomach. Had Frodo landed in trouble for something? While Thorin was never unkind, Frodo took criticisms to heart, especially if they came from someone he admired. Bilbo knew that Thorin's straightforward manner could sometimes feel more severe than intended.

Trying to shake off the uneasy feeling, Bilbo dismisses the worrisome thoughts. Perhaps Frodo was simply trying to build a rapport with the baker. Bilbo had advised his son to give Thorin space, considering the man's difficulty warming up to newcomers. Why couldn't Frodo just heed his advice?

Then, a more daunting possibility creeps into Bilbo's mind, topping his list of fears. Could Frodo be meddling in Bilbo's, well, potentially non-existent love life? The notion rattles him, yet a hidden part of his heart secretly wishes for it. But Bilbo quickly scolds himself for indulging in such whims. He staunchly believes that it's wise to steer clear of romantic involvements, especially within the workplace, particularly when the person in question is both his employer and landlord.

Bilbo cautiously approaches the back door, intrigued by the contagious sounds of laughter seeping through. The melodic symphony of Frodo's cheerful giggles intermingled with a deeper, comforting chuckle sparks a skip in his heartbeat. Anxious not to disrupt their camaraderie, he tiptoes closer, yearning to catch a glimpse of their moment.

Peering through a small window, Bilbo's eyes widen at an unexpected scene: Thorin and Frodo seated on barrels, relishing meat pies, faces lit with shared smiles and animated conversation. A wave of relief washes over Bilbo as he observes the two relishing each other's company. He had been troubled by Thorin's recent behavior around Frodo, uncertain

of the baker's sentiments towards his son, even though Bilbo knew Thorin had played a pivotal role in saving Frodo's life—an immense debt Bilbo may never repay.

When they first arrived here, Thorin had kept a respectful distance. The baker remained kind, maintaining a polite and warm welcome toward Frodo, displaying remarkable patience with the lad. Yet, he also seemed reserved around the young Hobbit, communicating only in passing pleasantries and assigning tasks.

Bilbo had previously feared that Frodo's mere presence might alter Thorin's opinion of him, possibly causing the baker to believe Bilbo was no longer deserving of his regard. His son's welfare and happiness would always take precedence—Frodo's needs outweighed any romantic feelings Bilbo might entertain. Nevertheless, the thought of Thorin's potential rejection stung deeply.

As Bilbo contemplates, immersed in his inner musings, another ripple of Frodo's laughter breaks through. His apprehensions dissipate, vanishing like mist under the morning sun.

It becomes clear that Bilbo has fretted unnecessarily. Observing his son and the man he has fallen in love with interacting so effortlessly, Bilbo senses a profound connection in Thorin's demeanor—an unspoken sense of care and concern that extends beyond mere acquaintanceship. Could it be that Thorin might grow to love Frodo as a son as well?

The pair suddenly hop off the barrels and begin making their way to the door.

In a flurry of nerves and an attempt to conceal his presence, Bilbo attempts to concoct an explanation for his unexpected appearance, only to collide into Thorin's firm form as the baker steps inside. Strong, large hands land on Bilbo's shoulders, stabilizing him before guiding him back. Bilbo's gaze instinctively rises, meeting Thorin's sharp blue eyes head-on.

Thorin's proximity feels both comforting and intense, flooding Bilbo with warmth that spreads to his cheeks, rendering him momentarily speechless. "Thorin," Bilbo stammers, "I, uh, I was looking for Frodo, you see."

Frodo appears behind Thorin, a hint of suspicion coloring his expression. "What were you up to?"

"Nothing, really!" Bilbo scrambles for an explanation. "I-I was about to open the door. Actually, Frodo, could you help Fili finish closing up while Thorin and I check the stock?"

The boy arches a brow, but then grins. "On it!" Frodo says cheerfully before bouncing back into the bakery.

Bilbo strides away, steering clear of meeting Thorin's probing gaze. His heart hammers erratically within his chest, the blush steadily creeping across his cheeks. Despite the flush, Thorin's hand remains on Bilbo's shoulder as they walk in tandem toward the stockroom. It doesn't feel like a possessive gesture, yet it resonates with a sense of belonging that leaves Bilbo slightly dazed.

As Thorin's fingers press through the layers of Bilbo's clothing, a shiver courses down his spine, leaving him grappling with an entangled mess of thoughts. Taking a calming breath, he keeps his gaze fixed downward, avoiding any chance of revealing his persistent blush. Bilbo wonders why he's so concerned about it—after all, he often finds himself blushing around Thorin. Perhaps the baker is accustomed to it by now.

As they reach the stockroom, Bilbo fervently prays for his nerves to quell and his mind to regain its focus.

"Everything all right?" Thorin's voice, soft and caring, pierces through Bilbo's distraction, prompting his breath to quicken in rhythm with his racing heart.

"Hmm? Yes, all good," Bilbo tries to brush off, his fingers fumbling with the list he's holding.

"You seem worried," Thorin gently probes, his concern clear.

Bilbo startles at the directness of Thorin's observation, his gaze briefly faltering. "Force of habit, I suppose. Concern for Frodo is a constant," he says with a nervous chuckle, shifting uneasily. Then, summoning courage, Bilbo decides to be honest. "I thought, perhaps, you took him aside to give him a talking-to," he admits sheepishly. "Not that it wouldn't be warranted if he had made a mistake, given your role as his employer... it's just..." Bilbo trails off, shuffling his feet and avoiding Thorin's gaze until he finally summons the courage to meet the baker's eyes. Under the weight of Thorin's gaze, Bilbo swallows hard. "I'm happy to see you both getting along so well."

Thorin's smile gradually widens, filled with genuine warmth, crinkling his eyes in a way that reassures Bilbo. "He's a delightful lad. A hard worker and quick to learn. Just like his father."

As Bilbo chuckles openly, he replies, "Oh, no! His father was always the clumsy one, with his head perpetually lost in the clouds. No, Frodo inherits his best traits from his mother, Primula. Prim was quite the force of nature, much like my own mother…" His voice trails off upon noticing Thorin's suddenly closed-off expression. "What is it?" Bilbo inquires, a hint of concern creeping into his voice.

Thorin's brow furrows, and he crosses his arms stiffly over his chest. "You must miss her terribly. Both of you."

Bilbo lets out a long sigh as memories of Drogo and Primula flash through his mind. The grief of losing them still lingers, even though many years have passed since the accident, leaving a healed scar in the wake of their loss. Frodo hardly remembers them, but that brings a different kind of ache, one Bilbo is all too familiar with.

"Prim was my best friend," Bilbo shares, his tone soft and wistful, a nostalgic smile playing on his lips. "I loved her very much."

A strangled sound escapes Thorin, drawing Bilbo's attention back to the present. To his horror, Thorin's face twists in obvious pain, his arms wrapping protectively around his chest.

“Thorin?! What’s wrong?!” Bilbo’s voice trembles with concern, the list in his hands falling forgotten to the ground as his own hands flutter around Thorin in a panic, unsure if he should offer comfort.

“I’m fine!” Thorin’s response comes out as a harsh bark. “Just… um, gas!”

The sharp tone startles Bilbo, making him recoil briefly, but he quickly comprehends. “Oh! That can be terribly painful. I have a remedy for that!” Bilbo rushes to assist, despite Thorin’s protest.

“That’s not necessary–”

Ignoring Thorin’s reluctance, Bilbo seizes the baker’s hand and gently tugs until Thorin allows himself to be led back through the bakery and into the house. Insisting that Thorin sit down, Bilbo sets a kettle to boil and retrieves various tea leaves and herbs from the pantry.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry for your loss. Yours and Frodo’s,” Thorin offers softly as Bilbo prepares the soothing tea.

Bilbo is so engrossed in brewing the remedy for Thorin’s discomfort that he barely registers the genuine consolations offered. His reply is absent-minded, almost reflexive. “It was a long time ago.”

Pouring the fragrant tea and handing Thorin his cup, Bilbo offers a warm smile that falters a bit when Thorin avoids meeting his gaze. “It’s chamomile with a touch of peppermint. Should help soothe the pain,” Bilbo says cheerfully, yet a hint of disappointment lingers when Thorin still doesn’t meet his eyes.

“Thank you, Master Baggins,” Thorin acknowledges as he takes the cup. But just before he sips the tea, he clears his throat and adds, “I don’t think you’re clumsy, by the way. Quite the opposite, actually.”

The unexpected address of “Master Baggins” catches Bilbo off guard. Thorin had been using his name frequently, so why the sudden formality now?

Bilbo chuckles nervously, feeling caught in a misunderstanding. “Clumsy? Me? No, no, no! I’m nimble, stealthy, like a cat! Who told you I was clumsy?”

“You did?” Thorin counters.

“What? No, I...I never… oh I never told you,” Bilbo stammers, realization slowly dawning on him.

“Never told me what?” Thorin inquires, his blue eyes searching Bilbo’s face for answers.

“I’m not Frodo’s father by blood. In fact, he’s technically my first cousin, once removed. Primula was my first cousin, and Drogo was her husband–first cousin on my father’s side and… Frodo’s real father. I adopted Frodo when they passed,” Bilbo reveals to Thorin.

Thorin’s eyes glint strangely as he leans forward. “So then...you never married?”

Bilbo laughs softly, feeling a tad uneasy discussing this topic. “No, I was a confirmed bachelor when I came of age. Hobbits tend to be more accepting of same-sex couples when they’re younger, but as they get older and are expected to settle down, it’s a different story. If you don’t change your preferences, you remain unmarried. If you’re lucky, you find another confirmed bachelor to be your smial spouse.” Bilbo realizes he’s rambling and becomes self-conscious.

“Oh,” Thorin responds after a peculiar silence, taking a long sip of his tea.

“So, is it working?” Bilbo inquires, nodding toward Thorin’s cup. “Is the pain gone?”

Thorin glances down at his cup, as if surprised to see it there. He rubs his chest thoughtfully and chuckles. Bilbo feels a pleasant tingle at the sound.

“Yes, it’s passed,” Thorin replies, smiling brightly. “Thank you, Bilbo.”

Observing Thorin’s expression, Bilbo senses a shift in the man’s demeanor. He eagerly waits for more, curious about what may have caused that subtle twist of Thorin’s lips, though the words don’t come. Instead, he watches as Thorin quietly finishes the tea, an enigmatic expression playing on the baker’s face, leaving Bilbo both puzzled and intrigued.

Bilbo pauses in his tracks, completely drawn to an unexpected addition in the kitchen’s decor. A single, elegant bloom stands proudly in a small vase atop the kitchen table. Its lavender-white petals unmistakably mark it as a snowbell.

It’s just a flower, yet this touch of floral elegance has never graced the bakery before—unless it happened before Bilbo came into the picture, a possibility he doubts.

His cheeks flush with a sudden rush of blood as Thorin’s image floods his mind. Could it be that Thorin was the one who picked this delicate snowbell? The mere idea sends a delightful flutter through Bilbo, leaving him giddy at the prospect. There’s something strangely endearing about the idea of the stoic, brooding man choosing such a fragile flower, stirring an inexplicable yearning within Bilbo.

Is this the subtle beginning of a courtship, Bilbo wonders, feeling a mix of excitement and uncertainty bloom inside him?

With a mixture of curiosity and anticipation, Bilbo leans in closer to inspect the blossom. His heart races in hopeful expectation, yearning for some subtle clue or note left by Thorin. Yet, as he carefully scans the table around the vase, his initial excitement fades into disappointment—there’s nothing to be found.

Bilbo’s gaze admires the snowbell’s slender stem, elegantly rising from the vase to cradle the delicate bloom and delicately pinches a tender petal between his fingers, marveling at its

velvety softness. Could Thorin have touched this very petal before picking it? He envisions the baker, perhaps lifting it to his sharp, handsome nose, inhaling its delicate fragrance.

A sudden realization jolts through him, causing his heart to race even faster: the snowbell's meaning—hope, new beginnings, and admiration. Could this, in fact, be Thorin's subtle message, signaling the start of his romantic advances? The idea sends Bilbo's thoughts spinning with dizzying possibilities.

Frodo seems to just pop into existence and Bilbo quickly withdraws his hand from the flower, clearing his throat as he busies himself with serving supper. "Frodo, did you happen to pick that flower?"

Frodo responds with a smug smirk and a playful glint in his eye, leaning casually against a chair. "Nope, it wasn't me," he says, his tone teasingly mischievous.

Trying to maintain composure, Bilbo tosses out another guess. "Perhaps it was Dis then?"

Frodo chuckles softly, rolling his eyes at Bilbo's guess. "Really? Can't think of anyone else who knows how significant a single snowbell can be to a Hobbit?"

A faint blush tinges Bilbo's cheeks, a smile breaking across his lips, before his fleeting happiness is curtailed. "A courtship flower is meant to be presented to the intended, not merely set at the table as decoration," Bilbo mutters in slight disappointment.

Frodo groans, exasperated. "Fine. Maybe ask Thorin about it."

Placing their plates on the table, Bilbo and Frodo begin their usual routine of maneuvering onto the tall, man-sized chairs. Settling in, Bilbo can't resist nudging Frodo for answers about his growing closeness with Thorin. "How long have you been in cahoots?" Bilbo jests.

Frodo laughs heartily, shaking his head. "In cahoots? That sounds like we're plotting a grand scheme. I've just been trying to get on Thorin's good side because, well, I aspire to be his apprentice someday."

Bilbo's eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "An apprentice? That's quite ambitious, Frodo," he responds, trying to sound encouraging, despite the doubt ringing in his mind.

"Yes, well," Frodo says, taking a sip from his drink after chasing down a mouthful of greens, "I figured, with you two getting married someday—"

Bilbo chokes on his toast, frantically pounding his chest with one hand while swiftly grabbing Frodo's drink with the other, hoping to dislodge the stubborn obstruction in his throat.

Meanwhile, Frodo cheerfully continues to discuss their plans for the future. "I probably have a better chance than most. Who knows? Maybe I'll inherit this place someday, since you two can't have your own children."

Bilbo, still catching his breath after chugging down the rest of the milk, manages to speak between gasps. "Frodo," he wheezes, fiddling with his shirt buttons anxiously, "I think you're

planning a bit too far ahead." He belches, trying to regain his composure. "Besides, surely his nephews are his current heirs."

"True," Frodo says with a shrug, his chipper demeanor unaffected, "we can run the place together as brothers then!"

"Frodo," Bilbo begins cautiously, "I don't want you to get your hopes up about me and Thorin. It's very complicated. He's our employer and our landlord. Mixing work and... other things, it's... it's risky!" Bilbo hides his face in his hands, trying to regain composure before facing Frodo's understanding gaze.

Frodo places a comforting hand on Bilbo's shoulder, a wisdom beyond his years reflected in his eyes. "That is why the flower is on the table. It's up to you to reach out and take it whenever you feel ready." He gives Bilbo a reassuring squeeze before grabbing a roll and departing, leaving Bilbo to his thoughts.

An incredulous huff escapes Bilbo, his nose twitching with nervous energy. The cheek! Frodo had orchestrated this intentionally! The lad knew precisely how to get a rise out of him.

Still, the picture Frodo painted was now taking up too much valuable space in Bilbo's old romantic heart.

He was driving himself mad, and part of Bilbo knew he could not hold back for long. It was either come to terms with the situation and get on with it… or… get wrapped up in the romance without working out his issues and possibly ruin the best thing going for both himself and his son.

Easier said than done, however. So much simpler to know which path to take than to find the courage to tread it. Ugly things lay beneath the shadows of Bilbo's heart. He knows he is not a good Hobbit, maybe a tolerable person and nothing special. But he *craves*. He *yearns* so badly. He's too selfish to stop himself from snatching at happiness with his thieving hands. And yet, he would at the very least make certain that Frodo's picture perfect future came to be… even if only in part… even if… Bilbo was the only thing missing from it.

He slumps in his chair but the flower catches his eye again. "New beginnings, admirations… and hope," he murmurs quietly, feeling his heart begin its familiar dance within his chest. The possibility seemed within reach, waiting for him to seize it. His hand moves almost of its own accord, reaching across the table until his fingertips make contact with the small vase containing the flower. He reaches. Gently, he traces the contours of the delicate petals, their softness grazing his skin. It's not stealing if it's meant for him, he reasons. No, it certainly isn't.

Holding his breath, Bilbo takes his chance.

Chapter End Notes

I've got my surgery scheduled for tomorrow. Here's hoping this is the end of PMDD and my own new beginnings. Hard work ahead but it's worth it.

Wishing everyone happy holidays!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Thank you Shantismurf for betaing this chapter! Check her ao3 hereLShantismurf

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sleep was a fleeting luxury for Thorin, a rare visitor in the caverns of his consciousness. Most nights were an endless cycle of staring at the ceiling, his mind swarming with fragmented memories from a turbulent past. He attempted to shun those haunting thoughts, instead conjuring recipes in a desperate bid to distract himself. Four hours of slumber was a victorious night by Thorin's standards, but this particular night granted him a mere two and a half, consumed by thoughts of the flower he'd placed for Bilbo in the dining area.

Morning now paints the sky in hues of dawn, yet Thorin remains captivated by the ceiling, a fond smile gracing his lips. He knows his Hobbits are safely nestled upstairs, most likely still sound asleep. Rising from his bed, Thorin decides it’s time to prepare breakfast, his body stiff as he dresses and ventures to the kitchen with measured casualness, hardly prepared for what he might discover—or not—on the kitchen table.

His eyes are immediately drawn to the vase. The empty spot where the flower used to stand is almost glaring in its vacancy. A grin tugs at Thorin's lips as he contemplates the implications.

He had planned it with Frodo’s wise advice, a gradual bloom-by-bloom approach to initiate a courtship. The fine line between expressing interest and giving Bilbo space has been at the forefront of his mind. He never wanted to appear too eager, too forward. Each flower was supposed to be a testament to patience, a silent assurance that he would wait for Bilbo. A method to communicate his feelings without overwhelming his hobbit, and yet here he is, contemplating the kitchen table like a child eager to unwrap a present. Thorin, who prides himself on his practiced stoic demeanor, finds himself positively giddy.

It doesn’t hurt that Thorin now knows Bilbo has never been married, and it soothes a part of Thorin's soul, easing the nagging worry of competing with a lost love. Thorin can't help but chuckle at himself, a man typically so composed now navigating the unpredictable waters of a budding romance.

Now, with the missing blossom, Thorin wonders if perhaps he has been too cautious. Should he have dared to speed up the process? These musings accompany him as he dons his apron, the anticipation of seeing Bilbo dancing in his veins. No, Thorin decides, he must stick to his plan because the clan meeting is in three nights and Bilbo must know everything before making his decision.

Besides, a playful game of cat and mouse never harmed anyone. After all, it was such a game that brought them together in the first place.

Bilbo's heart flutters with a jumble of emotions, his mind a chaotic whirlwind as he contemplates whether Thorin has already taken note of the flower's conspicuous absence. When Bilbo musters the courage to face the day, Thorin's mundane "good morning" ignites a torrent of internal frenzy, making Bilbo question his own sanity. The sleepless night and jittery anticipation appears to have been just for kicks. Bilbo eventually seethes with frustration.

In an attempt to rationalize Thorin's apparent obliviousness, Bilbo surveys the bustling chaos spawned by Thorin's relatives, streaming in and out of the bakery at all hours. They seem to be preparing for a significant clan meeting, a fact that clearly weighs on Thorin's shoulders. Amidst the hectic ambiance of the bakery and the looming family event, Bilbo clings to the hope for even a fleeting acknowledgment about the flower, yet Thorin remains persistently preoccupied.

Faced with mounting doubts, Bilbo's mind gravitates to the darkest possibility that the flower might have served merely as a decorative touch for the impending festive season. The realization pales his cheeks and then flushes them a vivid red with embarrassment. Of course. It's possible that his interpretation was nothing but wishful thinking from the start.

However, the evening brings a sweet surprise—a fresh bloom graces the vase at supper time. A Purple Hyacinth. "Constancy, sincerity, and loyalty," Bilbo murmurs, his voice awash with a reverent hush. Is his judgment clouded by hopefulness again, or could this be another coded message? Once that says Thorin can be patient. That Bilbo doesn't have to rush.

Bilbo takes the flower again. If Thorin thinks he doesn't know his own mind and heart, then he is greatly mistaken!

But the following day mirrors the previous one save for the pink carnation waiting for Bilbo at the end of the day. "Admiration, gratitude, and fondness."

They play this game for a few more days, at least Bilbo thinks it's a game (and if it's not, then he'll be greatly embarrassed indeed), until Bilbo has had enough and he puts his sneaky Hobbit-feet back to tailing Thorin unseen.

In the quiet of early evening, Bilbo retrieves his old, trusty Elvish cloak from its place, a cloak gifted with the remarkable ability to blend into the surroundings when needed, turning its wearer nearly invisible. A nifty thing for a burglar to own. It's been a while since he last used it, yet its familiarity brings comfort as he drapes it over his shoulders.

Bilbo slips out of the room unnoticed, and with careful steps, he moves to a discreet vantage point, hidden from view. From this position, Bilbo can observe the daily conclusion of Thorin's work.

Thorin's routine is methodical: counting receipts, handling coins, and consulting with Balin over the ledgers. Bilbo observes as Thorin, done with his managerial duties, sheds his apron and heads towards the washroom. Emerging moments later, with his hair damp and free from the shroud of flour, Thorin seems to pause at the doorway, his posture shifting subtly, almost as if he senses a presence watching him. His narrowed eyes and brief smirk are enough to make Bilbo's heart skip a beat, but Thorin's demeanor swiftly returns to its usual guarded self, and he proceeds on his way, leaving Bilbo to wonder if Thorin truly suspected something or if it was merely a fleeting instinct.

Outside, the streets bustle with the energy of a town winding down from its day's activities. Shopkeepers close their stores, shutting windows and hanging closed signs. Families stroll by, their arms laden with fresh produce and parcels, ready to retire for the evening's meal preparations. The air is alive with the sounds of greetings exchanged among friends, the clattering of closing shutters, and the muffled laughter of children returning home.

In the midst of this evening bustle, the object of Bilbo's covert observation walks with purpose. Bilbo trails behind him, blending seamlessly into the flow of the crowd and trying his best to keep up with Thorin’s longer legs. He keeps a prudent distance, ensuring he remains unseen while trying not to lose sight of Thorin’s broad figure ahead.

The sun dips lower on the horizon, casting long shadows across the cobbled streets as the sky shifts to hues of amber and violet. Lanterns flicker to life under the care of the lamplighters, illuminating the path home for the townsfolk. Bilbo weaves through the throng, careful to stay hidden, all the while maintaining his pursuit of Thorin's enigmatic figure amidst the evening rush.

Thorin, almost as if sensing Bilbo's pursuit, pulls up the hood of his cloak and suddenly veers into a narrow alley. Bilbo quickens his pace, keeping a discreet distance, his heart thumping with the exhilaration of the chase.

Following Thorin's swift turn, Bilbo anticipates the continuation of their clandestine pursuit, but as he reaches the alley's entrance, his sharp gaze scans the dimming passage. To his astonishment, Thorin is nowhere to be seen.

Bilbo's eyes widen in disbelief, a wave of bewilderment crashing over him. He casts a frantic gaze around, unable to fathom that Thorin, a stalwart and unmistakable figure just moments earlier, could vanish into thin air. Thorin isn't precisely known for subtlety, often making his presence known with resounding steps in his preposterous boots and his authoritative, booming voice. The notion that Thorin, of all people—a former target—could simply slip away defies reason.

Determined to make sense of what he has—or hasn't—seen, Bilbo cautiously advances. He scans both ends of the narrow passage, his eyes darting from side to side in search of any trace of Thorin. But, the alleyway stands deserted, the sole audible noise being the faint echoes of distant footsteps of other pedestrians making their way home.

A perplexed furrow creases Bilbo's brow. He mentally retraces Thorin's supposed route, yet there's no sign of where the baker might have disappeared to. Fleetingly, Bilbo entertains the idea of Thorin possessing a similar cloak, but it strikes him as implausible.

With disappointment trailing behind him, Bilbo retraces his steps toward the bakery. The initial rush of excitement from the chase dissolves into a murky blend of frustration and bewilderment, leaving a bitter tang in his mouth.

Just as he reaches the front step, he notices Bifur perched casually on the doorstep… munching on pink flower petals. Bilbo's heart sinks like a stone into his stomach before he can even understand why. Bifur, oblivious to the brewing storm within Bilbo, waves cheerily, a beaming smile spread across his face and with a mouthful of petals. Bifur's greeting is muffled but friendly, and Bilbo forces himself to reciprocate with a tight-lipped smile and a feeble wave before swiftly entering the bakery.

Once inside, the weight of disappointment presses heavily upon him, the realization settling in.

"Idiot!" he mutters, smacking his forehead in self-directed frustration. How could he have deluded himself into thinking Thorin was involved in some mysterious, romantic escapade? Of course the baker hadn't left those flowers for Bilbo! In fact, Bilbo realizes he's back to stealing people's preferred, odd, snacks!

A deep sigh escapes Bilbo's lips as he grapples with a blend of irritation at his own assumptions and mountain of embarrassment at the misunderstanding. The hopes he'd fostered come crashing down around him, leaving him grappling with the remnants of his own unwarranted excitement and breaking heart.

"Bilbo?" Thorin's rumbling voice breaks through his self-deprecating thoughts and Bilbo jumps with a yelp.

"Great gardens, Thorin!" Bilbo glares at the smirking baker as his fluttering heart steadies its pace.

Thorin's presence was so unexpected, he must have already been lying in wait. "Are you all right?"

No, no, no, he can't see Thorin right now. He just can't. Forcing a casual demeanor, Bilbo waves dismissively. "Just a small heart attack. How'd you get so sneaky anyway?!"

Thorin chuckles and squeezes Bilbo's shoulder before letting go. "I have many hidden talents."

"I'm sure you do," Bilbo mutters under his breath. And he really wants to know what those talents are and everything else hidden within the man he loves, but that just can't be. Ever.

"You smacked yourself quite hard from the look of that hand print on your forehead." Thorin remarks and reaches to touch Bilbo's head.

Before he can feel the warmth of Thorin's skin, Bilbo sidesteps and retreats, groaning as he massages his head vigorously. He's well aware that rubbing it will only make it worse, but at least it will mask his flushing cheeks. "It's nothing. I'm an idiot—"

A flower is suddenly held right under his nose, making Bilbo go cross eyed.

Blinking away the blur, his eyes focus on the flower before him. Recognition seizes him and he can’t help but gasp. It's a red rose. And everyone knows what that means… even someone as stoneheaded as Thorin… right?

Bilbo lifts his gaze, meeting Thorin's intense stare. Suddenly, the world around them seems to slow, sounds muffled and distant. Thorin's expression is different, stirring a thrilling shiver within Bilbo. Those intense blue eyes, usually so steadfast, now carry an unfamiliar intensity —dark, fierce, and maybe, just maybe, tinged with nerves. Bilbo feels speechless, certain that he’s suddenly forgotten how to form words, that, or his tongue went on a walking holiday without him.

After what seems like an eternity, Thorin breaks the silence. His voice, low and rough, striking Bilbo like the toll of a distant bell, resonating within his bones.

“I considered placing it in the vase like the rest, but…” Thorin takes a step back, the flower somewhat awkwardly held in his large hands. “Seeing as you've evidently run out of patience and tried to follow me to the florist,” he continues, “I had a hunch this one should be delivered in person.”

They stay like that for another moment, Thorin almost shyly offering the rose to Bilbo, who suddenly can't stop grinning and blushing like a schoolgirl. “So, you did know I was following you.”

Thorin looks too smug and handsome for his own good. “Not the first time I’ve been your target. I’ve learned your ways Master Burglar.”

Bilbo cringes, but Thorin responds with a soft laugh that manages to ease some of Bilbo's nerves. “It's beautiful,” Bilbo whispers, taking the flower hesitantly, their fingers brushing in a tantalizing moment.

Thorin's grip lingers, and Bilbo looks up, ready to step back, but Thorin's expression holds him in place. Nervousness etches itself on Thorin’s face, a sight that both melts and sparks Bilbo. "Do you want me to accept it or not?" Bilbo teases, eliciting a hint of mirth from Thorin's lips.

"You may accept it," Thorin replies, slowly, almost shyly, yet masking it with his stoic demeanor. "But after tonight’s gathering, if you change your mind, I will not hold it against you."

Bilbo worries at his bottom lip, uncertain how to respond. This feels different from mere flirtation, not a game. "After tonight’s gathering? But you said it’s a family affair…"

"And you are family. No matter what role I play in your life, Bilbo. You and Frodo are part of this clan too."

The unrelenting conviction in Thorin's voice, in his expression, makes Bilbo's eyes sting with unshed tears. Warmth floods his chest, and his heart pounds so loudly, it drowns out the rest

of his thoughts. Still unsure of what to say, Bilbo draws slightly closer to Thorin, even if that means he has to tilt his head back even more.

The dwarf's hands tentatively touch Bilbo's curls, pushing a lock behind his pointed ear and sending a jolt of longing that shoots down his spine. "Bilbo, will you please join us at the family gathering tonight and hear our story?"

He sounds so desperate, so earnest, and it stirs a storm of emotions within Bilbo's chest. He searches for the reason to refuse and finds none. "Of course, I will."

This is what he was waiting for, wasn't it? Yes. Oh yes.

"Good." Thorin's jaw works with words left unsaid. then he simply nods, offering a tender smile before stepping back to offer a respectful bow. With a final smile, and a soft "See you there," he departs, leaving Bilbo leaning against the doorway, breathless, a laugh escaping him as he feels his cheeks flush once more.

"Did that really just happen?" He looks down at the rose, the proof in his hands, and inhales its soft, sweet scent with a likely stupid grin on his face.

Chapter End Notes

My updates have been slow, and I apologize. The inspiration is just not really there but I am still writing little by little so I'm NOT abandoning this. Still, a co-writer would be awesome if anyone is interested.

My surgery went well and I'm recovering nicely. I hope everyone experienced happy holidays!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Well, guess who's inspiration has returned?
Or at least motivation. I hope this is an acceptable chapter because I sorta ran off on my betas (nervous chuckle) FORGIVE ME! lol

Anyway, I hope you enjoy!

Thank you Azeran and Shantismurf for the beta work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In a mad flurry of panic, Bilbo's world shifts on its axis. His steps become erratic and disoriented as he stumbles forward, propelled by a wave of disbelief and confusion. His name echoes in the background, a cacophony of familiar voices calling out to him. Among them, Frodo's voice rings out, accompanied by the unmistakable baritone of Thorin.

Yet Bilbo can't bring himself to stop, to turn back and face the reality of what he's just uncovered. His heart races like a thundering herd of wild horses pounding in his chest at an uncontrollable pace. Each breath is a gasp, shallow and panicked, his chest heaving as if struggling to contain the enormity of his discovery.

Thorin, the man he's in love with, isn't just any ordinary resident of their humble town. No, Thorin is royalty, a king hiding beneath the guise of flour-dusted clothes and the humble trappings of a baker's apron.

It's not just the startling realization that leaves him reeling, but the implications of what this might mean for him, for Frodo, for their future at this peculiar and unexpected turn of events. He doesn't know where he's heading. All he knows is the overwhelming need to flee, to hide.

As Bilbo continues to sprint, his breath ragged and his chest tight, a profound sense of worthlessness consumes him. Each pounding step feels like an echo of his spiraling thoughts, raising his fears and insecurities to the forefront of his mind.

If he had doubts about being worthy of a baker's affection, how could he possibly be worthy of a king? What could he, a simple Hobbit with nothing, offer someone of such status?

There is a small voice within him, a voice that insists he doesn't get to decide for Thorin, that this… *king* knows his own desires. But Bilbo feels small, unremarkable in comparison, lacking the credentials that might be expected for someone destined to be with royalty.

If only that winter had never come, the Shire and his family home would still be intact, and then he'd have at least a *little* something to offer—a respectable heritage, a smial that was the

envy of all Hobbiton.

But there was no use wishing for impossible things.

Bilbo's desperate sprint gradually slows to a stumble as the burn in his lungs and the ache in his legs become unbearable. He slows his pace until he's staggering, finally coming to a stop near the Prancing Pony. The noise emanating from within is raucous, a clamor of chatter and laughter mixed with the sounds of clinking glasses and boisterous conversation.

Steadying himself against the wall, Bilbo takes a deep breath, his chest heaving, and looks up at the inn's sign swinging in the wind. He feels a mix of relief and uncertainty at his arrival, the chaos of the place reflecting his inner turmoil.

Drunk patrons weave in and out of the establishment, their raucousness carrying through the open doorway. Bilbo can't help but feel a pang of envy at their carefree merriment, their ability to drown their worries in drink and revelry. He really doesn't want to socialize, not at all, but through the open door the dimly lit interior beckons with promises of warmth and, most importantly, ale. Lots and lots of ale.

With a heavy sigh, he pushes the door open and steps inside, the scent of drink and sweat hitting him immediately. The common room is bustling with activity—tables packed with patrons, the bar crowded with rowdy drinkers, and a fire crackling in the hearth.

A part of Bilbo longs to lose himself in the noise, to numb his racing thoughts with the clink of glasses. Perhaps a drink or ten might provide the solace he needs in this moment of turmoil.

Bilbo wearily edges his way through the bustling crowd towards the bar where the innkeeper, Mister Whitlock, is juggling several tankards at once. While Bilbo patiently waits for the innkeeper's attention, he belatedly recalls that he owes the man a bit of money. Realizing it's too late for a discreet escape, Mister Whitlock appears before him, presenting a half-pint.

"Ah, Bilbo! Haven't seen you and Frodo around since you started at the bakery," Mister Whitlock remarks cheerfully. "Congratulations, by the way! How's that grump of a baker treating you?"

Bilbo offers a faint smile, trying to appear composed despite the chaos raging inside him. "It's gratifying work and Tho–Mister Oakenshield has been more than kind. Now, I know I owe you a tab but–"

The innkeeper dismisses his words with a wave. "Your employer settled that already, along with a couple of other lads you owed."

Again. Thorin had paid his debts again. Bilbo didn't know how to feel. Should he be happy? After all, now he could drink without a lingering tab. Perhaps he should be afraid. Maybe the baker has a mind to indenture him completely! Was this Thorin's way of ensuring Bilbo entangles himself wholly so that Bilbo becomes completely dependent on his employer? Who the hell does Thorin think he is?! Oh, right…a king.

"I’m going to need a larger tankard, then, Mister Whitlock."

The innkeep nods and smiles and disappears briefly behind the bar, re-emerging with a foaming, proper pint-sized tankard. “Here’s your pint,” Mister Whitlock says as he places it in front of Bilbo with a dubious frown and makes to leave, but Bilbo calls out,

“You can leave that one too.”

Bilbo manages a grateful smile, nodding his thanks before retreating into his mind, consumed by thoughts of Thorin. Prone to thinking the worst of people, of men in particular, Bilbo mutters and grumps about what the baker’s angle might be. He gulps his ale down faster than he probably should, letting out a hearty belch and hastily wiping his mouth with his handkerchief before signaling for another round.

After downing about four pints, Mister Whitlock casts a concerned glance Bilbo’s way. “Ah, Mister Baggins, you might want to slow down there.”

“Hobbits are made of sterner stuff, my good man!” Bilbo insists, waving off the concern. “I could drink any man under the table!”

The boast echoes through the crowded inn and sparks a buzz among the patrons. Soon, a drinking challenge arises. One challenger after another tries their luck, only to be left defeated as Bilbo triumphs in every round. Yet, after several more rounds, his merriment borders on drunkenness. Against his own better judgment, he accepts yet another challenge from a newcomer.

As the man approaches the table, Bilbo’s bleary eyes widen, recognizing the grim expression that accompanies the person’s presence. It’s Thorin. And damn it all if Thorin isn’t the most gorgeous creature he’s ever seen, even with a loud scowl on his face. Bilbo barely remembers he’s supposed to be angry with the man, but he also doesn’t recall why exactly.

Without a word, Thorin slaps a handful of coins down onto the table, his tone clipped and resolute. “Another round, then?”

Thorin’s words hang in the air, heavy with both challenge and concern, his gaze fixed firmly on Bilbo, their eyes locking in a silent but loaded exchange.

A deep sense of shame floods Bilbo as he meets Thorin’s gaze. He’s caught and reeling with nasty feelings—regret, embarrassment, and a keen sense of disappointment in himself. He knows he can’t simply flee this situation as he did before; he’s well and truly cornered. He can’t find the courage to meet Thorin’s eyes again, but he nods in acceptance, feeling an ache in his chest as he braces himself for the impending round of drinks and awkward conversation.

His gaze remains fixed on the table, barely registering Thorin's motions as he sits across from him. Despite Thorin's presence, Bilbo feels detached, like an observer to his own emotional whirlwind.

The coins Bilbo has collected from his triumphs of the evening suddenly remind him of why he was supposed to be miffed with his employer. “I’m onto you,” Bilbo slurs as he wags a finger at Thorin, eyes narrowed to slits.

Thorin’s unrelenting attention on him is unsettling, just a bit, when the man leans forward with curiosity all over his face. “And what have you found out?”

Despite his relative inebriation and embarrassment, Bilbo focuses entirely on chugging the last of his ale in one fell swoop, an act that should surely count as a miracle because he's lost count as to how many drinks he's had.

Bilbo clears his throat nervously after making certain that he won’t pass out. “You,” he points a finger in Thorin’s direction accusingly, “have been paying all my debts!”

Thorin leans back, eyes wide and amused as he takes his own pint and swallows it down with one held breath. “Nope.” He belches for good measure that has everyone clapping loudly with how impressive it was.

Bilbo rolls his eyes as Thorin graciously accepts thanks from the audience. “I guess you’re a liar too,” Bilbo mutters into his next ale.

The crowd jeers a bit at the insult Bilbo has thrown Thorin’s way, but Thorin shakes his head slowly and emphatically, as if he is also making sure he doesn’t pass out. “I have not paid your debts; *you* have paid your debts.”

“I’ve done no such-such thing, Thorin Oakenshield, and you know it, because you–!”

“Drink-drink-drink-drink!” The onlookers cry. Bilbo glares at everyone’s interruption but does as requested. They pause a moment after Bilbo is done, and then promptly go insane when Bilbo lets out a larger belch than Thorin.

Thorin’s eyes bug out, and then he nods solemnly as he claps as well, ceding victory in the belching contest at least.

“You,” Bilbo continues, “have just been going a-around a-and paying everyone off so that I’m stuck working with you forever! I can’t pay off that kind of debt to you in my lifetime! You-you want to trap me!” He refrains from telling Thorin how much he actually wouldn't mind being trapped, as long as it’s Thorin doing the trapping, because that’s neither here nor there!

For Thorin’s part, he seems quite relaxed at Bilbo’s outburst, even when some of the male patrons scoff and leave, preferring not to listen to what was exceedingly looking like a lover’s spat.

“We came to an agreement that if you continued to work for me, that I’d settle your debt. You agreed. So your debt was settled.”

Bilbo frowns, recalling the conversation. “But that was because you thought I was leaving your employ! Which I never was. And since when did that deal include all of my debts

outside of our contact? It makes no sense!”

Thorin, leaning back in his chair, shrugs without a care. “I just assumed it did. I had already agreed to it before I knew you meant to stay all along, and I never go back on my word.”

Not knowing how to respond to that ludicrous logic, Bilbo throws back another pint. The beer, as if trying to offer its own commentary on the situation, gives a rather flat and unimpressed fizz as he drains it. As the tankard smacks the table in a victory flourish, the few remaining drunk patrons still invested cheer. Maybe he was too drunk to make sense of any of it.

Thorin smirks and downs his next without stopping, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Don't get too smug. Remember, Hobbits have faster metabolisms than men."

"I remember," Thorin says with his smirk still in place. "But I'm not just a man, am I?"

It hits Bilbo, then, that Thorin is right. It's easy to forget that Thorin is part dwarrow, and dwarves are notorious for their stamina in just about any sport, including competitive drinking. Bilbo thinks this may indeed be quite a challenge. However, his lips are tingling from alcohol and it's a pleasant sensation that leaves him in a blissful haze. If he had to have company during an ill-advised bout of public drinking, at least it's with Thorin.

On and on they go until even the last of their audience gets bored or too drunk to pay attention anymore. Bilbo thinks he might just actually lose but Thorin looks just as sauced as Bilbo feels.

"Who's going to pick up your drunken ass later when I win?" Bilbo slurs out.

Thorin squints hard and sways slightly in his seat but remains steadfast. "Definitely not *you* , my *tiny* Hobbit."

Bilbo accidentally lets out a giggle at being called *Thorin's,* but abruptly bristles. " *Tiny* ?! I'm not *tiny* ! *You* are *absurdly* t-ta… *large* ."

"Indeed… I am." Thorin’s eyes grow dark and he tries to growl but it comes out more like gurgling.

Bilbo is too pickled to be horrified by his own high-pitched squeak at the insinuation.

Thorin’s responding chuckle is downright evil. But then Thorin softens with an indulgent smile as he starts to down his umpteenth ale and is joined by a reluctant Bilbo.

By the tenth round, Bilbo is wavering in his seat, and he starts to wonder if his words are making any sense. "You… lied to me."

"Mmm no, no, I didn't," Thorin shakes his head and blinks slowly, somehow knowing exactly what Bilbo is referring to and miraculously understanding his barely-comprehensible Westeron. “But, I should’ve told you before tonight–”

“Yes, you should've!” Bilbo snaps, his voice louder than intended. He realizes that Thorin doesn’t sound very coherent either, yet he still understands the garble coming out of those thin, but tempting lips. How odd. Or maybe Bilbo only *thinks* they understand each other. Maybe they are having two different conversations. He laughs quietly at the thought.

Thorin’s guilty expression flickers with confusion as he continues. “I should have realized it would be a shock.”

Bilbo’s eyes widen. “Are you serious? You didn't think it would be shocking to find out that you’re a ki–!”

Thorin clumsily covers Bilbo’s mouth with his hand, urging him to keep quiet with his eyes while maintaining an intense, yet glassy, gaze. Thorin then speaks in a hushed tone, “If you’d stayed, you’d have learned that while I’m the head of my clan and a descendant of Durin, I am not a king. If I were, I’d have been crowned…I’d have a kingdom.”

Bilbo feels an urge to push Thorin’s hand away, but it feels oddly comforting against his flushed skin. He shakes his head, trying to regain his composure, despite the alcohol in his system. This is important! But his words come out muffled and incomprehensible against Thorin’s hand.

“What did you say?” Thorin asks, his tone softer as he finally and seemingly reluctantly releases Bilbo's mouth.

“I said, you do have a kingdom,” Bilbo mumbles, scanning their surroundings to ensure no one is eavesdropping after the commotion has died down. “Out there somewhere. Erebor.”

Thorin shakes his head, his expression clouded. “Erebor is but a myth now. Hidden in a mountain, its exact location unknown, with a hidden door.” Thorin sighs deeply, his eyes sullen from drink and memories. “I did search. As my father did. As my grandfather did. But my obsession nearly tore my family apart.”

Bilbo’s eyes well up with empathy. “You were searching for a home. It was hon-honorabable… honor…able.”

“That’s…what I told myself then,” Thorin nods with a sorrowful frown, meeting Bilbo’s gaze. “But it was a fal-falselie…to-to justify my *selfish* desire. I’m no king. I don’t deserve to be one.” Thorin’s smile turns sad, and he leans forward, placing his hand palm up gently on the table. Instinctively, Bilbo reaches out and places his hand in the baker’s warm and tender grasp. “I’m sorry that I did not tell you sooner.”

Thorin exhales heavily and covers Bilbo's small hand with his own. His touch is grounding and solid, reassuring and real, and it sobers Bilbo enough to try to reply in turn. "I shouldn't have fled. I'm sorry," he breathes, trying his best to stay calm. "I'm not entirely sure why you're even attracted to me of all people."

"I'll endeavor to show you some time," Thorin grins wickedly. "Some time. When we aren't in such a...pub...pubic palace…–” Bilbo giggles. “Public. Place," Thorin amends with a funny scrunch to his face.

Bilbo's nose crinkles. Thorin is just too adorable when he’s drunk. "Maybe you should forfeit."

"Pft. Forfeit? You forfeit," Thorin grumbles petulantly.

"Fair," Bilbo chuckles. "How about this... you forfeit while you can still walk and I'll let you carry me home."

"I forfeit." Thorin says quickly and jumps up to his feet as if spring-loaded, lifting Bilbo who lets out a yelp.

It had been a jest. The hobbit anticipated a bantering retort, not Thorin literally seizing the chance to sweep him off his feet! Yet, with Bilbo bundled in Thorin's arms like precious cargo, and both of them making a swift exit, Bilbo clings to Thorin like a leech. He seizes the opportunity to bury his face in the crook of Thorin’s neck, shrouded in the safety of Thorin’s wavy locks and the scent of Thorin envelops Bilbo—a mixture of warm bakery spices, a faint whiff of woodsmoke, sweat and ale.

It reassures and drives Bilbo to madness.

They end up not even reaching the threshold of the backdoor, laughing as they become one with the ground, just out back by the barrels and crates in the alley.

Bilbo clings onto Thorin and laughs hysterically, watching as Thorin can't help but do the same. Thorin ends up holding him through their rolling laughter and peels their entangled selves off the dusty floor with clumsiness.

Thorin carefully adjusts his weight, straightening enough to guide them to a sturdy crate. He seats Bilbo on it while he drops to the floor before him, laying his large head onto Bilbo’s lap with a tired sigh.

Initially uncertain, Bilbo’s hands begin carding through Thorin’s hair, scratching lightly at his scalp. When a pleased moan escapes Thorin, Bilbo shivers, not from the cold, though the chill should be biting. The alcohol still courses through their veins, and for some reason, Thorin radiates heat like one of his ovens. Bilbo longs to speak, to voice the dozen and a half insecure questions racing through his mind, or maybe ask Thorin to take them to bed—Thorin’s bed. He wants a kiss. Yet, that might not be the wisest idea considering their lingering inebriation. Strangely, Bilbo feels suddenly quite sober and clear-headed, while the crisp breeze starts to numb his nose.

“I don’t want to trap you, Bilbo,” Thorin suddenly says, his voice seemingly clear as Bilbo’s mind and achingly genuine. “You have no debt. Not to me. Not to anyone. I don’t want you to think that you owe me your…affection.” Thorin lifts his head off Bilbo’s lap, turning to face him with a shy grin. “I have something for you.” Slowly and a bit wobbly, Thorin stands and extends a hand to Bilbo, who takes it immediately.

Thorin leads him inside, everything dark except for one oil lamp left for them to find their way around upon their return. They walk hand in hand as Thorin tugs a curious Bilbo along, whose heart flutters like a hummingbird’s wings.

On the counter rests a covered cake wheel. Thorin releases Bilbo's hand to rummage around for a plate and a fork. Then, with a gentle flourish, he lifts the cover, revealing, unsurprisingly, a cake.

A loud grumble escapes Bilbo's belly, and they both snicker at the sound, though Bilbo feels his ears burn. He knows what this means. It's the second step in Hobbit courting. He eagerly takes the generous slice that Thorin offers him, but Thorin doesn't let go. Bilbo looks up to see a piercing look of intent in Thorin's lovely blue eyes.

"I'm just a baker," Thorin rumbles low. "Granted, a baker with responsibilities to his family and his clan. But…more importantly, a baker who wants nothing more than to court the Hobbit that's captured his heart."

Bilbo thinks this is perhaps the single most romantic confession he's ever received. He sways forward, tips onto his tiptoes, ready to kiss Thorin. Simultaneously, Thorin leans back, relinquishing the plate, leaving Bilbo blinking up at him with a half-formed pucker of his lips. Swiftly and as nonchalantly as possible, Bilbo rolls back onto his heels, shoving a forkful of cake into his mouth to disguise his obvious intent. He's so embarrassed that he doesn't realize the taste exploding in his mouth is...familiar.

As realization hits Bilbo, he freezes, and the plate slips from his hands, crashing onto the bakery floor.

"Bilbo?! Is it…is it bad?" Thorin rushes to grab a rag, covering the cake as if it were poisoned. "I'm so sorry—I can do better—the recipe is new to me—!"

"You," Bilbo breathes out with an incredulous gust of air, "made my mother's seed cake." He looks up at Thorin, who suddenly seems terribly small despite towering over Bilbo by a foot and a half.

Apologetic and clearly devastated, Thorin nods and backs away, but Bilbo won't have any of that.

"It tastes just like it," Bilbo whispers as his eyes well up and spill over.

"It…it does?" Thorin hedges with nervous hope. "Do you like it?"

"Do I like it?" Bilbo asks, not even understanding the question. "How–what–? Do I like it?!" Unable to contain himself any longer, Bilbo lunges at the man he loves, grabbing onto his clothes, yanking and pulling while Thorin staggers back with surprise against the counter. Bilbo continues to claw at Thorin until the baker finally realizes that Bilbo is desperately trying to climb him. "Get down here, you big, wonderful, kind, romantic sap of a man!"

Thorin throws his head back and laughs while picking Bilbo up by the waist and sitting him on the counter.

Quickly, Bilbo grabs Thorin's face in his eager palms and wiggles with excitement as he exclaims, "I'm going to kiss you if you don't say something to stop me, right now."

The beaming smile nearly stops Bilbo's heart. "Then my lips are sealed until you make good on your promise."

"Are you even real?" Bilbo asks, but he doesn't give Thorin a chance to say anything as he gently but eagerly scoots forward and tilts his head to the side just as Thorin's lips meet him in the middle.

It's everything. It's absolutely everything and it doesn't last nearly long enough, but Thorin breaks the kiss with a gasp. "Bilbo. Wait. Are we…Are we courting?"

Bilbo huffs out a chuckle and pulls Thorin's face back down to him. "Yes, Thorin, you sweet oaf, we are definitely courting."

Their lips meet once again and Bilbo tries to convey everything he possibly can with a single kiss. Thorin breaks it again with a wide, happy grin. A look Bilbo has seldom seen on such a lovely face.

"Bed?" Bilbo pants, and then flushes at his boldness. He laments the fact that this must mean he's sobering up.

But Thorin surprises him. "Bed," Thorin grunts.

Well, then. "Your bed." Bilbo clarifies as he looks up at the ceiling. "There's no way I'm getting up there without breaking something vital in my body."

Thorin snorts. "Of course, my bed. I'm not letting you go tonight. But just sleeping. Because I'm still drunk."

The man has to be too good to be true, Bilbo thinks, but buries the thought deep. He intends to sow this happiness for all it's worth. Bilbo wraps his arms around Thorin's neck, nuzzling into it, breathing him in, memorizing the feel and smell of him. "Okay," Bilbo sighs contentedly. "Just sleeping."

"And maybe kissing?"

"There better be."

Chapter End Notes

Whoever left that awesome review for Searlus and the Sailor, thank you SO much!
I hope you all check out my other works, including Donuts and Churros!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

> More fluff and a tiny bit of backstory for Bilbo and Frodo. I know I write similar themes, guys, but I write what I like! XD
>
> I'm thinking this one is almost done! Then I think I will work on Take My Heart, because I was working on the lore for it and ideas keep coming.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lying sprawled on the bed with his One tucked close under his arm, Thorin relishes a level of contentment he thought he'd never experience. Bilbo fits against his side as though he's always belonged there, a custom-carved space just for him. For a fleeting moment, Thorin wonders if this bliss is just another beautiful dream, teasing him before slipping away.

"Do you recall the first time we shared this bed?" Thorin inquires, a playful lilt in his voice.

Bilbo doesn't miss a beat, immediately covering his face with his hands and emitting a groan. "You promised never to bring it up again!"

They dive into a shared recollection, vividly recalling the undignified spectacle that transpired on that fateful morning. Laughter ensues, each trying their best to mirror the other's horrified face from that madcap morning.

As much as they laugh and tumble around, they always end up back in each other's arms. Thorin has been on his best behavior, hands diligently kept to himself or at least in areas he deems non-controversial. Bilbo hasn't lodged any complaints. Thus, Thorin indulges in gentle caresses, nuzzles, and chaste kisses. They share quiet murmurs as they trade tales of youthful escapades. The oil lamp on the bedside table flickers, and starts to wane. Thorin tightens his hold around Bilbo, his nose buried in the soft curls atop the hobbit's head.

In response, Bilbo turns his head, planting a shy kiss against Thorin's chest, fingers lazily tracing the pattern of his shirt. "When's your birthday?" Bilbo murmurs, curiosity evident in his drowsy tone.

"December 19th," Thorin replies, deliberately omitting the year.

"So soon! Are you throwing a party?" Bilbo's eyes light up with anticipation.

Thorin arches a brow and shakes his head. "My sister always attempts a surprise birthday party, but there's one crucial thing she forgets every year."

Bilbo preemptively smiles. "And what might that be?"

"That I harbor deep suspicion, instilled in me both by nature and nurture. And despite what my sister may believe, I happen to be fully aware of what day my own birthday falls."

Bilbo laughs openly and playfully smacks Thorin. "Do you at least attempt to look surprised?"

Thorin's eyelids flutter in bewilderment just as Bilbo bursts into another fit of laughter. "Do I strike you as the type," Thorin barely hears himself over Bilbo's wheezing, "to pull off a convincing expression of surprise, when I am, in fact, not surprised?" Bilbo is nearly breathless, but Thorin soldiers on. "Allow me to demonstrate." He sits up, gasps lacklusterly, hand belatedly clutching his heart, all the while maintaining his stoic expression. "My word, sister, I had no inkling it was my birthday today. How do you always manage to unravel this mystery? It's as if it happens every year on the exact same day. Remarkable."

Bilbo is now a mess of gasps and tears, holding his sides and snorting with laughter. Showing mercy, Thorin decides to let him catch his breath. After a series of short, intermittent giggles, Thorin turns the tables and inquires about Bilbo's own birthday.

"September 22nd," Bilbo says, lifting a little to meet Thorin's gaze. "Frodo's too."

"You share the same birthday?" Thorin expresses in surprise.

Bilbo nods proudly, and Thorin tilts his head, wondering aloud, "It's too bad I've missed it this year. I know Frodo is fifteen, but how old are you?"

Bilbo blushes and chuckles softly. "Forty-one. I know, I don't look it, but it's true."

"So young," Thorin smirks.

Bilbo's eyes widen, and he laughs. "Young? I thought maybe I was older than you!" Bilbo playfully shoves at him when Thorin stares at him without revealing his age. "Oh, come on now, you have to tell me how old you are!"

"Eighty-four," Thorin admits with a grin, fully aware that Bilbo won't believe him.

His Hobbit's incredulous squawk is hilarious, and Bilbo shoves at him harder, exclaiming, "Be serious!" He laughs and starts to poke at Thorin's ribs, who doesn't even flinch. Bilbo continues to poke and prod, growing more disbelieving that Thorin is not ticklish.

"I am always serious," Thorin says in his best Durin Serious voice.

Bilbo huffs, sits up on his knees, and places his hands on his hips, while Thorin pouts at the loss of contact. "You cannot be eighty-oh! Unless? Oh! Are you really?! Because you're part dwarrow?" Bilbo gasps, covering his mouth with his hands, eyes wide with wonder.

Thorin snickers. "You figured it out sooner than most."

Bilbo lowers his hands slowly, eyes still big as saucers. "Thorin," he whispers, "Great Gardens, Thorin, and I thought you'd think me an old man! You're *ancient!* "

Thorin shoots him a withering glare, prompting Bilbo to throw his head back in laughter. Playfully, Thorin lunges for him, eager to have his turn at finding out if Bilbo is ticklish. "I'll show you ancient," he declares, his fingers seeking out Bilbo's ribs—the Hobbit squeals and kicks out like a piglet. It turns out that Bilbo's love sides are particularly sensitive.

Unaware that he's hovering over Bilbo, trapping him below, Thorin continues the playful assault until Bilbo starts begging through his giggles. "Please don't—please don't!" Bilbo manages to say between gasps of laughter. "I'm extremely ticklish. I promise–I promise! I won't try to tickle you again!"

Thorin, still chuckling, kisses the nape of Bilbo's neck and rolls to the side, pulling Bilbo to his chest. Bilbo tucks back in without hesitation, still catching his breath.

"So," Thorin teases with a sly smirk and waggling brow, "I was going to offer to rub your back and shoulders, but if you're so ticklish...?"

Bilbo sighs deeply, propping his chin on Thorin's chest. "Hmm. Do I seem tense?"

Thorin scoffs, slapping a hand to his own forehead. "Durin's beard, Bilbo, your shoulders seem to constantly seek your ears. Even now, relaxed as you are in my arms—though it took a very long time—I can still feel your muscles stiffen. It's almost as if you are reminding yourself not to tense up."

"Um," Bilbo says, clearly confused, "Is that not a normal thing people do?" His brow furrows even more. "Because I'm doing it right now."

"My poor Hobbit," Thorin croons, beckoning by patting the bed next to him. "Lie down and let me take care of you." Thorin observes as Bilbo hesitates, swallowing nervously. "Waist up only. I won't hurt you, I promise."

Bilbo nods quickly, giving him a crooked smile. "I know that," he whispers. Then he surprises Thorin by removing his shirt, though he holds it close to his chest shyly, and he lies face down. "Go ahead."

Thorin can hardly contain his excitement at all that smooth skin. "And to answer your question, no, it’s not a normal thing that normal people do." He straddles Bilbo's thighs, trying his best not to accidentally squish him.

“Are you saying I’m not normal?” Bilbo asks with a smile in his tone, though the chuckle that follows sounds wary.

The sight beneath Thorin is almost too much to behold. He promised he'd behave, and he will. He looks down at the pale, freckled skin with a few scattered scars and frowns as he traces them with his fingers.

“I’m saying you and I are different from most,” Thorin explains. “I also have to tell myself to relax. If I don’t work out the stress, my body begins to ache, I cannot sleep, and become very…”

“Unbearable?” Bilbo deadpans.

Thorin ruffles Bilbo’s curls in retaliation. “Regardless, that state of constant flight or fight, all warriors who have seen more times of war than peace have it.”

Bilbo shivers, and his back breaks out in goosebumps. “I am no warrior,” he says quietly, almost shamefully.

“That’s not true, Bilbo. I can tell you’ve survived many battles. I can see you constantly fighting them even now. In here.” He places a palm over where Bilbo’s heart is. “And here.” He taps Bilbo’s head. Thorin hears Bilbo’s breath hitch, but his One remains silent. “How long has it been since you’ve known safety? Been comforted? You don’t have to fight anymore.”

In direct contrast to his words, Bilbo’s muscles bunch up under his hands. Thorin decides to leave the topic alone for now. "I'm going to heat up some oil. It makes a big difference." Thorin can't help but notice how his own voice has thickened. He clears his throat and leaves the bed, reaching into his drawer for the oil. It doesn’t take long to warm it up and there's plenty. He pours it onto his palm. "You're going to smell like my hair," Thorin says, hoping to lighten the mood, because Bilbo has started to tremble.

"That sounds lovely actually." Bilbo's voice is a bit muffled by the pillow his face is buried in. “I like the way your hair smells.”

Blushing a bit himself, Thorin looks fondly at the back of Bilbo's curls and can’t help but find the thought alluring—the subtle scent of himself lingering on Bilbo's skin for hours. It leaves Thorin with a satisfied and possessive warmth that settles in his chest.

He can feel the tension underneath his own hands as he begins to spread the oil all over Bilbo's lean shoulders and back. His hands look huge on Bilbo's small back; he doesn't even have to spread his fingers to reach from one side to the other. Although both his Hobbits have gained much-needed weight, Bilbo feels so small and frail under his touch, and Thorin holds most of his strength back. He'll have to be careful.

As he works at the taut little muscles, Bilbo immediately begins to tense and choke down laughter. Thorin can feel it in the shoulders under his hands. Bilbo is holding his breath, and Thorin sighs softly. "You need to breathe, Bilbo." He says this as gently as possible.

But Bilbo only tenses even further, his body quivering as Thorin's strong fingers move. His One laughs a bit hysterically. "The more I try to relax, the more I stiffen up. Bad-bad choice of words… b-but also… true in more ways than one…" he trails off with an embarrassed mutter.

"That’s alright," Thorin soothes and lets out a breathy laugh. He’s in a similar state, after all. Gently, he glides the pads of his fingers up and down Bilbo's spine as he ponders how to help his One unwind. "I think I'll start with your scalp. If you want me to stop at any time, tell me so, and I will. No questions asked. This is for your comfort."

There is a moment of silence where Bilbo’s tips of his ears turn pink and then a whispered, “Thank you.”

As Thorin runs his fingers up Bilbo’s neck, working his way gently and slowly towards his scalp, Bilbo finally begins to breathe with intent. He scratches through copper strands and… And Bilbo *moans* . A spark of energy travels directly to Thorin's gut and below, and Thorin has to bite his lip and take a moment to gather himself. Bilbo must notice his lapse in control, because he starts apologizing profusely, scrambling to turn over and sit up, but Thorin puts his hands on Bilbo's shoulders lightly, trying not to make it seem like he's pinning him. Bilbo goes pliant under him and Thorin swallows a groan.

"It's alright, Bilbo," Thorin says with a chuckle. "I'm not embarrassed at all. In fact," he pauses as his cock throbs between his legs and he tries desperately to have a normal thought. "Your, um, sounds help me know where to focus. That you, um, enjoy it. That I’m not hurting you." It was technically true. Really, though, Thorin was just so turned on by it and wants to hear more.

Bilbo relaxes again and allows Thorin to continue. They talk more as Thorin massages his Hobbit, and every moan, grunt, sigh, or groan drives Thorin to near madness. At one point, Thorin asks Bilbo if he wants a break because his muscles have become more supple than dough. His One makes no reply, eyes closed as he sleeps with a small smile on his lips. Thorin grins so wide; he worries his face may split in half. Bilbo looks so peaceful that Thorin doesn't dare move.

He doesn’t even realize that he’d also fallen asleep because he suddenly snaps awake, sensing something is wrong.

Bilbo whimpers in the dark, too far from Thorin for Thorin’s liking. Bilbo cries out, and Thorin gathers him up instantly. His small body trembles in Thorin’s arms as his eyes move wildly behind his eyelids, and Thorin knows he's trapped in a nightmare. Bilbo continues to thrash and shout out, as if running away from something.

Cradling Bilbo close, Thorin’s heart aches for his One and his mind races for a way to soothe Bilbo's troubled slumber. Drawing from the recesses of his memory, Thorin recalls a gentle melody he used to sing to his nephews.

At first, the notes are soft, uncertain whispers in the quiet of the night. Thorin hesitates, finding his voice after months of silence in this particular realm. As the familiar tune gains strength, he weaves a comforting spell with each word, his deep voice resonating between them. As the song unfurls, a sense of peace settles over the chamber, and Bilbo's frantic movements still, and his eyes flutter open.

Thorin pulls him close and Bilbo collapses into his chest, allowing Thorin to rub his back, murmuring how safe Bilbo is over and over again. He doesn't stop until Bilbo's breathing has finally evened out and he seems to be present.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Thorin asks. “I know it might be difficult to speak of but I find that the dreams do not trouble me as much once I share them.”

Bilbo nods and gives him a sad smile. “A river flood. More of a memory than a dream, actually. I’m a mediocre swimmer, at best.” He chuckles mirthlessly. “But most Hobbits originally from the Shire could swim none-at-all.”

“Frodo’s parents,” Thorin whispers.

Bilbo nods. “Frodo’s parents. And almost Frodo himself. And so, so many of our… friends and f-family. I couldn’t stay there. *We* couldn’t stay there. We’ve been trying to find our place ever since. And it’s been very difficult, for me in particular, to believe that we finally have. I fear the adjustment will take… time. I'm sorry," Bilbo sniffles against his chest.

Thorin hushes him with a gentle kiss to the top of his head. "No apologies. That feeling of displacement is familiar to me as well. King without a kingdom, remember?”

Closing his eyes and sighing, Bilbo cringes. “Of course.”

Thorin chuckles and gives his One a small shake. “I’m having a little trouble believing you're real. That you’re really here. In my bed.”

A wave of warmth rushes off Bilbo as he makes himself smaller in Thorin’s arms, but Thorin can hear the smile in his voice when he replies. “Think we will adjust soon?”

“I do,” Thorin says with conviction. “Do you feel a little less burdened?”

Bilbo looks up at him with a beaming grin. “I do.”

“Are you hungry? We should curb the hangover if possible. I'm going to feel this... well, actually I already feel it."

Bilbo chuckles, tearfully amused. "Hobbits don't get hangovers, Thorin." He pats Thorin's knee with affection, a hint of playful condescension in his tone. "But I'll help you curb yours," he declares cheerfully, and instinctively surges up with puckered lips only to suddenly hesitate, blinking at Thorin like a very confused owl. "Are we…?"

Thorin closes the gap with a quick peck on Bilbo's lips. "First breakfast?"

Bilbo agrees, a blush tinting his cheeks as they discover that breakfast is already prepared for them. There's a note from Frodo expressing gratitude to Thorin for bringing Bilbo home safely and mentioning he'll be spending their day off with Fili and Kili. A postscript adds that Frodo has never heard Bilbo sound so happy, especially after last night's raucous laughter from below the attic. This, of course, flusters Bilbo, leaving him spluttering for a few minutes.

As they relish their morning feast, Thorin can't help but revel in the delightful sight of Bilbo, usually wound tighter than a dwarf's braided beard, *relaxed* , chatting away and truly at ease. He would happily sit and listen to Bilbo chatter away indefinitely, but a pounding ache in his head reminds him that he should probably lay down before he embarrasses himself, acknowledging that trying to outdrink a Hobbit was probably not one of his best ideas. But it was so worth it. For these smiles? Thorin would do it again in a heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

What other bagginshield fics are you currently following? I'd love to know!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Beta by Shantismurf Thank you so much for your help!

Clothed smut in this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is an unmistakable shift in the air ever since Bilbo accepted Thorin's courtship. The bakery's atmosphere is now charged with heightened spirits. Thorin, once known to be stern and stoic, now carries a lighter tune in his heart. It's a melody that frequently escapes his lips in the form of songs, a habit he thought he'd lost long ago. Bilbo and Frodo always readily join the chorus, and with the addition of Fili and Kili, the place takes on the ambiance more of a pub rather than a bakery. Songs, laughter, camaraderie, as the enticing aroma of baked delights saturates the air and the customers love it.

"Have you been to that bakery with the cute little halflings?"

"Oh, don't let Mister Baggins or his son hear you say that! It's Hobbits, as they are half of nothing!"

"Hobbits! Aren't they just adorable?!"

"And the pasties are to die for!"

"The beer battered rolls! MMmm!"

"It's such a lovely place to bring the family for a treat. That baker did good by hiring them on. The sour puss himself smiles and sings now!"

"Do you think… you know*... Mister Oakenshield and Mister Baggins are…?"*

"Well, now that's none of our business. They're good and honest folk, besides! … But it wouldn't surprise me in the least. I've seen stranger things. But as long as they're happy–"

"Oh they do seem very happy, indeed!"

Needless to say, the reception toward the changes has been overwhelmingly positive. The Hobbits are warmly embraced by the customers, who find them endearing, polite, and utterly adorable. The bakery, once merely a provider of baked goods, has broadened into a place where people come not only to check off their shopping list, but for the joyful and welcoming atmosphere. Business is better than ever.

As the sun dips below the horizon, Frodo sets off with Fili and Kili, intending to spend the night at Dis' place. Thorin relishes the rare opportunity for an evening alone with Bilbo; their official courtship has just begun, and every moment is precious.

With Bilbo's love for a pre-bedtime meal and something sweet in mind, Thorin crafts a romantic setup in the living room. Flowers, a soft blanket, candles, plump pillows, and a basket laden with delectables adorn the floor by the crackling fireplace, creating a cozy haven that Thorin is quite proud of.

As Bilbo enters, his eyes widen at the sight of the thoughtful arrangement. A charming blush paints his cheeks, and he wrestles with a grin, lips quirking upward despite his efforts. Thorin, already seated on his pillow, winks playfully, beckoning Bilbo to join him.

The soft glow of the firelight dances in Bilbo's crinkled eyes as he practically skips toward Thorin, a proper smile playing on his lips. Seizing the opportunity of Thorin's seated position, Bilbo clasps his hands behind his back and leans down with a sweet intention of leaving a chaste kiss on Thorin's head.

However, Thorin adjusts quickly, turning a simple gesture into something more intimate. Bilbo's intended peck on Thorin's head lands squarely on his lips instead. A playful giggle escapes the Hobbit, and then a soft, dreamy sigh when Thorin gently takes his One's face in his hands and deepens the kiss ever so slightly. He breaks away just as Bilbo parts his lips for more.

Bilbo blinks at him with the most adorable, starry-eyed look. He shakes his head and finally takes his place beside him, his eyes now fixated on the basket of treats, tongue flicking out to wet his lips in anticipation. Or maybe even to savor their kiss.

With a teasing glint, Bilbo remarks, "What have you done, Thorin? This looks awfully romantic. You didn't have to do this. Supper at the table would have been just fine." But as Bilbo rambles humbly, his quick hands have already opened the basket and greedily removed its contents–quick as anything.

Thorin chuckles softly as Bilbo's cute button nose twitches and sniffs like a bunny as his eyes search for their first target. Making a happy noise, Bilbo selects a piece of cheese, bringing it to his mouth and biting into it with gusto, his eyes closing with pleasure. The sight leaves Thorin staring unabashedly at his One, listening to his soft moans while he chews and swallows.

He has never seen a lovelier vision or heard anything so erotic.

"It's rare that we spend time completely alone together. There is no one in the attic or the bakery. No rambunctious sister-sons, or nosy sisters." He leans closer to Bilbo, who looks up at him through his lashes. "Just us." He can see Bilbo swallow, but he's smiling and not backing away.

Instead, Bilbo shifts closer to him, his knee touching Thorin's thigh. "This is lovely," Bilbo murmurs with that shy smile of his that makes Thorin's heart race every time. "Thank you."

As Thorin touches Bilbo's cheek, his hand cradles his face delicately, as if it were precious glass. " *You* are lovely," he murmurs against his One's lips, the words filled with adoration and affection. Bilbo responds instantly, leaning into him and placing a hand on his chest as he deepens the kiss. Thorin embraces him, offering everything as Bilbo leans into the warmth of his touch. Thorin groans in surprise, taken aback by Bilbo's immediate and enthusiastic response. He pulls back, noticing how flushed and nervous Bilbo appears.

He wants Bilbo with a ferocity that frightens him. “Let’s eat,” Thorin lets out on a gruff, instead of taking more than he should from his eager One. He can wait.

Enjoying their late meal, they relish the comforting heat radiating from the fire. Bilbo's growing relaxation and increasing chattiness bring a wide smile to Thorin's face. He is overjoyed that his One feels safe and comfortable enough to share, and he desires nothing more than to draw Bilbo closer and spend the entire night absorbed in his animated storytelling.

As Bilbo must notice his expression, his eyes narrow with a mix of curiosity and suspicion. He clears his throat, the sound echoing timidly in the room. “I’m talking too much again, aren’t I?”

Thorin gently lifts Bilbo's chin, guiding his eyes to meet his own. “Never.” He runs his thumb along Bilbo’s cheek. "I find your voice so alluring that I would gladly spend days just listening to you," he confesses, desire clear in his rumbling voice.

Bilbo's eyes suddenly widen, his pupils enlarging, and he blinks repeatedly. A blush spreads across his face as he clears his throat, trying to hide a sly grin behind his napkin. “So, any more news from your relatives in the East?”

With an amused look, Thorin hums at Bilbo's segue before his expression turns into a frown. “They have suffered no direct harm from the Beacons, but their homes are being vandalized. They barely felt welcomed to start. They have decided not to wait another year and will join a caravan coming here in the Spring.” Thorin’s frown deepens, the weight of Dain’s letter lingering in his mind like a dark cloud. “They mentioned Erebor,” he mutters with a hint of frustration. “Dain thinks I should search for it again.”

Bilbo, sensing his turmoil, places a reassuring hand on Thorin’s. “And what do you think?”

Thorin covers Bilbo’s hand with his own, holding on tightly, finding solace in the warm touch. “I wanted Erebor for so long,” he admits, “but the thought of reclaiming it is not as tempting as it once was. I don’t want to give up a good life here for a dream that may never come to be.” Thorin rubs Bilbo’s hand gently, his thumb tracing soothing circles. “Especially now that I have you and Frodo,” he confesses simply, eyes shifting downward.

Bilbo’s expression goes from fond to wistful, his gaze clouded. “I have a bad habit of running away when things get difficult,” he admits with a sour face. “But the difficulties follow, or new ones sprout regardless of where I’ve run to. I could have run when you finally caught me. It’s what I do. Should have done. To stay alive. To be there for Frodo. But I didn’t.” Bilbo looks up at Thorin, unshed tears glistening. “I’m so glad I didn’t. The garden may look greener on the other side, but that is because it is well cared for and tended to by someone

who has committed to it. Like...” he coughs lightly and looks away, “Like I’ve committed to… the bakery.”

Thorin smirks. “The bakery?”

Bilbo sticks out his tongue and gives Thorin’s shoulder a small shove. “What I’m saying is, I want to tend this… garden with you, Thorin, but if you must go find Erebor, and you wouldn’t mind a couple of Hobbits tagging along, then,” Bilbo looks him in the eye with a fond but nervous smile, “then we will journey with you to find a new home.”

Thorin turns Bilbo’s hand to press a gentle kiss to his knuckles. Leaning forward, foreheads touching, noses bumping, he inhales Bilbo’s breath, exhaling shakily. “I am so honored, truly, but the way is dangerous. We lost too many last time and I will not risk your life or Frodo’s or anyone else’s for a fool’s quest again. Not unless it’s our last resort.” Thorin cups Bilbo’s face tenderly. “I have found a home already. We do not need an abandoned kingdom of legend or a mountain of rumored gold. All we need is right here.”

Bilbo chuckles, though his eyes betray the depth of his emotions. “I’m thrilled you think so.”

“I know so.” Thorin grins, and Bilbo mirrors it, beaming up at him with the full force of the sun itself. Thorin feels his heart skip a beat, his breath stuttering at the stunning sight. Bilbo is luminous.

In a sudden, impulsive move, Thorin pulls Bilbo onto his lap. In a moment of shock, Bilbo's breath catches in his throat and his hands quickly find their way to Thorin's shoulders, seeking support.

Settling in, Bilbo chuckles softly, his gaze shifting downwards bashfully. Thorin tips Bilbo’s chin up gently, a spark flitting between them. It’s a sensation Thorin hopes he never gets used to. Bilbo’s lips part with a sigh when Thorin gently drags his thumb across their seam. He feels a flutter in his chest as his One leans in, their lips meeting with urgency.

Bilbo’s eyelids shut as Thorin runs a hand along his jaw. Pulling back, his eyes search Bilbo’s for any hint of discomfort. He sees only a dreamy, blissful haze, and his lips quirk at the charming sight.

With each kiss, Thorin holds Bilbo tighter, their lips locking in a fervent dance, their longing escalating with every passing second. As Bilbo moves in his lap, his increasing hardness rubs against Thorin's, provoking an eager response from his soulmate. And in that moment, he realizes Bilbo's desire for a more adventurous evening matches his own. With a firm grip on Bilbo's pert little bottom, Thorin skillfully guides their movements, their clothed bodies pressing together in a passionate rhythm.

Their kiss impossibly deepens. It’s sloppy and full of longing, their tongues exploring, tasting, claiming. As Thorin listens to the sounds of Bilbo's breaths and desperate whines, a burning sensation ignites within him, coursing through his veins and settling in his loins. Bilbo, driven by his desires, clumsily presses against Thorin, creating a desperate yet tantalizing sensation as their bodies collide. The feeling of their throbbing cocks rubbing

against the layers of fabric becomes an exquisite source of pleasure as Thorin continues to thrust upward.

Gasping, Bilbo's head falls back, leaving his vulnerable throat exposed. Thorin dives in, savoring the taste of Bilbo's soft, exposed flesh. With a light nip, Bilbo's lips part, releasing a sharp, needy keen. Soothingly, Thorin licks the delicate skin, bringing a comforting relief. Bilbo's cries echo through the air as his thrusts grow increasingly frenzied. Thorin's hand swiftly shifts from Bilbo's backside, slipping between them. As he cups Bilbo's warm hardness through his clothes, Bilbo's pleasurably strained moans fill the air, intensifying as he pushes himself harder into Thorin’s grip. Thorin firmly presses his palm against Bilbo, massaging him with precision. Bilbo's breathing becomes ragged and shallow, his movements now truly faltering, his eyes half-lidded and distant.

When Thorin captures Bilbo’s mouth in another passionate kiss, Bilbo shudders in his arms, releasing a low, guttural groan. The sound mingles with Thorin's as Bilbo's hips jerk one last time, his body alternating between tensing and relaxing, surrendering to the waves of pleasure washing over him. The sight of Bilbo's unraveling, coupled with his lovely noises, pushes Thorin to his breaking point. In that blinding moment, Thorin's grip tightens around Bilbo, nearly too much, and a deep grunt of release leaves him. Bilbo collapses bonelessly against Thorin, his rapid breaths tickling Thorin’s neck.

They only separate for long enough time to clean themselves up before Bilbo returns with a crooked grin, eyes skittering around coyly and trying to act like they hadn’t just made love in their clothes. Thorin doesn’t tease him for it, instead he invites Bilbo to spend the night in his bed again.

Thorin's arms encircle Bilbo, and he gently presses his lips against the soft curls of his One. He smiles as Bilbo snuggles deeper, his breathing evening out. The sound of the crackling fire fills the air, creating a peaceful silence. With a sigh of contentment, Thorin lays still and takes in the moment.

Then his mind starts to wander, and Thorin reflects on their earlier conversation about tending their garden together. Then he wonders whether the acceptance and success of Bilbo and Frodo could attract more Hobbits back to Bree.

Then, a daring idea flits across Thorin's mind, like a spark igniting in the darkness of a mine. *What if* , he thinks, he reveals his family’s dwarven heritage? What if Bree welcomes them regardless, continuing to see them as part of the community? Could this influence the Khazad of the Blue Mountains to reconsider their isolation and reestablish ties with men?

In the growing city of Bree, echoes of a harmonious past between all races still linger, creating a hopeful backdrop for Thorin’s dreams of their future. Hoping it would be their final sanctuary, he handpicked this place for his family. Why not the rest of the clan? In a sudden moment of clarity, Thorin sees Bree through fresh eyes, envisioning it as the haven he had longed for in Erebor. Despite the nomadic ways of some cousins, most of his clan now spreads through the bustling streets, all finding their place in Bree’s tapestry. After all, some

of Thorin’s kin have already formed matrimonial bonds within Bree, and Mahal willing, Thorin would as well.

At that heart-pounding thought, Thorin gazes down at his drowsy Hobbit with an affectionate grin. Thorin intends to confess his love soon, to express to Bilbo the deep intensity of their unbreakable bond as Ones. He can't help but notice that, beneath his cheerful facade, Bilbo carries moments of doubt and wariness. Patient and content, Thorin is determined to wait for his One to catch up, regardless of how long it takes.

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter will have a little angst but I will not end it on angst. I will resolve it in the same chapter... pretty sure. No slow blood letting in this one. I refuse! lol

We are coming very close to the end I think. Just a couple things to wrap up with the boys and plot wise. Thank you so much for all your support!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Very long chapter this time. I didn't want to leave anyone hanging. Hence why it took so long to post.

CW: some angst, Bilbo shows signs of depression. Smut about half way through the chapter.

Comfort and Declarations. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If someone had approached Bilbo just a few weeks ago and predicted that he'd be debt free, proudly serving as a Master Baker's Assistant at the most esteemed bakery in town, all while being romantically entangled with that very same Master Baker, well, he would have politely inquired if they needed a mind healer.

Because this all feels quite surreal, as if Bilbo has stumbled into an alternate reality that belongs to someone else. He half-expects to wake up, possibly having been knocked unconscious in some bizarre turn of events.

The last few months have been so wonderful—filled with delicious food, good cheer, warm beds, and the best sleep he's had in… he can't even remember. Bilbo couldn't be happier.

And yet.

He has a strange gnawing ache in the pit of his stomach.

A niggling doubt that won't leave Bilbo alone. It doesn't happen often, but when it does, it hits him like a runaway wagon. His mood plummets and he finds it hard to breathe. Bilbo sometimes stares at his hands, feeling like somehow they are not his own. It makes him feel uneasy, like he's going mad. Like he's… *wrong* . Bilbo tries to force himself to feel better and sometimes that works, but at other times, it doesn't, and he hides away until the mood passes.

Being close to Thorin helps, but the more he spends time with his... his... lover? Not quite. His man-friend? Sounds awful. Baker. The more time he spends with his baker, the worse any amount of separation becomes! Yavanna forbid Thorin leaves the bakery without Bilbo anywhere, because then Bilbo's thoughts race with all kinds of awful things that could happen to him. Vision after vision of varying ways Thorin could come to harm leaves Bilbo pacing and gnawing at his fingers.

Even worse, when there is no one else home, which is rare, but Frodo is off with Fili and Kili more often than not nowadays and Bilbo can not concentrate on any task long enough to keep

him feeling sane!

An old friend of Bilbo's once told him he was "always waiting for the other shoe to drop." The odd turn of phrase, of course, had to be explained to the shoeless Hobbit, but all the same, his friend had been right. Bilbo is always waiting for disaster. Because life is just one tremendous pile of stinking disaster after another in his experience. He is intelligent and quick-thinking, able to adapt to fresh calamities as they arise because he has to.

Except now... there is no calamity, no disasters, nothing to do except enjoy his life. And Bilbo... doesn't know how to do that. Imagine a Hobbit who's forgotten how to revel in comfort.

And Thorin? Well, he is simply marvelous, kind, patient, and thoughtful. He's everything Bilbo didn't realize he was longing for, and it overwhelms him with affection so deep and powerful, Bilbo has difficulty containing it. It's just too many big feelings for his little body. Once those big feelings settle back down, once Thorin is safely in his eyeline, Bilbo gets exhausted. Bone achingly tired. Even a full night's sleep isn't enough most times.

So Thorin encourages him to take a day or two off to catch up on sleep, graciously continuing to offer his own bed while the Master Baker makes do without his assistant. But one day, becomes two, becomes four, and Bilbo could not leave Thorin's room and it's been six days. Oin is called in for advice, but Bilbo is healthy. There's no ailment. Physically, he just feels overwhelmingly tired and can't leave the bed. Oin stresses the need to consider Bilbo's exhaustion of the mind and spirit with the same seriousness as any ailment in order for him to recover.

He wants to be alone.

He doesn't want to be alone.

He doesn't want Thorin to see him like this.

He needs Thorin close.

On and on the juxtapositions go, making Bilbo inconsolable because he doesn't understand why this is happening, and he feels terrible and useless.

One day, Bilbo wakes with a small whimper of protest as his eyelids crack open at the feel of fingers running through his hair. Immediately, he burrows back into Thorin's chest with a soft sigh. He feels warm, cozy, and safe. But Thorin makes to pull away.

"No. No." Bilbo whines, clutching on to his lover like a persistent vine. "Don't leave! He presses his face harder against Thorin's solid chest and whimpers, "Please," his words muffled and full of shame.

Thorin's hands continue their gentle rhythm through Bilbo's curls as he whispers against the crown of the hobbit's head, "I'm not going anywhere, ghivashel, you are coming with me to the dining table to eat."

Bilbo, feeling trapped between Thorin's comforting presence and his own unease, attempts to shake his head, but it proves futile. "I don't feel ready," Bilbo confesses softly, his voice carrying a tremor.

"Remember what Oin said? Small steps," Thorin replies, the steady reassurance in his tone a lifeline for Bilbo's unease.

"Why is this happening to me?" Bilbo's question lingers in the air, a plea for answers that Thorin attempts to address.

"You have been through so much, your soul just needs rest," Thorin explains, his fingers tenderly tracing patterns through Bilbo's hair.

"I've been resting for six days!" Bilbo protests.

"Eight," Thorin gently corrects.

"Eight days?!" Bilbo's shock is clear.

Thorin, with a measured tone, implores, "Bilbo, you must give yourself time to heal."

"To heal from what?! Everything is fine! Better than fine!" Bilbo's frustration spills out as he grips onto his curls in frustration.

"That's not how trauma works, Bilbo. These things take time," Thorin patiently reminds him.

"How much time?" Bilbo's voice wavers.

"It could be a few more days or weeks..." Thorin says.

"Months?"

Thorin nods solemnly. "Or months."

"Years?" Bilbo's lip trembles, more anxiety settling in.

Thorin's shrug lacks reassurance. "You could feel suddenly well tomorrow but find yourself like this again years later–"

"I can't do anything," Bilbo mutters, the weight of his concerns becoming audibly frantic. "You'll throw me out at this rate, and then what will happen to Frodo? If I stay like this forever?" He was already obsessing about Thorin, eventually growing bored with him romantically! If he were completely useless, he could lose his job! He could never be a burden on Thorin, but even less on Frodo.

"Woah now, wait a moment–" Thorin attempts to interject.

"I can't do that to Frodo," Bilbo continues frantically, his words pouring out. "I'll die before I do–"

“Enough!” Thorin’s voice booms, startling Bilbo. Thorin quickly softens his tone, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace as he reaches for Bilbo again to bring him close. He cradles Bilbo’s face in his hands, urgency in his eyes. “Please don’t say such things. You and Frodo are safe here–”

“For how long?” Bilbo murmurs, his fears unabating and gnawing away at whatever was left of his peace of mind.

“Forever, Bilbo,” Thorin asserts. “There’s no time limit.”

Bilbo shakes his head. “You can’t promise that.”

Thorin only pauses a moment before a small grin appears on his face. “I happen to own the place, so I think I’m the only one who can promise that.”

“Stop that,” Bilbo protests, a sad scowl tugging at his lips.

“Stop what?” Thorin teases again with a chuckle. “Making light of the situation?”

Bilbo nods, feeling utterly too sensitive to joke about something so serious.

Thorin reads him well, always has, so his teasing smile fades to be replaced by understanding and kindness. “Bilbo,” Thorin starts with a soft sigh, his thumb tracing a gentle path along the Hobbit’s cheekbone. “If the roles were reversed, if I were the one ill, would you turn me out?”

“Of course not–I see what you’re doing, you know! It’s not the same! You’ve done everything to help me and Frodo! And now I’m returning your favor by neglecting the one task where I am of use!”

Thorin recoils and blinks furiously, seemingly utterly bewildered. Then he shakes his head slowly and his brow furrows as he stays silent, thinking. Bilbo thinks he’s finally done it, he’s helped Thorin see how obviously lacking he is and now Thorin is going to come to his senses and end things. Well, it was a good run. The happiest Bilbo has been in ages. He’s grateful, really he is.

“When you adopted Frodo…” Thorin says slowly, causing Bilbo to frown, as he didn’t expect the conversation to take any turn other than parting ways with his... his baker. “Was it because you had a use for him?”

It’s Bilbo’s turn to recoil, but in horror. “Of course not,” he breathes, “I’m the only family he has left! Of course, I’d take him in! It’s my responsibility!”

And Thorin laughs, a weak and breathy thing. “I said the same thing when my sister was left widowed and her son’s fatherless. I took full responsibility for what happened—I felt it was my fault, and as the head of my clan, I, alone, had to bear the responsibility of caring for them. The irony of this moment does not escape me.”

Thorin laughs again and Bilbo can’t help but jostle him to make him continue and explain what he means.

“My sister told me I was being ridiculous. She said, ‘Did you murder my husband in cold blood? No. If I were the eldest instead, would you not have helped me in my darkest moments? Would you have kept out of the boys’ lives? Are we nothing but duty to you?’”

Bilbo interrupts softly, sadly. “Thorin, that’s still different.”

“How?”

“I took Frodo in out of love! As did you with your family!”

“Yes.”

That single word makes Bilbo pause and look up. And there is no other phrase that comes to mind describing Thorin’s expression as anything but Burning Holes into him.

Bilbo blinks at him owlishly. “... Love?” He hears himself breathe out, his heart kicking into a faster rhythm without permission. His shock gives way to a spark of hope that he can’t stomp out.

Thorin tilts his chin up, gently but insistently, and nods. “Love.”

Bilbo blinks back tears. It can’t be. This is a dream. Just like all the others. But even if it’s a dream… Bilbo needs to hear it. He’s starving for it, just like he’s been starving for Thorin most of his life, even if he hadn’t known it before meeting him. This, what Bilbo feels, is real, and painful, and wonderful. But it could not be that Thorin feels the same. Bilbo is never lucky like that. Still… his heart is a desperate creature… a selfish one.

“Say it?” Bilbo’s lips betray him, sounding so tiny, so dreadfully fragile.

Thorin leans in closer, pressing their foreheads together, breathing in deeply as he nuzzles Bilbo’s twitchy, sniffly nose. Then he pulls back to make certain Bilbo is looking him directly in those gorgeous and sincere sapphire eyes. “I *love* you, Bilbo.”

Bilbo lets the tears spill over as he collapses into Thorin’s chest with a broken sob.

While holding, rocking, and caressing Bilbo, Thorin murmurs sweet nothings and impossible declarations. He speaks of Ones, soulmates, insisting that Bilbo is his One, and that he’ll never love another. That their makers made them to fit perfectly in each other. And though it seems improbable, Bilbo believes every word. He knows it’s true for himself; he’s loved no one else the way he loves Thorin, and he can’t imagine ever feeling the same for another. When he realizes that his fierce feelings are reciprocated, Bilbo becomes breathless and dazed. He’s drunk on Thorin’s words… his voice.

He listens to Thorin’s deep voice full of promises and feels the warmth of Thorin’s breath against the sensitive shell of his ears. Bilbo’s melancholy shifts. His tears of sadness turn to ones of gratitude and eventually dry altogether. The flush in his skin remains and his breath is still short, but for a different reason altogether.

The panicky ache in his middle goes warm and melts, pooling down pleasantly into something more welcome. He and Thorin have shared many intimate moments similar to the

night they shared after their drinking game, but things never ventured much further than hands beneath clothes since then. Now, Bilbo wants to change that. It's all he can think about as he shifts in Thorin's lap so that he straddles his thighs on the bed. He presses in as tight as he can and Thorin takes the hint quickly, leaning to catch Bilbo's lips and squeezing his rump.

"What do you want, amralime? How can I please you?" Thorin's voice is hoarse and raw.

Bilbo doesn't even try to speak his desires. His mouth refuses to do anything but kiss and nip and suck, so he tugs on Thorin's shirt and just hopes Thorin needs no more than that. His baker, no, his lover–his love–his One removes his shirt, exposing his torso with his muscled chest and soft stomach. Bilbo's fingers eagerly rake through the mass of thick hair and he feels a pang of longing when Thorin groans at the action.

He could spend an eternity touching Thorin's body, hearing his groans and moans and pleadings, kissing him. Instead, Bilbo quickly climbs off of Thorin and divests himself of his own shirt before Thorin can complain. He doesn't even remember deciding to remove his small clothes as well, but once he's completely naked, he catches Thorin's surprised face. Instead of giving into embarrassment, Bilbo reaches out and tugs on Thorin's trousers next.

The man stares at Bilbo's naked form, drinking him in to Bilbo's embarrassment, and then scrambles to remove the rest of his clothes. Thorin looks a tad ridiculous fumbling with his fasteners and then struggling to free his long legs from his trousers, pants, and socks all in one go, and it makes a laugh bubble out of Bilbo suddenly.

The sound stills them both–it's the first time Bilbo has laughed in more than a week. Thorin's cheeks flame as he smiles shyly, bringing his legs over the side of the bed to remove the troublesome clothing properly. And although Bilbo should feel nervous at what he sees between Thorin's legs, warm saliva fills his mouth as if he has just been presented with a very large silver tray of tasty treats, causing his cheeks to pinch in his mouth.

Thorin is unlike anything Bilbo has ever seen–not that he's seen much. But nothing compares to this moment when he slowly climbs into Thorin's lap again and the hairs on his body stand up. The pang of heat low in his belly grows into an aching hunger. They stay in each other's arms, reveling in the feeling of skin on skin.

"Do you still have oil?" Bilbo whispers his question, afraid to break whatever spell is over them.

Thorin's eyes grow wide as he nods slowly and reaches for the drawer of his night table. He takes off the stopper. "Should I warm it?"

Bilbo sighs as his nerves try to shake his resolve. "If you wish. But it's not a massage I want... I want *you* ," Bilbo says slowly, pointedly.

A shaky inhale and a hitch in Thorin's breath are the only sounds before Thorin nods. "We should, erm, have you lie down. On your stomach... like usual."

It was clear that Thorin was just as flustered and trying to ease them both into the next step of their relationship by beginning with something familiar. And Bilbo couldn't say he wasn't grateful. "All right."

As Bilbo lies on the bed on his stomach, he tries not to tense as Thorin's warm hands slowly dip into the oil and then rub circles into his back. But it's no use–Bilbo's skin prickles with awareness, every nerve coming alive under Thorin's touch. The sensation is both exhilarating and soothing, sending waves of pleasure rippling through his body. As the oil warms and Thorin's hands slip over his skin, Bilbo can't help but let out a soft sigh. The touch is familiar, of course. They've done this many times... but there's something else underneath now–restrained anticipation that makes him clench with need.

Thorin's touch is slow and deliberate, like he's savoring every inch of Bilbo's skin. It makes Bilbo's belly burn with want, his hips shifting slightly against the bed beneath him. Bilbo sinks deeper into the mattress, the tension in his muscles melting away like snow under the warmth of the sun. With each knead, he feels himself drifting further into a state of relaxation and humming with heady arousal–his mind emptying of all thoughts except for the exquisite pleasure coursing through him.

By the time Thorin's hands reach Bilbo's lower back, Bilbo's heart is racing, his breath coming in short pants. When Thorin's fingers trace along the curve of his backside, Bilbo can't help but gasp, a shock of heat shooting through him.

Thorin's hands still immediately, his breath heavy as he hesitates before he leans over Bilbo's back. "Amralime..." he starts, his voice rough as if dragged through the sharp peaks of the Misty Mountains. "May I... rub your feet next?"

Bilbo gasps and nods furiously, turning his head slightly to catch Thorin's eyes. "That is a most bold proposition among Hobbits, I'll have you know. Yes. Please. And thank you."

A slow chuckle leaves Thorin like distant rolling thunder, and the sound makes Bilbo's heart sing in response as he grins back at his love. Thorin's skilled hands move down to massage Bilbo's feet. The sensation is both comforting and invigorating. Hobbits may have thick soles, but they are no match for Thorin's dwarrow-inherited strength. As his fingers work their way over the arches of Bilbo's feet, he feels a deep sense of release, as if years of tension are being kneaded away with each firm stroke. It almost brings him to tears again, to release the clogged emotions trapped in every single one of his toes, his arches, his heels... The pressure is just right, firm enough to penetrate deep into the muscles, but gentle enough to soothe any lingering discomfort.

"Oh-my-prize-winning-tomatoes-thatsogoodThorin!" Bilbo rushes out in one groaning breath.

Thorin's hands dip into the oil again, and he continues his massaging, working his way up from Bilbo's feet to his calves. Each stroke of Thorin's fingers sends sparks of heat rippling through his legs and further up. As Thorin's hands rub over the curves of his calves and onto his thighs, Bilbo can't help but let out a low moan of pleasure. His legs fall open slightly, and he sinks deeper into the mattress. The friction between his legs is divine. With every motion of Thorin's hands, he feels himself getting lost in waves of bliss.

Bilbo's pulse quickens, and he grips at the sheets, his arousal building with each brush of Thorin's fingertips that gets closer and closer to where Bilbo is most desperate for his touch. When Thorin's hands reach the tops of Bilbo's thighs and dig into his cheeks, he can't help but whimper–a desperate, needy sound that escapes his lips before he can stop it.

"I love your sounds," Thorin murmurs, his voice thick with desire as he trails his fingers back down to Bilbo's calves. "I want to hear more."

"Oh, please, Thorin," Bilbo whines in a frustrated tone that he cannot help but feel embarrassed about. He wants to protest and tell Thorin to get on with it, but that would be silly and rude. Thorin is merely showing his affection, taking care of him and preparing him, and Bilbo has been selfish long enough. He'll allow Thorin to do as he wishes, even if it means going mad from want.

Thorin hums in satisfaction as he works his way up again. This time his movements are slower and more deliberate–each touch leaving a trail of fire in its wake. Thorin pauses for a moment before dragging his fingers between his thighs, grazing lightly into Bilbo's sensitive plums as he goes. Bilbo's hips buck involuntarily at the sensation, his breath coming in quick gasps as a fresh wave of heat washes over him.

"Ah!" Bilbo cries out, arching his back and pushing himself into Thorin's touch. He feels like he's teetering on the edge of oblivion, every nerve tingling with pleasure and anticipation.

"Do you like that?" Thorin's voice is barely more than a low rumble in his chest as he leans close, his breath hot against Bilbo's ear.

"Yes," Bilbo breathes, "So much."

So Thorin does it again and again, no rhythm to it so that every time he touches him there it's always a pleasant shock.

Thorin leans forward and kisses the tip of Bilbo's ear and whispers. "I will take care of you."

The promise makes Bilbo shiver, a warm flush spreading across his skin. He relaxes into the bed as he feels Thorin shift behind him, his hands gently encouraging Bilbo's thighs to spread.

Thorin nuzzles into Bilbo's hair as he gently circles his ultimate target, each movement sending a jolt of fever through Bilbo's body. He's felt nothing like this–the sensation is both exquisite and overwhelming. The feel of oil-slicked fingers pressing against such an intimate place makes him shake with a mixture of embarrassment and need. Bilbo tries to keep himself relaxed, breathing slowly as Thorin's fingers circle and press with gentle pressure.

Thorin's other hand rests on his hip, a grounding presence that helps to keep Bilbo present in the moment. As Thorin's fingers gently work him, Bilbo becomes lost in the sensations–the warmth of Thorin's skin against his own, the softness of the blankets beneath him, the heady smell of sex in the air.

Thorin's voice is soft and warm in his ear as he murmurs reassurances and endearments, his beard scratching deliciously against Bilbo's skin.

An eternity later, Bilbo gasps, arching his back as Thorin's fingers discover a deeper stab of pleasure, only to retreat and leave him completely. But before Bilbo can curb his whine of protest, Thorin guides his legs closed again, and he feels Thorin straddle them. Then Thorin braces himself, placing his arms on either side of Bilbo as he almost growls in his ear.

"My love, you are so small. Though I long to see your face as we do this, I do not wish to hurt you. Like this, you will be most comfortable and there is no risk of crushing you."

Bilbo lets out a whimper of disappointment. He really wanted to look at his lover. "As long as, as long as we can change position at-at the... end?"

A huff of breath tickles his neck as Thorin eagerly agrees. "All right." Then Thorin sits back onto his own heels and his warm palms cup Bilbo's cheeks and spreads them.

Bilbo coughs on his own intake of breath at the wanton display he must make at such an angle. He imagines his body is slick and gleaming in the lamplight from the oil Thorin used, his arse spread lewdly, and he has a split second to think a wild thought, to hope no one comes to check in on them.

Then he feels Thorin's solid weight over him once more, pressing him into the mattress, and all coherent thought is gone from his mind as he feels Thorin's blunt girth rub at his entrance. Thorin is moving achingly slowly, allowing Bilbo time to adjust to the feeling of being breached by his impressive size.

The stretch is both strange and exhilarating, a heady mix of burn and pleasure that has Bilbo panting and moaning into the pillow beneath him, but Thorin has prepared him thoroughly and Bilbo quickly adjusts to every press.

"Relax for me," Thorin husks, his voice thick and cracking. "It will make it easier."

Bilbo tries to do as Thorin says, focusing on his breathing and relaxing his muscles. But it's so hard when he feels so full already, and Thorin has barely made progress at all.

"Do you want me to stop?" Thorin asks, his voice heavy with concern.

"No!" Bilbo gasps out. "No, I don't want you to stop. I... I like the way it feels. Like I'm yours."

"Oh Mahal, Bilbo," Thorin groans. "You do not know what it does to me to hear you say that."

As Thorin slowly pushes deeper, Bilbo feels the burn give way to a richer ache of pleasure, his body singing with delight. Thorin presses on, and Bilbo feels the burn give way to a deeper ache of pleasure. Thorin continues to rock minutely, pushing further in. Bilbo howls at the blinding spark of pleasure as Thorin finds that spot once more. It calms only a bit as

Thorin stops to check in again. Bilbo tries to rock himself back, but Thorin's thick legs have him good and trapped, which only makes his pleasure rise.

"Oh, Thorin!" Bilbo cries out, panicked. His peak will come too soon, and only by a miracle of the gods it doesn't. "I won't last-I won't last," he whines as he shakes his head from side to side.

He can hear Thorin panting above him, trying to steady his breathing. "I'm going to pull out, and... we can... change." His voice is so strained.

Bilbo lets out a whimper of relief and tries to relax, but he's stretched so wide, he can't tell if he's succeeding.

Thorin moves back, and Bilbo's breath hitches at the sensation of being emptied. He's never felt so bereft, so hollow as he does the moment Thorin leaves him completely. Thorin curses and his voice trails off into a groan, still holding Bilbo's cheeks apart.

"You're a sight..."

Bilbo burns with embarrassment as he realizes Thorin is staring into him, literally! "Thorin!" He squirms until his lover grumbles and removes himself for Bilbo to turn over.

As soon as Bilbo gets on his back, he covers his flushed face in his hands. "Pervert," he mumbles into his fingers as he peeks through the gaps. He wants to slap the wicked grin off Thorin's stupidly handsome face. Bilbo swallows at the sight of Thorin above him, his skin flushed with exertion, his eyes dark with desire. But there is also a softness there, a tenderness that makes Bilbo's heart squeeze in his chest.

This man loves him. The thought makes his heart flip in his chest. This man desires him and loves him.

Thorin gently removes Bilbo's hands and cups his face, tracing the lines of his cheekbones and jaw with his thumbs, and whispers, "My love. My amral."

"Is that what that means?" Bilbo asks in wonder. Has Thorin really called him his love this whole time?

Thorin smiles, nods and then he leans down and captures Bilbo's lips in a kiss. When he pulls back, there is a furrow to his brow. "Are you certain I didn't hurt you?" he looks down between them at himself and smiles wryly. "I'm quite large compared to you."

"Yes, that's what I've been counting on since I first laid eyes on you." They both laugh at Bilbo's cheeky reply, but he can tell that Thorin is concerned. "No, Thorin, you didn't hurt me. You said our makers made our souls to fit perfectly as One. Why would they stop there?"

"A fair point," Thorin replies, a faint smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Thorin's pupils hide most of the blue and the muscles in his shoulders tense as he hooks Bilbo's closed legs over one arm.

The action exposes Bilbo again, but he can't help the moan that escapes his lips. He's hard and aching against his stomach. Thorin's eyes dart up to meet him, his gaze heavy with lust as he takes in Bilbo's need. He adjusts himself and it does not take as long for them to be flushed together once more.

Thorin rolls his hips in a steady rhythm, causing sparks of heat to ripple through Bilbo's body, and making his breathing ragged. Overwhelmed with pleasure, Bilbo lets out a gasp, his body instinctively arching as he yearns to bring Thorin even closer.

As Thorin's thrusts become harder and faster, Bilbo drowns in a sea of sensation. He feels utterly consumed by Thorin–his body humming with pleasure as he loses himself in the waves of bliss that crash over him. Thorin's fingers dig into Bilbo's hips, pulling him closer with every thrust, and Bilbo can't help but shudder at the sound of Thorin's ragged breaths as he drives himself deeper.

"Oh Thorin..." Bilbo moans, his hands gripping the sheets as he feels himself teetering on the edge of oblivion. "I'm... I'm..."

"I have you," Thorin's voice is thick with desire, his eyes burning with need as he gazes down at Bilbo. "Let go."

And Bilbo does, losing himself in the sweet release of his peak, his whole body trembling as pleasure floods his very being.

Thorin quickly follows–his body stiffening and his breathing ragged as he spills into Bilbo with a low groan.

Afterward, they lay wrapped in each other's arms, their bodies entwined as they slowly come down from the heights of their shared bliss. Thorin holds Bilbo close, murmuring words of love and devotion as he plants kisses into Bilbo's sweat soaked hair. Bilbo's heart swells in his chest, a deep sense of contentment settling over him as he snuggles closer to Thorin's warmth. He could happily stay like this forever, enveloped in the safety and comfort of his beloved's arms.

"Thorin?" Bilbo says quietly, timidly.

"Hm?"

Bilbo chews on his lower lip before taking in a quick breath. "You know that I... I... I feel the same, yes? You understand?"

He feels Thorin tense and then relax. A sharp nose nuzzles his temple. "I do," Thorin says simply, with a smile in his voice. "Come, let's wash up quickly and get you fed."

As if on cue, Bilbo's stomach lets out a loud growl.

Both he and Thorin burst into laughter, and Thorin guarantees Bilbo he will be well fed soon enough.

As they head towards the washing basin and the extra clothes on the dresser, Bilbo can’t shake the realization that the oppressive emotions that had plagued him for so long were now... quiet. In fact, his mind and heart seem to be in perfect harmony. They both radiate happiness, and in this moment, that’s all that matters. He refuses to dwell on worry. No, he won’t. Not this time. If the melancholy returns, Bilbo finds solace in the certainty that Thorin will still be there for him... and still love him, regardless.

Chapter End Notes

I believe the next chapter will be the last.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bilbo's eyelids flutter open to the gentle kiss of morning light filtering through the curtains. He relishes the warmth cocooning him within the blankets, a luxury of comfort in the quiet of their room. Because it is *their* room now, Bilbo and Thorin's, after that night of sharing themselves with one another so thoroughly. Bilbo lifts his head off the furry pillow of Thorin's chest and squints at his lover with his unruly hair obscuring most of his peaceful face.

A soft smile plays on Bilbo's lips as he recalls the previous night, when he had endeavored to tire Thorin out for his upcoming birthday so he could be the one relaxed for once. A smirk of success dances across Bilbo's features as he lazily traces patterns on Thorin's arm and shoulder with his fingertips.

Thorin emits a sleepy mumble that sends a flutter through Bilbo's heart. "You can't lie about much longer," Bilbo murmurs. "It's your birthday."

"I am aware," Thorin responds, his voice still thick and gravelly with sleep. "In fact, I suspect you planned it so that I would be too exhausted to protest this silly party."

Bilbo huffs, feigning offense. "You shouldn't be so cranky on your birthday."

"I'm not cranky," Thorin grumbles, a touch of petulance in his tone. "I didn't even want a party to begin with, and now you and my sister have invited half of Bree. They're closing the street, Bilbo."

"No, not cranky at all, I see," deadpans Bilbo, rolling his eyes. He stretches his arms overhead with a loud yawn before dressing. "You should thank me. Dis was insistent on making it a surprise. At least you've had time to adjust to the news. And this will be a great opportunity to sow—"

"Yes, yes," Thorin interrupts, mimicking a hand puppet with one hand. "Sow the seeds of friendship and community, blah blah blah."

Bilbo playfully tosses a pillow at Thorin's head. "Ingrate."

"It's my birthday!" Thorin protests. "I should get everything I want, and what I want is for you to come back to bed and for us to never leave it, especially not for *my* birthday party."

A soft chuckle escapes Bilbo's lips as he watches Thorin's futile attempts to remain in bed. As tempting as the offer is, the anticipation of celebrating Thorin's birthday with their friends and family brings a smile to Bilbo's face. Thorin deserves to be celebrated, and Bilbo is determined to ensure he knows it.

Bilbo's gaze drifts down to where Thorin's foot peeks out from beneath the sheets, and a soft smile curves his lips. To him, Thorin's feet have always seemed surprisingly dainty and bare. They are adorable, a rarity for Bilbo to behold, as Thorin usually keeps them hidden beneath boots or socks. Without a second thought, Bilbo reaches out and gently caresses Thorin's sole —only for a sudden, loud shriek to pierce the air, nearly sending Bilbo into an early grave.

Thorin quickly pulls both legs in close as he jolts upright in bed.

Both of them freeze in shock, their jaws drop and eyes widen at the unexpected and, frankly, girlish scream that had emanated from Thorin himself. It's a sound Bilbo has never heard him come close to making, and it's glaringly apparent that it's new to Thorin too by the rush of red that floods his cheeks.

Bilbo feels himself purse his lips as he tries to fight a grin.

"Bilbo," Thorin warns, as his shock and embarrassment turns to dread.

"Oh, Thorin..." Bilbo says somberly, as if he were about to tell him some devastating news.

"No, Bilbo. Don't get any ideas. I'm serious!"

Bilbo wiggles his fingers as he stalks forward. "So you *are* ticklish, after all."

Thorin scowls, crawling further back on the bed and tucking his feet further under the sheets. "You-you promised you'd never try to tickle me again!"

"Yes, well, that was before I *knew* you *were* ticklish. I feel you unfairly withheld information, so that promise is now void, I'm afraid."

Thorin laughs a bit hysterically as he catches Bilbo's wrists before Bilbo can even graze him. They tumble a little just for fun, because Thorin can obviously and easily subdue him. And he eventually does.

Bilbo ends up on his back with his wrist pinned over his head as Thorin chuckles above him. "Now look here, burglar," Thorin says with a grin, even though he's fighting to stay serious. "I'm afraid if you try tickling my feet, I'd kick you clean over the Misty Mountains quite by accident."

Bilbo barks out a laugh, concedes, and remakes his promise and then hurries off, leaving Thorin to his rare, lazy morning ablutions.

For once, Bilbo surprises Thorin by preparing breakfast himself. With the bakery closed in anticipation of the big party, the kitchen feels oddly quiet, but Bilbo moves with purpose, gathering ingredients. He cracks eggs with practiced ease, slices bread for toasting, and sets bacon to sizzle in the pan. The aroma soon fills their home, a promise of the hearty meal to come.

As Bilbo flips the last of the bacon, Thorin wanders in, lured by the smell. A look of pleasant surprise crosses his face, but before he can offer to help, Bilbo shoos him away. “This morning, you sit. Breakfast is on me.” Thorin, though initially hesitant, relents and takes a seat, watching Bilbo with a fond smile.

Frodo soon joins them, rubbing sleep from his eyes but quickly brightening at the sight of the spread laid out on the table. Together, they sit down to a breakfast filled with laughter and light conversation, the day’s excitement bubbling just beneath the surface.

Once they’ve eaten their fill, Bilbo hands Thorin and Dwalin their tasks for the day. “The bakery may be closed, but we’ve still got plenty to prepare. Dis needs you two for the heavy lifting,” he explains, ushering them towards the door with a playful sternness.

With Thorin and Dwalin dispatched to aid Dis, Bilbo turns his attention to the final preparations. Ori, Frodo, Fili, and Kili are enlisted to watch over the ovens, a task of utmost importance and one that allows Bilbo the chance to slip away unnoticed. He leaves them with explicit instructions, his trust in their competence clear. “Just keep an eye on everything. I won’t be long, and there’s nothing you can’t handle,” he reassures them, his tone leaving no room for doubt.

Sneaking out the back, Bilbo makes his way to the Prancing Pony, where his final and most secret task awaits—the collection of Thorin’s presents. The innkeeper, in on the surprise, greets Bilbo with a knowing wink and gives him permission to head to the closet in which the gifts are hidden.

While Bilbo carefully sifts through the closet, finding Thorin’s carefully selected gifts. He has just secured the last of the presents, turning to leave, when a voice slithers through the quiet, halting him in his tracks. “Look at what I just caught. The thieving Shire Rat. Up to your old tricks again, are you? I’d have thought you’d learned your lesson.”

The voice belongs to none other than Alfrid, his presence as unpleasant as ever. Bilbo can barely contain his fear. A wave of nausea hitting him as Alfrid’s notoriously foul breath reaches him. He fights the urge to gag, steadying himself with a deep breath of cleaner air before he responds.

Alfrid’s grin is all malice, enjoying the discomfort he’s caused. Bilbo, however, despite the revulsion curling in his stomach, refuses to let Alfrid see him falter.

“Hello, Mr. Lickspittle,” Bilbo greets, infusing his voice with as much politeness as he can muster under the circumstances, though his voice shakes a bit. He holds the presents tighter to his chest. “I can assure you that I am not stealing. These gifts are, in fact, mine. Mr. Whittlock has been holding them for me.”

He stands as firm as his legs allow, despite his anxiety over this ill encounter. He’s ready to defend not only the gifts but also his honor against any insinuation of theft. After all, he’s worked so hard and truly hadn’t lifted a single thing since Thorin saved him from this very man months ago.

“You may not know,” Bilbo continues, “but I’ve been gainfully employed for quite some time now.” He tries his luck to bypass Alfrid as the man’s expression shifts into a sneer. Alfrid moves to obstruct Bilbo’s path to the exit. The disdain in his gaze is palpable, making it clear he’s not moved by Bilbo’s claim.

“Oh, I’ve heard,” Alfrid says, stepping closer to loom ominously over Bilbo. His voice drips with ridicule as he continues, “Your savior, the famous Baker of Bree, employed two halflings.” His mocking tone makes it clear he finds the situation amusing or, worse, contemptible. “Two petty thieves,” his accusation hanging heavily in the air between them.

“My son is no thief, *sir*,” Bilbo nearly spits, his voice laced with barely contained anger. He can feel the tension mounting, the unease settling like a heavy weight on his shoulders. Though Thorin’s protection has shielded him from many dangers, he knows he must tread carefully with Alfrid. The man is not to be underestimated, and Bilbo senses the danger crowding in on him.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Alfrid lilts. “Though I still find it *strange*, you might say, that such an upstanding citizen like Thorin Oakenshield,” he hisses out Thorin’s name like a curse, “would employ a thief in his shop. Even stranger are the whispers going around that you may be paying off your debt in *other* ways to him.” He waggles his eyebrows with a lecherous grin. “I guess I can see what he sees in you. A tight little thing, eh?” Alfrid’s eyes rake over Bilbo with curiosity. “I could help you, you know. You could work for me instead. I could use your skills in sneaking and the like to be my eyes and ears on this side of town.”

Bilbo’s jaw drops in horror before shutting it with a loud click as Alfrid’s insinuations hit him like a slap in the face. His anger simmers beneath the surface, threatening to boil over, but he knows he must keep his composure. Thorin’s reputation is at stake, and Bilbo refuses to let Alfrid tarnish it with his vile allegations.

“I assure you, there’s no truth to your baseless accusations,” Bilbo responds, his tone icy with indignation. “As for your offer, I’ll pass. I have no interest in associating myself with the likes of you.” He squares his shoulders, meeting Alfrid’s gaze with unwavering determination. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have party business to attend to.”

With that, Bilbo attempts to sidestep Alfrid again, his heart pounding with a mixture of anger and dread. He knows he’s playing a dangerous game, but he refuses to let fear dictate his actions. If anything, this encounter only strengthens his resolve to protect what’s important to him, no matter the cost.

Alfrid’s sneer deepens as he snarls and seizes Bilbo’s arms, causing him to drop his packages to the ground with a clatter. “I’ve had my eye on you and that self-righteous baker of yours,” he growls, his grip tightening. “And you know what I’ve noticed?”

Bilbo fights to maintain his composure, resisting the urge to scream and thrash and flee. Every instinct in him screams for escape, but he steadies himself with a deep breath, forcing his muscles to remain still. “I can assure you I do not know,” he replies, his voice strained but steady.

Alfrid's grip tightens on Bilbo's wrist, sending a jolt of pain shooting through him. "He seems to attract a lot of *little* folk," Alfrid continues, his tone curious. "In fact, I'd say there are more little folk coming to Bree every day, and they all seem to be connected to your employer."

Bilbo's face pales at Alfrid's words. While it's not illegal to be small, he knows all too well the tensions simmering between men and dwarves, exacerbated by the Beacons. The last thing he wants is for Thorin or his family to come under suspicion simply for being dwarrowmen in a town filled with wary eyes.

"What's he planning, eh?" Alfrid demands, his suspicion palpable. "Is he building himself a little army of thieves and spies?"

Bilbo's heart pounds in his chest as he struggles to maintain his calm facade. Sweat beads down his temple. This could spell trouble not just for Thorin, but for all of them. "I don't know what you're talking about."

But Alfrid isn't easily swayed. He narrows his eyes at Bilbo, a sinister smile creeping across his face. "Oh, I think you do," he taunts, tightening his grip on Bilbo's wrist, making an involuntary hiss escape the hobbit. "But mark my words, Shire rat, I'll be keeping an eye on you and your *little* friends. And if I catch wind of anything suspicious, your baker will be the one to pay the price."

Bilbo's stomach churns with fear. With a forced calmness, he nods, his voice steady despite the turmoil within. "Understood," he says.

As Bilbo stands there, caught in Alfrid's iron grip, his heart nearly beats out of his chest as he hears loud footsteps coming closer. The innkeeper steps in, his brow furrowing at the sight before him. "What's the meaning of this?" he demands, his voice stern but wary.

Alfrid briefly tightens his grip on Bilbo's wrist before releasing it, feigning innocence. "I saw this halfling stealing from you," he explains, his tone dripping with false concern.

But the innkeeper's gaze shifts to the parcels scattered on the floor, and he shakes his head. "Mr. Baggins is not stealing. Those parcels belong to him, and I was just holding them for him."

Alfrid's expression morphs into one of exaggerated contrition. "Ah, my apologies, Mr. Baggins," he says with a smirk, though there's no sincerity in his voice. "Just doing my civic duty, you understand."

Bilbo's fists clench at his sides as he fights the urge to lash out at the deceitful man before him. Instead, he nods curtly, his voice tight with restraint. "Thank you," he mutters, his gratitude directed towards the innkeeper.

With a dismissive wave of his hand, the innkeeper shoos Alfrid away, and Bilbo wastes no time in picking up his parcels and hurrying out of the inn. The encounter serves as a stark reminder of the dangers lurking in the shadows of Bree, and Bilbo resolves to be even more vigilant in the days to come.

Thorin's party unfolds like a dream, the streets alive with laughter and music. Bilbo can't help being swept up in the festive atmosphere, despite the lingering unease gnawing at the edges of his mind and the throbbing ache in his wrist. He scans the crowd periodically, half-expecting to see Alfrid lurking in the shadows, but the vile man is nowhere to be found–thank the Valar.

Still, Bilbo can't shake the memory of Alfrid's grip on his wrist, the bruises now a painful reminder of the encounter. When Thorin notices the injury and demands an explanation, Bilbo brushes off the inquiry with a vague excuse, promising to explain later, not wanting to burden Thorin with worries on his special day. He will tell Thorin, he promises silently, because Alfrid's threats cannot go ignored. Just… not today.

Instead, Bilbo throws himself into the festivities, greeting familiar faces and sharing in the joy of the occasion. The music starts, and soon the streets fill with the sound of laughter and dancing. Friends and family offer well wishes and small speeches, celebrating Thorin's accomplishments since his move to Bree.

As the night wears on, Bilbo forgets his fears in the warmth of Thorin's happiness and the camaraderie of their friends. The party continues late into the night until it begins to snow and the chill in the air drives them indoors. With the help of many hands, they clean up the street, hearts full of good food and cheer.

The party is a resounding success.

Despite not wanting a party at all, Thorin had a great time of it and doesn't even pretend he hadn't–even when his sister gives him an annoying and triumphant smirk. He sits amidst a mountain of presents, feeling overwhelmed by the generosity of his loved ones. He would love nothing more than to beg off opening them all, but the insistence of his hobbits and nephews wins out. With a resigned chuckle, he unwraps the gifts from close family and friends, saving those from his hobbits for last.

Dis and the boys present him with new knives for his trade. Dwalin and Ori gift him with knives of a different sort, ones meant for protection and defense. Bofur's gift elicits a raised eyebrow and a flush, the contents hidden from view but clearly meant for private enjoyment between couples. There's more, but he can't keep track because he's most anticipating opening the ones from his beloved.

Finally, he comes to Bilbo and Frodo's gifts. Frodo knitted him a scarf and winter hat himself in dark gray and Durin's blue, and it warms his heart that the lad had put so much effort and care into them. But it's Bilbo's gift that truly takes his breath away. Bilbo presents him with a bound leather book, an Oakleaf and acorn etched onto the cover. When Thorin opens it he sees Bilbo's fine, looping handwriting dedicating the rest of his family's recipes to him, a treasure trove of culinary secrets handed down from generation to generation.

“Thorin,” Bilbo’s voice is soft, with a hint of pride woven into its timbre, “in hobbit tradition, sharing our family recipes is a high honor, usually reserved for, well, weddings.” His One’s face flushes red as a beet at the other’s whistles and whoops. Bilbo quickly shushes them with a playful glare before clearing his throat to continue. “But I couldn’t think of a better occasion than today to gift this to you. You’ve done so much for me... for Frodo. I want you to know that I... that we are beyond grateful to you. And... well,” he adds with an embarrassed laugh, “that you are just as much a part of our little family as you’ve claimed us to be of yours.”

“And we love you!” Frodo adds as he elbows Bilbo to declare it as well.

“Yes,” Bilbo says softly with a fond smile at his boy and then sending it to Thorin as well. “That too. So much.”

The small gathering coos and awws and Thorin is deeply moved, his throat having trouble swallowing and his eyes stinging. “Thank you, Bilbo,” he manages, his voice gone a bit hoarse with the amount of gratitude he feels. “It means more to me than you can imagine.”

But Bilbo isn’t done yet. “Which brings me to your next gift.” Shyly but determinedly, he produces a small box and hands it to Thorin as if his gift may not be accepted, which is ridiculous because Thorin would accept anything and everything from his One. Thorin opens it as reverently as it was given to him and he gasps. “This,” Bilbo adds, “is a token of my affection, in line with the, ahem, courting tradition among your clan. Um, Bifur helped since I’m no good with carving…”

A bead. A courting bead made from an acorn, carved by his own hand with the help of Bifur.

Thorin’s heart swells with love for the hobbit before him. “Bilbo,” he says, his voice catching. “I am honored beyond words. And I accept.” He grabs Bilbo by his waistcoat and tugs him into a persistent and thorough kiss that leaves them both gasping for air.

Thorin waits for the merry hollers and shouts of congratulations to settle before he declares his own surprise. With a steadying breath, Thorin announces to the gathering, “But the tradition of hobbits is to give gifts on one’s birthday, not receive them. So I have gifts for you both as well. You beat me to it, Bilbo, but this is as good a time as any to give you these.”

The room erupts in cheers, and laughter because they know what’s coming. As Thorin presents the gifts to Bilbo and Frodo, Bilbo tries to protest. “Thorin, you shouldn’t have.”

But Thorin simply smiles, his eyes soft with affection. “Nonsense. It’s been long since coming. Open them.”

With eager hands, Bilbo and Frodo tear through the wrapping paper and open their boxes. Inside each box lies a delicate bead made of mithril, intricately carved and gleaming.

Bilbo’s eyes widen in awe as he lifts the bead from its velvet cushion. “Thorin, this is...”

“It’s a Durin clan bead,” Thorin explains, his voice filled with warmth. “It marks you both as members of my family, so that all may know you belong.”

Frodo’s expression mirrors Bilbo’s as he examines his own bead. “Thank you, Thorin,” Bilbo says, his voice strained.

Thorin nods, his heart swelling with pride as he watches the hobbits admire their tokens. “You are both so dear to me,” he says softly. “And I am proud to call you family.”

Overwhelmed with gratitude and affection, Bilbo and Frodo rush towards Thorin, tears glistening in their eyes. With joyful exclamations, they tackle him in a flurry of hugs and warmth, their arms wrapping tightly around him.

Thorin lets out a wet laugh of his own and he returns their embraces, pulling them close to his chest. Surrounded by the ones he holds most dear, Thorin truly feels there is a bright future ahead. He finally feels home. They all do.

Clad in flowing gray robes that billow around him in the brisk evening air, a curious figure moves with purpose through the now quiet streets of Bree. His pointed hat, pulled low to shield his weathered face, casts a shadow over his piercing eyes, adding an air of mystery to his already enigmatic presence. At his side, his trusted staff seems to hum with ancient power as he strides forward.

As he approaches the bakery, its windows aglow with warm light, he can’t help but feel a pang of hesitation while he silently witnesses the joy and love exchanged by those within.

He smiles wistfully as a happy couple embrace. “So they have found each other at last,” he murmurs with a twinkle in his eye. Long absent from the lives of his friends, he now wonders if he should intrude with the news he bears.

Thorin and Bilbo, dear friends though they may be, are not mere mortals caught in the ebb and flow of everyday life. They are bound by the threads of destiny, woven into the grand tapestry of fate.

With a deep breath, the Gray Wizard walks closer to the door in preparation to disturb the merry gathering, steeling himself for the task ahead. He knows that his friends’ happiness and peace are at stake, but so too is the fate of many others. Will his revelation disrupt the peace they have found in each other’s company? Will it bring about the change they all long for, or will it simply stir up old wounds and buried desires?

In the evening's quiet, he stands for a moment longer, the weight of the parchment hidden in his robes pressing against him. A map. A map to Erebor.

Chapter End Notes

OMG... it's done... I can't believe it's done! I thought I'd NEVER finish! lol
Thank you so much for staying for the ride and for your patience with my sporadic

updates. I have no idea which story I'll do next. I need to finish a gift fic in the Good Omens fandom that will be a kinda fix-it for S2. That one is almost done.

There are many reasons why my update took so long, and I'd love to share why but that would take too long. Instead, I just ask that you act with love in your heart and don't give into the hatred being spread. Staying silent...? I don't think that's an option anymore. Call out the hate when you see it, regardless of how it may make you appear. Don't stay complicit in the horrors being done to others. Go VOTE.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!