



Lay Down Your Sweet and Weary Head



A Story by Elenothar

**Lay Down Your
Sweet and Weary Head**

by Elenothar

A Hobbit Fanfic

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Summary

Thorin dies. Thorin wakes up. He is understandably confused by this, especially since he appears to be in the Erebor he knew as a young dwarf, about to be attacked by a dragon.

A time-travel fic with Thorin as the one living his life twice.

Chapter 1



*Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
Night is falling
You've come to journey's end
Sleep now
And dream of the ones who came before
They're callings
From across a distant shore*

*

Dying had turned out to be easier than Thorin had expected. The battle had left him weak and with many wounds, only connected to life by a thin thread to which he clung with grim determination until his apologies had been made.

Even filled with sorrow his burglar's eyes were still steady and blue as they coaxed Thorin's mouth through the words that needed saying. And once that was done... Fili and Kíli were dead, the battle was won and Erebor retaken. There was nothing left for him here anymore and when Thorin Oakenshield finally let go of life, he did so gladly enough.

Dying was indeed easy. He just hadn't expected to wake up after.

*

Thorin comes to with a shout and a whole lot of disorientation.

The last thing he remembers seeing is the face of a hobbit marked by grief and the dirty grey cloth of the tent under above him and he feels as if no more than a second has passed since he'd closed his eyes for what he'd then assumed to be the last time.

Later he'll have to fight the insane urge to laugh at the fact that the first thing he notices as *wrong* is the length of his beard, the long forgotten weight trailing down his chin, complete with delicate clasp. He hadn't worn such a beard since the day that Smaug came, the one outward sign of his shame and all that he'd lost.

One hand comes up to finger the silken strands, just as his eyes finally focus on his surroundings. For a long moment his heart stops, deeply buried pain rising at the sight of his old quarters in Erebor all around him. Just like he remembers them. *Exactly* like he remembers them, from the bed he's sitting on, to the harp in the corner, and the armour in another one. Even on the quest he'd never truly believed he'd see these rooms again.

Before he can do anything but stare, uncomprehending as to why he's now suddenly vividly imagining his past when he should be *dead* and buried, the door slams open to a worried looking Dís clutching a dagger.

Her presence slams into him like a hammer on an anvil – she looks young, so painfully young - *small* - and unburdened by sorrow and responsibility. This is a Dís he hasn't seen for decades, decades that dragged longer and longer the more the spark in her eyes extinguished.

Grief erupts at the reminder of the fate of her sons, their bloodied and still bodies flashing through his mind's eye as he sees their mother in front of him. He tries to tell himself that here, in this strange construct of his past, they're simply not alive yet, not *dead*, but he can do no more than mute his sorrow.

Dimly he realizes that she's talking, now looking even more worried as she hurries over to the bed and shakes his shoulder while he does nothing but drink in the sight of her as he'd always tried to remember his sister even in the darkest of times.

“ – nadad, what’s going on? What happened? Are you – ”

The desperation in her voice finally yanks him out of his own mind. “I’m fine, namadith, everything’s all right.”

Her features relax a little at his response, but it doesn’t erase her suspicions. “You were *screaming* Thorin,” she points out, her eyes intent beneath the worry. “Loud enough that I could hear you. I’ve never heard you scream like that.”

Thorin almost winces, even while trying to look as reassuring as possible as he attempts to figure out how to get out of this one. Of course *this* Dís wouldn’t know, she hasn’t lived what he’s lived, hasn’t ever seen him as less than her strong, dependable older brother, not yet cracked or broken.

“Just a nightmare, Dís,” he finally settles on saying, calmly enough that she’ll hopefully believe him. “Nothing to worry about.”

A familiar frown appears on her forehead, that little cleft between her eyebrows that he used to tease her about endlessly. The frown that says, quite eloquently, ‘not buying the load of dragon dung you’re spouting right now, Thorin’.

“Leave me the right to worry when my brother suddenly starts screaming like he’s being skewered in the middle of the night,” she says a little acidly. Even back then she hadn’t been a fan of Thorin’s habit to downplay any kind of injury, physical or otherwise. Or should he say even now? He wishes he knew what in Mahal’s name is going on here anyway.

He also wishes he hadn’t given in to the instinctive urge to check his body for the wounds that should, by all rights, be there at the mention of being skewered – which he quite clearly remembers being – only to find no bleeding wound or scar marring any of the places he’d been struck. Dís’ gaze grows even more suspicious at the motion.

One thing, however, he is sure of. If this is reality and not just a dream or hallucination, he will *never* tell anyone, especially not Dís, the truth of the life he has already lived. He will not burden anyone other than himself with that knowledge – unfortunately this also

means that he can't just ask her what the date is without appearing like a complete loony for having forgotten.

So he makes himself smile, despite his own worries, and says, "As I told you, just a nightmare. I'm fine." And because Dís still makes no move to leave, he adds, "And I would like to go back to sleep sometime soon."

It's a clear dismissal and Dís' mouth thins as she throws him one last glare and turns on her heels. The door bangs shut behind her.

Thorin collapses back against the soft mattress, pushing away the stab of guilt at having exploited Dís' anger whenever her help is turned down to make her leave to focus on his situation. He died. He *knows* deep in his bones that he did truly die and yet everything that has happened since then has felt no less real than his life before.

What is this then, a second chance? He's never believed in second chances, far too cynical far too early for such a hopeful view of the world and yet he doesn't know what else it could be, either. Maybe he's cursed to relive his life's pain over and over. He'd be damned though if he just sat by and did nothing knowing what would happen.

His lip twists wryly. It's that easy then. He doesn't know what's going on, maybe he'll never know, but whatever it is he'll do everything in his power to change fate and spare his loved ones the pain he remembers. He would settle for no less.

And a sense of purpose has always been his driving force. Even if it usually isn't accompanied by the need to keep secret from his family and friends that he's a stranger in his young body, six times older than he should be.

He falls asleep trying not to think about a certain hobbit burglar and his loyal company that he's left behind in death. He fails.

*

He oversleeps the next morning, whether because his mind needed the rest or his body had he isn't sure, but he curses himself nonetheless as he rushes through the hallways after a quick breakfast. He still

doesn't know what year or day it is, doesn't know what kind of duties he should be attending to at this moment and his planned head start on the day has gone down the drain.

"Thorin!"

At the cry ringing out from behind him, Thorin turns before his brain has caught up with his ears and placed the voice, and only many years of practice in keeping his face clear of his emotions keep him from showing his double-take.

He hasn't seen his little brother for well over a hundred years.

"Thorin," Frerin says again, slightly out of breath and thankfully oblivious to Thorin's inner turmoil, "why aren't you at the council session? You'll be late."

Council session? "Oh *bother*."

Tearing his gaze away from Frerin, so vibrantly alive, Thorin starts to double back the way he'd come with what he hopes to be a cheerful wave indicating that he would see Frerin later.

Right now it doesn't matter that he all but collapses against the stone wall as soon as he has rounded the next corner, his legs weak when he really *should've* expected to run into his brother at some point. *This must be what seeing a ghost feels like.*

He hasn't seen his brother in so long, and now that he has seen him, all he can feel is shock overlain with painfully vivid memories of Frerin dying in his arms –

*(blood bubbling from pale lips and only silence greeting
"Hold on, brother, don't give up, stay with me."
as Frerin's last breath rattles his chest)*

– memories that, despite his best intentions to the contrary, he'd ended up recalling most often when thinking about his younger brother. After a while he'd simply started trying to stop thinking about him altogether as much as possible, even with the bitter knowledge that Frerin deserved better than that from his remaining kin pounding be-

hind his eyes.

This Frerin, the smiling, joyful, barely teenage Frerin that he's just seen, had been all but buried beneath all the sorrow his passing had caused. And this Frerin, just like this Dís, doesn't know what Thorin has lived through.

His mouth twists a little at the reminder that he will have to put on an act for his own family's benefit. He isn't even sure if he remembers how to be the Thorin that Frerin would know, a young unburdened self.

But wallowing in self-pity has never helped anyone, so he pushes off the wall with new determination. For their sake, he would relearn himself. He would blunt the edges that a hard life has left on him and smooth his expression into something less grim and serious.

His father throws him a reprimanding look when he slides into his chair as unobtrusively as possible, but turns his attention back to the assembled councillors at Thorin's minute shake of the head.

He lets councillor Dragur's words about a complication in the eastern mineshafts wash over him, not caring much for their mundane nature – he still remembers having been excited to finally be allowed to sit in on these sessions, though playing little active part, but a life full of frustrating negotiations had curbed his curiosity – until his grandfather's voice suddenly catches his attention.

“Lord Girion and King Thranduil have requested a meeting to discuss trade arrangements and military concerns – ”

The rest of Thrór's words drown in the white noise cascading into Thorin's mind. He knows this meeting, remembers it like he remembers everything that had happened on *that* day in painstaking detail.

It's the day that Smaug came.

Completely ignoring the continuing meeting around him – he knows what's being said anyway – Thorin casts his mind back to the events preceding the fire-drake's attack. After the council meeting he'd made his way to the great gates for the usual inspection and had met Balin there only about a minute before the first firs had flown through

the air, uprooted and blazing.

He yanks himself out of his recollection before long familiar panic overcomes his iron resolve. During his distraction the meeting has finally wrapped up and he has to force himself not to display undue haste while getting up. If the absolutely crazy plan forming in his head should have a diamond's chance in a forest he needs to move and move fast to acquire a bow and a quiver from the armoury before heading up to the gate.

As he runs, Thorin silently thanks his father for having insisted on his son learning to use every kind of weapon there is before settling on one to achieve mastery in, for while he has always been drawn to the sword, he also knows how to use a bow – and is surprisingly proficient at it, pride and a sense of duty not having let him rest until everything the weapons masters had thrown at him had been accomplished to their satisfaction (and they'd been exacting indeed), while never as good as his younger nephew would one day prove himself to be.

He is also quite sure that he isn't as good as Bard the Dragonslayer, but he remembers Bilbo talking about a bigger than fist-sized soft spot on the dragon's belly and that is *not* an impossible shot to make. After all he remembers the exact course of Smaug's flight.

As he ascends the steps to the balcony above the gate the weight of the bow in his hands is strangely comforting for a weapon he's never put much stock in beyond its tactical value. He has long ago accepted that there will always be fear before a true fight, a rush so fierce that it debilitates some, and only years of control over his emotions help him stay sane in the seconds before Smaug attacks.

It is almost worse, knowing what's to come.

Fire cascades over the balcony, just as he drags Balin behind a pillar and yet his hands are rock-steady when he jumps back into the open after the deluge has let up. Smaug is banking right to return for another pass at the gate and for a moment, just a moment, his belly is exposed.

Thorin lets the arrow fly, straight and true. Dwarven steel and hardened wood eat deep into the beast's belly and with a horrible shriek it

plummets.

Thorin feels curiously numb as he stares down at the body of Smaug the Terrible, *the chieftest and greatest calamity of our age* as Bofur had put it, twitching in its last death throws. He has done it. He has defied fate and changed the course of the future. Many would live whose deaths he'd already witnessed once.

And yet, strangely, he feels the urge to cry for the future he has just destroyed. It's selfish, he knows. The life he has lived hadn't been easy and many things had come to pass that he'd tried his best to forget, but it had been *his* life and there had been joyous moments too. There had been relationships that he now mourns and people he misses – he keeps looking over his shoulder expecting to see Fíli or Kíli behind him as they always are, and even those who *are* present like Balin and Dwalin are not the same and he knows that they *will never* have the same relationship as before, now that all the tragedies they'd suffered through together will not happen.

He doesn't regret killing Smaug, would do it again in a heartbeat, but even that knowledge doesn't quite mitigate the pervading sense of loss.

Finally Balin clears his throat next to him, tearing Thorin away from his brooding thoughts as he stares at the dragon below.

"Congratulations, laddie," he says, voice dry as dust, "you've just killed a dragon."

Thorin can't help his answering snort, though he tries to remember that this, technically, is not a moment to look cynical *or* bleak.

He claps his friend on the back silently, and leaves the balcony.

*

The first thing he does once he finally finds himself alone – no father and grandfather insisting to hear every detail, no crowd of whispering dwarves staying a respectful distance away – is to pay a visit to the throne room and then the lower halls. He looks at the arkenstone and only sees the blood that has been spilled on its account – not the

least because of his own damning greed.

(He sees Bilbo, face white and bloodless with fear as his feet dangle above the ground, the pain in his eyes as Thorin snarls at him.)

He walks between piles of gold and only sees a way to keep his people fed and provided for. He touches the crown that had been crafted for him at his birth, mithril interwoven with steel and sapphires, and only sees the faces of his friends and family, those he longs for, and those he is finally reunited with.

He leaves the bowels of the mountain with a lighter heart.

And as for his friends... the relationships he remembers might never be the same again, but that doesn't mean there could not be new ones. He would need to be patient, of course, considering that most of his company, including Bilbo, aren't even alive yet, but once the time has come, he would do everything in his power to help them, and perhaps be granted the gift of growing close to them once more.

He could ask no more than that.

And in the meantime, he has a family returned to him that he thought forever lost, and a kingdom he hasn't walked in peace for too long.

Chapter 2



A feast is thrown later that week, in honour of the victory over the dragon – of course there is; dwarves never fail to use every possible excuse for a good round of food demolition and drinking.

Looking over the cheerful, loud crowd in one of the largest halls of Erebor, Thorin quietly wishes he had more of a mind for celebration right now.

As it is, he slips out of a side-door only a few hours after the feast's beginning and before the most raucous period of the evening when everyone's finally attained their goal and managed to get drunk.

Not that his wish for quiet and solitude is granted, even in the remote corner he's sequestered himself in.

"What does the hero of the hour do hiding in a corner during the feast thrown in his honour?" a voice sounds behind him. It is both old and familiar and has really *no reason whatsoever* to be here.

Having fought and conquered the instinctive urge to reach for his sword, Thorin calmly counters, "And what does a wizard do this far east?"

He's still facing away from Gandalf, yet he can all but hear his bushy eyebrows rising, and there is unabashed surprise and curiosity in the wizard's voice when he speaks next. "You know me."

"I know of you," Thorin corrects – falsely, as it is, but he considers it wiser than to outright admit to an impossible truth so early in the conversation when he has no idea how much Gandalf actually knows; and what he's doing in Erebor of all places. "Your reputation precedes you, Tharkûn."

"No, you *know* me," Gandalf repeats, his clothes murmuring softly

as he moves. “And you trust me enough to keep your back turned and sword sheathed.”

“Not everyone is paranoid in their own home.”

Gandalf only chuckles, entirely unimpressed by his reasoning. “I know a warrior when I see one, Thorin Dragonslayer.”

It’s not the first time Thorin has heard that name lately, yet, quite irrationally, he finds himself thinking that he liked Oakenshield much better. Really, such a fancy name would fit an elf or even a man much better than a dwarf. Not to mention that Bard had actually really deserved the title.

“What do you want?” he repeats flatly, impatience creeping into his tone as he finally turns to face Gandalf.

The wizard looks exactly like Thorin remembers him. He probably shouldn’t have expected anything else, considering that he’s no idea how old Gandalf actually is – and suspects that the number is staggeringly high.

The glint in Gandalf’s eyes, too, is familiar. “Can an old man not want to see the dwarf who saved so many lives?”

Thorin doesn’t even bother to hide his snort. “Not if it’s you.”

“You *do* know me then,” Gandalf observes, his lips twitching.

Thorin decides to not bother denying it again. If there’s one thing he’s learned from their ill-fated journey to reclaim Erebor it’s that Gandalf the Grey has a way of knowing more than he should and, almost by definition, everything that one tries to hide from him.

He also would be lying to himself if he pretended that he didn’t, at some level, *want* Gandalf to find out, to have at least one person who understands his situation – not to mention that the wizard is the only person Thorin has knowledge of who isn’t an elf who could possibly explain what happened to him.

But right now Gandalf is being unhelpfully silent, studying Thorin with eyes intent under so impressively bushy – even a dwarf would admit – brows.

“You are an impossibility, Thorin, son of Thráin,” Gandalf finally

murmurs.

Thorin's gaze snaps up, a wordless question in his eyes.

"Your body is young, and yet your eyes are old." The wizard's face is solemn, something peculiar passing through his eyes as he sighs. "Too old, some would say."

Thorin snorts, despite the relief, so heady it surprises even him and he should *know* himself, coursing through him. "We're all old sooner or later in this world. *Especially* you."

Gandalf shakes his head almost helplessly. "So cynical already. Life has not been kind to you, young prince."

With a start Thorin finally recognizes the emotion in the other's eyes: sadness. Gandalf has always been good at feeling sad for every creature he comes across and pity every fate less than ideal and suddenly Thorin finds himself unaccountably angry.

And the urge to scream out his entire mad story has always been there since he'd woken up *after bloody dying*, only common sense and a desire not to burden anyone else with the convoluted, incomprehensible mess of events that is his life keeping him silent, despite his more and more common frustration. There's no such barrier with Gandalf and he finds himself suddenly unable to keep a lid on days of pent up torrential emotions.

He stops caring about his lack of control a second later. At any rate, he's pretty certain that Gandalf has been able to grasp most of the big picture from the ensuing yelling, considering that he started with 'You try living your damn life twice'. At least the wizard looks more amused than irritated and definitely intrigued.

He also only gazes at Thorin placidly, as the dwarf breathes harshly, already regretting his outburst. He should know better than forgetting himself like that by now, no matter how good it feels to let go for a few moments.

Gandalf's quiet voice, filled with a reverence Thorin hasn't heard in his tone ever before, jerks him out of his thoughts. "The Valar do not interfere lightly in the matters of Middle-earth."

“This is their doing then?” Thorin murmurs, more to himself than to Gandalf. The idea had crossed his mind before, but it had seemed... fanciful, and he had seen no reason or proof for their involvement. Especially considering his behaviour before his death. “They chose foolishly then, in me. There are many others who would’ve been more suitable and deserved it more.”

The bitterness in his voice does not escape Gandalf, who simply raises a brow in response. “Aulë is fond of his children.”

“As The One is not,” Thorin snorts. “We’re his *adopted* children after all.”

Gandalf only sighs. “I would argue with you, but the stubbornness of dwarves is well documented.”

Silence descends between them, Gandalf thoughtful, and Thorin simply unsure of what to say – or whether to say anything at all.

Finally Gandalf stirs, his ubiquitous kindness back in his eyes. “I will be staying in Dale for a little while, if you find it in yourself to wish to talk, you know where to find me.”

He turns to go, halts, and throws one last look at Thorin over his shoulder. “I do not think it would do harm, so think about it, Prince Thorin.”

Thorin’s lips twist wryly. A hint and a warning at the same time, yet both indirect, left up to his own choice – so very much like the old wizard.

But this matter would wait. For now, he’s hidden himself away for long enough. Sighing, he heads back to the feast, head held high as is expected of him.

*

Over the course of the next few days Gandalf’s words stubbornly refuse to leave his head, swirling around in his mind whenever there’s a lull in activity.

The prospect of telling someone his life’s story is surprisingly appealing considering its contents – Thorin is no fool. He knows that

keeping such a large secret takes its toll on people and Gandalf presents exactly the opportunity to prevent him from growing too lonely with the events still stuck in his head.

And strangely enough he trusts the wizard, for all that they'd been at odds during most of their acquaintance the last time around. Then, Thorin's stubborn pride and different views had kept them apart, despite that aura that Gandalf always seems to carry which makes people want to trust and like him, but he likes to think that he has grown a little wiser in the interim.

Also, false or not, he still feels like Gandalf knows the ending of his story anyway. It's not this Gandalf, but a Gandalf nonetheless and somehow that makes him entitled in Thorin's mind.

It only takes him two days to get over himself and visit Dale. Gandalf, helpful as usual, hadn't told him where to find him, so Thorin decides to look for him at the town hall first – or what's left of it anyway – and is decidedly unsurprised to see the wizard leaning against the building's still intact side wall as if already expecting him. He might've felt annoyed at the blatant show of 'knowledge I should have no way to have' once, but now he's only faintly amused and glad not to have to search the whole town to find the wizard.

All right, maybe he's a little annoyed too.

The wizard at least could have the decency to look surprised, instead of blithely calling, "Ah, Thorin, just on time."

"Just on time for what?"

"To meet Girion of course."

Thorin only barely stops himself from grumbling that he hadn't been aware he'd be meeting anyone *but* Gandalf, much less the Lord of Dale and really, some advance warning might not have gone amiss, since that is quite probably the point.

Girion, whom Thorin only has the vaguest of memories of, turns out to be a man only a little past his prime, yet with eyes too old and a face too weary for his years. It is clear from one glance that the burden of leadership lays heavily on him during these times.

“I am grieved by your loss,” Thorin states, voice quiet but no less sincere for it. He inclines his head.

Girion gives him a tired smile. “Dale is all but destroyed, many of its men and women and children dead. Forgive me for speaking clearly, my lord, but we’re far past the point at which words might help, even if I appreciate them.”

Our dead were beyond the count of grief, Balin’s voice from long ago echoes in his mind, weighted with emotion now mirrored by Girion.

Thorin opens his mouth, a reassurance that Erebor would do everything in its power to help the survivors of Dale rebuild already on the tip of his tongue – it had taken a life-time for him to see through stubborn pride and acknowledge the worth of allies, but some things death had dealt which he does not regret now – but realizes before he can speak that as only second in line to the throne he technically doesn’t have the power nor the right to do so, however accustomed he’d grown to being king himself.

He swallows around the words he wishes to say, and falls back on diplomacy instead. “I am certain that if you asked Erebor for help we could reach an agreement.”

Girion’s nod of agreement looks more cynical than reassured – not that Thorin can blame him. From all that he’s seen of the man he doesn’t seem to be a fool, and Thorin can respect that.

“A word of advice, though. If King Thranduil has already offered the elves’ assistance, try not to mention that when you petition King Thrór.”

Girion stares at him. “How did you – ”

“Let’s just say I’m not as ignorant of the politics involved here as some choose to believe,” Thorin murmurs, allowing himself a small smirk. After all Girion doesn’t have to know that he’s technically cheating.

Girion’s brows rise, a new respect in his eyes. “Indeed.”

After that conversation turns out to be surprisingly easy.

When Gandalf finally returns and they take their leave of the Lord

of Dale, Thorin notes with no small amount of satisfaction that Giron at least seems somewhat less burdened for their talk and they part on good terms.

Glancing at Gandalf walking purposefully on his right, Thorin can only hope he'll be able to say the same of himself once the original purpose for this trip has been met.

At least Gandalf has found them a nicely secluded spot, even if the wall he's now sitting on can't be termed the most comfortable of seats.

To keep his hands busy Thorin tugs his pipe out of a belt pouch, his fingers mindlessly running through the motion of preparing the wooden heirloom.

"You're sure there will not be any ill effects from me revealing this to you?"

Gandalf nods seriously. "I am quite certain. You seem to already have changed your fate, perhaps the fate of Middle-earth irrevocably. What you remember is your life, the reality of your past, but here? Here it is now only a story." A secret joy tugs at the wizard's lips. "And stories should always be told."

Thorin regards the other for a long while, at war with himself despite his already mostly made-up mind. "If I do this, then you have to swear to me never to repeat my words to *anyone*, especially not my family."

Gandalf meets his gaze and lays an old, gnarled hand over his heart. "I promise."

Thorin nods once, a little jerkily. For a fearless king, he's far too afraid of the words he knows are now to come out of his mouth. Far too afraid of his own life.

Gandalf turns out to be the perfect listener, not that Thorin is much surprised. He sits quietly, an intent expression on his face, doesn't interrupt save for a few encouraging noises, and pretends not to see the silent tears rolling down Thorin's face as he nears the end.

And, most importantly in Thorin's eyes, he doesn't judge.

When he'd finally reached the end of the sorry tale, Thorin doesn't

feel better, or lighter, just drained. A burden doesn't lift in a day, he knows, but perhaps the groundwork for a more peaceful mind has been laid.

Chapter 3



Days pass, then weeks and Thorin slowly finds back into the life that was once his. He only wakes up shaking with remembered nightmares a few times a week instead of every day now, and hardly ever flinches anymore when suddenly confronted with people that to him have long been dead. Guilt still accompanies his heart, but its crushing burden has eased a little with the acknowledgement of the joy that he's been given, by whatever means.

It has been impossible to conceal all of his changed bearing and attitude from those closest to him, but Frerin and Dís had summarily decided that apparently having killed a dragon had screwed with their poor older brother's head and proceeded to alternate between trying to get him into trouble and showering him with gestures of affection whenever he least expected it.

It is, admittedly, kind of nice, and has the added perk of putting off any other people's questions about the crown prince's occasionally peculiar behaviour.

The reminder that even here in this almost utopian life not everything is perfect and shadows encroach, darkness threatening turmoil and a return of only half-forgotten pain comes swiftly, bluntly, and entirely unmistakable.

And Thorin – Thorin doesn't even see it coming. When he goes to petition his grandfather on Girion's behalf, he expects the King to agree without much thought upon the matter. Dale has long been their ally and one of their main providers of food – not to grant this request, especially with Erebor's ever growing wealth would be folly.

And yet Thrór tells him exactly that.

“Their troubles are no concern of ours,” he says airily, vacantly, as if he’s only half aware what he’s saying. “I see no reason to spend our gold for the men’s sake.”

Thorin hears the refusal, unconcerned and loud in the still air of the empty throne room, and coldness seeps into his gut, his world falling apart a little bit more with each word. The gold madness has advanced quicker, more brutal than even he had anticipated.

Thorin stares into Thrór’s empty eyes and sees only madness; he has to excuse himself before his inner turmoil becomes visible and goes in search of his father.

Thorin is not going to sit by idly as *his* kingdom is governed by a madman, be it his grandfather or not; he might only be a prince at the moment, but Erebor is still his and always will be in his heart.

Thráin listens to his concerns and Girion’s plight with a grim but determined face.

“Of course we’ll help them,” he agrees, his one good eye troubled. Thorin remembers well how Thráin had turned his gaze from his father’s descent into madness, choosing inaction over admission that Thrór truly is not fit for rule. “The men of Dale have always stood behind us.”

Relief hits Thorin like an avalanche; he would not stand alone in his fight for Erebor then. His father would stand beside him and together they might even accomplish what he’s set out to do.

The question remains: how?

“There is always... *nâbûn*,” Thráin finally says quietly, anguished.

Thorin frowns. *Nâbûn*. Point-man, a political figurehead, when decisions were made by others not the king, yet not demanding an official abdication to safe face. It’s an ancient tradition, a failsafe which he doubts anyone but the scholars and members of the royal family even remember.

“Can it be done?”

Thráin sighs. “We would have to convince the council that my father is unfit to rule. If they agree, the practical side of ruling will go to

us. But you have to understand, this hasn't been attempted or even thought of for centuries. Some might see it as us trying to grab power before our time. Some will resist change on principle."

"If it can be done we must at least try," Thorin says strongly. "His gold-lust is starting to interfere with the running of Erebor and I will *not* let that happen."

Thráin regards him curiously. "The dragon has been a bit of an eye-opener then?"

Thorin nods, though of course Smaug has little to do with his change of manner this time around. Before, he'd tried to hide away his grandfather's illness, always in the impossible hope that if he just kept tending to him, kept *caring* for him, Thrór would come around somehow and cast off the madness.

His own experience with that particular affliction has clearly shown that nothing short of extreme circumstances would do that however; the simple, dedicated love of those of his blood will never be enough.

("Uncle," Kili pleaded, "won't you see sense? Our home and treasure is important but not at the expense of all our lives!")

Fili's serious, sad voice joined his brother's. "We would all die for our king, but not for a pile of gold. Or pride to the point of madness."

"So you, too, would leave then? My own blood? Would rather make deals with the enemy than defend what is rightfully ours?"

He hadn't seen their heart-break then, hadn't even felt his own.

"Isn't our love enough for you?")

Isn't it? Now, it is. But then, no, it hadn't felt like that. Love had been trumped by rage and pride and greed until a small buried part of him screamed in despair.

No, it isn't Smaug who has changed his opinion, it's simply that Thorin understands his grandfather all too well.

The morning before the emergency council session Thorin takes extra care with his appearance, choosing some of his finest tunics and grooming his hair until it gleams. Their case would not be an easy one, and he is very much aware that every little thing might tip the scales in their favour. He is also painfully conscious of the fact that most of the council members still see him as a young dwarf, inexperienced and hardly worth to be listened to on other grounds than him being the crown prince.

Even without his... special circumstances they would only be half-right in their assessment. Thorin might not always have possessed as great an understanding of politics as he does now, but he has never been stupid, nor a fool.

The rest of the council is already assembled when Thorin and Thráin enter, precisely on time. It had been easier to call a meeting without Thrór's knowledge than they had anticipated; the King rarely leaves the treasure halls these days and seems to care little for what goes on at his court.

Predictably, the atmosphere is a little strained, the knowledge of their excluded leader sitting uneasy in many of the councillors' minds.

"We've called this special meeting of the council, esteemed members," Thráin begins, "to discuss King Thrór."

Thorin gets to his feet, a clear supporter at his father's side and says, "We have ignored his obvious madness until now. We, the council, and we, my father and I. We took the course of least resistance through inaction and now we're facing the threat of a kingdom bent on its knees, abandoning its allies and in turn being abandoned by them all due to the gold lust of one. I say, it is time to act!"

The expected protest isn't long in coming.

"That's preposterous!" Lord Borin immediately exclaims and Thorin almost sighs. Of course it would have to be him; Borin might not be the stuffiest, most traditional dwarf ever to walk this earth but Thorin certainly can't remember ever actually meeting anyone stuffier.

"I wish it were," Thráin intervenes, clearly sensing that it wouldn't

help their case if Thorin was the one to continue speaking. “Believe me, my lords, when I say that I wish nothing more than for my father to be sane and of sound mind. But we all know the one weakness of Durin’s line and you cannot deny that he is afflicted. Are you willing to risk Erebor in support of a King bereft of sanity?” He pauses dramatically. “Or are you willing to consider nâbûn?”

Shocked whispers break out all over the room, only dying down when Nain speaks up for the first time. “What made you decide to wish to act now, sire?”

Thráin nods at Thorin. “My son recently paid a visit to Dale. The city has sustained heavy damage by the dragon’s attack. Many of their men and women are dead. Lord Girion has asked for our assistance and I, as well as my son, am of the opinion that it should be granted – Dale has always stood at our side as a valuable ally and we do need their trade, especially for food. King Thrór... did not agree.”

Another whisper, this one sounding even more concerned, makes its way through the ranks of councillors.

With typical clarity of mind and efficiency, Nain announces after only a moment’s deliberation, “Then you have my support.”

Several of the other more open-minded dwarves exchange looks and agree without much fuss and it’s all Thorin can do not to exhale in visible relief. They already have more than half of the councillors convinced – a majority.

But of course Lord Borin wouldn’t give in graciously, nor his staunch supporter next to him.

“This is madness! Nâbûn hasn’t been invoked for centuries!”

Thráin raises one eyebrow. “And that makes it less valid? After all our society is founded on ancient traditions upheld to this day.”

Thorin smothers a smile. He’s got Borin there, considering that *tradition* had been the dwarf’s main argument against this move – which he can now no longer evoke without looking the complete fool.

The rest of the meeting goes smoothly – Thorin has the distinct impression that their opposition is having a barely dignified sulking fit.

But that doesn't matter. The most important thing is that Girion will get the help he needs for Dale. After all Erebor can't allow itself to be second to *Thranduil* and his elves, not when it comes to incurring the favour of their allies.

His grandfather would not be happy, but then again, he's rarely happy about anything but gold these days.

*

Frerin *never* knocks, making it fairly easy to identify him as the culprit whenever someone barges into Thorin's study unannounced.

"Whatever you're thinking, I really don't have the time right now," Thorin says distractedly, peering at a figure which should *really* be much lower.

Frerin only rolls his eyes. "Yes, we all know that you will continue overworking yourself until you drop dead, brother. But even you need some free time and getting out and catching a little sunshine, *as I was just about to propose*, will do you good."

"We are dwarves. We thrive in the darkness," Thorin grumps back, eyes still focused on the damned report.

"Even stones warm under the touch of the sun," Frerin counters cheerfully and suddenly the parchment Thorin had been holding is ripped away, leaving him free sight of his brother's grinning face. "And I'm not taking no for an answer, Thorin. I'm calling family time."

The staring contest lasts only for a few moments, and for once it's Thorin who looks away first.

"Fine," he mumbles, for truthfully, he *does* want to go and have some fun with Frerin. His brother's presence, sorely missed for so many years, is still miraculous enough that spending time with him is something precious. The paperwork would keep. Hopefully.

"What are we doing?" he asks, halfway down to the gates.

Frerin grins over his shoulder, a *very* familiar mischievous glint in his eyes. "We're going riding."

Thorin groans. "Riding? Nadad, you *know* how well I get along

with horses.”

He had got a lot better about the whole ‘sitting on another sentient being which is bound not to like a heavy dwarf on its back’ thing in his later years, but that doesn’t mean he has to *like* the beasts.

“They’re ponies, Thorin, not horses,” Frerin says, rolling his eyes. “And Blackmane hasn’t seen you for such a long time.”

“And for a good reason,” Thorin grumbles. Blackmane is a biter and only emergency stashes of apples in his pockets soothe the pony enough to let the loyal steed she has otherwise proven to be shine through.

Frerin on a pony, on the other hand, is all but unstoppable. Thorin has never seen another dwarf so at home with the animals; then again, Frerin has never been one to conform to all of society’s expectations. For one he still hasn’t grown more of a beard than some golden fuzz. Very becoming fuzz it may be – or so some dwarrowdams claim – but it can’t compete with beauties like Groin’s beard for example.

And only Frerin would urge his pony into a gallop up the flanks of one of the surrounding hills. Despite the other’s challenging yell, Thorin opts for the safer option of allowing Blackmane to slowly trot after his reckless idiot of a brother, which at least means that *his* pony won’t be tired and irritated by the time they reach the top. Especially when they only go up to the top to go down into the valley again because Frerin proclaims the sudden urge to watch the River Running as it gurgles along towards Dale.

Thorin narrows his eyes at him since clearly *something* is going on when Frerin of all people wants to sit still and watch water, but follows him towards some stones at the edge of the water willingly enough.

“See? Wasn’t this worth getting out of the mountain for a while for?” Frerin asks, dangling his legs as one of his arms sweeps out in a gesture encompassing the tranquil environment all around them.

“Be careful, you’re starting to sound like one of those weed-eaters, brother.”

Frerin snorts. “In your dreams, Thor.”

Thorin almost freezes. He hasn't been called *Thor* by anyone since Frerin's death, his little brother always the only one who dared shortening his name – and of course thought it hilarious.

He catches himself before he can say something unwise and shudders theatrically. “My nightmares you mean.”

Unbidden the memory of the last time he'd seen an elf rises in his mind; Thranduil, his usually perfectly styled hair mussed and dirty, blood all over his gleaming armour, slaying orc after orc, his son and that mouthy guards captain at his side.

A hand on his arm, warm and real, brings him back.

“No brooding, brother dear,” Frerin murmurs and –
Splash.

Thorin comes up spluttering, shedding water everywhere as he shakes strands of hair out of his face. Frerin, too busy laughing himself sick, doesn't see the danger until it's too late and Thorin's fist has grabbed his tunics and dragged the blond dwarf in after him.

That a rather heated water fight ensues is a given.

When they finally vacate the river, dripping wet and slightly chilled but still grinning from ear to ear – Thorin because he'd kicked Frerin's butt and Frerin because his devious plot to get Thorin to smile had worked – dusk is already falling and Thorin has been away from work for far longer than he'd anticipated.

He's too content to complain about it, though, and if Frerin's smug smile is any indication he knows it too.

*

Dís looks oddly vulnerable, perched on her bed in her nightgown when Thorin quietly enters her chambers that night, his time with Frerin having shaken him out of his single-minded state. Well, not that oddly – sometimes he forgets that by dwarvish standards Dís is still a child, for all that she acts like a grown-up most of the time and his memories of a far older Dís still overlay the girl he sees now. Thorin would be more consternated if it weren't also a reminder that this Dís

would have the complete childhood she'd always deserved.

"Will you sing for me?" she asks, her voice unusually timid. "You used to do that all the time."

Thorin barely holds back a flinch, guilt rising through the pit of his stomach without mercy. It is true, he hasn't spent enough time with either of his siblings lately, except when they both all but force him to, so busy is he with his father keeping Thrór anchored in his insanity and running the kingdom for him.

He also knows with a deep ache that he needs to stop using his memories of a strong, capable, independent Dís as an excuse.

"Of course, mizimith," he murmurs and smooths down her hair, gently running his fingers through the silken tresses like he used to, both in comfort and reassurance. "What do you want to hear?"

It is a subtle thing, the way her face lights up at his words, but the happiness in her tone when she orders him to get his harp first reminds him once more of the power he has, to change her mood with no more than a few words or actions. He doesn't think he appreciated that back then, as loss and hardship have now taught him to.

He already has the harp in his hands when he realizes that it's been years since he last played. He used to be good – the difference would surely be noticeable, unless he plays a song with just a few simple harmonies.

Thorin plucks a few notes and wonders what song to sing. The last song he'd sung had been dark and brooding, full of longing and despair and remembered pain and not something he would wish to recount to his young sister, even if his voice has always been better suited for such dark melodies.

Then finally he begins to sing softly, his eyes on Dís. "Lay down your head and I'll sing you a lullaby..."

Sometime in the middle of the refrain Dís burrows against him, her head a warm weight at his side. The song ends and he begins another one, equally quiet and melodious, until her breathing evens out completely, her hand slipping from where it had fisted into his clothes at

some point between waking and sleep.

He lets the last notes die away, vanishing into the air like a forgotten dream, only echoes remaining in his sister's slumber.

Thorin doesn't move for a long time, even when the harp digs uncomfortably into the crook of his elbow and his own eyes grow heavy with fatigue.

*

Frerin involves him in a food fight the next day – clearly determined not to let Thorin slip into another work-funk and cheerfully ignoring Thorin's glare with the excuse that crown prince or not, he needs to loosen up a little now and then.

This is becoming a bit of a trend.

Thorin doesn't actually disagree, but would have preferred if said 'loosening up' hadn't involved flying food at breakneck speeds. On second thought, he also would've preferred if it hadn't involved *Frerin* either, for any and all of his little brother's ideas are infamous for unavoidably ending in disaster.

On the other hand listening to Frerin laugh, Dís try to contain her chuckles, and watching even his father crack a smile, is definitely worth the *thorough* bath he's forced to take after.

(That doesn't, however, stop him from stealing all of Frerin's belts the next day in retaliation – he might be nearly 200 years old, but if he's stuck in his barely adult body then he might as well make the best of it. Incidentally, Frerin's scowl the next day is truly magnificent to behold.)

Chapter 4



One thing he also does his best not to neglect is his weapons training, even if he certainly needs it far less than he should at this point in his life. After all being too good all of sudden would be suspicious and raise questions he can't – or rather won't – answer.

Sometimes however, in the heat of a sparring match or in particularly absent-minded moments, he forgets himself.

At first privately tutored, he'd joined the guards training sessions under Chief Guard Valda, as tough a dwarrodam as he's ever met, ever since he'd been able to hold his own with a sword. Usually he's partnered with Dwalin, but sometimes Valda singles out someone for a duel, usually to keep everyone from getting overconfident through the simple method of kicking their asses at least once a month.

She's good, very good, and a fight between Thorin and her at the height of his abilities would've been an interesting spectacle.

Which is why his heart sinks when she calls him over to the ring.

"Let's see how the Dragonslayer does with a sword these days." Her sharp eyes seem to bore into him. "You haven't been to training very often lately, my prince."

A fact, which Thorin very much regrets, if mostly because he enjoys the physical exertion, the wild dance with a blade, but right now it cannot be helped. His duties are too numerous for him to have much time for training.

He bows to her, as a student would to his master, and adopts the traditional high guard preceding the start of a duel. At the other side of the ring Valda does the same.

At the first clash of steel against steel instinct takes over. There's

simply no keeping back moves ingrained in muscle memory after so much repetition and Thorin reacts without thinking. When usually he would've been 'dead' after a minute or so, they're still going strong after three. He isn't even aware of the slight surprise on Valda's face, nor the openly astonished ones of the other trainees.

He is in too deep not to take the opening when she gives him one, a lightning-fast backhand chop bringing the tip of his sword to her throat.

Only their laboured breathing can be heard in the dead silence that has fallen over the training court.

Slowly Thorin lowers his sword and bows to Valda, silently cursing himself in several languages for having lost control. He should have simply let the training master win this duel as everyone had expected to happen, but once one had been in combat more than a few times it becomes ever harder to leave oneself open to attack – so deeply ingrained is the knowledge that if one does, chances are it's also the last thing one will ever do.

"Well done, Thorin," Valda finally breaks the silence, her voice quiet. "It doesn't seem like there is much left to teach you, despite your performances prior."

Thorin almost winces, remembering their last duel before he'd woken up an older, tried dwarf.

"I've practiced a lot lately, Master Valda."

He can practically feel Dwalin's gaze drilling into his back, suspicious, disbelieving and slightly hurt at the same time. The last especially pains Thorin for he understands his friend well. They'd always trained and practiced together, advancing at a similar pace, but now Thorin has suddenly made a leap in skill that Dwalin hadn't, and, more importantly, he has done so without telling him.

He sends his friend an apologetic look, but Dwalin's face is like stone. Thorin would have to work hard to make things right between them this time, he fears.

Without listening to the whispers that have broken out all around

them, he knows that most attribute his sudden prowess to his defeat of the dragon, however ridiculous the notion actually is once one thinks about it.

Mostly through luck – and the gullibility of young dwarves – it seem like his slip might go unpunished – this time.

After that incident he makes very sure that his skills seem to advance in a more sedate yet still rapid fashion. After all, he wouldn't have the luxury of holding back in a real fight – and has no intention of getting himself killed because he shouldn't be a master swords wielder yet – and he would rather that no one be surprised or even distracted by his talent out in the field. Which means that he must at least *appear* as if he acquires skill over time.

Thorin finds Dwalin leaning against his favourite secluded parapet several stories above the gates. His shoulders are slumped, bent forward and he doesn't even react when Thorin steps up next to him.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs quietly, staring out into the sky. "I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Then why didn't you tell me you were practicing so much?" Dwalin's voice is gruff with unvoiced emotions. *Why didn't you trust me?*

It is frighteningly easy to call upon deeply buried feelings that he once upon a time had stuffed beneath layers and layers of shields into the darkest recess of the mind. There's no need to lie about this, even if, once again, it is far from the full truth. "You did not see that dragon," he says quietly, painfully. "You did not feel the terror of being infinitesimally smaller and weaker than what attacks you." He looks at Dwalin and finally his friend looks back. "It doesn't go away. You relive that moment over and over again, that paralyzing fear and *it doesn't let you go.*"

Dwalin's uncomprehending expression makes it clear that he doesn't understand. He's still so young, so untouched by the world's evil, a far cry from the tough, unshakeable Dwalin of later years. "But you *killed* it. What is there to fear?"

"Everything." He looks into Dwalin's confused eyes and repeats

bleakly, "Everything."

He sees Dwalin's heavy hand on the shoulder as the peace offering it is and takes it gratefully. The other dwarf might not understand, not truly, but he will still stand beside him and offer his support. There aren't many things of greater worth in the world than the loyalty of a friend.

Things don't immediately go back to normal after that, but they do settle down gradually. He still catches Dwalin looking at him suspiciously now and then during training, but since Thorin has taken it upon himself to catch Dwalin up to his level as soon as possible, the other doesn't complain much. Or perhaps he's simply resigned himself to the fact that life is strange and strange things happen. Dwalin has always had little use for puzzling over mysteries, preferring hard facts over conjectures and flights of fancy.

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Thorin is sitting in the royal family's mess hall, chewing on some roast venison, when Balin drops into the seat next to him.

Usually the very picture of tact and circumspection, the older dwarf says bluntly, "You have changed."

Thorin pauses with a slice of meat halfway to his lips.

"Ever since the day the dragon attacked you seem different, you act different, you *know* more," Balin continues, voice completely steady as if he's reading from a grocery list. "Some say slaying Smaug is the reason for the change in you. But I was there as well and my eyes are not haunted. *Nothing* in your life accounts for that look in your eyes."

Balin doesn't look at him, busying himself with the tankard of ale in front of him, but there's a tight set to his shoulders that Thorin wishes he couldn't see. He doesn't want Balin to blame himself for something so far beyond his control. He doesn't even truly want his friend to worry about him, even if the sentiment behind it warms his heart.

"You have always known me well, Balin," he finally says, non-committal. He takes care to draw Balin's gaze and meet it squarely with the

slight but honest smile on his face when he adds, “You’re only the second person to have noticed. And the first had never met me before.”

Balin’s eyebrows twitch. “I might be only the second person to *mention* it to you, but that doesn’t mean that no one else has thought it, laddie.”

“Gossiping about me Balin? How shameful.”

Balin snorts, but his voice is serious when he says, “I wouldn’t call it gossiping as much as being worried about you.”

There is a short pause, but before Thorin can think of anything else to say Balin speaks again, a far- away look on his face.

“Do you remember when Frerin fell into the river and you almost drowned trying to rescue him?”

If Thorin didn’t know his friend’s style of rhetoric so well he would think it a complete non- sequitur. He nods silently, wondering where this is going.

“You were barely into your teens, Frerin not much older than a toddler and even then you would have done everything to save your family. And afterwards when everyone was praising you for saving your brother and being such a brave little dwarf you were *proud* of having done the right thing despite your fear, of having earned such praise. And you were right to be proud because sometimes pride in good deeds is needed – a fact I think you have forgotten recently.”

Balin rises from his chair, laying a gentle hand on Thorin’s shoulder. “Keep your secrets if you wish. We all trust you enough to know that you wouldn’t stay silent unless there was a good reason.” A faint smile graces his lips. “I would, however, advise that you stop flinching every time someone calls you ‘Dragonslayer’.”

And with that he departs, leaving Thorin to stare at his fork deep in thought – probably making a very interesting picture to anyone else, looking at an eating utensil with such focus as he is – and faintly amused that however old Thorin himself gets, Balin always seems to be there to lecture him when needed.

For a while he'd been inclined to be mad at Gandalf for setting Girion and him up so *blatantly*, but by the third time he – voluntarily, no less – visits the Lord of Dale with the expectation of some good company, conversation, and hopefully dinner, he has to admit to himself that perhaps it hadn't been such a bad idea on the wizard's part. He has never met another man so unbothered by his race.

He is *very* tempted to retract that thought when he enters the Town Hall that day.

Thorin bites back his immediate distaste at seeing the tall form of Thranduil sit at Girion's side, his back ramrod straight and cool gaze haughty as ever. It's doubtful that he will ever forgive the elf for his first betrayal, but in the end he had proven his mettle under dire circumstances. The elves of Mirkwood could be a powerful ally – more so than they already are, due to Thrór's obvious aversion, which, to be fair, Thorin had once shared – and he knows better now than to let his personal feelings get in the way.

Doesn't mean he has to *like* Thranduil though. Thank Mahal. Some things may change, but others would simply prove a bit too much of a shock for his peace of mind.

"King Thranduil," he acknowledges coolly, inclining his head.

There's a hint of a smirk on the elf's face; no doubt he takes pleasure in seeing him so wrong-footed. "Prince Thorin."

"Why don't you sit down, Thorin?" Girion suggests, sounding far too pleased with the whole situation. The man also blithely ignores Thorin's glare. He could at least have had the decency to *warn* him first – Gandalf has obviously been a bad influence.

He sits down, probably as stiff as Thranduil looks, but he cannot help the instinctive tension fizzling through his body.

"Why did you call us both here?" Thorin asks, subtly emphasizing the *both*. Which is fair, considering that Girion hadn't informed him of this fact.

Girion bows his head in Thorin's direction, not looking particularly

contrite. "I simply wished to thank you both for your kingdoms' continued help in rebuilding Dale."

"We don't need to be here *at the same time* for that," Thorin grits out through stiff teeth. Girion is *still* ignoring his glares.

Thranduil's haughtiness ratchets up another notch (Thorin hadn't believed *that* to be possible). "I am only here because Lord Girion has spoken highly of you, *Prince* Thorin. It seems his judgement may have been... rash."

Girion looks like he's only barely holding himself back from rolling his eyes.

"It is my belief that this whole region could benefit from a closer rapport between our kingdoms," he says pointedly, obviously having grasped that he wouldn't get anywhere with these two without blunt honesty. "So that perhaps, further attacks like the dragon's can be prevented, or at least faced together in a strengthened union." He directs a short, almost ironic smile at Thorin. "We won't always be so lucky to have one person on hand to save us all."

Silence descends, as both Thorin and Thranduil take great care not to look at each other. Thorin because *he* still remembers the elf's betrayal, not exactly conducive to Girion's argument, and Thranduil because... well, Thorin doesn't know why, but perhaps the elf also knows what he *would* have done if Thorin hadn't slain Smaug.

Thorin takes a deep breath. He is supposed to *change* things, he cannot cling to old wounds as he'd once done his whole life.

"I agree," he makes himself say, staring straight ahead without meeting Thranduil or Girion's gaze. "A closer alliance would be the most logical thing in these darkening times."

At least he can take some measure of pleasure from actually having surprised Thranduil. When Thorin finally looks at the elf both his silvery eyebrows are raised as high as they can go.

"Some would say such an accord between dwarves and elves to be nigh impossible."

"I'm not suggesting we need to be friends," Thorin growls, "for I'd

rather not. But an alliance of arms might prove necessary if the orcs keep strengthening their numbers.”

After a long moment Thranduil inclines his head. “I concur. However, there is still the matter of your status as only a prince. You do not possess the authority for such a treaty.”

“We both know that King Thrór would look less than favourably on such an endeavour,” Thorin bites out, trying *very* hard not to lose his temper and belt the smug bastard one in the face. After all Thranduil doesn’t know that Thrór is Erebor’s ruler in name only now and Thorin would rather keep it that way. “As you say, the official agreement will have to wait until my father ascends to the throne, may it be long until that day, but I wouldn’t think a few years, perhaps decades, to be much of a problem for *you*.” When Thranduil doesn’t content the point, he continues, “And I do have the authority for preliminary agreements.”

Something he hadn’t had just a few weeks ago, but again, the elf doesn’t need to know *that*.

Thranduil nods, if still looking a little reluctant, and turns to Girion. “What do you have in mind?”

Two hours later Thorin realizes with a faint feeling of horror that in this life he actually makes more than a fair diplomat – if because of newfound perspective, the overwhelming need not to have to go to war again, or because he has managed to lay his dislike of elves to rest somewhat he isn’t quite sure, but it doesn’t matter for the end result.

When Thranduil has finally left, after hours of a first discussion about the possible alliance, Thorin collapses back into his chair; he imagines he hasn’t felt this wrung out in years, but that, at least, is a lie.

“You bastard,” he sighs with feeling.

Girion only grins with entirely *undeserved* smugness.

Chapter 5



For a time Thorin wonders if it's the right thing he's doing, interfering in everyone's lives as he is – actually doing his damndest best to – but considering that by killing Smaug he's already altered everyone's fates irrevocably, worrying about doing so further seems nonsensical. Not that that really stops him from worrying; a habit so long perfected isn't easily thrown, nor does he try particularly hard to do so. He is what he is, and at least it makes him feel needed, useful in a way that he'd feared lost to him in this better world. Well, not entirely lost – the amount of work heaped on him due to his position as Crown Prince has mounted alarmingly lately.

There are a few other 'duties' he has taken upon himself, though no one requires it of him.

He takes care to walk the lower levels on his rounds as well as the royal family's usual haunts with two aims in mind. One, he shows his face to all inhabitants of Erebor, even those down on their luck or in a less prestigious profession. And two, he can see and assess for himself how his people are faring, any problems would first appear here, where those labour who have no other choice.

There are none in Erebor that are desperately poor, there is work enough for everyone, but not all work pays well.

Usually he receives a few nods and greetings but tends to be left alone. Sometimes a parent points him out to their child, whispering importantly, and occasionally he's asked for a blessing or even advice, but those instances are rarer.

It makes for a bit of a surprise, then, when he's almost run over by a little dwarfling bumping smack bam into his shins. Flailing his arms

a little for balance, Thorin bends down to look at his new leg-attachment.

“Little one, what are you running from?” he asks gently, keeping his leg very still.

“Nothin’,” is the mumbled reply, muffled by the material of Thorin’s breeches, while Thorin tries rather unsuccessfully to pry him loose – the little tyke refuses to let go of his hold around his shins.

“Come on, nidoy, look at me,” he coaxes, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’m not going to let anything harm you.”

Finally the boy looks up – for a moment he seems familiar, but Thorin can’t quite place his young face – and Thorin takes advantage of his short moment of distraction to pry him loose and swing him up on into his arms like he used to Fíli and Kíli when they were young.

“See, that’s much better, isn’t it? What’s your name?”

Big grey eyes look at his face, then the boy mutters, “Dori” and Thorin almost freezes. *Mahal’s beard, he’s holding child Dori in his arms.*

Dori blinks up at him, clearly expecting a response, and Thorin pulls himself together.

“My name is Thorin,” he offers, looking down at the child in his arms with no little amount of wonder. Life really has become *strange*. “Do you want to tell me what you were doing now?”

Little Dori only gives him a fairly suspicious look and Thorin has to bite back a chuckle; it’s the exact look Dori used to favour Nori with every time he thought his younger brother was stirring up trouble – which had been often. It’s a strangely comforting thought, that some things really do stay the same.

In a further show of nonchalance and complete disinterest in enlightening Thorin as to his circumstances, the dwarrow sticks his thumb in his mouth and begins to suck with small happy noises, leaving Thorin to wonder what exactly he’s supposed to do now.

Dori clearly isn’t forthcoming, Thorin has no idea who or where his parents are – always a sore topic with the Ri-brothers, and thus never

talked about – and people are beginning to stare, perhaps because it's really not every day that the crown prince can be seen standing in a crowded market square holding on to a little dwarfling.

“Dori!”

The dwarfling perks up, wriggling around in Thorin's arms until he can see the originator of the shout. Following his gaze Thorin's eyes land on a flustered dwarrowdam making her way towards them.

Onlookers make way for her without prompting and Thorin can understand why; her beauty shines even in the dim light of the lower halls, gleaming silver hair and beard worn in elaborate fashion a signal fire for everyone around.

She bows to him, still a little breathless. “My lord, excuse the commotion. I was just searching for my son here,” she says with a stern look towards Dori who manages to look at least a tiny bit contrite. Though not much.

“He was being mean again,” the child protests stubbornly.

Thorin frowns. “He?”

Dori's mother looks faintly pained and obviously uncomfortable with sharing this matter with a stranger, and one with blatantly noble blood at that. “His father,” she admits curtly, warning Thorin not to inquire further with another glare before turning back to her son. “It's all right sweetie, he's gone. And I don't think he will be coming back this time.”

There's still more pain there that Thorin can see, along with relief and worry.

When he looks back at Dori his face is set in defiance, his small hands clinging just a little tighter to Thorin. “That's what you said last time, mama.”

The lines on her face deepen, an unnamed sorrow darkening her eyes. “This time is different, little one, I promise.”

Dori doesn't say anything, stubbornly quiet. She turns to Thorin.

“May I have my son back, my Lord? I'm already late for work.”

He gives her a small smile. “Of course. I wouldn't want to keep

you.”

Except that handing Dori back to her turns out easier said than done for he steadfastly refuses to let go of his newly acquired safe haven.

“No!” he cries, tears already pooling in his eyes. “Mister Thorin is nice! I don’t want him to go!”

“Dori – ” his mother starts, only to find him glaring back at her with fierce determination. Mindful of the many gazes still watching their little scene, she steps closer, whispering furiously, “You’re coming with me right this instance, young dwarf!”

Dori’s glare deepens. “No.”

Thorin holds back a wince at the pressure on his arm – even as a dwarfling Dori is already uncommonly strong. He could, of course, pry him loose with some force, but he finds himself rather loath to do so. Dori is just a child, and, well, *it’s Dori*. If he wants to hang on to Thorin a little while longer he certainly doesn’t mind.

“It’s no matter, I can escort you back to your lodgings,” he says, a nod of his head indicating the crowd around them. “I would certainly like to get away from this scrutiny.”

She opens her mouth, no doubt to protest, then closes it again and reluctantly nods. Thorin really hopes that it’s his reassuring smile that makes her give in, not the fact that he’s the prince and she doesn’t dare contradict him.

On the way Dori grins happily and Thorin finally learns his mother’s name, Darla, though she proves tight-lipped otherwise.

Considering their circumstance, perhaps he should’ve expected their home to be this small and dark, but he had hoped to prove his intuition wrong. Shame flits across Darla’s face, but Thorin doesn’t say anything – he has not lived in luxury all of his life, after all, the first few years in the Blue Mountains had been hard on everyone. He had once made the mistake of awkwardly trying to express his condolences at someone’s bad lot in life. The realization that most people down on their luck despise anything they can interpret as pity has stuck with

him ever since.

And many insist on keeping their dignity even in the most trying of times, hanging on to good manners and politeness to prove that *poor* doesn't equate *lazy* or, Mahal forbid, *ill-mannered*. The tea thrust under his nose almost as soon as they've entered and he's put Dori down is proof enough of that.

It seems that Darla has resigned herself to his presence, for once he's accepted the cup she barricades herself in a corner with a heap of knitting equipment, leaving him to look after Dori for a while. Though he doesn't doubt that sharp eyes watch over the proceedings whenever he isn't looking.

Sometimes he despises the power dynamics that come with being *the* prince for he is sure that were he anybody else she would've thrown him out on his ear already – but of course she wouldn't dare do that to the crown prince of Erebor. Sighing to himself, heart heavy with the knowledge that he *should* just go and leave her in peace, yet unable to do so because it's *Dori*, one of his company whose life he can make better, Thorin resolves to prove to her that his presence doesn't just have to be an obligation, but a help, and perhaps even wanted in time.

With that he concentrates all his focus on Dori again and sets about making the next hour or so as enjoyable for the dwarfling as possible – and finds himself quite glad for all the practice with Fili and Kíli.

"I've never seen him take to someone so fast. He's usually far more reserved around strangers, especially older dwarves."

Darla's quiet voice interrupts the game of 'who-can-roll-small-stones-closest-to-a-bigger-stone' – Fili hadn't been a particularly creative child when it came to name-giving – and Thorin looks up, meeting her now decidedly less hostile gaze.

The 'because of his father' remains unspoken.

He shrugs, carefully neutral. "I have some experience looking after little ones." It's not a lie, even if, in this case, it's not what he suspects to be the truth either.

Fortunately Darla seems to accept the answer. They both watch

Dori as he putters around the room, having abandoned their game as soon as Thorin's attention had wandered. He knows he's spent too much of his day here already, but it takes all of his not inconsiderable will-power to tear his eyes away from the silver-haired dwarfling. He has duties to attend to.

"If you have problems again report it to the guards," he says, looking up at her from the floor.

"Hah!" she snorts. "The guards have better things to do than chase after a small time crook and help the unfortunate dwarrowdam who lost her heart to him."

There is resignation in her voice and no small amount of bitterness. Truth, too, for Thorin knows that despite his and Dwalin's best efforts not all of the guard care for the commoners, preferring to keep out of the poor's business as much as possible.

So he nods in acceptance of her point, even if it saddens and angers him equally that there's still no perfect system of justice to be found in Erebor. One more thing he'll have to work at.

She grasps his arm just as he's about to get up. "What do you *want*?"

He stares into her eyes. "I don't want anything."

A disbelieving snort. "Everyone wants something."

"Dori is a sweet dwarfling." He hesitates. "I've seen what losing a parent at an early age does to a little soul and if my being here and playing with him for a while helps, than I would be more than happy to come by now and then, duties permitting."

She draws back. "It's not as if I could stop you."

He shakes his head, lips twisting. "I may be a prince, but I would never intrude where I'm not wanted. This is *your* family, Darla."

For a long moment silence reigns, then she whispers, "Thank you," and steps out of his way.

He leaves with the knowledge that he will be back.

And if, in the following weeks, he not only makes visits to them but also to the small store in which she sells her knitted products and

commissions a set of arm warmers for Dís neither of them mentions it, despite the marked increase of customers since Dís had worn them in public the first time.

*

Thráin turns out to be less than receptive to his plea to keep his life-day celebration a small family- affair. Not that Thorin is surprised, but he had really hoped to avoid a huge feast.

No amount of trying out Kíli's usually so effective trick of making huge doe eyes at his father sway the stern dwarf.

"We both know that you're going to get a big ceremony, whether you wish it or not," Thráin points out, rather unsympathetically. "The whole court expects one."

Thorin almost snarls at him. He neither needs nor wants to celebrate his fiftieth life-day *another* time. It's not only that it feels wrong, celebrating an age that is actually nowhere near his true age, that alone he could live with – the first time hadn't been a very happy occasion after all; homeless and on the run, vague plans of retaking Khazad-dûm being formed and acted upon three years later, no, he can't say he'd felt much joy during that time.

The real issue, lies somewhere else; the fiftieth life-day of a dwarf is generally considered his coming of age – and thus he is now eligible for match-makings and those who search for their Ones. As crown prince Thorin is bound to attract a lot of unwanted attention in that regard. It had been bad enough when he was simply a king in exile with little more than a title to his name and he shudders to think what it would be like now that he is the heir of one of the mightiest and wealthiest kingdoms in Middle-earth. Considering that he has a fair suspicion who his One is and has no interest in forming a political match with some Lord's daughter, a celebration of his life-day with many visitors from far away countries is bound to be a rather unpleasant experience, unless he can somehow get drunk enough before the dancing starts.

His father's uncharacteristically gentle voice rouses him from his

increasingly glum thoughts. “I am rather proud of you, you know.” Thráin’s smile is almost a smirk. “I couldn’t blame anyone trying to get into your, how shall I say, *good graces*.”

Thorin’s glare ratchets up another notch. “That is not funny, father.”

“Oh, in about a hundred years you’ll appreciate the joke,” Thráin tells him, now fully smiling.

With a sigh Thorin gives up on trying to glare even harder and barely resists telling his father that no, even two hundred years haven’t made him see any humour in *this*.

His father’s obvious glee isn’t helping matters, as he calls, already on the way out the door, “Wear that blue outfit you commissioned a few weeks ago, will you?”

Thorin resists the urge to bury his face in his hands.

At least he can probably make Frerin and Dís suffer with him. His brother’s panicked flailing whenever an older dwarrowdam so much as flutters her eye-lashes at him and his sister’s absolutely frigid attitude towards any and all dwarves making eyes at *her* might even make it worth it.

That hope doesn’t stop him from being in a particularly foul mood the following days, though; a mood that doesn’t exactly improve when his siblings start whispering secretively whenever they think he isn’t paying attention, because that can only mean trouble.

‘Trouble’ turns out a little different than he had expected and not as unwelcome as he had thought.

After having spent most of the day greeting what seemed to be hundreds of nobles with their entourage – an action required of him as the host of this celebration – most of said time, it should be noted, *bored out of his mind*, Thorin is in dire need of a break or a distraction or anything which doesn’t involve bowing his head and uttering words of greeting really.

He barely has enough time to grumble darkly to himself that he’s probably going to be stuck on this dais for another ten hours before

the next pair steps up in front of the throne and it's all he can do not to let his mouth fall open.

Dís is letting herself be led by *Frerin*, her arm in his, her almost manically beatific smile only matched by *Frerin*'s shit-eating grin. They're both wearing finery *Thorin* has never seen before and he briefly wonders whether that had been what they were whispering about before – if he didn't know their faces and shapes so well by heart even *Thorin* might have had difficulties recognizing his siblings in these courtiers.

As it is, he can hear his father sigh resignedly next to him, his scarred face not showing a hint of surprise.

Dís curtsies at the same time that *Frerin* bows deeply and *Thorin*'s eyebrows fly up into his hairline. *Dís* *bates* curtsying.

Before either he or *Thráin* can say anything, not that they are much inclined to, *Dis* speaks up, her clear voice loud and yet surprisingly intimate as to only be heard by a few dwarves around them at the same time.

“Your majesty, we beg of you to spare your son for a moment. The day has been long, food and ale await us all and my brother and I have prepared a special gift for the prince to enjoy.”

Thráin looks like he's only barely repressing an incredulous eyebrow raise himself, but one look at *Thorin*'s frankly desperately hopeful gaze appears to change his mind.

Five minutes later he's finally out of the throne room and away from the prying eyes of hundreds of dwarves.

“You, my dear siblings, are life-savers,” *Thorin* says with feeling, all but collapsing against the next-best wall. “And here I thought you were planning on setting the hall on fire or something similar.”

Frerin pretends to look hurt. And fails miserably. “Who us?”

Then he winces, probably because *Dís* has elbowed him in the side none too gently. “You're welcome, *Thorin*,” she says, smiling gently – a nice change from her former mania. “But we do have another gift for you, so if you can break away from that lovely wall we would like to

get to that. Besides you aren't really safe here."

That, considering, is a really good point. Anyone could walk by and drag Thorin back to the festivities or Mahal help him, the throne room. He is already half-way down the hall when the other two catch up to him.

"Where are we going?" he asks, increasing his speed a little more as he hears voices wafting through an adjoining hallway.

"Your room," the other two chorus, and their exuberance makes him smile. He is usually not one to get excited about gifts – except for the times when they came from Fíli and Kíli, their little faces scrunched up in mixed anticipation, pride and worry that he might not like it – but they seem so happy with themselves for thinking this up that he wouldn't rain on their parade for anything in the world.

"As you know you already received part of your gift," Dís says and ignores Thorin's fervently grateful nod in favour of pausing dramatically and then throwing the door to his chambers open.

"Here's the second part."

Thorin's eyes widen in honest surprise. His clothes stand has been moved into the middle of the room and upon it hangs a cloak. For a long crazy moment he thinks it's the exact one he'd worn during the quest, dark Durin blue blending into soft fur at the seams and collar. Then he looks closer, finds small differences in the cut and decoration, the fur more silver than the brown-grey it had been before.

He turns to Dís and Frerin, not even trying to hide his astonishment. "How did you –"

Dis smiles, her eyes twinkling. "Remember that awfully dreary council meeting father forced us all to sit in on? You drew a sketch of this. I simply liberated it once you had thrown it away. It seemed important to you."

Thorin does remember. Back then, only a few weeks after his reawakening he had still often lost himself in his head and in the past. He hadn't consciously decided to draw anything, let alone his old gear; he had been so lost in his own head that when he'd finally looked at

the parchment in front of him he had startled in surprise at what his own fingers had unwittingly drawn.

(He'd almost forgotten that he used to draw, used to enjoy drawing. Pain had taken away the pictures in his mind and refused to let them be captured on paper or even stone.)

There had been Erebor in one corner, a small round door in another and an embroidered handkerchief along with his cloak. Memories had stung him then and he had crumpled the paper and disposed of it, unaware that Dis had been watching him the whole time.

Then, he hadn't appreciated the reminder of the past he has lost, but now... the sheer thought alone that had gone into this gift, the recognition that somehow this piece of clothing must be important to Thorin somehow are enough to combat any sadness he might have felt at the reminder. There had been fond moments too, after all, recalling which can be a joy.

("Are you cold?" Thorin asked, quietly enough that his voice could barely be heard above the crackling of the fire. There was no need for the whole company to witness their leader suddenly having developed a softer side after all.

Bilbo looked up, as if startled that Thorin was even speaking to him and the dwarf couldn't fault him for his suspicion, considering he'd only just acknowledged upon the Carrock that Bilbo wasn't only a hindrance and an annoying one at that.

"It's fine, I'm fine," the hobbit muttered, unconsciously shifting closer to the fire in negation of his words.

Thorin almost sighed. If there was one thing he had hoped would be a benefit of hiring a non-dwarven burglar it had been that said burglar might not be as stubborn as the usual dwarf – clearly, in the case of Bilbo Baggins that was blatantly untrue.

"You're cold," he rephrased his question into a statement, imbuing it with just a little of the authoritative tone that was usually the only thing keeping Fili and Kili in line when they had mischief on their minds.

Shrugging out of his heavy cloak, he draped it over the halfling's smaller shoulders and watched with some amusement as Bilbo almost disappeared in its folds.

His amusement only increased when Bilbo's head popped up again only to level a glare at the cloak's former inhabitant.

"Now you're going to get cold," he pointed out grumpily, already moving to give the cloak back to Thorin, who steps back out of reach.

"I'm a dwarf, we don't get cold easily. I'll be fine."

Bilbo searched his face for any sign of a lie, then hmped once and snuggled back into the cloth. It was probably a good thing he couldn't see Thorin's smile in the dark – or guess that this was going to be regular occurrence from now on.)

"It's more of a travelling cloak, not so much for everyday use," Frerin says, looking a little nervous at Thorin's persisting silence.

He smiles at them, a full smile that sheds old memories in favour of the present, and murmurs, "Thank you, thank you both. It's perfect."

Frerin relaxes, just as Dis says, "Go take a closer look."

Thorin does, hands parting folds of cloth that feel almost exactly like he remembers to find something glinting beneath. He lifts the silver locket into the air, admiring the fine necklace and carvings, before opening the little clasp slowly. Inside a minute sketch rests on a dark plush piece of cloth, a sketch of two dark-haired and one fair-haired Durin, heads close together and all smiling – though Thorin's smile is, admittedly, the smallest. For a long while Thorin simply looks, almost the same smile he's wearing in the picture gracing his face as his heart feels like it is bursting in his chest.

What had he ever done to deserve such siblings?

When he finally closes the locket again with a gentle click he wastes no time pulling the chain over his head and tucking it under his tunic out of sight so that it rests on his chest, a small spot of coldness that slowly warms against his skin.

That done, he turns to Dis and Frerin once more and draws both of

them into a firm embrace. He knows he'll have to return to the feast soon - before his father sends someone to drag him, and wouldn't that be undignified - but for this moment he can forget what awaits him the rest of the evening.

"You needn't have done all this," Thorin murmurs against their hair, continuing before either of them can protest, "But I'm glad you did, mizimîth. I truly hadn't expected such a joyous birthday."

He can feel both their smiles against his neck.

Chapter 6



It's a simple routine patrol. Or rather, it should have been a simple routing patrol. Thorin had left the mountain with a group of warriors and, of course, Dwalin, who refuses to let him go anywhere alone – Thorin bears it with a mixture of amusement and barely concealed ill grace but makes no attempt to escape the arrangement knowing how much Dwalin needs this for his peace of mind – to scout out the situation at their borders. It's not the first time he's done this, for he has always been a firm believer in not asking anyone to do something he wouldn't be prepared to do himself and this is one of the ways he shows his dedication to his people.

There had been rumours of increased orc activity in the mountains, but the possibility of an actual fight had seemed remote. In retrospect Thorin really *should've known better* than to be so foolish, so unprepared.

Woods on one side, a sheer cliff face on the other he immediately realizes that only the relatively small numbers of orcs attacking would save their lives. One on one, no normal orc is a match for a fully trained dwarven warrior – and yet even the greatest warrior can be felled by a single arrow, and neither Thorin nor any of the other dwarves had seen the single orc hiding on the ridge behind them.

A strangled cry erupts from his lips as pain explodes in his lower back. He stumbles, one hand barely catching his weight on a nearby tree and when the second arrow hits his grip slips, just for a moment, but it's enough to send him tumbling to the ground. The sudden pressure on the arrows still sticking out of his back is too much and he slips into darkness, not even the alarmed cries all around him enough to

anchor his consciousness.

A sense of time escapes him, much as lucidity and awareness of his surroundings do. Drifting in between darkness and a world of pain, Thorin only surfaces for the briefest of moments, catching the end of a murmured sentence “ – there’s nothing more we can do for him” which his addled mind struggled futilely with to understand before he’s pulled under again.

It might be hours that follow, or days, only interrupted by short snatches of the reality around him. Once he hears a deep voice he knows to be his fathers, reading from a book of dwarven tales in a long, hopeless monotone. Another time he thinks it’s his mother singing that dredges his mind up from the abyss, tears choking her clear voice into a grief-filled melody, and then, later again, he feels his grandfather’s presence, but there is only silence and he doesn’t know if it is just a fluke of his feverish mind.

Somewhere deep in the back of his mind he knows that he isn’t getting better, that he’s simply continuing to exist and slowly sliding towards the same end that had already met him once.

It takes smaller hands on his arm, a more childish voice, desperate and afraid, and a the feeling of soft hair, braided into such a distinctive shape that he cannot help but recognize the owner, brushing his face, for Thorin to rouse his strength enough to force a hoarse croak past his lips. “Óin.”

He barely hears the startled gasps over the roaring that is already eclipsing his hearing once more.

“Thorin!” he dimly hears Frerin exclaim, at the same time that Dis cries, “Udad!”

Dredging up the last of his strength Thorin opens his mouth once more. “Óin, son of... Groin. Healer.”

Consciousness flees before he can determine whether his plea had gone answered. Had he been in a more rational state Thorin might have remembered that Óin isn’t the old experienced healer that his memories remember him to be, that he isn’t older than Thorin himself

and not even a master in his craft yet – but fevered as he is, Thorin only recalls the many times Óin had healed and cared for him and his family in the Blue Mountains and later on the quest, his steadfast faith in the healer eclipsing everything else.

The next time he wakes to worried but relieved faces Thorin's mind is finally clearer again, the haze of fever caused by infection lifted.

Though his attempt to sit up quickly belies any illusion of health as his limbs simply refuse to move. It's a loss of strength that he would've resented *more* if he weren't so aware that he is lucky to be alive to feel it.

He still resents it.

His little attempt also gets him yelled at by no less than five people, the entire number of those gathered around his sick-bed.

The slew of reprimands and insults range from 'stop moving you bloody idiot' (Frerin) to 'keep still or you'll be doing *all* the paperwork for a year' (his father) and 'does no one in this family have any sense?! Lie down!' (Óin). Apparently the irascible healer has already developed his blunt and sometimes cheerfully insubordinate streak.

"Is that the only greeting I get?" Thorin asks hoarsely when the worst of it has died down.

Dís' glare could've cut through iron, but he's practiced enough to see the relief lurking not far underneath. "You deserve far more than that for making us all worry so much!"

With a sudden jolt that almost makes him try to get up once more, Thorin remembers the rest of the patrol troupe. "What happened to the others? Did everyone survive?"

"You were the only one seriously wounded, inùdoy," his father answers, a mix of wry resignation and fondness in his eyes.

Thorin sighs and closes his eyes for a moment. Just the emotional jolt has tired him to an alarming degree. "Good."

He tries to open his eyes again, to reassure his family some more, but finds that the heavy lids refuse to move, despite his brain's urging. Dimly he hears Óin usher everyone else out, obviously having noticed

his patient's fatigue. At least he can rest a little easier now, knowing that no one else had come to harm and also knowing that thanks to Óin he, too, is now out of danger. He would have to ask him later how he'd managed that...

Thorin doesn't remember falling back into dreams, but the next time he manages to open his eyes he is alone.

Or so he thinks until a head pushes itself into his vision.

"Ah, you're awake!" Óin says cheerfully. "How do you feel, my prince?"

Thorin thinks about that for a moment. "Like a horde of orcs just trampled all over me, but I suspect you already know that. And please, call me Thorin. You've certainly earned the right after patching me up like this."

Óin stares at him for a very long moment, a peculiar expression on his face Thorin can't place. "As you wish, Thorin."

The healer turns back to undressing Thorin's wounds, checking for infection underneath. As he works, he asks, "Why did you send for me?"

"What?"

"You asked for me," Óin repeats, "when you were delirious with fever and close to death. Why?"

It's a fair question, considering the circumstances, and not one that Thorin can answer with complete honesty. One cannot exactly tell someone who doesn't even know you that you trust him completely because of something he hasn't even done yet.

"I'd heard some talk about you, about your new treatments. Ointments, I think you call them." He shrugs. "I knew I was dying. There wasn't much chance you could make anything worse."

Óin's lips quirk, even if he doesn't look completely convinced. "True enough. You were in a bad way when they dragged me out of bed to tend to the crown prince."

Thorin lets him work in silence for a while, pointedly not looking at Óin's hands as they're doing... something to the bare wounds. Óin

doesn't need the added stress of him scrutinizing his every action, not when he's already been thrown into this mess without warning.

"As of today the position of royal physician is open," Thorin says casually, eyes still fixed somewhere above Óin's head. "I would ask of you to accept the position."

Óin's hands still for a moment before resuming their work. "And why should I do that?"

"Well, you will still be able to gather all the experience you want in addition to being the royal physician. And you'll be recompensed much more generously than you're used to."

"Very charming, your royal highness."

Óin's snort elicits an honest grin from Thorin. "So I've been told. You may take some time to think my offer through if you wish."

"Oh don't be daft," Óin snaps without hesitation and finished tying up the bandages around Thorin's midsection once more. "You already know what my answer is going to be."

Thorin smiles. There's already budding familiarity here and he suddenly finds himself certain that he will make a good friend in this younger Óin, when the last time he'd only met him decades later. It's another reminder that there have been and are good things coming from this twist of his fate – a thought to cling to when doubts and worries rise.

His mirth is, however, rather short-lived as his attempt to get up from the bed is met with a stony glare and a steadfast proclamation of *at least* one more week bed rest if he doesn't want to tear his stitches.

Damned fussy healers.

*

Surprises litter the day that he finally escapes Óin's clutches. Darla and Dori are waiting for him at the front of their new rooms as expected, but when he finally finishes his laborious way up the stairs - *perhaps* he isn't quite as recovered as he'd like to believe – he is met by the rather unexpected sight of a strange dwarf lounging in an armchair.

Thorin immediately sees Nori in his blazing copper hair and strong nose, and thinks he catches a bit of Ori in his eyes.

For a long moment they stare at each other, measuring and assessing until Thorin can practically feel the waves of anxiety coming from behind him where Darla is still trapped on the stairs.

“Don’t mind me,” Thorin finally says and steps into the room with careful movements, “I’m just here for the splendid tea.”

Out of the corner of his eye he sees the other dwarf relax a fraction. “Nani, at your service.”

Thorin notes the deliberate omission of acknowledgement of Thorin’s status with some amusement. It seems this is where Nori got his irreverence for authority from.

He bows his head in return, exaggeratedly polite. “Thorin at yours.”

“I will come back later, Darla,” Nani directs at the still flustered looking dwarrowdam. “No need to make this... crowded.”

“Don’t feel that you have to leave on my account,” Thorin throws in before she can answer, a perfectly pleasant smile hiding his smugness at the other’s sudden discomfort. It had only taken him watching his grandmother take down a councillor out of line with a few perfectly polite and thus all the more cutting words the once to realize how effectively ‘good-breeding’ can be used as a weapon.

Unfortunately Darla, after years of knowing him, is more or less immune by now. Shooting him a glare, she turns to Nani and says, “That would be a good idea. Do drop by later.”

She all but slams the door as soon as he’s cleared the threshold.

“Was that really necessary, Thorin?”

“Oh, I think it was. I’m not just going to abandon you now that Mister ‘I’m the smoothest dwarf in the mountain’ is here.”

Dori, who doesn’t seem very much enamoured with Nani, turns a snicker into a cough just in time.

Darla’s glare softens a fraction, but her voice remains tart. “I can fight my own battles, thank you very much.”

Thorin holds up a placating hand. “And I would never dare to claim

otherwise. I'm only trying to help you along a little, as friends do."

Darla still mutters darkly under a breath, but she seems somewhat appeased – or at least appeased enough to actually brew the tea Thorin had supposedly come for.

Later that evening, when Dori has reluctantly gone to bed, Thorin joins Darla in front of the small fire. He keeps quiet, aware of the suddenly melancholic atmosphere as she stares into the fire.

"Nani is a nice dwarf," she finally says, voice almost small. "I wish he didn't also remind me of *him*."

Her hands are fidgeting in her lap, rubbing over a golden brooch as if she doesn't even know she's doing it. Thorin stays silent, waiting.

"He gave me this, a long time ago. Before Dori. Before he started making memories I would rather forget."

"Why did you keep it?"

She is still turning the brooch over and over in her hands, her eyes far away. "Sometimes these things are the only reminder that they were ever there," she says, unheeding of the tears trailing silently down her cheeks.

Sometimes Thorin feels that for all his years he still doesn't truly understand. "He left you."

"He did," she agrees quietly, "but I still loved him, even if no love is worth what he put us through. This brooch is a sign of that. Of love – and survival."

She doesn't elaborate, and sensing a moment that requires solitude, Thorin quietly excuses himself. He tries not to dwell on her sorrow, but their conversation nevertheless ghosts around his mind. What she'd said about signs had touched something in him, rang true in a way that he hadn't yet considered.

The next day he departs for the forges on the lower levels of Erebor with an idea blossoming behind his eyes.

*

With a skill he should not yet possess, Thorin crafts fourteen small

miracles of metalwork. As he works, he pours all of his memories, good and bad, into his hands, lets them pass behind his eyes and remembers without the reservation, the hesitancy to remind himself of a past that's no longer *there*, he's felt since waking up. Tokens he creates, both delicate in their small lines and fine edges and sturdy, for their dwarven made and born from metal. The runes for faithfulness, surrounded by detailed interwoven strands of dwarvish design.

Thirteen of these tokens he forges, one for each member of the company and all distinguished from each other by a tiny detail – a differently coloured stone for each adorn the middle, no bigger than a pinhead.

For Balin he selects a blazingly white gem.

For Dwalin he decides on a dark red one.

For the brothers Bofur and Bombur and their might-as-well-be-a-brother cousin Bifur he chooses matching stones in warmer colours, yellow for Bofur, orange for Bombur, and light red for Bifur.

For Glóin he ends up using a rusty red reminiscent of his own hair colour – and, as Thorin happens to know, of his future son's as well – and for Óin a distinguished silver.

For Dori he picks a purple gem, for Nori a rust-brown one, and for Ori a lavender colour.

He doesn't even have to think about Fíli and Kíli's stones, for only the purest diamonds would suffice for their light.

Bilbo's gem, inlaid in a flowery pattern reminiscent of what Thorin had seen in the Shire a long time ago, sparkles in many different shades of green, but the prevalent one resembles the green of that round door under the hill so much that Thorin can't even imagine picking a different stone after having seen it.

The dwarf looks down at the row of thirteen little treasures, almost unassuming in their disguise and yet so heavy with meaning and finds that something is missing. He'd been so caught up in honouring each of the members of his company that he'd completely forgotten himself and while he'd been the leader – and perhaps not always a good one

– on that journey he’d still been a part of the company, a part of their spirit.

He creates a fourteenth token with a dark blue gem glinting in the middle and a different set of runes; they read *blessed*.

This, he will always carry with him.

It proves easy enough to slip the little tokens into Balin, Dwalin, and Óin’s coats, as they are all familiar enough with him at this point not to be suspicious when he gets near their possessions – Thorin is quite aware that Dwalin is liable to give anyone *but* him and Balin a good thumping if they even so much as touch anything of his.

Dori is a little harder to manage unnoticed, but he does have a spot of luck a week later. The young dwarf is alone at home when Thorin sticks his head through the door. In fact he is sleeping and Thorin would feel a little more awkward if the other didn’t look completely adorable, his blanket clutched beneath his chin, his usually so neat hair in disarray and his face smooth and relaxed in sleep. It is a matter of seconds to slip the token beneath the blanket and watch Dori’s fingers curl around it as if they’d been waiting for it.

He hides the other nine tokens in his room, for when they may be given to those he doesn’t have access to yet.

Balin is the first to notice.

After one of their lessons in which the older dwarf tries to teach the crown prince all the things he will need to survive the politics of ruling and Thorin tries to act as if he hasn’t heard all of this before, Balin takes his token out of his pocket – Thorin notes with some joy that Balin at least has kept it close – lets his fingers play with its smooth surface and gives Thorin a pointed look.

“I found this in my coat a few days ago. I don’t expect you have any idea how it got there?”

Thorin musters his best bland ‘who me?’ face, with apparent little success as Balin only rolls his eyes.

“Laddie, I know your craft when I see it,” Balin informs him dryly, “even if it is a tad more advanced than I would have expected. Your fo-

cus has always been on weapon smithing.”

He fixes Thorin with a discerning stare that the recipient tries his best to ignore. “I’ve picked some things up as I went along, you know how it is. Besides, I *have* worked on these for quite a while.”

“These?”

Thorin winces a little, not having expected Balin not to know about Dwalin’s yet, and quickly pulls out his own version as proof.

Balin, of course, doesn’t buy it, his eyes narrowing in thought. “Did you give anyone else one of these?”

Thorin sighs. Clearly there’s no getting around Balin when decides to pursue a topic. “Only Dwalin, Dori, and Óin,” he replies truthfully. As his best friend, his ‘young charge’ as Balin likes to call Dori, and his healer that would at least make sense.

There must be something in his bearing that alerts Balin to the seriousness Thorin feels on this topic, for he only nods and doesn’t push further, though clearly still not quite satisfied with Thorin’s general evasiveness.

“It’s quite curious,” he murmurs instead, eyes far away, his fingers still playing over the token. “When I first discovered your gift I went to put it aside, not knowing what it was or from whence it came, but found myself strangely reluctant to do so. As if it gave me some reassurance and warmth to have it in my pocket.”

Thorin masks his surprise by looking down at his own token, still clutched tightly in his hand. It had been his intent to craft something deeper through the emotions he’d poured into his work, but he hadn’t truly expected there to be a noticeable result. Or maybe he had – why else would he have done it?

He looks up and meets Balin’s gaze squarely. “There is no magic in these, Balin. Only honest emotion.”

Thorin isn’t sure if Balin understands what he’s just said, the depth of affection he has revealed, but there is a smile on the other’s face.

“Then I’m honoured, my lad.”

Chapter 7



Dis shrieks when Thorin rips her blanket off in one go, bolting up with a murderous look in her eyes that would have anyone else scrambling for cover. As it is, Thorin knows her well enough to anticipate the pillow flying for his face.

“Rise and shine, dear sister!”

Her glare only intensifies. “It’s not even light out, Thorin.”

“It’s never too early to start training,” he recites, making his voice deeper and even more rumbling in a surprisingly good imitation of their grandfather, and then has to smile at Dís’ mutinous look.

“Since when are you training me?” she asks suspiciously, trying to cover a yawn. But she does slide out of bed and starts searching for appropriate clothes. His sister has always liked a good work-out.

“I’m not, but that doesn’t mean I can’t run you and Frerin into the ground now and then.”

She looks over her shoulder from where she’s half-buried in her armoire and raises a brow.

He sighs in defeat. Trust Dis to never let him get away without an *actual* explanation. “You know how worried I get about you both.”

And can anyone blame him? He almost died himself not so many days ago.

“Worrywart,” she says, but her tone is fond and her gaze warm. “Did you drag Frerin out of bed already then?”

Thorin grins. “I thought you might like to help me with that.”

Not surprisingly Dís looks positively delighted at the prospect and said delight only grows when Frerin shrieks *much* louder than she had upon receiving the same treatment. He also doesn’t stop grumbling

the whole way to the small private training hall only accessible to the royal family and their personal guard. Whether the room had been built to ensure their opportunity to privately practise or to keep an air of mystery around the abilities of the ruling family and those whose sole purpose it is to keep them from harm is still unclear – Thorin is simply grateful to have a place to train which doesn't usually overflow with loud and sweaty dwarves.

Finding the training hall empty as expected, Thorin ushers Dis and Frerin in.

"Catch," he says, and throws one sheathed dagger to each of them. They're small enough to be hidden beneath clothes easily, but as sharp as his skill could make them and with intricately carved inscriptions on the hilts.

While making the tokens Thorin couldn't help but think of the other two people in his life who have always supported him; it hadn't seemed right including them in the company, so he had wracked his brain for some other token of appreciation.

To a dwarf, weapons have traditionally been gifts oft given to family and friends – and they're useful to boot.

"Now, have you been taught much about close combat?" Thorin asks, interrupting both their studies of their gifts.

Frerin shrugs. "Some grappling."

Dís nods in confirmation and Thorin has to repress a sigh. He would have to have a word with the training instructors.

"I will show you how to use that dagger to the most effect," he says, nodding towards their new weapons. "And how to deal with someone restraining you in any way."

And that is exactly what he does. Some of these tricks he'd learned from Nori, some life had taught him. He shows them how to throw a dagger, how to slash someone attacking from behind, how to best conceal the weapon on their persons. He shows them how to escape various holds, not satisfied until both of them can get free from his grasp and throw him down to the mats on the floor.

“An orc is hardly going to grab me from behind,” Frerin points out, massaging his neck. It had taken him several tries to properly dislodge Thorin.

“Not all attackers you should fear are orcs,” Thorin says darkly. “There are wicked men in the world, and sometimes wicked dwarves. You should always be on your guard. Especially *you*, Dís.”

Her mouth is set in a grim line as she nods.

When Thorin finally allows them to stop at lunchtime, both Frerin and Dís are drenched in sweat and ravenous, but he feels they’ve made some progress.

“If this is what all your training sessions are like I’ll be quite happy to go back to *not* training with you,” Frerin groans, stretching sore muscles.

Thorin raises a brow. He of all three still looks mostly unchanged, neither very sweaty nor as mussed as the other two. “Or perhaps you need to toughen up, little brother.”

“If this is how it’s done I don’t want to toughen up,” Frerin grumbles, but his heart isn’t in it, and Thorin knows he won’t complain again. Both his siblings are quite aware of the importance of being properly trained.

The flash of fear he’d seen in Dís’ eyes when she had performed a move correctly and the tip of her dagger had landed at Thorin’s throat had all but confirmed the lingering worry about his well-being. His short dance with death had left marks on all of them.

On their way out Thorin stops Frerin with a hand on his arm. “Are you still training with the sword?”

“Of course.”

“Why don’t you give the bow a try?”

Frerin stares at him. “The *bow*?”

“You have very good eye-sight and we don’t have enough warriors with long-ranged weapons as it is.” He smirks slightly. “And of course you don’t have much of a beard that could get in the way.”

When Frerin only looks a mix of confused and suspicious, he sighs.

“Just give it a try, Frerin. If the bow isn’t to your liking you can simply give it up again.”

Frerin’s nod is still slightly dubious, but it’s enough for Thorin, who smiles at him and ambles away.

*

Frantic hammering on his door wakes Thorin from slumber. He would be more annoyed at being roused so rudely, if it hadn’t interrupted a rather unpleasant nightmare. Most people’s nightmares are of imaginary scenarios, of fears they harbour. Thorin’s nightmares are of the past. Of reality.

(His grandfather’s head rolling over blood-stained ground. Fili and Kili dead, bats circling above their corpses. Bilbo’s eyes wide and frightened, his face pale as blood ran down his forehead.)

“Mister Thorin?”

The high, frightened voice is enough to wake him completely, icy focus pushing aside the last vestiges of sleep and terror. *Dori*.

For a moment confusion threatens to undermine his focus – what is *Dori* doing here and at this hour? – but then he hears another voice growl threateningly and he hurries toward the doors.

The scene outside is not entirely unexpected, Dori shrinking back against the wall one hand still raised, poised to knock once more, Dwalin, towering above everything as usual, an axe in his hand.

What’s not so expected is the distance between them, as if Dwalin has consciously held himself back not to intimidate Dori further even though he usually goes berserk at the slightest hint of a threat to Thorin (which he doesn’t appreciate most of the time, but Dwalin doesn’t much care about his opinion in this instance, or rather as usual – he’s got it in his head that Thorin isn’t heedful enough of his own safety and it’s like trying to move a mountain trying to convince him otherwise).

Thorin is also pretty certain that he doesn’t imagine the look of relief in Dwalin’s eyes as he demands, “What’s going on here?”

It's a testament to how serious the situation is that Dori doesn't hesitate in throwing himself into his arms, though he had lately insisted that he was now too big for such things.

Thorin spares a quick nod for a still tense Dwalin, indicating that this is all right and he can stand down before focussing completely on Dori who seems to be near hysterical.

"It's mom," he brings out between gasps for air. "She's in so much pain and the healer we go to wasn't there and I didn't know what else to *do* - "

"Dori," Thorin interrupts him firmly before the young dwarf's face can get any redder as words pour out of his mouth in an unstoppable flood, "it's all right. You know you can come to me for everything. Now, take a deep breath and tell me what's wrong with your mother."

Dori looks up at him, his eyes wide with fear. "I don't know. She just started screaming and holding her stomach."

Thorin stokes his hair a little, trying to calm him down. "It's fine, it will be fine. Dwalin?"

Dwalin moves over from where he'd remained, unwilling to leave Thorin alone with someone he doesn't know.

"Find Óin. We'll need his help. Meet me at the market place."

Dwalin nods curtly and disappears down the corridor. Thorin gently steers Dori in the same direction with a hand on his shoulder.

Óin is still grumbling about the 'godawful hour in the morning' he was woken up at when they meet at the market place, but it is a rather half-hearted complaint as he stops as soon as he sees Dori, who, though slightly calmer than before, still looks like he's afraid the ceiling will come down any minute.

It's a good thing the Ri's home isn't much further away, for the second they open the door Thorin finds that Dori saying that his mother was screaming had *not* been an understatement. By the time they reach her bedroom the screams have died down to pained sobs but soon enough, he suspects, they will be screams again.

Óin doesn't waste time getting to work, leaving everyone else stand-

ing around uselessly as he examines her.

Thorin's heart contracts as Darla's voice starts to rise again and with look at Dwalin he hoists Dori into his arms before he can protest and leaves the room. Her son doesn't have to witness any more of her pain than he already has.

For a moment he thinks Dori is going to protest, but then the young dwarf just sort of deflates and hides his face against Thorin's cloak. It's easy to forget that Dori is but a youngster still sometimes.

Óin finds them sitting outside the door half an hour later.

"She's pregnant," Óin says bluntly, looking at Thorin as if it's all his fault.

Resisting the urge to throw up his hands and proclaim his innocence, in this matter at least, Thorin asks, "I may not be an expert on pregnancies, but I do not believe they should be this painful?"

Óin's grim look isn't encouraging in the least. "They shouldn't. The babe was lying incorrectly in her womb. I pushed it right again, but I can't be certain of the damage already done."

"But you'll be able to help her, won't you Master Óin?" Dori quickly demands, face falling.

The healer looks to be torn between annoyance at his skills being questioned in such a manner and being charmed by Dori's good manners.

Despite the gravity of the situation Thorin has to hide a smile. Leave it to Dori to ensnare not only Dwalin – who admittedly has always had a bit of a soft spot for the wee ones – but also the usually so dour Óin.

"I should be, yes," he finally settles on saying and Thorin doesn't miss the way his expression has softened. "As long as his majesty here doesn't object? I am the royal healer after all."

Thorin glares at him. "Of course not. If you need it to be *official* I shall tell you that you have my permission to do everything you can to help Mistress Darla. Or do you wish to see it in writing?"

Óin's lips turn up. "No need to trouble yourself needlessly, my

lord.”

Dori, having finally lost his patience with the two adults bickering, tugs on Thorin’s hand. “Can we go see Ma now?”

Thorin looks at Óin, who nods.

“Lead the way.”

Darla looks to be sleeping when they enter her bedroom, her face drawn and weary even in slumber. Dwalin stands from where he’d been sitting quietly on a chair in the corner.

“Is she all right?”

Dori looks up at Thorin, his eyes pleading, and the vulnerability on his small face breaks his hearts. Yet even now, he knows better than to lie.

“In time, I think she will be,” he says quietly. “But it may be a while, until your sibling enters this world, Mahal be merciful.”

Not even the mention of his future brother or sister can much lighten Dori’s mood, though Thorin knows that the young dwarf had quietly been wishing for a sister or brother to call his own.

The light of the morning sun, filtered through huge windows in the mountain side begins to illuminate the walkway outside and Thorin suppresses a curse.

“I have a meeting in half an hour’s time,” Thorin murmurs, looking at Dori with regret. “I’m sorry, Dori, I have to go. I promise I’ll come back later.”

Dori nods silently, not voicing the worry and fear still lingering on his face.

“I’ll stay here and watch over them,” Dwalin suddenly speaks up, drawing both their gazes. The warrior smiles at Dori, hard features suddenly less forbidding. “If that’s all right with Master Dori here.”

Thorin can only stare in wonder as Dori *giggles* – whether because being called ‘Master Dori’ amuses him or because of the solemn expression on Dwalin’s face unclear. It’s one of the greatest mysteries, how Dwalin, a dwarf who can intimidate even the stoutest opponent if he so chooses, has one of the softest hearts when it comes to dwar-

flings – and the dwarflings love him for it.

Dori nods and says equally solemnly, “I would like that, Master Dwalin.”

“Oh none of that now. Call me Dwalin.”

With a shake of his head and fond little smile playing on his lips Thorin leaves them to it. This might just be a good thing, for Dori to have found another friend and protector. If he knows Dwalin at all the other won’t easily let go of the young dwarf from now on and it does his heart good to know it.

Thorin doesn’t see the softening in Dwalin’s eyes as he leaves, nor his friend’s satisfied expression.

*

He makes a point to visit Dori and Darla as often as possible during the days of her recovery, trying to support the struggling family with his presence at least since he can’t do much else. Much to his amusement he encounters Dwalin there more often than not, though the only comment his friend deigns to give condenses to something like ‘Dori is a good lad and I have too much free time anyway’.

Thorin almost snorts the first time Dwalin says that, considering that the other is one of the busier dwarves in the mountain, and no one would debate it. Technically there is a rotation of guards assigned to him, but somehow Dwalin has managed to get himself into almost every rotation, clearly unwilling to trust anyone else with his prince’s well-being – no matter how often Thorin tells him that *he’s fine, stop being so damn stubborn, we’re inside Erebor for Mahal’s sake*. After a while Thorin had simply given this fight up as a lost cause. Dwalin might act at being obedient and following the rules of his profession but in the end he always does as he wishes anyway; of course Thorin wouldn’t have him any other way either.

It had only occurred to him some time after having left Dori and Dwalin at Darla’s bedside that night – during his meeting to be precise, and concentrating on even more mining issues had been a bit of

struggle after that – to wonder where Nani had been during all of this.

He had waited a little while to bring the subject up, expecting the dwarf to come out of the woodwork soon enough, but Darla's suitor hadn't shown and Thorin *wants answers*.

Dori is out on a food run when he enters the house a little more than a week after the incident, for which he is grateful.

Darla is already puttering around in the kitchen, blithely ignoring Óin's strict instructions for more bed rest.

(One of these days the poor healer is going to have a coronary, unless they actually find him a patient who listens to what he says some time soon. Thorin isn't particularly sad to say that that certainly won't be him.)

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" he asks mildly, making her turn towards the door, a piece of cram in hand.

Even – or perhaps one should say especially – the crown prince of Erebor has his moments of hypocrisy.

"If you had lain in that bloody bed for as long as I have now you'd be crawling up the walls too," comes the tart reply and Thorin has to smile. She looks well enough, still a little tired but not weighed down by pain anymore.

"I would be a fool to dispute that," he returns amiably and seats himself at the table. "Are you eating more then?"

She snorts. "More? The little one here seems to be demanding quite a lot more than 'more'."

Thorin decides to take that as a good sign, though the intricacies of pregnancies and associated eating habits are clearly beyond him.

(By the third consecutive time Dís' sneaking into the kitchen in the middle of the night had disturbed his sleep – he had always been a light sleeper, and that habit had only been helped along by his warrior training and later the hardships of the road, a time during which too deep a slumber could mean one's death or the death of more dwarves all around him – Thorin heaved himself out of the bed with a groan and padded

into the kitchen himself, if mostly to find out what the hell his sister was doing eating when she should be resting.

"Dís?" he questioned quietly, his eyes piercing the gloom of the kitchen to find his sister in the act of biting into an apple.

She startled a little. "Thorin! What are you doing here?"

"Asking you the same thing."

"I had a craving," she shrugged, focus returning to her apple. "Fili seems to like apples."

He raised a brow. "How do you know it's going to be a he?"

"I simply do." She smiled at him, and he was glad to see mischievous dimples gracing her face once more. This pregnancy seemed to be doing his sister a world of good. "I expect it's a dwarrowdam thing."

"I wouldn't dream of debating that point," Thorin returned with a smile of his own, though it quickly died when he saw that Dís did look a little tired despite her good mood. "How much have you been sleeping?"

She sighed, setting the apple core aside. "Don't be such a nag, nadad. I'm fine. He's just a little active during some nights."

Thorin wanted to protest, to air his worry, but for once he held his tongue. "How about some tea, if you can't sleep anyway."

Dís looked at him, surprised. "Shouldn't you be resting, too? You will have a long day at the forge tomorrow."

Thorin was having none of it. "That may be so, but right now I wish to sit with my younger sister and spend some time with her." His gaze warmed. "If you can endure sleepless nights I will manage to cope with one."

That did make her smile. "Fair enough."

He would fondly recall memories of that night later on, even though no sleep was had during the rest of it and Dwalin had to keep him from nodding off several times during the following day.

Three nights later found him knocking on Dwalin's door, red-eyed and tired, and his friend didn't even laugh as he let him in and allowed him to crash in the guest bed for the night.)

A few moments pass in silence, then Thorin abruptly asks, “Where’s Nani? He should be here.”

Darla looks everything but surprised at his question.

“He’s away on business,” she says, but she doesn’t meet his eyes. Considering what he knows of Nori’s choice of career, which he must have got from *somewhere*, Thorin isn’t too surprised.

However much it tears at him to ask, if his guess that he is Ori’s father as well is correct, he forces himself to do so anyway. His regard for her would not allow anything less. “Is he good for you? Do you truly believe he is good for you?”

Now she does meet his eyes and the conviction he sees there settles him more than her words.

“Yes, I do.” She smiles briefly, though it is slightly sardonic. “I do not fully approve of his... occupation, but he is a good dwarf and he makes me happy. And he will be back soon.”

He ignores her pointed look and simply nods – he can only hope that this time her heart has chosen a worthier mate. He’d once asked her whether she had a One, for it is quite unusual finding a dwarrow-dam who’s given herself to multiple partners, but she’d only told him that she’d never felt the pull and had left it at that. He respects her privacy enough not to ask again, fully aware that the matter of Ones can be a painful subject as much as a joyful one.

“Good,” she says briskly. “Now that that is out of the way, would you care for some tea?”

And that more than anything else tells him that she will be all right.

Chapter 8



Thorin stands in the training hall, eyeing a rather sheepish looking Frerin as he fiddles with his bow.

“I do believe I rather proved the merits of archery a few years ago,” Thorin says pointedly, despite the fact that he’d harboured much the same scepticism about the elvish weapon not too long ago. (Now he simply prefers to believe that elves don’t have the monopoly on bows.) “I certainly will not censure you for enjoying your craft. And *don’t* let Dís talk you into believing it to be a sissy’s weapon – she’ll change her mind after the first time you save her life with it.”

It’s not that he hadn’t expected Frerin to have some doubts, but he had quite neglected to realize that Frerin might want to make doubly sure that Thorin wouldn’t mind him not only using the bow out of necessity but because he actually *likes* the weapon.

He looks up to find Frerin staring at him and raises a brow. “What?”

“Nothing,” his brother murmurs, shaking his head. “It’s simply that this is the first time you’ve openly acknowledged that particular heroic deed, *dragonslayer*.”

Thorin pauses in surprise at the truth in Frerin’s words. He’d been reluctant to see his killing of Smaug as significant for himself as a person for a very long time, refusing to let himself be defined by something he feels he had little control over. Now time has dulled those bitter thoughts and he gives Frerin a nod to acknowledge his point, before gesturing towards the target.

“Again.”

Frerin’s sour look as he rubs his sore arms is enough to bring back his cheer.

The first time Thorin witnesses Frerin's arrow thudding into the very centre of the target he cannot – and doesn't even want to – repress a proud smile, which only widens when his brother whoops with joy, even though Thorin is fairly sure it's not the first time Frerin has hit the bull's eye. He would hardly have called Thorin here now if it hadn't happened a few times before – the dwarves general inclination towards showing off certainly hasn't passed the Durins by.

Clapping Frerin on the shoulder, he asks, "Have you tried moving targets yet?"

Frerin raises a brow. "A little hard to do that inside, isn't it?"

"There's a pulley system," Thorin replies, pointing towards the far end of the training hall. "The target always swings in the same arc, of course, but it is good training for beginners. And once you master *that* we can go hunting together."

Frerin's face lights up. He's been trying to get Thorin to take him to the nearest woods ever since he'd started practicing, but Thorin had been adamant on waiting, not only because Frerin's skill with the bow had still been rather questionable at the time, but also because he is fully aware that venturing outside Erebor is becoming more and more perilous.

"Truly?" Frerin asks, not even trying to disguise his excitement. For all that he's a dwarf, being cooped up in the mountain for everything but short trips to Dale is taking its toll on him. Frerin has always been a free soul, and is used to *having* freedom, but not even for his brother's peace of mind would Thorin risk his death needlessly.

"Truly," he confirms, though he opts not to point out that they would assemble a larger hunting party than Frerin is probably imagining. Safety in numbers, even if he doesn't believe that anything would happen.

Frerin grins at him and begins to carefully pack away his equipment. As he unstrings his bow, he asks, "Can we visit Darla later? I haven't seen the Ris in a while."

Of course, what he really means is ‘can I see Nori later’ – Frerin has taken a shine to the newest addition to the Ri family, from the moment he had seen the small babe in his mother’s arms. Admittedly, that had been more than two weeks after his birth, for it had been a long and arduous process and Nani had snarled at anyone – who wasn’t Óin – getting within ten foot of his beloved and his son for days after; not that that had stopped *Thorin* from visiting, but he had refrained from bringing anyone else out of respect for the new father’s feelings on the matter for a while. Especially since, after the near disastrous realization of Darla’s pregnancy, the other dwarf *had* made an effort to be around more.

In retrospect he feels with an encroaching sense of doom that introducing Nori to Frerin of all people at such an early stage might’ve been a mistake. He shudders to think what those two might get up to in a few decades and still he cannot help but look forward to such a time for it *hadn’t happened the last time*. Hadn’t been given the chance to happen the last time and for all that he mourned the loss of his beloved brother for himself, he also mourned for all these lost chances and the life that Frerin could have led.

The life that Thorin will do everything in his power to ensure he can live now.

By the time he refocuses his mind, Frerin is looking at him oddly and Thorin finds himself perhaps a little too grateful that Darla chooses that moment to enter the training hall, providing a beautiful distraction.

“Balin said I would find you here. Can you watch Dori and Nori for a while?” she asks him briskly, and once more Thorin finds himself taken aback and humbled by the trust she places in him. A few years ago she would never have dreamed of entrusting her sons to someone who’d been a stranger not so long ago, much less the crown prince of Erebor. She had come to trust him on their own terms, terms where age and titles don’t matter and only his care for her and her sons counts.

And not many people can claim his trust in return, for all that he is more open now than he had been in his first life for always, always his mind warns of betrayal and subsequent pain.

Dori, trailing after his mother, looks somewhat grumpy at the implication that he might still need looking after, but Thorin notices that the young dwarf's eyes rarely stray from his bundled up baby-brother.

"Of course," he says, giving her a reassuring smile as Frerin all but bounces behind him. "I'll look after him."

She smiles back, though Frerin gets an – understandably – more suspicious look before she hands Nori over to Thorin.

The little dwarf barely shifts in his blankets at the strange arms around him, eyes closed in sleep and an expression of innocence that older Nori would have been hard pressed to recreate.

"We should go somewhere more comfortable," Thorin murmurs, more to himself than Frerin, who is hovering behind his shoulder, looking like he wants nothing more in the world than to steal the dwarf baby from Thorin. Reflexively he draws little Nori closer to his chest.

"You're going to spend the entire afternoon hogging him again, aren't you?" Frerin grumbles, falling into step next to him. "Why does she always give him to *you*?"

Thorin gives him a pointed look. "Perhaps because I can be considered a responsible adult unlike *some* people I know."

"But whenever you're busy she lets Dís watch Nori!"

"Exactly."

*

Thorin reads the letter from Thranduil over for the third time, hoping against hope that the words had miraculously changed, and doesn't even try to hold back some colourful curses when they remain predictably consistent.

Why does that blasted elf want a meeting with the king *now*? The timing couldn't have been worse. His grandfather's mood swings had

been even more harrowing than usual and guards report that he hasn't left the treasury for the last three days, which is never a good sign.

Yet he cannot go himself, neither can his father, for that would reveal the truth about the current ruler of Erebor and they *cannot* afford to show this weakness, this strife in the line of Durin itself to such tentative allies. Especially not to Thranduil, as far as Thorin is concerned. Bard he might concede to tell, provided he doesn't pass the information on to his council, but *Thranduil*? About as likely as a tree suddenly growing in the throne room.

There is no way around it; if they don't want to wave an alliance with the elves of Mirkwood permanent goodbye, Thrór will have to go, and they will have to hope that he can hold it together long enough not to jeopardize a future treaty. For a short moment he allows himself the hope that time away from the mountain and the treasure might even do his grandfather some good, but it is a fools' hope at best so he pushes it aside.

Rubbing a hand over his face wearily he reaches for a piece of parchments to pen his return letter and doesn't even smile at Carc's displeasure at having to fly to that place full of dank trees *again*.

His father, it hardly needs to be said, isn't exactly enthusiastic either. After a full minute of grunting and cursing he flops down on his chair and grumbles, "Couldn't you have at least asked me before answering that father and I would be coming?"

Thorin realizes, with a guilty start, a little late that, yes, he probably *should* have done that. He still sometimes forgets that he isn't the sole king anymore.

"You know that this is our only option. Grandfather needs to go, and someone needs to keep him in check," Thorin points out, trying to sound sensible even though he actually agrees with Thráin's point. "I'll keep things running here while you're away."

Thráin smiles somewhat wryly. "No doubt. With the hours you work it's not surprising how efficient you are."

Thorin stifles a groan. The last thing he needs his father joining in

the increasingly vocal group of people protesting against his work ethics.

"I shouldn't think you would be unhappy about that," he murmurs, just a tad acidly.

Thráin sighs. "As prince, no, I'm not. As your father? That's an entirely different matter."

"Duty comes first," Thorin repeats quietly, the saying that his ears had heard from the day they were capable of hearing anything. "Such is our lot."

A pained look flashes across Thráin's face, but he doesn't argue. He's heard the maxim even more often than Thorin has, after all.

"I suppose I should make arrangements then."

Thorin allows himself an only slightly strained smile. "I would appreciate that. I will go and talk to grandfather."

Thráin's expression darkens even further. "Good luck with that."

Thorin almost snorts. *Luck* is not exactly something he tends to associate with his life.

Bolstered a little by the fact that he doesn't find Thrór in the treasury this time, Thorin knocks on the door to the king's rooms firmly. There's no reply and after the third unsuccessful knock Thorin simply pushed against the door. It isn't locked.

Thrór is lying on his bed, fully clothed, staring blankly at the ceiling as he turns his heavy crown over and over in his hands. Thorin isn't even sure he's aware of his grandson's presence, despite the intentional racket he'd made moving towards the bedroom.

"Grandfather?" Thorin asks softly so as not to startle the older dwarf.

Thrór blinks once, but fails to acknowledge him in any other way.

Thorin fights the urge to scream at him just to get a reaction. It wouldn't help. He *knows* nothing helps, so he simply states quietly, "King Thanduil has asked for a meeting with the King Under the Mountain. Father and I think it's a good idea." He looks at Thrór's unmoving face. "You'll leave in two days' time."

Still no reaction. Swallowing through the hard lump in his throat, Thorin stands and makes his way over to the door. His hand is just reaching for the handle when suddenly Thrór does speak, voice blankly pained.

“There are some moments when I *know*. When I know what I’m doing. Those are the worst.”

Thorin turns around, hair swinging gently as he stares in amazement. They’re the first words Thrór has spoken in a long while that actually sound like the grandfather he remembers, even when they’re tinged with despair.

He returns to the bed, sitting on the edge so that Thrór may see the honesty in his face. “You know we’re here for you, adad.”

Thrór finally looks at him, really looks at him, his tired blue eyes boring into Thorin’s. “But *I am not*.”

But he doesn’t resist when Thorin takes one of his hands in his, offering silent comfort and warmth.

“It doesn’t matter,” Thorin murmurs, though they both know it to be a lie. Sometimes he needs to lie to himself, even if only for a moment.

The crown slips from the king’s other hand, as if all his strength to carry it had deserted him. It slips down the blanket, rolling to a stop in front of Thorin, glinting dully in the light.

He ignores it and simply keeps holding his grandfather’s hand, a silent vigil until the other dwarf’s mind finds rest in sleep.

Only then does he rise, and gently set the crown onto the nightstand where it will wait for its rightful bearer to awake again. Some things, he decides, even sickness cannot touch.

*

Thorin is the first to be told. He meets the ragtag, bleeding group of returning warriors at the gate, lets his gaze roam over their diminished ranks and understands before the first word is spoken.

“The King is dead, long live the King.”

The words echo bleakly along stone walls. He doesn't think his father's grim, blooded face will ever leave his mind again.

There's irony, too, next to the shock. Thorin had *told* Thrór to take more guards for his trip to Mirkwood, had warned him of the increased orc activity during the last season, but the older dwarf had refused to listen to his counsel. Thrór had been a formidable dwarf, hard to argue with even before the gold sickness, yet then he had still listened to reason. After his mind's descent into darkness and greed, neither logic nor well-meaning concern had been able to sway him from his chosen path. Nor had his short bout of lucidity lasted long.

Now it has cost him his life.

Thorin looks at the guards assembled in front of him, burdened with more than bruises and wounds and addresses them quietly, his voice carrying on the still air.

"We mourn the death of King Thrór. You did Erebor proud defending him to the last. Captain, report to King Thráin. Dismissed."

Some might think him callous, sending them away with such sparse recognition, but Thorin has spent much of his life around seasoned warriors. Few of them had liked rehashing past battles, and even fewer had strove for commendation after tragedy. To dismiss them now means to give them the chance to return to their families for a while to recover from the horror of battle and he knows that every one of them is grateful for it.

Dwalin is the last to leave, lingering behind with something looking far too much like guilt for Thorin's liking compassing his face.

Meet me later, my quarters, Thorin signs in their modified version of Iglismêk and waits for Dwalin's nod of acknowledgement before turning away himself. He has a duty to fulfil.

He finds Dís and Frerin in the latter's quarters, playing one of those strategy games Thorin remembers having liked very much at that age – now the prospect of moving around differently coloured stones in a mock-battle only makes him feel vaguely sick; too often had he decided on the lives of others with similar methods before combat.

Thorin kneels down beside them both and some of his grimness must show on his face for his siblings immediately fall silent, gazes fixed on him with growing trepidation.

He takes a deep breath, trying not feel the weight of their fear and expectations – the older he gets, and sometimes he feels damned old, it never gets easier to be the bringer of such news.

“Grandfather has left us for Mahal’s Halls. He is now with grandmother and amad.”

Frerin, in a rare show of his innate but hidden perceptiveness, asks quietly. “Is it because of his sickness?”

Thorin nods solemnly. “That’s part of it. But he was killed by orcs.”

Dís, meanwhile has other things on her mind than the manner of Thrór’s demise. Her bright blue eyes are fixed on Thorin’s face still, glistening with tears as horrible vulnerability steals across her face. “Why does everyone have to leave?”

Thorin *hates* the lost, timid quality of her voice, hates that he has nothing really comforting to say to her, hates that he can barely help. Not with this. Doesn’t mean he’s not going to give it his best shot.

“Every dwarf returns to stone some time, nadad,” he tries to quietly explain, despite its inadequacies as a true explanation, “it’s how we were created. And King Thrór led a long life.”

There’s stubbornness in her face now, too, as if daring Thorin to have forgotten. “Mother didn’t.”

He closes his eyes in defeat. It’s true, Freia had died far too early, leaving a gaping hole in their family structure. He has always suspected her death to be the reason why Dís especially is so close to him – he had tried his best to be there for her, such a small child then – for the both of them, even if Frerin had been more reluctant – during the period of grief and incomprehension that had come after. Had let her use him as a crutch, a replacement as much as he’d been able. And he’d never regretted it.

“No, she didn’t. Sometimes death isn’t fair and many who die deserve to live. But it’s not our place to decide that.”

He had learned that painful lesson better – and earlier – than most.

Dís looks at him, eyes wide and voice small. “Promise you’ll never leave me?”

Frerin hasn’t said anything, but Thorin feels the weight of his gaze too. He wants to promise, wants to lie for their peace of mind, but he has only once sworn an oath he could not keep – and he is sure Dís would never have forgiven him for failing to protect her sons – and this would be a promise that he has broken once already. He has no guarantee that he would not break it again, in fact, he will try his very best not to let either of his siblings die before him this time.

So he doesn’t promise, doesn’t tell the comforting lie.

“I will do my best. But, kurdíth, if I do leave, I will still watch over you from the halls, I promise you that. You’ll never be alone in spirit.”

It’s not enough, but it’s all he has to give.

They hold each other for a long time, three bodies pressed close together in a tangle of limbs and braids.

*

His father stands motionlessly on the balcony overseeing the gate, looking out over the valley towards Dale.

For a long moment Thorin simply stands there, unacknowledged, his insides twisting painfully at the desolation he doesn’t need to see to know it to be visible on Thráin’s face.

“I suppose we should call this a blessing,” Thráin finally says, voice flat.

Thorin doesn’t say anything. After all what *could* he say to that? If he were to answer honestly he would agree, but some truths are so terrible they should not be voiced.

“I never wanted to be king,” Thráin continues in that same dead tone. “But I am an only child and I knew that one day duty would catch up with me.”

He turns around and Thorin finds himself face to face with exactly the expression he had imagined on the older dwarf’s face. He would be

hard-pressed to remember a time when he had been gazed at by more intense eyes.

“Tell me, son, do you want to rule?”

The question throws him. Thorin has grown up with the knowledge that he would be king one day, has never questioned that fact – has never actually asked himself whether it’s something he *wants*. Because in the end it wouldn’t matter, it’s something he *needs* to do, one way or another.

He answers as honestly as he can without burdening his father further. Without burdening himself further. “I would not ask another to do so in my stead.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” Thráin murmurs, an odd mix of pride and despair in his voice. “If there has ever been a dwarf born to rule it would be you.”

Thorin stares at his father in a mixture of astonishment and bitterness born from irony. There had been a time that he would have done everything to hear such praise from his father, from his *king*. Now, with the mess he’d made of his last rule still oh-so fresh in his memory, he can only try not to laugh. There are many he would name before himself who had been – or would have been, *don’t think of Fíli, don’t* – far better rulers than he had.

Once upon a time his father had agreed.

(Devastation in his gaze, the slightest hint of accusation and madness in his eyes as he stares at Thorin over Frerin’s lax body. Thorin can only stare back wordless, wishing reality away. It had been the last time he’d seen his father alive.)

Now there’s something very much like pride in Thráin’s gaze, but Thorin would trade it in a heartbeat to see a measure of happiness there too. He’d tried so hard to shelter his family this time around, to not have it break apart in front of him, but more and more it seems as if he’ll fail in this life too.

His quarters are dark when Thorin returns, his mind still troubled. For a moment he thinks he is alone before he sees the outline of his best friend's bulk only barely illuminated by a single guttering candle. Dwalin is utterly silent.

Keeping his own silence, Thorin walks over to the fire-place and busies himself with getting a fire going. If he is giving Dwalin the time to pull himself together or himself, he doesn't know.

The crackling of the fire is the only thing disturbing the silence for what feels like an eternity.

When Dwalin finally turns and looks at him, Thorin mourns the darkness he sees in his friend's gaze.

"He didn't defend himself," Dwalin says blankly. "Azog was right there and he didn't even raise his axe."

"You know that my grandfather... hasn't been well for some time now?" Thorin says, choosing his words carefully. It had taken meticulous diligence to ensure that most of Erebor remained in the dark as to the King's ailment, but he suspects that Dwalin, with his greater exposure to the royal family as Thorin's personal guard, has at least guessed at the truth.

Dwalin stares at him. "And how exactly is getting himself skewered by that beast a solution for that?"

Thorin stares into the fire for a long moment, watches the flames' red dance as his answer refuses to pass his lips. Dwalin steps closer, his face forming worried lines, his own plight all but forgotten in the face of Thorin's pain. It has always been thus – so much loyalty that he doesn't remember ever earning.

"Perhaps it is better this way," he finally whispers. He looks up, straight into Dwalin's eyes and takes strength from what he sees there. Is strong for the other in turn now. "And for whatever reason he did it, it is *not* your fault, nor the fault of any of the other warriors." The shadow of a smile passes his face. "Thrór has always been a rather strong-headed dwarf. I doubt anyone could've changed his mind once it was set. And he chose death with dignity, more so than what might

have awaited him otherwise.”

Dwalin mulls his words over, one of his hands absent-mindedly fiddling with his axe; a habit that Thorin has observed many times when the warrior feels unsettled by something, but he keeps his mouth shut. This is something Dwalin has to accept on his own, and no amount of meddling would be successful if Dwalin truly decides to lay the blame for Thrór’s death on his own shoulders.

Finally Dwalin nods, much to Thorin’s relief.

“Thank you,” he says quietly and takes his leave. Thorin lets him go, quite familiar with the feeling of needing solitude to mull over certain events.

He wishes he had the luxury of the same, but the funeral of a King needs to be planned and he would rather not push that duty onto his father, whose grief at the loss of his father is still new.

Rubbing his eyes wearily, Thorin sets to work and tries to forget.

A part of him hates himself for his lack of grief, for his *relief*, feels guilty that he can’t even muster much anger at Azog for his continued crimes against his family. Well, no, that’s not completely true – Thorin lives with anger at Azog like he lives with grief and regret, but in this, in this one instance, he finds himself almost grateful.

The Thrór he had known and loved had already died many years ago. And while Thorin himself had recovered from the gold sickness – for a short while at least, it had never been proven that it had completely left him – he, better than anyone, knows that recovery after such a long while would only lead to a life burdened with shame and guilt and the dwarf his grandfather had once been did not deserve that.

Sometimes he wonders if he’s seen so much death that he’s grown numb to it, but when he finally stands in front of his grandfather’s casket, hewn from the same stone that would one day bury Thorin too, he proves himself wrong.

Dís and Frerin, on either side of him, don’t understand the pained smile gracing his face, but for once he doesn’t care.

Chapter 9

After Thor's death Thorin begins to plan in earnest. He shouldn't have needed another demonstration of their frailty and life's shortness to awaken to the fact that if he doesn't act soon chances *are* going to slip from his grasp, but he decides not to dwell on his own short-sightedness for now.

Instead he gathers his thoughts and goes to petition his father for a trade expedition. He could probably have come up with a different excuse as to why he really needs to go to the Blue Mountains sometime soon, but the idea to send an envoy to cement non-existent trade agreements had settled itself in the back of his mind and refuses to let go. As far as he knows the dwarves in the Blue Mountains have little to offer Erebor in terms of trade at the moment, but that might change and he's learned to always prepare for the worst. Hopefully trade relations would bolster relations in general – and shouldn't dwarves stick together anyway, when there were already so few of their settlements in Middle-earth?

Thráin listens to his proposition, nodding at the appropriate times – yet Thorin can't quite shake the feeling that his father's mind isn't really on the matter at hand, even if it does afford him the intended end result.

The first thing he does after securing Thráin's approval for his plans is go talk to Óin.

The healer looks up from where he's mixing some green... stuff in a bowl and smiles at him.

"Ah, Master Thorin. What have you done to yourself this time?"

Thorin glowers at him, not only because of the expectation that he

is injured and the implication that it happens often – which is an outrageous lie, thank you very much – but also because he'd thought he'd got Óin to call him Thorin by now. It might be strange for a prince to be uneasy with titles of respect, yet when it comes to his friends Thorin really quite wishes they would stop calling him 'Master' or 'Sire' or 'my prince' or whatever nonsense they could come up with.

He's almost too caught up in his frustration to notice that Óin's eyes are alight with a teasing glint.

"That is not funny, Óin," he grumbles.

"Are you sure? Your impression of a bird with ruffled feathers is quite delightful." At Thorin's grumpy look he adds, "A bird of prey, of course."

Somewhat mollified, Thorin clears his throat and says, "As you can undoubtedly see, I am *not* injured. I simply have a question."

A bushy eyebrow rises. "Oh?"

"You have a brother, do you not? An aspiring merchant?"

Looking slightly puzzled, Óin nods. "Aye, he's learning the ways of the trade, though I think he might as well end up as a treasurer as adept at keeping track of money as he is. Good with axes, too, our Glóin."

He levels a stern look at Thorin. "Now are you going to tell me why you're asking this or not?"

Thorin's lips twitch. It's always refreshing talking to Óin.

"I'm planning an expedition to the dwarf settlement in the Blue Mountains to foster trade relations and I'm looking for someone to help coordinate my efforts. Someone I can wholly trust. Glóin's name came up and once I realised that he's *your* brother I was all but decided."

If anyone can manage to look both proud and still faintly suspicious at the same time it's Óin.

"Then what are you talking to me for?"

"I wanted to hear your honest opinion whether Glóin is up to the job," Thorin says seriously, shrugging his shoulders infinitesimally.

Óin holds his gaze for a moment, then gives a decisive nod. “He is. Now get out. I have actual patients to attend to.”

Thorin goes. He would seek out Glóin on the morrow, though there is little doubt in his mind that the dwarf would agree to come – most would jump at such a chance to accompany the crown prince.

Which leaves only one more person he needs to convince to come with him when they depart, this one more important than any other.

Dis is writing at her desk when he enters, but smiles at his greeting, her quill already forgotten. Like Frerin – and Thorin, if he’s completely honest – she had always been an active soul and sitting at a desk poring over papers has never been her preferred method of passing the time.

“How would you like to accompany me to the Blue Mountains in the summer?” he asks without preamble and Dís’ eyebrows fly up into her hairline.

“What?”

“You once told me that you wished to see some of the world outside of Erebor, do you remember?”

“Of course.” She snorts lightly and pointedly continues, “I also distinctly remember being told that I was ‘too young and lands too dangerous’ about fifty times before giving up. Frerin frequently complained about similar answers. *You* were the only one who always seemed to have free reign in this.”

Thorin refuses to feel guilty about that, considering that he is *actually* a fully grown adult.

“Those were valid reasons a few years ago,” Thorin points out, probably unnecessarily judging by her glare, “but you aren’t a little dwarfling anymore. And while the lands are still dangerous, I was never of the opinion that you should always hide away here.”

“Did you clear all this with father?” she asks sceptically.

“I’m sure he wouldn’t mind.” He grimaces slightly. “Even if he weren’t... occupied at the moment.”

The growing joy on her face at the prospect of getting to go on a

journey immediately dampens. “So you noticed it too.”

Thorin’s laugh has a tinge of helpless bitterness. “It would’ve been hard not to, considering that he spends more time inside his head than outside these days. I don’t even know *what* has him so absent-minded.”

If truly pressed he could probably venture a few guesses, but none of those would be a comfort and so far Thráin hasn’t even said a word of this to any of his children. It’s a worrying pattern with the line of Durin, to keep their troubles to themselves until everything blows up in a big disaster.

He pushes these dark thoughts aside for the moment, a little startled to find Dis right in front of him, a soft look in her eyes as their foreheads touch.

“You shouldn’t worry so much, brother. At the rate you’re going you will be going grey before you’re ninety.”

He gives her a rather weak smile – in fact he’d found grey strands in his hair at age 77, but he’s not going to tell her *that* – but relaxes minutely into her strong touch nonetheless.

When they finally draw apart, she asks, “What about Frerin?”

“Frerin will stay here and keep an eye on our father. I fear it may be needed.”

Dis snorts. “Have you told *him* that yet?”

Thorin’s slightly sheepish silence is all she needs to make a very educated guess.

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Dis looks tired but cautiously excited on the morning of their departure, a pack slung over her shoulder. Thorin doesn’t even remember his first longer trip away from the mountain so long has it been, but in her expression he sees some of the wonder he must have felt at the world beyond their borders.

“Frerin is still sulking,” she comments, moving to stand next to Thorin and his pony. They’re only waiting for Glóin now, the guard

and their mounts already assembled.

Thorin grins briefly. “He will cope. Besides some time with just him might do father some good.”

It certainly always does him whenever he falls into brooding. Frerin simply has a cheering effect on people around him – Thorin knows from experience that it’s quite hard to remain dour when Frerin has got it into his head to make one smile.

“I just thought he would come say goodbye,” Dís mumbles, suddenly looking vulnerable, and Thorin reflexively shifts a little closer to her.

“He will come.”

His confidence isn’t faked – Frerin had always possessed far less of the, occasionally damnable, Durin pride than both his siblings; he would never let Dís leave without a farewell.

And true to his word more footsteps sound behind them before Dís can open her mouth to reply.

Frerin still looks a little put out, but he smiles at his sister readily enough – though Thorin privately thinks that it would be rather hard not to, considering her obvious happiness at seeing him.

“Now, now,” Frerin says around the arms engulfing him. “Surely you didn’t think I wouldn’t come? I couldn’t let my little sister leave without a farewell.”

“That’s what I said,” Thorin mutters and is summarily ignored.

Holding Dís at an arm’s length, Frerin winks and says, “Look after our big brother, mizimith. He’ll get his head done in one of these days and we don’t need any more arrow-holes in the future king.”

Torn between gladness that Frerin can finally joke about that incident and worry about the ideas he’s putting into Dís’ head – she already looks fiercely determined and they haven’t even left the mountain yet – Thorin only gives him a rather dry smile over Dís’ shoulder. He’s sure his look says ‘thank you for the vote of confidence, brother’ about as eloquently as Frerin’s does ‘and you better look after her too’.

He inclines his head in acknowledgement for no words are needed.

Frerin knows as well as he does that Thorin would die for Dís without a moment's thought if necessary.

The moment is broken when Glóin finally arrives, huffing and puffing – from the embarrassment of having made everyone wait for him as much as from the strain of running – a satchel that looks like it belongs to Óin clutched in his hand.

“Apologies, my prince,” he gasps, bowing. “I was delayed.”

Thorin nods at him and calls towards Garin, the captain of the guards accompanying them, “We move out!”

Perhaps they would have a peaceful, uneventful journey for once – he certainly intends to do his best to make it one, and is happy enough when the only thing disturbing the first few days is Dís’ griping about rocks and roots stabbing into her back wherever she lies down.

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They have bypassed Rivendell to the north, travelling through the Trollshaws when Thorin remembers the troll hoard, and more specifically *Orcrist*. He had – grudgingly – adjusted to using a different sword once more, but he had never forgotten its unparalleled balance and deadliness. A little galling, perhaps, that something elvish would feel so right in his hand, but for such a beautiful weapon even Thorin can push aside his distaste. Which brings him back to the point that he would really rather like to have *Orcrist* *back*.

They aren’t even far from the trolls’ erstwhile campsite and though he doesn’t know whether any of the hoard is already there, he somehow doubts that three trolls, and not even the brightest of their already rather dim-witted race, had somehow managed to slay these ancient swords’ wielders – it seems much more likely that they chanced upon the priceless objects themselves (though, granted, it hadn’t been very likely at all to find such items in a troll hoard or cave in the first place).

To Thorin it seems worth looking into and since it’s already well into the afternoon he doesn’t see the harm in stopping their party a little earlier than usual, even if it earns him confused looks from Dís and Glóin. The guards are stoic and obedient as always, none of them

batting so much as an eyelash at their leader's order to halt. They won't ask for a reason either, and it's times like these that Thorin misses Dwalin the most – his friend would have done as ordered and then later in private demanded an explanation if he thought it necessary. That doesn't mean he regrets leaving him behind in Erebor to keep an eye on things – and Frerin – but it's far easier for a leader to go astray like that, without someone there to question or at least enquire about the decisions one makes. Dwalin and Balin had always filled that role perfectly.

But he's letting himself get distracted, so he pushes those thoughts out of his mind and focuses on the situation at hand.

"Garin," he calls to the head of his guard contingent, "secure the campsite. I'm going to have a look around."

Garin is too professional to show much emotion on his face, but he does manage to look a little uneasy without losing his usual forbidding expression.

"Alone, my lord?"

Thorin opens his mouth to say 'yes, alone, I *am* capable of looking after myself' and thinks better of it. It's Garin's duty to protect him after all and he does have a point. Wandering alone in the wilderness isn't always a good idea, nor without its risks.

"I'll take Glóin," he says instead. "We're not going to go far."

Garin nods briskly, with an air of relief and goes to instruct his men. Thorin holds off on calling him back to tell him to look after Dis – it would have been an insult to any capable guard to state something so implicit in their job.

Calling for Glóin, who has that slightly suspicious look on his face that he used to get whenever Nori was around but follows along with no complaint, Thorin sets out in the direction of the troll cave. Some things one never forgets, and the way to the place where he'd feared his youngest nephew and their new burglar lost is one of those things, even if he does have trouble remembering directions above-ground sometimes – as a slew of people would no doubt happily attest.

The absence of the horrible smell wafting from the opening of the cave alone is indication enough that the trolls haven't made it their own yet.

"Wait here." Glóin is already opening his mouth to object and Thorin resists the urge to sigh. "I'll be fine, it's just a cave."

Glóin isn't convinced. "Doesn't mean there isn't something sinister lurking in its depth."

"I promise I'll shout if I encounter trouble," Thorin says, perhaps a little more sharply than intended for Glóin scowls but doesn't protest any further.

Thorin turns back to the cave opening and takes a deep breath before remembering that it doesn't smell like death and decay and troll unmentionables this time around. It makes the second time he enters this particular cave a lot more pleasant than the first, that much is certain.

He lifts his torch, the sound of his boots scraping over dry stone the only thing breaking the silence. Nothing moves around him and for a moment he thinks, disappointment rising in his gut, that there is nothing here at all. Then the light from his torch hits a dark patch towards the back of the cave and suddenly there are prisms of light reflected all over the walls. He starts forward, gaze focused on the glittering armour of elven make that hadn't dulled for whatever years it had lain there, then stops at the sight the expanding cone of light affords him.

White bones are scattered around the armour, at least of two people – elves he would guess, as the bones are long and slim. A shiver races down his spine and even though he can now see Orcrist and Glamdring and even Sting resting near the remains of their former bearers he hesitates to simply take them and desecrate whatever peace this last resting place had brought. He wonders what happened to defeat such a pair of warriors, for surely they must've been with weapons such as these, what had brought them to die in this remote place far from their friends and loved ones. He knows he will probably never know.

Muttering a quick prayer – they might have been elves once, but

now in death the boundaries blur and Thorin will afford them respect – he gently takes the three swords and bows his head for a moment before making his way back outside.

Glóin looks up from where he was grumbling to himself on a stone not far from the cave's mouth and his eyes widen at the sight of the three weapons Thorin now carries in his arms.

“Hold this,” he instructs, giving Glóin both Glamdring and Sting while he straps Orcrist in its usual position on his back. Glóin's practiced eye roams over the two blades he now holds.

“These are of elvish make!” he exclaims, voice caught somewhere between outrage and reluctant admiration at the obviously stellar craftsmanship.

Thorin hums, only partly listening as he fastens a buckle. “So they are.”

“How did you know these would be here?”

Finally satisfied with the sword's position, Thorin looks up. And lies. “I didn't.” At Glóin's perplexed look he elaborates. “There are many places like these scattered through the lands where no one would stumble over them by accident unless they were privy to their location.”

It's a bit of a holey non-explanation, but it will have to do. Fortunately, Glóin only looks curious.

“So there are caches of goods hidden all over Middle-earth?”

In fact there aren't, but there sure as dwarves have beards would be now, as soon as Thorin could get it done – the thought of how their years of wandering might've eased with such resources at their disposal is bitter, but one that needs to be had for he had long ago sworn himself that he would do everything in his power to prevent such suffering of his people from happening again.

So he fixes the other dwarf with a stern look and says, “Only few know of this, Glóin, son of Groin, I expect you to stay silent on this matter.”

It's not exactly an answer and the conclusions the younger dwarf

draws from his words are quite probably at least partly false, but it has Glóin nodding earnestly and to his satisfaction.

When they return to camp Thorin stows away the other two swords in his pack before anyone can inquire about them and when Dís comes stomping towards him he can soothe most of her anger at being left behind by letting her inspect Orcrist to her heart's content and answering all her questions about elvish weapons to the best of his ability.

That night, after his first watch and before he crawls into his bedroll right next to Dís' sleeping form, Thorin quietly moves over towards Glóin's gently snoring form and tucks the token intended for him into his pack right next to a pouch of medicinal herbs – that Óin had forced him to take, no doubt.

He is sure the other dwarf will find it in due time.

Chapter 10



The settlement in the Blue Mountains looks almost exactly like Thorin remembers it, small huts and houses hugging the mountain-side, partly hewn from the stone. He'd rarely enjoyed a simple stroll in those days, either working or helping Dís out with the boys at home, but now he finds it surprisingly relaxing to stroll through the market place and cast his gaze about to find dwarves known and unknown to him. He only quickens his steps to a more purposeful stride when his growling stomach reminds him of the meal he's already missed at the inn with Dís and the rest of his travelling companions.

"Hiya there!" a voice hollers behind him, and Thorin turns, half a smile on his lips.

What are the odds?

Bofur stops dead in his track, studying Thorin's face as if searching for something. "My apologies, sir," he finally mumbles, a hint of confusion audible in his voice, "I erred. You seemed familiar."

"No harm done," Thorin assures him warmly. It is even better to see Bofur again, alive and looking healthy and happy as ever, than he had expected it to be. He'd heard of the saying of men that absence makes the heart grow fonder, but until his death he'd never put much stock in such a claim. Either one likes, even loves someone or not, distance has nothing to do with it – or so he'd thought. It is hard to cling to such notions when so many of the people one misses the most aren't even born yet.

He bows low, perhaps even a little lower than common respect demands – Bofur had earned it, over and over, just like any other member of the company. "Thorin, at your service."

“Bofur at yours,” Bofur returns the greeting automatically, despite his still startled bearing.

Thorin is reasonably certain that the miner hasn’t recognized him as *the* Prince Thorin and decides without much hesitation not to enlighten him just yet. Especially since he’d slain Smaug, reactions to him had varied from awed to slightly frightened or intimidated, and he has no intention to let the same happen to his ‘first’ interaction with Bofur.

“What brings you to the Blue Mountains?” Bofur asks, his innate curiosity preventing him from just letting this stranger leave without at least asking some questions. He tilts his head a little, that ridiculous hat that he’s apparently *already* wearing slipping a notch, and Thorin has to swallow once at the sudden tight feeling in his chest. He might not have been as close to Bofur as he’d been to others, but he’d still been a dear friend.

Perhaps he would be again.

“I’m part of the envoy from Erebor,” he answers truthfully, only barely suppressing a smirk at the way Bofur’s eyes light up at the chance of getting some first-hand information to gossip about later.

Hook sunk.

It doesn’t take them long to start a true conversation from there. Bofur is eager enough to listen to the reasons for their presence and Thorin’s hopes for a trade agreement between Erebor and the dwarves from the Blue Mountain. Bofur in turn tells him about life in the settlement and the political situation at the moment; all in all quite useful information that it would have taken Thorin far longer to compile through other means.

Thorin is in the middle of describing the rebuild Dale, when a grumble erupts from his stomach, loud enough to overshadow his words.

Bofur’s merry laugh washes over him before he can get truly embarrassed, even if the whole thing is rather undignified.

“Missed a meal or two, eh?” Bofur comments, still chuckling. At Thorin’s slightly sheepish expression, he just slaps his arm companion-

ably. “My brother is the best cook in town. What do you say to nipping over to his place and getting a bite to eat?”

“I would be delighted.”

Apparently that’s all the encouragement Bofur needs, as he immediately directs Thorin to the family’s lodgings.

Bombur looks much like Thorin remembers, perhaps yet a little slimmer around the waist – and with a little more hair on the top – but it takes him a moment to recognize Bifur, simply because he is so used to seeing an axe stick out of the dwarf’s forehead. With a jolt he realizes that without the Battle of Azanulbizar Bifur never even received his wound, making him a perfectly healthy, normal dwarf. Well, healthy anyway, Thorin has his doubts that Bifur had ever been completely normal – he had met him only fleetingly before the battle, but *normal* hadn’t been the adjective he’d have used to describe him even then.

Bifur takes one look at him and says, bushy eyebrows raised, “Bofur, why are you dragging Prince Thorin of Erebor into our home?”

Bofur stops dead in his track, a fleeting look of quiet horror passing over his face. “*What?*”

Thorin, momentarily forgotten as Bifur stares at his cousin unbelievably, has to raise a hand to his face to hide his smile.

“Are you trying to tell me you didn’t *notice*?” Bifur says, disbelief slowly being replaced by a quiet sort of glee.

Bofur fiddles with his hat, a habit he’s apparently always indulged in. “It’s not as if I’d seen him before, begging your pardon your royal highness.”

“Call me Thorin,” he quickly interjects before the situation can devolve into the horribly stiff affairs that tend to take place whenever people insist on calling everyone by their proper titles. “I didn’t mean to embarrass you, Master Bofur, tis simply nice not to be recognized all the time.”

“It’s just Bofur... Thorin,” Bofur immediately corrects, looking slightly uncomfortable. Bifur and Bombur are looking on interestedly.

“I’m just a simple dwarf, not some kind of noble.”

“As you wish.” Thorin smiles. “But I’ve found that deserving respect rarely depends on one being of noble birth.”

Seeing that Bofur still looks faintly embarrassed, Thorin gestures to the other two dwarves.

“Perhaps introductions are in order?”

“Bifur, at your service.” The eldest bows low, black and white braids swinging wildly. He points at Bofur. “I’m this lout’s cousin.”

Bombur, who is still staring at Thorin in astonishment – is he so intimidating to meet? Or perhaps he’s just used to these dwarves looking at him with respect and recognition instead of abstract awe – rouses himself out of his stupor to mimic Bifur’s bow and mumble, “Bombur at your service. I’m Bofur’s brother.”

“Which brings us back to my first question,” Bifur says almost jovially and blessedly unaffected, “what are you doing dragging the crown prince of Erebor into our house?”

If Bifur notices the relief in the grateful smile that Thorin sends him he doesn’t show it.

When Bofur only opens and closes his mouth silently once, Thorin steps in smoothly. “Your cousin was kind enough to invite me for dinner when he found out that I had missed a few meals.”

“Well, that certainly isn’t tolerated around here, if one can help it,” Bifur smirks.

Bombur on the other hand looks rather panicked. “But I haven’t had time to prepare!” he splutters, cheeks reddening. “I can’t just pull together some scraps for the Prince of – ”

“Your brother called you the best cook in the Blue Mountains and I have no cause to doubt his word,” Thorin interrupts him gently. “I’m sure anything you can provide will be satisfactory. I am, after all, simply a guest here.”

Bombur blushes a deep red, but looks pleased.

As he expects, the ‘scraps’ are delicious. Fresh bread is served with a meaty soup interestingly spiced which reminds him of the broth he’d

eaten at Bag End that one time he'd set foot into the Hobbit's comfortable home – perhaps it had been Bombur who'd cooked it then too. Now that he thinks about it, Bilbo had seemed far too preoccupied with the horde of dwarves in his dining room to have done much cooking. The ale set on the table is excellent as well and Thorin has the sneaking suspicion that it had been in storage for a while, waiting for the right occasion, but he can hardly complain without seeming ungrateful.

Predictably it's a far fuller – and drunker – Thorin who finally says his goodbyes amidst several demands that he come back soon, the ale not only having relaxed *him*, which don't let up until he promises to do so.

When he gets back to their inn that night only to find Glóin telling him that Dis is 'out' and he doesn't know when she'll be back Thorin can't say he's surprised, even if things are moving a long a little faster than he'd anticipated. Quietly smiling to himself he readies himself for bed.

He lies awake for a long time that night, thinking of Dis and Víli, longing in his own heart, thinking of Bifur, Bofur and Bombur, so real and so similar to how they used to be. Still as unburdened as they used to be – before they ever met him.

*

Víli, fitting his generally sunny attitude, is well-liked and well-known in Ered Luin and thus not hard to find.

The dwarf in question looks up from a mug of ale and a hearty lunch as Thorin approaches.

"I thought you might want to talk to me," Víli says, gesturing for him to sit. He's clearly not very surprised to see Thorin so soon after his first meeting with Dís a few days ago. But then again, it never takes dwarves long to recognize their One.

Thorin takes his time looking the other dwarf up and down. If he's supposed to put the fear of Mahal into him he might as well do it thor-

oughly – after all Víli doesn't know that Thorin has no intention of stopping his courtship with Dís. The miner looks nervous, but Thorin also finds determination and resolve in the other's gaze.

Thorin leans back in his seat, satisfied. "You are aware of who you're courting?"

Víli swallows hard but keeps meeting Thorin's steely gaze. "Yes, your majesty."

Thorin represses a sigh. It's hard, being addressed so formally by people he, from his point of view, has known for a long time, people who have his respect and used to use his name as they should. Rationally he knows that *they* don't know him, but it doesn't help the deep-seated ache at the reminder that even after all these years in this second life, he is still, in some respects, a dwarf out of his time.

Noticing Víli's pale and sweaty face he realizes that he's probably been silent a little too long to not be cruel.

"I have no objection to your relationship, Víli, if you can make her happy," he says, his voice softer – but only for a moment. "However, if you willingly hurt her, know that there's no place in Middle-earth that I wouldn't find you. Am I understood?"

"Yes, your majesty," Víli repeats. "You have to believe me, I don't want to hurt her. Dís is... even after only a few days, Dís is *everything*. She makes me happy and if I can devote my life to making her as happy as she makes me I will die a happy dwarf."

Thorin smiles. "Good." He stands. "And stop calling me 'your majesty'. I'm Thorin for those my family cares about."

He leaves the room to Víli's slightly shell-shocked nod. Presumably it isn't every day that the King of Erebor invites one to use his name instead of the usual honorific.

The faces of Fíli and Kíli swimming in front of his mind's eye, Thorin resumes his way to their inn, his heart a little lighter.

*

By the time he gets back to their inn, his sister finally has managed

to drag herself out of bed as well. A comment about the dangers of staying out all night drinking and feasting is on the tip of his tongue but he bites it back. She isn't a child anymore – besides her hangover is bound to be impressive and punishment enough.

"You spoke to Víli?" Dís looks highly, and in his opinion entirely unreasonably, suspicious and a tad worried.

He raises an eyebrow. "Are you honestly surprised?"

She slumps. "You didn't scare him away, did you?"

Thorin gives her his best innocent 'who me?' look. "I only talked to him, namad. Made a few things clear."

"I don't need you to fight my battles for me!" she cries, her face taking on a mulish expression he knows only too well.

His gaze gentles, a slight smile tugging at his lips. "That may be so, but you are far too precious to me for me to simply let you be courted by someone without informing him of the consequences should he hurt you. I'm not about to let just anyone break your heart, mizimith."

Dís blushes faintly in pleasure. Thorin still doesn't often speak openly of his regard for those he loves, though far more often than he used to. "I don't think he wants to break my heart, Thorin," she tells him earnestly, and he doesn't doubt her conviction. Víli had been her One in his last life and it seems clear that he is the same here. "Besides we're not yet courting."

"But you will follow tradition?"

Dís hesitates. She's never put much stock into the rigidity of dwarven laws. "I will," she finally says, "if it is your wish. I *am* aware that in my position I have to be careful whom to give my love."

This earns her a full smile, and no small amount of pride. "I'm glad. Be back for dinner today though, will you? I wish to consult your opinion on the settlement here."

She nods, though her cheeks are dimpling impishly. "Should I bring him then?"

Thorin pauses, thinking it over. "That might actually be a good

idea,” he says to the startled Dís who’d only wanted to needle him a little. “The opinion of a local could be beneficial.”

He gives her a meaningful look. “*Ask* him first though – no dragging him here if he doesn’t want to go.”

Now it’s her turn to look innocent. Thorin just shakes his head at her.

Considering Dís’ considerable powers of persuasion, he isn’t surprised to see her arriving at dinner with an only slightly cowed looking Víli in tow.

Glóin is, quite mysteriously, absent. Thorin frowns for a moment. When had he seen the other dwarf last? It must have been at least two days already, though he dimly recalls hearing heavy footsteps outside his door the other night. Was it possible Glóin had found Gimhala already? The thought alone makes him smile. Gimli may only have been a dwarfling when Thorin had died, but he recalls the young, fiery dwarf who had played with Fili and Kíli so often with fondness – as he does his mother. Gimhala, a beauty by every dwarf’s standard had always had one of the kindest hearts he’d ever known.

Yes, if Glóin is out meeting with her, Thorin would be more than glad not to see anything of his companion for a number of days.

Instead of immediately grilling Víli for information, Thorin focuses on the food and lets the conversation run freely around the table, mostly about inconsequential things.

The last of the food eaten, the conversation has dropped to a lazy murmur and Thorin finally turns his full attention to Víli.

“Do you believe closer trade agreements would be beneficial for both our realms?” he asks, eyes intent on the other dwarf’s face.

Víli hesitates, his gaze flickering over to Dís before refocusing on Thorin, his bearing that of one choosing his words very carefully. “For the Blue Mountains yes, I believe it would be beneficial.

For Erebor, however... we have no resources or goods which you do not have yourself or could get for less from nearer the mountain.”

Thorin allows himself a small smile. Of course he is quite aware of

these points, but it's good to see Víli's honesty despite its potential to harm his home's trade.

"Very true," he says, leaning back and quite aware of everyone staring at him incredulously. "It was never my goal to enrich Erebor further with this venture, but rather to establish a closer rapport between different dwarven colonies. Our people have grown few and farther apart and it is my belief that we should hold closer together in these darkening times." He inclines his head in Víli's direction. "Meeting such upstanding dwarves as you is a more unexpected benefit."

Víli blushes. Dís beams.

After that the ice has completely broken.

*

His inevitable meeting with the ruling council of Ered Luin – one of the very few dwarven settlements without a single leader, be it king or lord – draws near and Thorin spends some time reviewing what he wishes to tell them and what he can offer them without going too far.

Bifur, who had responded to his offhand comment about the upcoming negotiations over lunch with surprising clarity and insight, proves to be a great help. For a while Thorin wonders how he could have missed the other dwarf's wily diplomatic skills so completely the first time around, but then he remembers that an axe to the head has the potential to mess up more than just your looks and feels guilty how easily he has forgotten how limited Bifur's existence had been then, for all that the dwarf had always borne it bravely and without complaint.

It's another thing to add to his carefully maintained mental list of things that are *better* now – the list that reminds him in his darker moments why he is still doing this, why he is still fighting. For these rays of light.

"They are wary of you," Bifur tells him, face serious despite the faint trace of froth in his beard as he sets aside his tankard. "They see no reason for your presence if it is not to take something from us."

He frowns, a mix of sadness and frustration. "Have we neglected

relations so much that it has come to this?”

Bifur only shrugs, his expression clearly saying that the *why* is beyond him and he certainly doesn't mourn it being so.

Thorin rises with a sigh, knowing that he can only hope that the elders will extend him the courtesy of the benefit of the doubt if that part of his journey is not to fail. He has never particularly liked politics, nor has he enjoyed navigating harrowing negotiations – there is something far too duplicitous about the way that those whose specialization lies in these directions never quite seem to say what they mean, always carefully beating around the bush and avoiding refreshing bluntness as if it spelled a death sentence.

There seems little need to mention that Thorin rather prefers the company of those inclined to the opposite and it does not help that his memories of the dwarf council of the Blue Mountains are spotty at best, and what he does remember does not inspire confidence.

(Something akin to fear passing over many a face as they regarded him, a weary traveller in worn clothes and yet still unmistakably a king, a leader of people.

Hushed murmurings behind hands, hostile from some, more pitying from others. He detested both.)

He hopes that those memories, too, are tainted by his state of mind back then, to be surprised by their openness and their willingness to work together this time.

Bifur watches him go with shrewd eyes, but keeps his peace.

The city hall, the deepest place in the mountain hushes at his entrance, no guard challenging his right as his steps echo all around.

It is a council of ten. Thorin stands before them, tall and strong and says his piece, talks of closer ties between dwarven lands, of prospering trade and cultural exchange.

Three sit around the table for their own gain, eyes starting to glitter at the prospect of more riches. Three look at him with fear still, seeing the usurper, the destroyer of balance instead of the hand of friendship he extends. Three look thoughtful, listening with sombre faces and

cocked heads, showing neither overt approval nor disapproval.

And one looks into his eyes and reads between the lines what Thorin isn't saying (hears of danger and the destruction caused by division between should-be allies, or even only apathy) and nods, almost imperceptibly but Thorin's heart lightens nonetheless.

They do not reach a consensus with him there, placate him with platitudes, but he goes gladly enough, knowing that the seeds have been sown. Let them take a year to decide, or two it matters not – those that can are not blind will make it happen.

*

After two weeks' stay, departure draws near and Thorin visits the Ur-brothers one last time, enjoying a quiet meal with the three dwarves whose presence he's relearned gladly.

He watches them as Bofur laughs at a joke from Bifur, and Bombur finishes off the last crumbs of bread, the expression on his face one of contented fullness.

"We are going to need ambassadors from Ered Luin in Erebor," Thorin says suddenly, all but nonchalantly, but his eyes are sharp as he studies their reactions.

Bofur and Bombur look like they've been caught completely wrong-footed. *Bifur*, however, looks faintly interested, a gleam coming to his eye. "Would that job include me being able to shout at people?"

Thorin smothers a smile. "Possibly. I also have it on good authority that there are very few proper toy-makers in Erebor and even fewer which have specialized in wood and could match your talent."

Bofur's brow creases while Bifur looks pleased. "How do you know that?"

"I saw your window display," Thorin replies, voice dry.

That gets the round of laughs he'd been hoping for.

"You don't have to decide now," he adds seriously. "It will be a while yet before relations are at a point that we need ambassadors. But do think about it. I would rather have dwarves of integrity doing this

kind of work than those who vie for such a post.”

The three exchange a long look.

“We’ll think about it,” Bofur promises seriously. Then he grins. “Though I doubt you could pry Bombur here away from his kitchen long enough to actually do the work.”

“And having tasted his cooking I’m not too sad about the fact,” Thorin re-joins with a smile of his own.

He bows to all three of them, a rare gesture of respect, hoping in his heart that this wouldn’t be the last time he sees these three.

“I thank you for your hospitality, fine dwarves. Perhaps Mahal will see it fit for our paths to cross once more, but know that if you ever need or desire my help, you only need send word to Erebor.”

He leaves with regret, but the long road home lies before him and even while he enjoyed his time in the still peaceful settlement he hasn’t forgotten Erebor and the problems that await him there still.

*

Dís complains a lot less on the return journey. (Thank goodness.)

Glóin on the other hand suddenly proves rather talkative, especially where a certain young – and of course extremely beautiful – dwarf-dam is concerned.

Chapter 11

The library is light and quiet as ever, occupying one of the topmost floors of Erebor with daylight illuminating scrolls upon scrolls upon carefully bound books and manuscripts. The one room that had been spared by Smaug's wrath and ruin and yet in his last life Thorin had not been able to bear entering through its large doors into the world of shelves and memories beyond – fond memories, that he wished not, *dared* not spoil with glaring emptiness and the absence of those that had made them such.

So he'd sent Ori instead, to survey this piece of their legacy while the others searched piles of treasure, for that had still been the beginning, when the thrall of the gold had only just begun to darken his mind and he still remembered better times which he sought to preserve, still remembered how to make those following his lead happy – for Ori had not returned for long hours, lost in the amazement of thousands of writings, more gathered force of heritage of dwarvendom than anyone had beheld in more than a century.

After awakening from death, he had ventured into the library once more, finding – a little to his surprise – that it held little to fear, that it offered a sense of peace instead. For the first time since Thorin had woken up again he now enters the library with a distant sense of unease. Though his father had always been fond of reading and knowledgeable of their lore, he had never before spend this much time secluded in a distant corner of the great room – and he had never before made sure that his son would not see what he is pouring over. Several times Thorin had tried to catch him unawares and steal a glance at whatever parchment he is brooding over, but Thráin is far too good a

strategist to sit in an easily accessible place when he doesn't wish to be disturbed.

Perhaps what hurts the most, however, is that Thorin has seen his father only once since their return, when he'd greeted them at the gate, smile fond but gaze distant.

He stands silently now, gazing at the alcove Thráin has sequestered himself in and only just catches a glimpse of a map before it is shuffled aside deeper into the pile of parchment on the ornamental desk.

He wants to flinch at the barely veiled look of annoyance that passes over his father's face as he looks up at his son but forces himself to remain impassive.

The tray of food in his hands feels heavy and cold.

"Father," he greets, voice distantly polite even to his own ears, inclining his head. "We missed you at the morning and midday meal."

Thráin clears his throat, one of his hands twitching towards the pile of parchment. "I was busy."

Thorin sets the tray down carefully, avoiding various bits of paper scattered around the desk.

"Nevertheless you should eat. Wasn't it you who told me not too long ago that being busy doesn't excuse one forgetting to take care of oneself?"

As if on cue, Thráin's stomach rumbles loudly and his faint, slightly rueful smile looks more sincere than smiles on his face have in a while. For the moment, the shadow on his thoughts seems to have passed. For the moment.

"You might be right there, son," he murmurs, already reaching for the bread, though his expression has sobered once more. "When did you grow up so much, so *fast*, Thorin? I can still remember the days of you running around as a young dwarfling with nary a care in the world as if they were yesterday – and yet now I look up to see a wise dwarf in that little dwarfling's place, grown up and mature."

Thorin tries not to stare in surprise at the sudden change of mood and topic. He doesn't know what to say, for the truthful answer is not

one he cares to divulge, nor does he think his father is in the right state of mind to hear it. Thorin hadn't even been aware his father felt like this – Thráin had never been one to talk about his own feelings much, least of all to those they concerned.

"Time always passes," Thorin finally murmurs and traces of his quiet grief must linger in his words, for Thráin looks up from his meal. Their gazes meet, hold until Thráin drops his back to the tray, unable to meet Thorin's eyes any longer.

"Will you not tell me what has you so preoccupied, father?" Thorin asks, grasping his chance. "Your family is worried for you."

For a moment Thráin looks torn, an almost open expression on his face, but then his expression shutters, and Thorin can all but see a wall descending between them.

"It is not of import yet, Prince Thorin," Thráin replies, his voice cold enough that Thorin's heart wants to freeze. *Yet.*

The title is as clear a dismissal as can be, and Thorin doesn't even try to disguise his disappointment and worry as he bows stiffly and turns to leave.

Hope might be dwindling, but he will continue to try and elicit a reaction that isn't coldness or rejection from his father for as long as possible. The symptoms are all there, yet perhaps, *perhaps*, descend into madness could still be avoided – for Thráin acts not quite like Thrór and Thorin had once done under the gold's thrall. And Thorin tries and tries to believe that it's not simply a different kind of madness, not their family's curse struck again, even as his heart grows heavier with worry and darker with foreboding.

*

He does what he always does now, when he feels adrift and floundering – he goes to find his siblings. Even if it does mean interrupting Dís staring longingly into the distance as she moons over a certain dwarf whose name may or may not end in –íli.

Thorin almost lets slip a comment about young love when she

doesn't even notice his approach, but then he realizes that his experience is rather limited in that department and he really shouldn't tunnel into the rock without support struts.

Her little shriek when he taps her on the shoulder without warning is satisfying enough anyway.

"I see vigilance isn't your watchword today, dear sister," he says, lips twitching with amusement at her disgruntled expression.

She has turned to face him and Thorin can see the exact moment that she takes in his expression and realizes that something is wrong.

Dis studies him for a moment longer, then asks quietly, "Father?"

Thorin isn't even surprised that she knows. It has been getting more and more obvious that something is seriously wrong.

He nods. "He still will not talk to me about the matters on his mind."

He doesn't say *and I fear for him, for all of us* because he doesn't need to. Dis is well aware of (some, never all) of his worries already.

"Do you want me to go get Frerin?" she asks quietly and Thorin almost smiles at her understanding of what he needs right now.

"If you know where he is," he murmurs, and she is out the door before he has even finished speaking.

Once she is gone, he too makes his way out of the room, in the direction of the nearest kitchen. He could have rung for a servant to bring refreshments, but usually he prefers to do what he can himself. He had spent a very long time not being waited on hand and foot and had grown used to it – the shame, too, had lessened with time for all that mundane tasks such as this had been beneath his status once (and technically still are, but now he isn't the same dwarf anymore). Besides, ever since Bilbo there is something sacred about tea and its preparation. He can all but hear his hobbit's voice echoing in his head as it had once reached his ears.

("You have a bit of a temper on you, Thorin Oakenshield," Bilbo said, hands on his hips in a gesture that might have been intimidating if done

by someone who reached above Thorin's shoulders and looked less like a cuddly child. "I suggest you cool it before you make this situation worse."

Thorin honestly wasn't sure how this situation could get any worse – being stuck in an elvish dungeon certainly wasn't his idea of fun – and was about to inform his companion of that fact rather loudly when he caught a glimpse of Bilbo's expression in the small sliver of moonlight falling through bars. The hobbit's worried, thin face was enough to make him swallow his cutting words and take a deep breath in an attempt to douse the flames of ire still licking at his consciousness.

"What do you do then when you're angry, Master Burglar?" Thorin grumbled, face dark as a thundercloud still.

Bilbo's smile, in contrast, was positively disproportionately cheery, despite the wanness of his face "Oh, I make tea of course."

Thorin stared at him blankly.

"It's very soothing, you know?" Bilbo went on, either choosing to ignore Thorin's obvious incredulity or simply uncaring of it. "A simple task to keep one's hands occupied and then at the end you have some lovely tea to drink, naturally. I can never stay angry long with a nice, hot cup of tea in my hands."

Thorin was still staring. "Surely that's not all there is to it."

Or perhaps the halflings' tempers did not run as hot as the dwarves? Bilbo certainly didn't seem to get angry easily – or much for that matter – and never for very long.

The smile Bilbo gave him, warm and somewhat helpless, made something jolt in his stomach.

"What else would there be to it?"

Thorin had tried it out, years ago when this new life had still been raw and his mind like a wound that had yet to heal.

It hadn't worked.

He may have developed a taste for tea, but the act of making it did not soothe the anger and grief burning brightly in him. Then finally, at around his tenth try – because he is Thorin and he is stubborn and

tries and tries – he had found what had been missing. It wasn't making the tea that was soothing or distracting, it was the memories of Bilbo that it inevitably evoked, little flashes of the time spent in each other's company, some of which he had all but forgotten until the smell of freshly brewed teas brought them to the surface of his mind once more. Needless to say it had become something of a habit; when his mind needed rest and his time was free enough, he would go and make himself tea, ignoring the slightly puzzled looks of the cooks who caught him at it. They had become used to seeing the Crown Prince of Erebor in the kitchen at all hours of the day and night, brooding over tea leaves and pots, soon enough.

When he returns to Dís' room, tray in hand and slightly calmer, Dís and Frerin are already waiting for him.

"Tell us what happened," Frerin immediately demands and it would've sounded callous if it weren't exactly what Thorin needs – a fact his brother is well aware of.

So he tells them, perhaps not quite everything, but he tells them, and they listen.

They always do.

*

The shock of finding someone waiting in his quarters unannounced, puffing their pipe, almost makes him fling an axe. He never goes without weapons, even in his own mountain, his own home.

"Gandalf?" he exclaims, tension slowly dissipating. He lowers the small axe. "What are you doing *here*?"

Gandalf raises a bushy eyebrow. "I went through all that official pomposity you dwarves so treasure when I arrived at the mountain."

"Yes, until you apparently ditched your escort and broke into the crown prince's chambers." Thorin crosses his arms and looks at the old man pointedly.

"No harm was done," Gandalf counters cheerfully and Thorin would agree if it weren't for the poor guards who were probably being

screamed at by Dwalin at this very moment.

When he doesn't say anything Gandalf looks at him with silent intent, eyes glimmering behind the curtain of smoke. Thorin would've shivered if he hadn't been familiar enough with the wizard to know his ways by now.

Gandalf's lips quirk and he takes another puff from his pipe.

"You've been busy, Thorin Oakenshield."

Thorin raises a brow at the obvious hint but refuses to let the topic drift towards his 'achievements'.

"Quite the coincidence that you chose to visit Erebor now," he murmurs instead. "I have something to give to you."

Gandalf's eyebrows rise in honest surprise. "Indeed?"

It only takes Thorin a moment to open the trunk at the foot of his bed and take out the wrapped sword.

"This is Glamdring, the Foe-Hammer. You bore it once and many good deeds came of it. I believe it is meant that you should have it again."

"Your tenses seem to be a little confused," Gandalf murmurs, but he accepts the sword, running an appraising eye over the blade as it smoothly slides out of its sheath.

"A very good blade, I see, *and* one with a history." The wizard's eyes are sharp as he studies Thorin. "Not many dwarves would part with such a treasure willingly."

Thorin glares at him. "You know as well as I do that I'm not just any dwarf. You might not think that those of our race are able to learn from our mistakes – "

Gandalf holds up a placating hand, his voice strong and honest enough to interrupt Thorin's angered words. "Forgive me, I meant not to imply such a thing. I thank you for this gift... I have a feeling I will need it."

"Which would be the reason why I gave it to you," Thorin says with a curt nod, his anger dissipating. Even after all these years Gandalf still possesses the ability to rile him like few others can. "But as you didn't

know I was waiting for you, *why are you here?*”

Gandalf only hums, completely undaunted by Thorin’s faintly aggressive tone. “I just wished to check up on you. See how you are doing.”

“And find out whether I buggered anything up yet?” Thorin finishes darkly.

“As I said, you’ve been busy.” Gandalf shrugs, unconcerned. “And since I assume I’m still the only being you’ve told of your unique situation I thought you might like a sympathetic ear to vent to.”

“How very self-sacrificing of you,” Thorin says sourly, but he can already feel himself surrendering.

Some days he doesn’t even remember why he had been so adamant never to tell anyone of what has befallen him, in this life and the last. But then he imagines revealing the truth, seeing the shock, sadness maybe even horror on their faces (and pity, always pity that he doesn’t want to face). The slow realization that the person Thorin remembers is not who they *are*, is someone who they will never be. The creeping doubt that perhaps he doesn’t even *see* them as they are, but a pale shadow of who they had once been, shaped by a different life; that perhaps he liked the other ones better, likes them now only on the merits of who they now aren’t. The endless questions about events and details he’d rather forget, reliving moments that had nearly broken him (and then the one that had) and all the shame and guilt of his last living days that he would have to reveal to those who matter most to him. Those who have the right to judge him.

And after all that, how could he lay himself bare? That would take an inner strength he still lacks, even now.

“It’s different. Everything is so different.”

He has spoken without conscious thought and hates how small his voice sounds, even to his own ears.

Gandalf’s voice would be insultingly gentle if it weren’t so soothing. “Isn’t that a good thing, what your heart wished for?”

“Of course.” Thorin’s lips twist almost bitterly. “But there’s always

a prize to be paid. *You* know this, wizard, but for a while I tried to tell myself that I wasn't already paying it."

Gandalf is silent for a while then he puffs a cloud of smoke into the air. In front of Thorin's eyes it morphs into many different shapes, Erebor, Dale, the green valleys beyond the mountain's gates. The faces of his family.

The message is clear.

"If I didn't already think of what I *do* have, I wouldn't be here, Gandalf," he states quietly and the smoke dissipates, leaving nothing but the faint smell of tobacco behind.

Gandalf nods silently.

"You seem to be making headway with the elves as well," the wizard says a few moments later, and a slightly confused Thorin follows the other's gaze to the woodcut of Erebor on the mantelpiece. It is so obviously elvish, swirling silvery lines decorating dark wood that Thorin can't be surprised Gandalf drew the right conclusion. It had been a gift Thranduil had presented him with at their last meeting, in recognition of the changed political course Thorin is responsible for. The initial urge to simply throw the gift away had faded by the time he had entered the mountain, bested by common sense and a grudging appreciation of the beauty of the piece – and the tact that had gone into choosing the subject.

Still, even thinking of Thranduil sours his mood.

"Don't remind me."

Gandalf's lips quirk, then says, quite nonchalantly, "Thranduil has been even worse tempered than usual."

At that Thorin brightens up. "Indeed?"

Gandalf nods solemnly. "I have it on good authority that he's driving Lord Elrond mad with his constant complaining about being the only who has to deal with dwarves on a regular basis."

Thorin's grin can only be described as smug. "Well, as long as I'm not the only one suffering, I suppose I can bear it."

"That is all anyone can ask, though it is hard not to question your

motivation,” Gandalf says dryly.

He studies Thorin for a moment, a thoughtful silence eclipsing any mirth either of them might have felt (Gandalf may be a dignified old man most of the time, but Thorin has *seen* glimpses of a wicked sense of humour underneath the wisdom and ever-present crankiness).

Finally the wizard speaks again, low and serious. “It may be that you’re already aware of this, but I think it bears repeating. There are some things that will happen, regardless of your knowledge, events so deeply entrenched in the fabric of the world that no one can change them. And there will be some things you may try to accomplish and fail, for they are not meant to happen.”

For a moment Gandalf’s form seems to shift, power shining from his eyes as his age falls away.

“The many twists of fate do not solely rest on your shoulders, Thorin Oakenshield, and you would do well to remember this.”

And then he is Gandalf again, the old, gnarled and kind being known to Thorin. He shivers despite himself, a foreboding chill settling in his bones.

There are still so many things to fear.

Chapter 12



There comes a day – still *far too early* – that Thráin says ‘Khazad-dûm’ and Thorin says ‘no’, and somehow, fails to be truly surprised. The conversation ends in a shouting match that threatens to rattle the stone all around them.

“The legacy of our people! Of our line! Our inheritance!”

The walls of the King’s study reverberate with the passion of Thráin’s words, but Thorin refuses to be swayed.

“The orcs have our halls firmly in their grasp, father. An attack would cost more lives than anyone should be willing to sacrifice.”

Thráin stares at him. “Would you give up the chance to reclaim our ancestral home? Erebor is prospering, we have many warriors. *The time is now.*”

“We also have a home here in Erebor, our people are happy!” Thorin counters, willing his rampant emotions to calm. After all, his father doesn’t share his memories of the Battle of Azanulbizar. “Why risk all of this for a dream?”

A ring glints on his father’s forefinger as he gesticulates and for a moment Thorin stares at it, horrible recognition dawning somewhere in the back of his mind.

“Is my son so much of a coward that he would run away from a fight to take back what is rightfully ours?” Thráin hisses and Thorin barely holds back a flinch, his gaze snapping back to Thráin’s face. Before now, whatever his mood, his father had never openly tried to hurt him like this, with words of barbed wire and cutting honesty.

Suddenly he feels inextricably tired and worn. Once upon a time he had sounded much like Thráin does now – *you miserable hobbit! You*

undersized burglar – and only now he sees the folly and blindness that apparently has always been a trait of the heirs of Durin.

“No, but I’m rational enough not to wish for death at the hands of orcs or even Durin’s Bane, nor would I lead our people to that end.”

Silence descends, and Thorin looks away from his father’s glaring eyes.

“I will follow you, should you choose to go through with this folly. To whatever end,” he says quietly, wearily, “but I will not give you the approval you’ve asked for.”

And he turns around and leaves, before he can do something he will regret later, helplessness sinking into every muscle and every bone until he aches with phantom pain.

The next time the topic is broached between them his arguments do not fare any better, nor the time after that. Thorin’s mood steadily darkens, for he sees the signs of suicidal determination in his father and recognizes the preparations he’s begun to make. Preparations for war.

It seems that once again, Thorin alone isn’t enough to stop this tragedy.

He knows that this time the blame does not fall on his shoulders, not solely, but he can’t help but think that if he’d been around more in recent years, hadn’t spent his time with a trip to the Blue Mountains and work – and had not been quite so preoccupied with his siblings only, instead of his whole family – he might’ve kept his father from sliding into this trap, could’ve stopped him from thinking that they could possibly take back Khazad-dûm with the forces available to them.

But he *hasn’t* been there, too busy with his scheming and plans to the eventual re-gathering of his beloved company to notice what is right in front of his nose.

Fool. Azanulbizar has cost him so much already.

Despite the revelation of yet another of his short-comings, fierce determination rises. If there is one thing he’s utterly sure of, it’s that he’s not going to let his little brother anywhere near that battle, no matter

how much it might cost him.

Unfortunately thick-headedness and a need to take action aren't traits that only Thorin has inherited from his father.

"You cannot be serious!"

Thorin has never seen Frerin so furious. "I am quite serious," he reiterates calmly. "I've already talked the matter over with father and he agrees that you and Dís should remain here to carry on the line of Durin should we fall."

"I can fight! I should be there to watch your back!" Frerin cries, his eyes spitting flame. "You can't expect me to simply sit here and do nothing while I wait to hear of your fates!"

"I can and I do. Frerin, *nadadith*, you are only sixty-five years old, not yet ready for war. There are others who will remain – the life in Erbor must continue while we are away." He softens his gaze and mellows his voice. "And someone has to look after Dís. Would you leave her all alone here?"

Finally a hint of indecision flickers over Frerin's face. Clearly the thought of Dís all alone in the mountain without family nearby doesn't appeal to him either. And perhaps there is a little fear there, too; dwarves might be born for fighting and endurance but the thought of a grim battlefield still doesn't sit easily with such a young soul as his – and Thorin is glad for it.

And suddenly the vulnerability briefly glimpsed after Thrór's death shows itself once more in the rapid blinking of his sky blue eyes and his reluctance to look his older brother into the eye. "And what if something does happen to you? What then?"

Thorin shakes his head lightly, letting just a little of his long-suppressed pain show on his face. "Then you go on, knowing that your presence there probably wouldn't have prevented it. Years will pass, some days you will forget your grief, some days you won't. But you should always know that I love you, little brother, and Mahal willing we will meet again in his Halls."

Their foreheads touch lightly together and Thorin's grip on Frerin's

shoulders tightens a moment.

“That said, I have no intention of dying any time soon, so don’t go borrowing trouble where there ain’t any.”

Frerin exhales, his lips quirking the barest bit. “That’s Mister Dwalin’s saying.”

Thorin grins. “Sometimes even Mister Dwalin is worth listening to.”

*

It’s already dark by the time Thorin has disentangled himself from Frerin and reached Dwalin’s rooms and he can see no light spilling under the door. Yet he isn’t surprised to see both sons of Fundin sitting at the kitchen table, silently staring at a lone flickering candle. Sombre expressions and almost unnaturally still limbs give the impression that they had simply been sitting there for hours and not bothered to move and start a fire, and given the circumstances Thorin wouldn’t be surprised if that were actually the case.

Balin takes one look at his face and says, voice resigned, “It is happening then.”

It’s not a question, but Thorin nods sharply anyway. Without further comment Balin drags out another chair from under the table for Thorin to fall into. It’s only Dwalin’s strangely intent, measuring look that stops Thorin from simply dropping his head on the table and pretending the world doesn’t exist for a few moments.

He meets Dwalin’s eyes, unflinching. “What is on your mind, bâhâl?”

For a moment Dwalin hesitates, looking as uncomfortable as ever can look, then he shrugs, deliberately nonchalant. “I don’t understand why this is such a bad thing. Going to war, it’s what we do. We mine and craft, and we fight. That is what being khuzd *is*.”

“But not blindly! We might be walking into a slaughter, for nothing more than a dream!”

“Do you know something we don’t?” Dwalin asks, a hint of confu-

sion in his voice, as if he can't quite believe that this is the same Thorin he's known for years, fought with years. "The last time I looked we had one of the greatest armies in Middle-earth."

Thorin shakes his head sharply, wearily. "No. Just... a bad feeling."

Dwalin fixes him with a dubious stare.

"We do not know what dangers await us in Khazad-dûm," he elaborates. "And do you feel entirely comfortable leaving Erebor in such an unprotected state with the way the orcs have been sniffing around here these last few years?"

On his other side he sees Balin straighten and take note. "Do you believe there might be an attack on Erebor?" the older dwarf asks sharply.

Thorin can only shrug helplessly. "I don't know. Perhaps I am simply too worried about nothing."

"I will see to it that precautions are taken, and the remaining soldiers to be on their guard," Balin says without hesitation, his eyes sharp and Thorin hopes his smile conveys his gratitude.

Balin nods at him, a gentle smile tugging on his lips in return, and Thorin's hope becomes knowledge.

"I will talk to the guards under my command," Dwalin states gruffly, rising from his chair.

Walking past, Dwalin lets his scarred hand rest on Thorin's shoulder and for a moment Thorin wants to warn him, tell him to be careful, but he bites back the words. This is not the time, the battle still too distant. But he does let his gaze linger on his friend's strong profile, illuminated by the flickering candlelight. Not yet a goodbye, but another memory to be treasured.

With a nod at him, Dwalin withdraws his hand and walks out the door, leaving Thorin and Balin in thoughtful silence.

"It's more than just a bad feeling," Balin finally interrupts the silence and it's definitely not a question.

Thorin forces his mouth into a somewhat lopsided smile. "How about a *very* bad feeling?"

Balin snorts softly, but his eyes are intent on Thorin's face, glinting faintly in the candlelight. "You know that we will stand by you whatever fate holds in store for us."

"Yes." It's almost a sigh, his voice heavy. Sometimes he still catches himself believing that he doesn't deserve this, this utter *devotion*. Other times he wishes they hadn't given it to him, simply because it might keep them out of harm's way. But mostly he's thankful, has learned how to appreciate those persisting in trying to make his life better.

"We'll be fine," Balin says, and almost sounds like he means it.

*

Dís', rather unsurprisingly, doesn't turn out to be any easier to convince to stay in Erebor than Frerin had been. Thorin finds her in the training halls, throwing the daggers he'd once gifted her at a target with ferocious accuracy.

Thorin rather thinks she might be trying to prove a point here, not that it's working. There's no greater chance of him letting her come along than there was of him letting Frerin come along. He has no desire to see his brother's dead and bloodied body on the battle-field exchanged for his sister's.

"I'm coming."

The words reach his ears before he can even open his mouth to say something quite to the contrary. He sighs.

"No you're not. Frerin isn't either," he says in a tone that brooks no argument – a tone that she well knows.

Her eyebrows fly up, surprise warring with outrage. "You convinced Frerin to stay?"

"I did. You can ask him yourself if you want."

Her expression sets back into mulish rebellion. "Just because he's staying doesn't mean I have to."

"It doesn't," he agrees, voice perfectly measured, "but if you value me at all you will stay nonetheless."

It's a low blow, and Thorin's well aware of it, but he *needs* to know

that both his siblings will be safe whilst he marches towards war.

Dís lets her head drop to her chest, stray wisps of hair falling over her face. “That’s not fair, nadad,” she whispers, her voice breaking.

He knows it’s not, so he doesn’t even try to deny it. “And yet I’m asking this of you, mizimith, just as I asked this of Frerin.” Sadness wells up, railing at the unfairness of life. “Perhaps one day you will thank me.”

Her wet chuckle bears no humour. “As long as you’re still around to be thanked. I will not ask you to promise to return to us, but know this: if you die, I will personally hunt you down and kill you again.”

Heart swelling, Thorin steps forward and draws her close, murmuring into her hair, “There’s no doubt in my mind that you would. And I would happily let you.”

“You better not let it come to that, fool of a brother,” she says into his shoulder.

He smiles. “I will do my best. That I promise.”

Thorin feels her nodding against his chest.

Still, once he turns to go, the next dagger goes flying with a little more force than necessary and the target all but disintegrates.

*

Nain and Fundin, those of his father’s court he trusts the most, hardly seem surprised when he asks them to meet him a few days before the troops’ departure.

Both already elderly dwarves – though nowhere near decrepit, and anyone who would dare suggest such a thing would be liable to meet the sharp ends of various suddenly appearing weapons – they are both experienced and battle-hardened and very, very familiar to Thorin, considering that they’d been around since his birth; dependable and rock-steady.

“I’m sorry, laddie,” Fundin says gravely, gently bumping their foreheads.

Thorin lingers in that moment, before drawing away. “Nothing to

be done about it.”

Nain scowls. “If I thought bashing that stubborn dwarf over the head would help I’d have done it a long time ago.”

That at least coaxes a smile from Thorin. “The Durins have never been very susceptible to that kind of education.”

“Slight understatement,” Fundin snorts – with ample cause, having been in charge of all attempts to bash manners and all kinds of knowledge into not only Thorin’s but also Frerin’s and Dís’ hard heads.

“When are we marching?” Thorin inquires and the mood immediately sobers.

Nain clears his throat. “At the rate preparations are going, the troops will be ready in half a fortnight.” He pauses, then continues, tone firm. “We *are* well prepared, Thorin. We’re not walking into a slaughter.”

Thorin looks at him steadily, and asks matter-of-factly, “Are we not?”

Nain’s bushy eyebrows draw together. Fundin doesn’t react outwardly, but there’s a new tension in the room, crackling in the air.

“We’re not,” Fundin finally says long moments later, but his voice is firm.

The older dwarf’s eyes soften further when he sees the slump of his shoulders that Thorin hadn’t quite been able to repress.

“This is not your fault, Thorin of Durin’s blood,” Fundin adds quietly, and Nain nods. “Remember that on the battlefield.”

Thorin swallows past the lump in his throat, knowing that this, this one seemingly innocuous thing, would be impossible.

Don’t blame yourself. It wasn’t your fault.

How often had he heard that from different people over the span of both his lives? Often enough that he’d lost count somewhere, and yet it had never actually *helped*. Blaming himself comes as easily and inevitably to Thorin as breathing, and he sees it for the flaw and the advantage it both is. Flaw for the crippling self-doubt and fear of another failure left in its wake, advantage for the drive it kindles to do better,

to succeed in protecting his loved ones the next time danger looms. Or perhaps it is wrong to say that it has never helped – sometimes it had only hurt, when he had been too mired in his guilt to hear the concern beneath, but times like this, it also wakes a small kernel of warmth in him to know that these people he trusts and values think enough of him to not wish him to be burdened and do not lay blame on his shoulders. The weight of his own recriminations is enough that he can appreciate not having theirs added to its pull. This, at least, you know with dwarves: most would never tell a lie to make another feel better, and there's a comforting steadiness in having that honesty to count on.

*

Thorin tries to go see his father while the mountain is still busy preparing for war, but for the first time he is denied access to the king's chambers. For a moment he thinks about barging through the door anyway, but the fear of making things worse holds him back.

He doesn't know whether it's because Thráin truly doesn't want to see him, or because there's still a small part of his father which recognizes what he's doing, though unable to stop, and he is simply ashamed of facing his son.

In the end it doesn't really matter why.

*

Thorin paces, his rooms, the wide halls, even the flank of the mountainside once, despite the danger. His mind will not rest and his body refuses to. He polishes his armour until it shines, checks every inch of chain mail and plates of armour for tarnishes and weak spots, would probably have found the most miniscule weakening of a joint. He sharpens all his weapons, several times, even Orcrist, the sword that never rusts or grows dull. His hands draw battle-plan after battle plan, all that he remembers of the orcs' charge – and what little tactic they'd employed in their mindless rush, confident in their leader and the overwhelming odds – transcribed onto paper, black ink on slightly

dirty white, glaring at him when he looks at it, glaring at him when his eyes are closed and image after image scrolls past his mind's eye.

His pack is filled with everything he needs and more already, sitting by his bedside, mocking, silent.

The day of departure draws nearer.

*

The troops are ready to march within the week, just as Nain had predicted, many of Erebor's warriors about to set out into what Thorin will only ever remember as a bloodbath.

Too many.

He stands on the balcony above the gate, silently watching as dwarf after dwarf leaves the safety of the mountain. There are no words. Soon he will join them, but for now only watching over them all will do.

The truth, as he painfully sees it, is that deathly fear plagues him.

Corpses upon corpses, burning pyres spitting smoke into the air, not even the dignity of true dwarven funerals granted for neither simple warrior nor fallen King and prince. So many dead. Their people crippled. Hollow-eyed survivors ghosting across ravaged stone. Pain.

It seems he cannot stop this nightmare from happening again, that he will fail his people once more; but that doesn't mean that he will not try his utter best to work against the loss of life looming above them all along with the shadow of the enemy. Even if it means asking for help from those who have withheld it before. Staring out into the distance, over rows and rows of warriors towards the rising sun, that blurred shape of dull red on the horizon, an idea slowly takes form in his mind. Desperate and not unlikely to fail, but an idea nonetheless.

Chapter 13

The wind whispers in the forest not a hundred strides from where they've made camp at the edges of the Greenwood, and Thorin, busy with pitching the tent he would share with Balin and Dwalin tries his best to ignore them. His memories of this particularly forest are less than fond.

He would like to deny the blanket of anxiety that layers his shoulders, for tomorrow he would meet with Thranduil once more in the hopes of securing his help in their venture, but by the third time he's snapped at an unsuspecting soul he has to acknowledge just how tightly wound he is. Balin and Dwalin have already – wisely – made themselves scarce for the time being to avoid his temper and he can't blame them.

And where Thorin doesn't exactly look forward to the morning, he *dreads* the night. He has made sure not to sleep with anyone in close vicinity for many years now – with the exception of longer travels during which he took care to lay some distance away from the rest of the camp and bury his face in his bedding in a way that would muffle any sounds threatening to escape – and while his nightmares had become rarer over the last few decades, they didn't vanish completely. And then this whole mess started happening and in truth he had barely slept at all since Thráin first spoke to him of his plans, not only because his mind buzzed with helpless anger and worry, too busy for sleep but also because he was simply *afraid*.

He still is. He is afraid of the memories that visit him regularly again in his sleep, the nightly terror of watching a bloody battlefield, unable to intervene, of watching his family die over and over again, their dead

bodies overlain by Azog's cruel smile.

It's not the cold, or panic that makes him shake ever so faintly as he lies in his bedroll, Dwalin and Balin both snoring peacefully to his left, yet unburdened. He forces his eyes to remain open, blinking at the ceiling with increasing tiredness, but it's no use. Soon he starts to lose chunks of time, one blink suddenly minutes long and not even the harshest of occasional pinches to his bare arm is able to stop him from falling into uneasy slumber.

This time his dream is only filled with sounds, clashes of metal, howls and screams and drips of blood and still he wakes with a scream on his lips, panting as if he has just run for miles. There are hands on his arms and on his chest and for a moment he panics, struggling against the holds restraining him, until voices finally penetrate the haze in his mind.

"Thorin, Thorin! Calm down, it's us!"

"Keep still, dammit you knobhead, you're going to injure yourself!"

Finally aware of his surroundings – and of the two dwarves gazing at him with concern – he doesn't exactly have to guess who said what.

Thorin slumps back into the bedding, fight leaving his muscles. It feels like he's never wished to be somewhere else quite this badly, away from Balin and Dwalin's worried, curious, a little bit accusing – or is he just imagining that part? – eyes.

"I'm fine," he mumbles, trying not to sound like he's just gone through a meat grinder. "Just a dream."

"If that was 'just a dream' I'll eat my axe," Dwalin growls lowly. Next to him Balin doesn't look any more convinced by Thorin's feeble lie.

Thorin glares at him. "A nightmare. Nothing to worry about."

Balin's gaze gentles, though the worry remains. "I know a night terror when I see it, laddie."

Thorin avoids both their gazes, choosing to stare up at the shadowed tent.

After a while Balin speaks up again. "I talked to the guards who

went to Mirkwood with King Thrór.” That he’d done so out of worry about Dwalin’s state of mind goes unspoken. “Some of the younger ones who hadn’t seen combat before were... distant, and their sleep was disturbed by night terrors. Óin called it ‘battle-shock’.”

Thorin wants to say that it doesn’t matter whether it’s your first battle or your tenth battle or even your twentieth battle, but he can’t. In this new life he hasn’t truly seen battle, save for that one skirmish which almost led to his death.

“As you well know I haven’t *been* in a battle,” Thorin says evenly. “It follows quite logically that I can’t have this ‘battle-shock’.”

Balin’s brow furrows. “I don’t believe you have to have been in a battle, Thorin. *You* saw and faced a dragon descending upon Erebor.”

Thorin represses a reflexive shudder. As a matter of fact he does still dream of fire in the sky and his world burning.

“Or maybe I’m just afraid,” he finally says quietly. It costs him to have these words pass his lips, but he thinks they know already, and it’s foolish to hold on to damnable pride now, when perhaps some solace is to be found in their understanding.

Dwalin’s grunt sounds like it can’t decide between surprise and grudging agreement. Balin on the other hand, looks *proud*.

“Your generation of Durin’s continues to amaze me, Thorin. Some characteristics just seem to have passed you all by.”

Thorin almost snorts. “I have plenty stubborn pride, Balin, never doubt that.”

He does have a lot of pride, he used to have far too much and he knows it’s still there, buried under layers of hard-won restraint and guilt both. He’s proud of Erebor, of his home. He’s proud of his siblings, of his company, and most importantly, of being a dwarf. *He is proud of being a dwarf*. It’s exactly that pride that has caused far too many problems already.

“And yet...” Balin has that thoughtful glint in his eyes again, the one that says that he’s figuring out something. “You haven’t displayed the blind pride of your forefathers for a long time now.”

Good. Some things he might be able to forgive himself for, but falling into the same traps again wouldn't be one of them.

Still, this conversation was getting far too close to topics he still isn't ready – and might never be ready – to talk about, so he remarks, “We should get some more sleep. The sun will rise soon enough.”

Balin regards him for a moment longer, lips pursed, but acquiesces. With a quick look to his brother they both make a grab for Thorin and before he can do more than voice an indignant squawk they've deposited him in the middle of the tent, Balin now to his right and Dwalin to his left. Flanking him, as if to protect him even in sleep.

It's more reassuring than it has any right to be. When he falls asleep this time, no dark dreams await.

*

Thorin looks at the gates to the elven kingdom with deep-seated suspicion, trying not to remember the sound they'd made falling shut behind him with echoing finality.

Thranduil might now be their still tentative ally, but he would never trust him completely, not after having been burned twice. Fighting the insistent sense of *déjà vu* as he is led towards the antlered throne, Thorin almost regrets his decision to come alone. At least his hands aren't bound this time.

He forces more recent memories of the negotiations with Thranduil in Dale to the forefront of his mind, instead of *a hundred years are a mere blink in the life of an elf, I am patient, I can wait*, and inclines his head the necessary amount to show respect from one ruler to another.

Thranduil, reclining on his throne with nonchalant grace, returns the gesture and Thorin is relieved to find that the menacing glint in his eyes is absent once more.

“Hail Prince Thorin, be welcome in my kingdom,” Thranduil speaks, in that slow measured way of speaking that always rubs Thorin the wrong way. “Where, may I ask, is King Thráin, he who leads your army to my forest?”

Ignoring the subtle reminder that this is indeed the elf's forest, Thorin simply replies, "He is overseeing the breaking of camp. A figure of authority is needed there."

They both know that usually it would've been Thorin at the camp, and Thráin here doing the important negotiating, but Thorin can hardly tell Thranduil that he thought it wiser this way.

"And what is your reason for bringing an army onto my doorstep?"

Thorin grits his teeth against the coldness in the elves' voice. "We only wish for passage through the Greenwood, King." He hesitates but for a moment. "And ask for what help you may lend us in our endeavour."

Thranduil rises in a slow gliding motion and turns his back to Thorin. "It is true then, that you set out to reclaim the halls of Moria, your ancient kingdom?"

Thorin raises his head, defiant against the note of derision in the elf's words. He may not agree with his father's decision, but he will back it against those doubting it. "It is."

For a long moment silence reigns, as Thranduil turns back to face him, eyes boring into Thorin's.

"It is folly," Thranduil finally says, quiet and cold, but before he turns his head away Thorin glimpses a glimmer of regret in those old eyes.

He cannot agree in speech, not to this old ally and enemy, though agreement lurks in his mind. But when Thranduil turns back again he must see something in Thorin's face, for coldness is replaced by a horrible understanding pity.

"My warriors can ensure your safe passage through the forest, but do not ask me to risk the life of my kin for this doomed venture."

Thorin ruthlessly squashes the little bit of disappointment that wants to rise – this is more than he had truly expected already.

At Thorin's tight nod Thranduil adds, "I will send my son, Legolas, with a guard detail to escort you to the other side of the forest."

"You have my thanks, King Thranduil, and the thanks of my peo-

ple,” Thorin returns the expected response.

He turns to leave, but his feet have barely reached the first set of stairs, when Thranduil calls out one last time. “And please do try not to get yourself killed, Prince Thorin. It would be ever so tedious to try and establish a... rapport with *another* dwarf after your untimely death.”

Against his will the corner of Thorin’s lips twitches.

“I shall do my best, your majesty,” he calls and continues down the stairs. Now he simply has to hold on to his amusement in order to keep his temper while meeting that stuck-up elf-princeling, by whose actions Thorin had almost lost his life, while simultaneously being saved several times during his last life.

Legolas indeed appears to be just as haughty and displeased to have been tasked with working together with dwarves as ever, but at least he keeps his distaste contained.

The elven guards accompanying him however...

“What do they whisper about?” Thorin finally, and with some reluctance, asks Legolas. The constant glances and mutterings are making him uneasy, the hairs on the back of his arms standing up with tension.

Legolas regards him for a moment, as if judging his worthiness of a reply. The same ice Thorin had seen in the elf’s gaze when training an arrow on him still inhabits his eyes, but there’s also something else, something almost like curiosity.

“They are curious.” The prince’s voice is as even and melodic as he remembers – and also still automatically incurs distaste. “Even among elves there are few who can claim to have killed a dragon.”

So that’s what this is about. He should’ve known.

“And what exactly are they wondering?” he returns, tone barely polite. Thorin has never dealt well with people poking their noses into this specific topic, though most are wont to do so when first meeting him.

Legolas’ lips curl in faint derision. “They wonder how a *dwarf*

could have accomplished this deed, when you are barely tall enough to draw a bow.”

Thorin’s smile is all teeth. “That depends entirely on the bow. But if you really want to know, Prince Legolas, it was luck, simple luck. And I thank Mahal for it every day of my life.”

And with that he walks ahead, leaving a stymied elf behind. Who would’ve thought that it would be the truth that would shock that pointy-eared arrogant sod the most?

*

The uproar in the dwarven camp when Thorin returns with thirty elves in tow could’ve rivalled the rumbling of a mountain and it takes him more than an hour to explain why exactly he thought it necessary to ask for the aid of ‘those damned tree shaggers’, but in the end, though the grumblings don’t cease, all accept his initiative.

(It is quite hard to argue with the Crown Prince after all, and Thorin has little qualms to play that card when he thinks it’s needed.)

*

“I don’t like this forest,” Dwalin grumbles from behind him and it’s all Thorin can do not to roll his eyes as it’s about the twentieth time he’s heard this sentiment from him over the last two days.

Balin’s usually so endless patience, however, seems to be exhausted. “Brother, I swear to Mahal if you do not shut up about this forest I *will* knock you out.”

“It’s true though.”

If Thorin turned around now he would surely see his friend’s face set in mulish lines.

“It gives me the creeps. Too many trees, and all of them creaking and groaning as if they’re about to collapse on top of us.”

“And if you don’t shut your trap it will be you who’s groaning,” Balin says tersely. He doesn’t sound any happier with their surroundings than his brother, but has apparently decided that ignoring it for now is

the smarter option.

To be fair, Dwalin's complaints are getting on everyone's nerves.

Hearing the warrior take a deep breath, no doubt to rise to the bait, Thorin interrupts the brewing argument.

"It wants us to feel this way," he says quietly. "This forest isn't healthy."

Behind him Dwalin and Balin are finally quiet, mulling over his ominous words.

"How do you know this?"

Thorin almost jumps out of his skin at the unexpected question, staring at Legolas where he's suddenly appeared next to his pony. Bloody elves, couldn't they at least have the decency to make some noise when moving?

He is sure that Legolas will look amused at having startled him, but the elf's face is only grave.

"The Greenwood didn't use to bear its name for nothing," he finally replies, when his racing heart has slowed down some, "yet now darkness reigns more than its natural light colours. And some of these trees even *look* sick, their bark is rotting or taken over by fungi."

Legolas' eyes narrow. "What does a dwarf know of trees?"

What a hobbit once told me about them. His heart twinges painfully, but he cannot voice his thought.

"We may be creatures of stone, but I have travelled far and seen enough of the world to know more than any elf would give me credit for," Thorin says instead, not bothering to hide his aggravation. "After all I'm only a dwarf."

His widening eyes are the only outward betrayal of Legolas' surprise. For a moment they simply look at each other, dwarf and elf, and neither could've said what the other was thinking. And then, miraculously, Legolas inclines his head in acceptance of Thorin's point, and Thorin can't help but suddenly wish, with an overwhelming intensity, that Bilbo were here to witness this, this first step toward mutual understanding, even respect. After all his hobbit had always maintained

that elves and dwarves should put aside their differences and age-old grievances.

Perhaps it shouldn't surprise him this much after what has just happened, but when Legolas speaks once more, his words couldn't have been more unexpected to the dwarf.

"We've watched this wood, our beloved home, slowly darken for years now, and for all our woodcraft we've not been able to keep this creeping sickness at bay. It worries us all, and none more than my father."

It's the first time Thorin has heard honest emotion in the elf's voice and this Thorin, too, can understand. It might not be the same thing as a dragon stealing their home, but the heart of the issue is the same, the loss of the home one has always known.

"Should you ever wish our help, the dwarves of Erebor will come," Thorin says and it's impulsive and somewhat reckless and he might regret it later, but right now he can't bring himself to care.

Some things no one on the side of the good should have to bear alone. And the surprised look in Legolas eyes, the flicker of gratitude that Thorin hopes he hasn't just imagined, Thorin finds, strangely enough, make it worth it.

The rest of the journey through the forest passes in much more amicable silence.

*

From the edge of the Greenwood they turn south, towards Azanulbizar, and Thorin finds his mood spiralling downwards once more. Balin tells him he's brooding, which is probably true, and Dwalin is still cross with him for having been friendly with the elves and that elf princeling in particular. He barely sees his father at all, as the older dwarf sequesters himself in his tent and refuses to let anyone in.

Day after day he pushes the hurt of that aside, mulling over his plan to keep this battle from being as big a disaster as the last time instead. He hasn't told anyone yet, for most, he's sure, would either laugh at

him or declare it impossible, or, in Dwalin's case, just get even angrier.

Yet still he hopes, and looks toward the south.

*

The woods of Lothlórien send shivers crawling down his spine, a profound sense of displacement and unease settling in their wake.

There are eyes on him, whether real or imagined, and Thorin doesn't like it one bit. He wants nothing more than to turn around and leave this accursed forest – not as dark and dank as Mirkwood had been, but as terrifying in its own elvish way – but he has a concern that is more important than his comfort, so he squares his shoulders and marches on, waiting for the moment that the guards he is sure must be around somewhere deign to show themselves.

It doesn't exactly come as a surprise that they let him wait until he has got himself well and truly lost among trees that all look the same. Bloody elves.

He stops when he reaches a small stream, gurgling merrily along its winding path through the light woods. With a defeated sigh he settles himself down on a stone next to the water, staring at it somewhat balefully. It is clear now that without guidance, he will never reach the Lady of the forest to ask for aid for his people.

"It has been decades since a dwarf has stepped foot into fair Lothlórien, not since the days of the last Durin," a cool voice says from behind him, accompanied by the quiet creak of a bow being drawn. "And even longer since one has dared to look upon Nimrodel."

So *now* they decide to appear.

"With your fine sense of hospitality I'm not surprised by that," he replies evenly, refusing to be daunted by the threat of an arrow to his head.

With a faint rustling sound the elf steps around him, piercing eyes trying to strip Thorin to the bone. The arrow aimed at him never wavers.

"What is your business in our woods, *dwarf*?"

Thorin raises his head to meet the elf's gaze. He will not be cowed, not by an elf. "I am Thorin, son of Thráin, Prince under the Mountain," he says, his voice strong and unwavering. Somewhere in the back of his mind he is dimly amused at the thought that Balin would be proud of him. *See, I did learn something in your lessons, old friend.* "I've come to seek an audience with your lord and lady."

The elf's eyes narrow, but something holds him back from more outright hostility. Instead he turns away, hands motioning one of his still hidden companions.

"We will await my lady's word," he says neutrally and moves a few steps away at Thorin's acknowledging nod. Still in reach to act in case Thorin chose to do something unwise, but leaving him be otherwise.

Stifling another sigh, Thorin settles down to wait, his irritation strangely soothed by the soft plashing of the stream. It's not as hard keeping his temper in check here than he had feared. Or perhaps he had simply grown more patient with other races' idiosyncrasies. Dealing with Thranduil and Legolas was good practice after all. Glancing at his pointy-eared watcher who stands still as stone his bow at the ready, he almost sighs again – or maybe not.

The second guard returns not long after, as silent as he'd left. Their whispered conversation is too quiet to catch, though Thorin does have at least a rudimentary grasp of both Quenya and Sindarin – a ruler does not have the luxury of ignoring other kingdoms, after all, and understanding a race's language is key to understanding them, even if it has taken him a long time to truly realize that when it comes to elves – but he does notice that their faces are a trifle unhappy and smothers a smile. It seems he would be getting his audience.

"Follow me," the elf instructs curtly and Thorin could swear he hears irritation in his melodious voice. He suppresses a smile.

Caras Galadhon, as his guide calls it, is not only built almost entirely above ground, winding around trees and branches, which in itself makes Thorin instinctively weary – dwarves, much like hobbits, prefer solid ground beneath their feet – but is also possessed of something

otherworldly, unreal, *elven*, even more so than the woods surrounding the city. It is everything a dwarf's home would never be and Thorin's discomfort doesn't ease, despite his reluctant admiration of some of the craftsmanship displayed all around him. It is also, even he can admit it, beautiful. One need not be elven to admire golden leaves and silver boughs dipped in almost ghostly light.

And who can fault this eternal race for their disdain of others when steeped in such incomparable beauty?

The thought comes unbidden and leaves a bitter taste. Thorin may be a dwarf, made of coarser, sturdier matter than any elf, but he will not be shamed by their beauty. He will *not*.

The trip up the highest mallorn seems to take forever and he does his best not to look over the side of the fragile platforms as they climb, keeping his gaze fixed straight ahead.

He steps upon a broader platform and raises his head to meet the gazes of the ruling pair of Lothlórien, clad all in silver and white.

The Lady of Lothlórien is not what he'd expected. Even a dwarf could not deny her beauty, her radiance which catches the gazes of those stood before her, puts them under a spell that he can barely shake into rationality. The realization makes him vaguely grumpy – he would not suffer any elf, be it Thranduil, or Elrond, or Galadriel to enthrall him.

It's due to what Gandalf has said about her, the clear respect he holds for this ancient elf lady that Thorin is even here.

He straightens a little under their combined scrutiny, age old eyes searching for wisdom in his soul.

"I am Thorin, son of Thráin," he says, for the second time that day and bows his head in the deference due another realm's leader. "I have come to ask for aid in my people's fight against the orcs."

"Your army has been spotted making its way towards Moria, many axes strong. Why would you ask the elves for help?"

Celeborn sounds even more reserved than Thranduil on a bad day.

"The orcs' numbers are great, my Lord, I fear for my people should

we take them on without allies,” Thorin replies, barely keeping the edge out of his voice. Here he is, a dwarf asking help of an elf, shouldn’t that be enough of an indication how serious he believes the situation to be?

But Celeborn is shaking his head. “This is not our fight.”

“As it wasn’t your fight when the orcs took our ancestral home in the first place?” Thorin bites out.

The elf’s lips twist in slight irony. “Indeed.” He tilts his head in light curiosity. “Why did you come here to ask this of us? Dwarves have long avoided our realm.”

Thorin shrugs in complete honesty. “I had nothing to lose. I did not believe you would aid my people and if your decision is to leave us to our fate, then I would have gone with the knowledge that I was right. The smallest hope that you would decide fairly, without regard to my race brought me here.”

“You have doubts,” Galadriel suddenly speaks up and Thorin’s head snaps around to meet her piercing gaze. She seems not to have heard his previous words. “You did not support this venture.”

“It is true,” Thorin admits with some reluctance. He has the strong sense that lying here would get him nowhere. “I spoke against this campaign, but I will do as my king commands.”

Thorin has to tamp down on the instinctive urge to twitch under her assessing gaze.

“Long have you sought a stable future for your people and a measure of happiness for yourself, Thorin, son of Thráin. Your journey is not yet nearing its end.”

He shivers slightly at the power of her words, a foreboding sense of truth permeating every syllable.

“This might mark the beginning of a new age of understanding between dwarves and elves, thanks to your intervention.” A slow smile tips her lips. “That is not something to be underestimated. Dark times are coming and when the fate of Middle-earth hangs in the balance, we will need the dwarves – and you, Durin’s Heir.”

Her remote features soften a little, her gaze turning warmer. “Take heart, Thorin, rest your mind.

We shall confer on your request for aid. The dwarves must not stand alone in Azanulbizar.”

Thorin nods once, hoping his dubiousness doesn’t show. “I do not have the time to wait for your decision. I must return to my command before my presence is missed. It would be... disadvantageous if a rumour of the prince’s desertion at the eve of battle sprang to life.”

The memory of Dwalin’s outraged look when Thorin had asked him to cover for his absence is still clear in his mind. His friend had not been happy that Thorin wouldn’t tell him where he was going, nor had he been of the opinion that it was a sensible idea to leave the camp mere days before the battle. Dwalin being Dwalin had certainly made his displeasure known, but in the end he had done as Thorin had asked, muttering something about ‘foolish, mystery-mongering dwarf princes’.

He didn’t really have an argument against that, considering that he *has* been fairly mystery- mongering since his death – out of necessity, not because he wishes too, but somehow poor Dwalin had often borne the brunt of Thorin’s recalcitrance.

Galadriel’s voice calls Thorin back to the present. “Go then,” she says, calm and remote once more, “with the blessing of the elves. May the Valar watch over you, Thorin Oakenshield.”

Thorin takes his leave with a bow and a mind whirling with confusion and hope. He is aware enough of his history to realize that he might well be the first dwarf to have received such a blessing as this in well over an age. Though he has already started repairing Erebor’s relations with the Greenwood, he had never even considered re-forged alliances to such an extent – he had simply expected the elves to be as resistant to the idea as most dwarves would prove to be. This Lady Galadriel however... his heart tells him that she has grander plans, more concern for the future than to turn him away now.

And then there’s the fact that she called him *Oakenshield*, a name

that doesn't *exist* anymore. He didn't even notice it at first, so used to almost a lifetime of that epitaph and it still sounds *right* to hear it in a way that Dragonslayer never has. Doesn't mean he likes her poking around in his head, nor the possibility that his strange circumstances might be uncovered, but in the larger scheme of things it's an acceptable price to pay, he supposes.

Even if she's an elf.

Chapter 14



An axe whirs past his head, deadly in its accuracy as it strikes the orc about to charge him. Thorin spares a quick grateful glance for Dwalin before diving back into the fray. He needs to *focus*, especially now that memories of another time at the same place threaten to overlay reality.

The battle is much as he remembers – *bordes upon bordes of orcs spewing from the gates of Moria, charging with beastly roars and brutal viciousness, dwarves falling around* – yet also different. There is no Thrór leading the charge, there is no Frerin trying to protect his back in vain, their warriors are better chosen and better equipped.

But they're still falling and for all his knowledge Thorin is helpless to stop it. There is no more painful a way to find out that history has a damning tendency to repeat itself.

The knowledge bites into him, tearing and ripping, and he watches as time slows to a crawl, as his father engages Azog despite Thorin's silent plea to back away – he watches, unable to come to his aid. Orcs surround him, shouting hoarsely and swinging their weapons in deadly if clumsy arcs and yet he has only eyes for the scene playing out only a few meters away. One by one the enemies around him are felled by his blows, though little attention he gives them. They all fall around him but it isn't enough.

His scream is all too real, a mirrored echo of what once had been, denial and grief and anger. His father's head rolls to a stop at his feet and Azog's laugh is exactly the same, cold and cruel. A taunt.

For a while Thorin loses himself, memory blurring into reality, reality blurring into an all-encompassing drive to finally rid the world of the pale orc's evil. Later he doesn't remember fighting the orc. Doesn't

remember taking up the oaken branch that saves his life once more.

Doesn't remember severing Azog's arm in the same desperate manoeuvre that had assured his victory the last time.

He comes back to himself when his sword slices through Azog the Defiler's neck. There had been no shock this time, no hesitation, no chance for orc underlings to drag Azog to safety.

It is done.

And yet, as the first elvish arrow slices through the air to find its mark in an unsuspecting orc, he only feels empty. His father and many more are dead.

The elves have come.

But his father is dead. *He is king now.*

He turns around, unheeding of the orcs still behind him and sees the Lady of Lothlorien, resplendent in a white cloak and gleaming armour, as elegant as light itself. There is power in her eyes and power in her hands and she barely needs to use her sword to cut a swathe through the fleeing orcs' ranks.

And yet there is kindness in her gaze when she reaches him.

"Go and rest, Child of Durin," she says and though her voice is quiet it rises above the din of the battle and the cries of the wounded and dying, unquestionable. Misplaced beauty among such carnage. "The victory is ours. Rest."

"Do not let them pursue the orcs into the mines," he says, his voice and tongue heavy. "Enough have died today."

She smiles at him, grave and reassuring at the same time. "I shall not. *Rest.*"

And for the second time in his life Thorin Oakenshield gives in, lets go when there's still work to be done.

*

Thorin opens his eyes to Dwalin's face hovering directly above his eyes and fails to repress a startled yelp. Dwalin's worried grimace transforms into a smirk in the space of a heartbeat and it's all Thorin can do

not to groan; he knows from *painful* experience that he's never going to live this down, and he mentally kicks himself for reacting to something that had happened about a hundred times already – Dwalin has the annoying habit of hovering over people when he's concerned.

Considering this show of blatant emotionalism the general opinion that Dwalin is an absolute hard- ass comes as a bit of a surprise. Perhaps it's his impressive glower that does it. Or the fact that he's only all too happy to let Grasper and Keeper have some action even when their use really isn't warranted.

Thankfully Dwalin is neither glowering nor threatening anyone with an axe at the moment. "A little on edge, are we Thorin?"

"Seeing your ugly mug so early in the morning will do that to a person," he grumbles, but fails to wipe that damned smirk off Dwalin's face.

"No need to get insulting," his friend says, almost cheerfully, before he suddenly sobers. "It's about time you re-joined the land of the living." His smile is only grim. "After yesterday some reassurance is sorely needed."

Thorin frowns. "Shouldn't fa – "

He stops himself before the words can fully leave his mouth, bitter reality sinking in. No, his father couldn't reassure anyone right now, would, in fact, never do so again. With that realization, returns another one, equally unwelcome.

I am King now.

They were waiting for *him*; for him to show them that one of their leaders is still alive, still breathing and still fighting – and still concerns himself with their fate.

He swallows past the bitter taste in his mouth and raises his gaze to meet Dwalin's. "Of course. I'll do so immediately."

Someone – he *really* hopes it wasn't Galadriel, or Mahal help him, a different elf – has stripped his armour and divested him of most of his torn and bloody clothes before dumping him in bed.

Various more or less shallow wounds and abrasions on his body

have already been treated, paining him only a little once he moves. As he goes hunting for his pack and the one change of clothes he brought, he asks, "How long was I asleep?"

He hears Dwalin shift from foot to foot and looks up. Much to his consternation the other looks almost embarrassed. "The better part of two days."

"*What?!*"

Two days? How had he even slept that long? Then again, his last clear memory is of Galadriel standing over him, so his rest might not exactly have been natural. *Bloody elves* is becoming a bit of a mantra.

Dwalin only shrugs his broad shoulders. "That elf woman said you were exhausted both physically and mentally and we should let you sleep. I can't say I really disagreed with her, considering you looked rather more dead than alive minus any life-threatening injuries that would've explained it."

The string of expletives that follows Thorin's disbelieving glare makes even Dwalin raise his brows.

"I have duties, Dwalin, especially now!" he growls, throwing clothes on hastily, only a step down from haphazardly. "I can't just drop off the face of Middle-earth for two days because I look tired!"

"Everything is *fine*, Thorin," Dwalin growls right back. "Nothing much happened while you were out and we need you well-rested and aware and you well know it!" Seeing Thorin's still mutinous expression, he adds, a little gentler, "No one thinks less of you because of it, azaghâl. Most of us saw you slay Azog and avenge your father – you're a *hero* now, Thorin, you stepped forward when no one else could and they adore you for it. Well, more of a hero, anyway. No one's forgotten how you slew that dragon either." He grins again, a sliver of a smile. "Not that you need an even bigger head than the one you already got."

Thorin snorts. "You're one to talk. That mohawk is either making up for some deficiency or you're trying to look like a partly bald lion."

Buckling the last straps of his armour, he takes up his sword.

"Father and Balin are tending to the dead."

Thorin releases a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. Fundin is alive then. He'd lost sight of the three of them in the melee, and had feared the worst.

"How many dead?" he asks curtly.

Dwalin hesitates only for a split second; anyone else wouldn't even have noticed the slip. "One-hundred-and-ninety-three at last count."

Thorin stops walking. *Almost two-hundred*. Worse than he'd hoped, and yet... better than the last time at least. Still, it's a grievous blow that a small part of him still thinks he could've prevented.

Many a family in Erebor would mourn during the months to come.

He resumes his steps, ignoring Dwalin's concerned look. "Where would you say I'm needed the most?"

Thorin's voice is wooden, or rather more aptly, like stone and probably does nothing to allay his friend's worries.

When Dwalin remains silent, Thorin looks at him, surprised to find a grimace on the other's face.

"I hate to say this," Dwalin rumbles, distaste clear in his very bearing, "but someone's got to take care of *them*."

Dwalin jerks his head in the direction of the remaining group of elves. Most, Thorin had learned, had already returned to the woods they came from, but he can spot the Lady amidst the group of warriors.

Thorin sighs, conceding his point. The mere thought of anyone else trying to sort this out makes alarm bells start ringing in his head. *Loud* alarm bells.

"I'll come find you once this is taken care of," he says and waits for Dwalin's reluctant nod before making his way towards the elves.

He stops after only two steps and turns back to face his friend.

"And Dwalin?"

"Yeah?" Dwalin grunts.

Thorin smiles a little lop-sidedly. "I'm sorry. I haven't been easy to be around lately."

"You have nothing to apologize for, bahâl," Dwalin says, sounding

uncommonly grave. "I know some of the burdens lying on your shoulders. All is forgiven."

Their foreheads thunk together and Thorin lets himself rest there for a moment, grateful.

"Oh and Thorin?" There's definitely amusement in Dwalin's voice, causing Thorin's eyes narrow in suspicion. "You better get used to another epithet, *Oakenshield*."

For a long moment Thorin freezes, mind blank. It had been so long, *so long* since he'd last heard that name.

"What?"

Dwalin shrugs, still smirking. "It's what some of the warriors have come to call you after they saw you stand up to Azog with only that oaken branch as a shield."

"Well, at least it's less ostentatious than dragonslayer," Thorin mumbles, doing his best to hide how his heart is still beating quickly in joy. Strange, that such a simple thing as a name could make a sense of belonging, of rightness swell in his breast. He knows better than to hope that he'd now be rid of 'dragonslayer', but maybe there would be some people liking *Oakenshield* better.

Dwalin only laughs heartily, clapping one hand on Thorin's shoulder with the force of a small boulder, before finally turning away, leaving Thorin to resume his path towards the elven contingent.

When he nears, as if by soundless command, the elven warriors move away as one, allowing Galadriel and him unasked for but nonetheless much-appreciated space and a degree of privacy.

She looks at him for a while, no doubt taking in the exhaustion that must still show on his face.

"You made a difference," Galadriel says quietly, neither belittling his grief, nor encouraging his guilt.

Dwalin and Balin need not mourn their father. Frerin remains alive and well in Erebor. Less have fallen than the last time. And it simply isn't enough; he had known, he should have been able to prevent it.

"And yet here I am, King, with two hundred warriors to bury," he

retorts darkly. “And no place to bury them as befitting our people.”

He had even considered carrying the bodies back to Erebor for them to be laid to rest properly, but there are simply too many and it would take too long. The bodies would rot and Thorin had seen enough of that for more than two life-times.

“Follow me,” she says. Not quite a command, an invitation.

She does not seem to be in the mood to answer any questions, so Thorin quietly trails behind her, ruthlessly squashing his curiosity.

When they’ve reached the Kheled-zâram she turns right, until they stand in front of the sheer cliff-face of the mountains above Moria. Thorin squints against the setting sun and takes a deep breath in surprise when he realizes that he is, in fact, *not* looking at a completely sheer cliff-face – there is a crevice, leading to what must be a cave in the mountain.

“There should be enough room for your fallen warriors if my memory does not deceive me,” Galadriel says quietly behind him. “And stone to entomb them in.”

Thorin doesn’t even try to hide his astonishment, not this time. “How did you know about this place?”

“Ties of friendship once bound the elves of Lothlórien and Eregion and the dwarves of Khazad-dûm together. While Celembor and Nari crafted the western gate together, we made the eastern.”

Thorin nods mutely, wondering whether ‘we’ actually involved Galadriel – somehow, he wouldn’t put it past her.

“There are those among us even now who are eager enough to study elvish texts and culture,” he finally says, a picture of Ori with his face buried in one of his ever-present tomes clear in his mind.

She tilts her head in a gesture of mild curiosity. “Oh?”

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. “Well,” he starts again, slightly sheepish, “he’s actually not born yet.”

And the Lady laughs.

Thorin hadn’t heard such a clear tone in his entire life, the sweetest of bells ringing in delight. It really is a shame she’s an elf.

“You have unique problems, Thorin Oakenshield,” she says, amusement still crinkling the corners of her eyes.

“How did you know?” he asks and she doesn’t pretend she doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“The minds of others lay open to me.” At Thorin’s more than a little alarmed expression, she smiles slightly. “Do not worry yourself, Thorin. It is beyond me to see and feel every single memory – your singular experience has simply left highly visible traces on your soul.”

For a second he thinks he sees a ring glimmering on her finger, but the light disappears as quickly as it had flashed.

“And Mithrandir did make a vague mention when he last passed through our woods.”

Thorin could swear he sees faint annoyance in her expression before it eases again. “At the time I did not understand his meaning. I assume he meant to reassure me for when the moment arrived that I looked into your mind and found something I had never seen before.”

His smile is only a little crooked. “I am certain you would have managed, milady.”

“Perhaps,” she says. “But you know how much Mithrandir likes to meddle in the affairs of others.”

“Do I ever,” he grumbles, though it’s more for show than anything else. Any residual anger at Gandalf had long ago dispersed, even if the wizard remains annoyingly frustrating at times.

She doesn’t say anything in return, so Thorin steels himself to broach the one topic that still causes him anxiety. “What do elves want as recompense for their help then? I assume you didn’t aid us to receive nothing in return.”

The corners of her lips turn upwards once more and he cannot help but marvel at the effect such a small movement can have. “We seek no reimbursement, Thorin Oakenshield. It was our honour to stand with Aulë’s children against the darkness once more.” Her eyes are far away, or rather *farther* away as she rarely seems to be completely anchored in the moment, when she adds, “It is very possible that we shall need

our strengths in the years to come. Do not forget this, King under the Mountain.”

He bows his head in deference. “Our memories are long, Lady.” It is a promise, tacit yet, but understood nonetheless. “I thank you for your kindness, where others would have scorned me simply because of my race.”

She smiles once more and inclines her head in return.

No words are spoken between the King under the Mountain and the Lady of the Golden Wood after that. Perhaps none are needed – a miracle it would be indeed, such accord between a child of stone and a child of the stars.

*

Long after the elves have left and he has stood in front of his soldiers, reassuring them just by his presence and with a few well-chosen words, and night has descended over their camp Thorin sits awake in his tent, his mind refusing to rest.

A ring rests in front of him on his makeshift pallet, small and simple by dwarven standards – gold inlaid with a single blue gem of the colour of Durin’s house – yet clearly wrought with great skill. The rest of his father’s things, too, had been brought to his tent, including a key that Gandalf had once given Thorin himself, but his attention is captured by this one small item only.

Unwilling to touch it, Thorin simply stares at the almost irritatingly beautiful ring, his mind at war.

The ring itself, or the dark pull that lingers from a time long gone when Sauron had been strong and had influenced the minds of the wielders of the nine and, to a far lesser extent, the seven cannot bear the sole responsibility for his line’s weakness for gold and treasure; after all, Thorin himself had succumbed to the madness and he had never worn this ring, can in fact barely remember seeing it a handful of times in his life, glinting tantalizingly on the hand of his grandfather and father. Very few only know that one of the famed rings of power is

still in the possession of the line of Durin, all others lost or destroyed. Fewer even are aware that this, the first of the seven, the ring of Durin's line was once given to Durin III by Celebrimbor – not by Sauron like the other six. (Presumably not many dwarves would appreciate that fact these days, much as Thorin had not appreciated it when he had first been told this lore by his father.)

This ring now is rightfully his to wear – *rightfully*, oh how he wishes it weren't so – and Thorin is afraid to even touch it.

So much for the fabled strength of Durin's children. Though perhaps, in this case, it *is* prudent to be afraid.

He is afraid because he fears madness with good cause. He is afraid because a part of him still, after everything, *wants* to put that seemingly innocuous ring on his finger. He is afraid that this little thing has played a role in his father's and grandfather's downfall and yet there's nothing to rage against, nobody to blame but their own twisted minds.

He is afraid that this ring truly was the reason that Erebor has prospered for so long and once the ruler stops wearing it their wealth will diminish until life is a struggle once more.

He is afraid that he will fall again.

And yet he cannot simply throw the ring away, the thought of it in a less cautious dwarf's hands alarming to say the least, nor is it in his power to destroy it – and he isn't sure that he would, if it *were* in his power.

Slowly his hand reaches out, one finger skimming over the ring's smooth surface. For a moment his breath halts, his thoughts stop, his mind in flux as the gold glimmers in front of him growing brighter and brighter, but then the illusion passes, only leaving a small ring, shiny but not unreasonably so, behind.

Thorin's movements are only a little jerky as he carefully wraps the ring in a wad of cloth and tugs it away safely in his gear. Once in Erebor, he could hide it away safely and leave it to accumulate dust in some secret corner. Fili – and what Fili knows Kíli usually knows too

– would have to know one day, of course, but that is still decades away and Thorin has no intention to give the secret of the ring to anyone without a *long* list of warnings that better be heeded or else.

And still, sleep that night would be a long time in coming.

Chapter 15

With a last lingering look at the stone now obscuring the entrance to two hundred dwarves' and King Thráin II's last resting place, Thorin mounts his pony, setting out to the north, to Erebor, at the head of a long line of dwarven warriors, many of them bent but not broken.

At the edge of the valley he gives in to the urge to look back once more, and sees the glowing figure of Lady Galadriel in the distance, standing atop a rock formation as she gazes towards the darkened halls of Khazad-dûm. What her thoughts are Thorin cannot begin to guess, but it feels strangely comforting to know that someone stands guard at the borders of their ancient kingdom, wary of the shadows that still dwell within.

This time it is Balin who rides beside him at the front of the column and Thorin can't quite decide whether he's grateful for that fact or not because only Balin would be direct and dutiful enough to bring up the state of Erebor's throne so soon after tragedy had struck.

"You do realize that the coronation will have to be soon, Thorin?" Balin murmurs, quiet enough for only Thorin to hear him – who groans.

"Mahal help us all, the Lords are going to have a field day with this. A king barely out of adolescence."

"I don't think you need to worry about that, Thorin. You are already well-liked and respected. Do you truly think the people haven't noticed you spending time on the lower levels, listening to their complaints and going on patrols with the guards? And don't forget you're now a hero twice over."

Thorin snorts. "It's not the *people* I'm worried about, Balin. The

noble families will no doubt want proof that I can hold the throne and run Erebor with the same efficiency that my father did before me.”

Balin’s smile is all teeth, and reminds him far more of Dwalin than of his usually rather easy-going brother. “Do you wish for me to arrange an example?”

He shakes his head. “No, this is something I’ll have to do myself. But I *would* ask for your continued support. I’ll need all the trusted advisors I can get.”

And the list isn’t that long.

“Of course, Thorin,” Balin promises, his eyes softening. “We’ll always stand by you.”

“And I couldn’t ask for better friends.” The admission comes easily and Balin’s gentle smile lets him know it’s appreciated.

The moment of peace doesn’t last long enough by a long shot, his thoughts soon returning to the political quagmire he’d soon need to step foot in.

After some deliberations, a mess of half-formed plans, and a newly acquired headache that dully pounds behind his eyes, he sighs, only having come to one clear conclusion.

“Have I ever told you that I loathe politics, Balin?”

“Lately it seems you have diplomatic relations, at least, well in hand,” Balin points out, though he doesn’t protest the statement. “Not that you ever talk about it.”

Thorin raises a brow.

Balin sighs. “Frequent visits to Dale, at least once when Thranduil was present also. And we’ve all seen you talk to the Lady Galadriel.” His expression turns slightly puzzled. “Thranduil even sent us an escort for the journey through the story. Mahal knows how you suddenly get along with elves so well.”

The reflexive denial that would have spewed forth instantly only a few years ago remains absent.

“Yes, well,” he says dryly, “even tree-huggers have their good sides. And we need those alliances, just as we need to be on good terms with

Dale.”

He turns his head to look at his old mentor and finds Balin gazing at him with both astonishment and no little bit of pride.

“You have grown in wisdom, Thorin,” Balin remarks, shaking his head fondly. “To think I still remember trying to beat etiquette and history into your thick head when you were just a wee lad.”

His face suddenly turns deadly serious. “I say this with the utmost respect, but whatever you do, do not let the kingship consume you. Do not lose yourself for this.”

Oh Balin, don't you think it's a little late for that?

He doesn't say it out loud. Chances are Balin knows exactly what he's thinking anyway; and if not, well, then there's one piece of knowledge he can spare his old friend.

“We all do our duty, Balin,” he finally does reply, short and yet it says everything. Balin's troubled and saddened expression agrees with him, but he doesn't protest.

After all, he is a dwarf too.

*

The closer they come to Erebor, the more Thorin's mind darkens. He should be glad to have home in sight once more, but all he can see is the faces of his siblings when he brings them tidings of their father's demise. The three of them are all that's left of the ruling house of Durin's descendants now, three stragglers trying to remain afloat in a world that seem bent on destroying their line.

At least Azog won't be doing any of the destroying anymore.

Balin and Dwalin, too, have been quiet, whether because of their own darkened thoughts or because of respect for Thorin's grief he could not say, but he is grateful nonetheless. He doesn't think he could stand meaningless conversation right now, not when he struggles to keep his mind from bitterness and already tries to compose a way to break the news to Dís and Frerin that would incur the least damage to any of them.

He should've known that it wouldn't come to that, that they would await the return of Erebor's host at the gates and that they would *know*, like he knew the moment he saw his father's face that his grandfather was dead. That, and the fact that he is the one to ride at the head of the ranks of warriors and supply wagons, not Thráin.

Their faces are dead-white when he finally hands the reins of his pony to somebody else and halts in front of them. There must be similar heart-break on his face for when he opens his arms they fall into them without thought or hesitation.

Somewhere behind him Dwalin is making sure that they will be left alone, their grief honoured, but he cannot find it in himself to care about anything but the two dwarves in his arms, shaking with shared pain and shock. Deeply buried beneath his grief there is relief that he wouldn't need to say the words. He wouldn't need to say *father is dead*. He would have to say *he is buried near the gates of our lost kingdom* and *he died valiantly*, but that time is not yet – for now there is only silence.

Sometime later, he hasn't kept track, they finally move towards the privacy of their rooms – Thorin's rooms to be exact, for that is where they always go when they need to find refuge from the world, ever since Dís was just a wee dwarfling and scared of thunder raging outside the mountain.

They make it to his room and collapse on the plush rug in a tangle of limbs and braids and there is always a hand touching him, an elbow, a head, at least a finger, as if they are afraid that if they let go of him, he too will vanish and never return. So he leans into the touch, returns their gestures and breathes calmly and deeply and doesn't really know who's reassuring who here anymore.

"It could've been worse," Frerin says, voice slightly hoarse and startlingly loud after their long silence, and Thorin wishes he hadn't heard it. It's true, achingly true and yet it shouldn't have been Frerin who had said it, shadows in his eyes and forced to confront reality so early.

Dís' eyes are fixed on nothing, wide with remembered horror. "We

waited every day to hear from you, for a raven to come bearing news. When there was nothing we feared that *you...*”

Her voice chokes on the rest of her sentence, not even Thorin’s broad hand on her cheek enough to banish the memory.

“Shh, I’m here, lukhudel, I’m right here.”

With a shudder she turns her face into his hair, clinging tightly as she seeks to suppress further sounds. Next to him Frerin, too, is silent, but Thorin can hear him breathing tightly.

He doesn’t know how to help them, how to truly reassure them for he does know the brutality of the world, and that? That is the hardest to bear.

So he screws his eyes shut and draws them both closer still and hopes that somehow it will be enough.

*

For several days they sleep in the same room, mostly even in the same bed, unwilling to let go of each other even for the night. Suddenly it doesn’t matter that Thorin wakes up screaming from nightmares more often than not, or that Dis latches onto them both so strongly that they can hardly move, or that Frerin lies awake for much of the night unable to sleep.

Five days into their retreat from the rest of the world, Balin softly knocks on the door. With a heavy heart Thorin goes to meet him – duty calls once more, he knows he’s let it wait for long enough.

“The lords are getting restless,” Balin says quietly, as to not disturb the tangle of bodies that is Frerin and Dís on Thorin’s bed. “You will have to make an appearance soon.”

Thorin nods tightly. He takes a step out into the corridor, gently closing the door behind himself.

When he looks back at Balin, to his surprise he finds the older dwarf smiling. “I’ve also had a very lovely dwarrowdam batter down my door for the last few days.”

Thorin’s eyebrows rise. “Oh?”

“Said her name was Darla,” Balin continues, sounding a little too smug for Thorin’s liking, “and she told me to tell you to ‘get your behind to my door soon or else you’ll never taste my tea again’.”

Thorin almost winces. Right.

With a stab of guilt he realizes that even before their departure for the gates of Khazad-dûm, he hasn’t visited Darla and her sons much, too caught up in his own worries. Another item to add to his ever-growing list of people and duties he had neglected during his worry, and then later his grief.

“Arrange a meeting with the lords,” he finally says wearily.

Balin nods once and leaves with a last sympathetic look. He knows better than to interrupt further, now that the end of their seclusion already nears.

Later that day a note from Balin lands on his desk.

Tomorrow at noon.

He stares at it for a while, then crumples the paper in his hand.

Thorin goes to the meeting with all the determination and stubbornness of a Durin on a mission.

Everyone else is already seated when he enters, and he doesn’t even bother to sit down himself before starting the meeting.

“You have called me from my grief for this gathering, my lords. State your intent,” he says loudly, silencing the small conversations all around the room.

Fundin stands, inclining his head. “We apologize for this, my Prince, but the matter of the empty throne of Erebor has to be addressed. We do not do well without a king.”

“Is there any question as to the succession?” Thorin inquires, though they all well know that the throne is his by rights.

There is a general wave of muttering and unrest around the room.

“You have not the right to deny me the throne, unless you have grounds to do so.” Thorin lets his gaze sweep through the room, eyes hard even while his voice remains pleasant. “Have I done anything in the last few decades to make you deem me unsuitable for the throne?”

Only silence greets his question. And just when he begins to hope that this will be quick and painless after all, Lord Borin speaks up. Of course he does. "What about your consorting with those... *elves* in the woods, not even to mention the men whom you drain our treasury for. There're even rumours about trade with the *halflings* of all people."

Thorin's expression goes from cold to downright icy in a heartbeat. Anyone who knows him would recognize this look as spelling Danger for whoever angered him.

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with trading with hobbits for food we dearly need? With making alliances to support us against the attacks of our enemies?" His voice is dangerously low, yet quiet and even in exaggerated patience. "Tell me, Lord Borin, would you rather not have had the assistance of the elves in the battle only weeks past? Would you rather have double or triple the dead lying on the battlefield due to your thick-headed insistence to hate everyone who isn't a dwarf? Would you rather there were even more families crying out in grief for the loss of a loved one?" He pauses, leaning closer to the noble, almost cowering with fear at the fire in Thorin's words. "But wait, you weren't there, were you? You didn't face death in battle, you didn't have to care for the well-being of your fellow warriors."

He smiles crookedly. "And as for draining the treasury? We could rebuild Dale ten times over and it wouldn't even make a dent in the wealth of Erebor. Do not worry yourself with poverty."

None of you know what poverty even looks like.

Silently, Borin shrinks back against his seat. He's gone white beneath his full brown beard.

Thorin looks around the room, eyes still sparking with anger lingering on every face. "Does anyone else have anything to say?"

More silence.

A chair scrapes over the ground as Nain rises and Thorin could swear he sees a barely repressed smile on the old dwarf's face. He bows deeply and says, loud and clear, "Your majesty."

The rest is only a formality.

It takes Thorin two hours on the training grounds to even begin extinguishing his fury at Lord Borin's words. It's not only that he insulted Hobbits, which Thorin is *never* going to stand for, not when one of their folk had proven a greater friend to the dwarves than has been seen in centuries, or his thrice-cursed short-sightedness, but the fact that Thorin knows that Lord Borin isn't the only one who harbours such thoughts. It makes him want to scream and throw the truth of what their fate had once been in their ignorant faces. It makes him want to punch something – so punch something he does, until his hands are almost bleeding, his muscles trembling in fatigue, his voice hoarse.

When he leaves the training hall again his whole body hurts, but his secrets are still safe and he has calmed himself enough to return to his rooms. He would not want Frerin and Dís to see him so angry.

*

Darla answers his knock on the door immediately, mouth already open, no doubt to chastise him, but as soon as she gets a good look at his face she silences herself.

“Come in then,” she finally says instead. “The tea is waiting.”

A subtle scent of fresh leaves and green, does indeed hang in the air, and Thorin – quite involuntary – finds his nose twitching.

He has barely settled down in one of the big armchairs when a cup is plonked down on the table next to him, hot and steaming, and a sleepy young dwarfling placed in his lap. Nori looks up at him with wide eyes, immediately catching all of Thorin's attention.

Two minutes later one of his braids has ended up in Nori's fist, despite him having left the baby stage quite a while ago – perhaps the little tyke is already developing a habit for stealing things – and Thorin's cup is still untouched.

However, he does spare the focus to ask, “Where's Dori?”

“I sent him to the market to get food for the evening meal.” She

gives him a stern look. "You'll have to wait at *least* until he's back before you disappear again."

"I will do my best," he promises solemnly, and finally reaches for his tea before it can go completely cold.

Nori makes a small sound of discontent, but settles down when Thorin's other arm tightens around him securely.

They drink silently for a while, Nori almost eerily quiet on Thorin's lap – rather unusual in that most dwarflings are very noisy quite a lot of the time (Thorin would know).

Finally Darla opens her mouth to ask something, then closes it again, looking helpless, but Thorin can imagine what the question would've been about well enough.

"The coronation will be next week," he says wearily, resisting the urge to burrow his face in his tea cup and never come up again.

Darla regards him over the top her cup. "You don't seem glad for it," she says carefully, as if afraid to tread on dangerous ground.

He shrugs. "Who knows if I'm ready for this responsibility?"

More than 200 years old and here he is, still asking himself this question. Perhaps even asking this question with more force behind it than he ever had when he had been young and not ready for as much responsibility as had been thrust upon him.

"I do," Darla says, and the fierceness in her voice leaves him no choice but to look up and meet her gaze. "And I wager everyone else who knows you, if only a little, does as well, my king."

Thorin knows he must look pained in some way for she adds, a little gentler, "There's no other king under whose rule I would rather raise my three children."

It takes a moment to register, for the coin to drop, but when it does his mouth falls open in astonishment.

"Again?"

Darla snorts. "Tactfully put, Thorin."

Thorin manages both to close his mouth and a sincere smile.

"It's a blessing," he says quietly, his smile widening. But still there's

sorrow in her eyes and he frowns. “Where’s Nani?”

No husband should willingly be absent during this joyous time.

Thorin’s heart sinks when Darla avoids his gaze, her throat working silently for a moment before she says, half on a sob, “He went with the host. He didn’t come back.”

He sits frozen, noise roaring in his ears. He had never known Nani well, neither in this life nor the last, but he knows that he hadn’t died on the battlefield the first time. Which means that Nari is dead because of *him*. Because Thorin showed kindness to the dwarfrowdam he loved and he decided to pay back that debt by following him into battle. By dying for him.

And until now, Thorin hadn’t even *known*.

“I’m so sorry,” he says bleakly for he well knows those words alone are never enough. “I didn’t know.”

Once more guilt sinks heavily into his stomach. One of his warriors, and he hadn’t even *known*. Hadn’t even acknowledged the sacrifices of single individuals. It doesn’t matter that Balin had refused to give him the list of the dead on the grounds that Thorin had enough to grieve for already, and that Dwalin had aided his brother in keeping the scroll out of his reach. It doesn’t matter, *he still should’ve known*.

He finds no more peace in his mind that day, not when talking to Dori, who looks older again and speaks with more maturity than ever, nor when sneaking Nori’s token into the dwarfling’s bedroll when no one is looking.

Not even Dís and Frerin can shake him out of his bleak thoughts that night, though they do not desist trying until sleep has claimed them, and eventually him.

*

Girion, too, he had neglected to meet lately, so Thorin makes his way to Dale under the pretence of inviting the Lord of Dale to the coronation in person – he’s still not the king, can still do these things without everyone immediately reading too much into a simple gesture

– but, really, he just wishes to see his friend again. Ill thoughts still plague him after the day afore’s revelation, and he hopes that the fresh air and an old friend will soothe the hurt somewhat.

Thorin is aware that Girion has already passed the prime of his life since they’ve first met, and that the last thing he needs to be reminded of right now is how soon the lives of men (and hobbits) fizzle out compared to a dwarf’s, yet his heart still gives a painful twinge at the realization that there is more white and grey than dark brown in Girion’s hair now when he greets Thorin with open arms and an open smile.

“It is good of you to come, my friend,” Girion says as he leads Thorin inside his hall towards the warm fireplace. “Especially in this time of your grief. I’m sorry for your loss.”

Thorin accepts his words with a small nod. It’s not the first time by far that this has been said to him in the last week, but coming from Girion it means more than most.

“How have you been then?” he asks, steering the conversation into safer waters. He’s talked about his grief enough.

A brilliant smile transforms Girion’s face, one that Thorin understands when the man returns from the next room with a carefully wrapped bundle in his arms that he holds out to Thorin.

Thorin looks down at the little boy that he is now holding. He is fast asleep.

“You’re old already, for having a babe, if I remember the ages of men correctly,” he murmurs.

Girion shrugs. “My wife is young and sprightly enough. And he’s a lovely wee lad, well worth a few sleepless nights even at my age.”

Thorin smiles gently. “They usually are.”

With a slight jolt he wonders when Bard would be born. His dealings with the honourable if suspicious man are on the list of things he still deeply regrets.

But no, it would be decades yet. Still, the feeling of a babe in his arms brings back a wistfulness he hasn’t felt since holding a younger Nori in his arms. Some days he lives without thinking of Fíli and Kíli

and feels slightly ashamed for it, but most days their absence leaves a glaring hole at his side that not even Dís an Frerin can completely fill. They're his beloved siblings – and he can wish for no better – but not his beloved nephews. Those he still misses, and he knows with a heavy heart that he would continue to miss them for a while. Or perhaps forever, but that is a possibility he refuses to dwell on.

Patience has long been his necessary watchword now, however much he despises it.

Chapter 16



The day of the coronation, dawns with a mass of rain clouds obscuring the view down the valley and Thorin can't help but be glad that he lives inside a mountain – and feel a quiet sort of glee at the thought of the elven delegation from Mirkwood getting sopping wet on their journey.

Before he even has the time to really think – read: worry – about the day ahead, Dís and Frerin, both still in their morning clothes, invade his chambers to ‘help’ him get ready. In Frerin’s case that means skulking around in the background and making funny faces, but Dís has brought his newly made ceremonial garb, which he does in fact *need* so he can hardly complain about their early morning visit.

As she helps Thorin put on the sapphire studded belt, Dís says nonchalantly, “You aren’t even the youngest dwarf to ever sit on Erebor’s throne. Thorin I was three years younger than you are now. I looked it up.”

“How reassuring,” Thorin says, dry as the dust that has no doubt accumulated on the throne in his father’s absence, and lets her fiddle with his hair. “If I recall correctly Thorin I was the one who abandoned Erebor in favour of the Grey Mountains, leaving our home empty for three hundred years.”

He can practically see her deciding not to dignify that with a response.

The long, sweeping cloak goes on last, and Dís gives everything a cursory pat.

“Are you ready?”

Thorin almost snorts. For all that he’d been the King of Durin’s

folk for most of his last life, he had never been officially crowned, a de jure king, but not much more. Still, he had never doubted his calling – until his last days – and yet now here he is, about to officially become a king and *he isn't even sure he deserves it*.

Misinterpreting his silence, both his siblings are looking at him with worried eyes.

“We’ll be right beside you,” Frerin assures him softly – an encouraging concept, if it weren’t for the fact that the long walk up to the throne is required to be done by Thorin alone.

He gives them a smile nevertheless. “I know. I’ll be fine.”

“Yes, you will,” Dís says firmly and with a last tug to right his collar she steps back, eyes sweeping over Thorin’s figure in a critical once-over.

He stands still, letting her gaze at his ceremonial garb – tunics of royal blue with silver highlights and small diamonds at the hem and cuffs, a long dark cloak, run through by veins of gold, beard braided and clipped with its usual clasp, his black tresses flowing freely down his back with only two braids proclaiming his status as brother, prince and heir of Durin; further braids would be woven during the course of the ceremony – but when she makes no move to tear her eyes away, a damning wetness obscuring her blue eyes, he asks gently, “Do I pass muster?”

She startles, one hand unconsciously rising up to her face, and takes another step back. “Of course, nadad. You look fabulous.”

Behind her Frerin tries to cover his snort with a cough and fails miserably. Twin glares make him throw up his hands in defence. “I didn’t say anything! You do look absolutely *lovely*, Thorin.”

Thorin’s glare intensifies, and now it’s Dís turn to try to hide a giggle.

“You’re hopeless, the both of you,” he sighs, though fondly. “Have some decorum.”

“I’m quite certain you have enough decorum for the three of us,” Frerin points out and jumps out of the way when Thorin swats at him.

Dís inhales noisily. “Hey, careful! You’ll undo all my hard work!”

“Hard work?” Frerin scoffs. “You just shoved the pile at Thorin and told him to put everything on before the council changes its mind.”

Not that the council really can change its mind now, as Thorin had told both of them at least three times already. He is the crown prince, and that’s that. They might – and will – continue complaining, but he’s fairly sure that it’s not actually anyone’s goal to see another on the throne; dwarves are far too traditionalist to condone such a thing, and far too loyal to their ruling house. Besides it doesn’t take a genius to realize that the only thing that would follow would be chaos.

Before Dís can open her mouth to retaliate, Thorin says a little pointedly, “Shouldn’t you two change as well? It’s only a half hour till the ceremony.”

He can *see* Dís repressing a groan – if there is anything Dís hates like the pest it’s having to get dressed up, even if it’s for her own brother’s coronation. But she does go when he shoos them out of the door, a well-placed elbow landing in her other brother’s side when he dares to snicker at her.

Closing the door behind them, Thorin resists the urge to collapse against the hard stone.

This is entirely ridiculous.

He’s a prince of Durin’s blood, has been king for over a hundred years already, why in the name of Mahal’s blessed beard should he feel nervous *now*? The lingering guilt, that he understands, for his last few days of life the last time never truly leave his mind. But nervousness?

Abruptly he straightens, his chin set. He is Thorin II Oakenshield and Dragonslayer or whatever else they want to call him now, and he will face his own coronation head held high and without fear. He *will*.

*

Thorin kneels in front of the throne, the cold seeping into his knees, anchoring him in reality. It is Nain who steps forward, bearing the crown of Durin, now cleaned off the blood that had stained it on the

battlefield.

Both his father and grandfather had elected to wear this crown at all times – Thorin on the other hand has already decided to use this crown only in official situations; the lighter, less ostentatious one that had been forged for him in his youth would do just as well – not to mention be more comfortable – the rest of the time.

He barely hears Nain reciting the traditional words, rouses only enough to say his own vows, voice strong and unwavering.

The crown sinks down onto his head, an almost uncomfortably heavy weight, an alien presence on his brow.

Two pairs of hands, familiar in their shape and size, touch his hair, movements equally sure yet deliberately slow as two more braids are woven into his hair to be tied back at the back of his head, almost lost in the mane that still flows down his shoulders.

A slight tug – that *has* to be Frerin – announces that they are finished, and his siblings step back, one on each side.

He rises and turns around slowly, presenting himself to his subjects, head raised high.

For a moment, all he can see in the mass of faces looking at him is the lack of his sister-sons. Fíli and Kíli should have been here, should have been at his side during this moment. So many things he'd done *for* them, for them to witness this – and stand in his place in years to come.

And somehow, he'd also always imagined, ever since that moment that one little halfling had stood between him and certain death, that *Bilbo* would be here at his side during his moment of triumph.

That Bilbo would be there, his hand ready for Thorin to slide his into his touch, smaller in statue, yet large in presence and warmth.

(A flight of fancy, a ruthlessly realistic dwarf would've called it. Nothing more than a dream, even without his deplorable behaviour towards the hobbit before the end.)

So many should-haves.

He wrenches his mind away from such perilous thoughts – he can-

not appear weak, not now, not right after his coronation in front of his people (not ever) – and focuses on the pathway in front of him, and those waiting to wish him well.

Thorin has to admit to some surprise when the elven delegation from Mirkwood steps forward and he recognizes King Thranduil as the one leading them. He had known an envoy was on its way, yes, but that the King himself had come is an unexpected gesture of respect; Thranduil hadn't been present at Thráin's coronation.

It's mostly a symbolic gesture, considering that their exchange is limited to dignified nods and an offer of congratulations on Thranduil's part, but an encouraging one.

On the other hand Thorin isn't exactly surprised to find the tall form of Gandalf among the envoy from Dale. The wizard would hardly have let this chance to check up on him slip by.

Girion, too, keeps their exchange short, but there is an honest smile playing around his lips and his eyes sparkle in such a way as he looks upon Thorin that he cannot help but quirk his lips in reply.

The Lord of Dale, at least, he knows to be sincerely glad for his ascension to the throne.

A long line of dwarven dignitaries follows, one the same as the next and most barely interesting enough to make it easy not to dwell on unwelcome thoughts, and despite it being his own coronation Thorin can't say that he's sorry when it's all over and the feast begins, leaving him free to roam.

It takes him a little while to corner Gandalf and before he finally does he's half believed the wizard to be gone again already.

"Why didn't you come earlier?" Thorin asks, the question out before he can stop it and still he is unable to keep a hint of accusation of out his voice.

Gandalf looks uncommonly grim. "Your father would not have listened to my counsel, not when he didn't possess clear enough a mind to listen to his own son in the end."

With the confirmation Thorin's knees sag. "I couldn't stop him. He

just wouldn't *listen*, wouldn't see reason."

"I know." Gandalf's voice is gentle, as is the hand he places on the dwarf's shoulder. "You did all you could."

At Thorin's questioning gaze, he admits, "Imagine my surprise when a missive from the Lady Galadriel reaches me with a detailed account of what you had done. An alliance between elves and dwarves, however grudging." Gandalf smiles, something very much like wonder crossing his face as he shakes his head. "I hadn't thought it possible, not so early on."

Thorin frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I fear this battle with the orcs will not be the last one." The wizard suddenly seems to be leaning on his staff more heavily. "Darkness is gathering. Under whose command or to what end, I do not know. In fact I do not even know that much for sure, it is only a sense of unease dogging my steps wherever they lead me, that something is wrong in the heart of Middle-earth. And we will all feel its effects sooner or later."

Gandalf gazes at Thorin, his dark eyes glittering under the rim of his hat. "We might need to call on the gathered might of dwarves, elves and men again before your time is over."

Suddenly the wizard smiles, bright in the wake of the former gloom. "But let us not talk of such dark things now. Today is a day to be merrily and rejoice."

Well, maybe Gandalf should've thought of that *before* starting on the topic, Thorin thinks a little sourly, but without voicing the complaint. Arguing with Gandalf gets one in only exactly one direction: nowhere.

"One still might have wished for the day of one's coronation to not also serve as a day of remembrance for the dead of Azanulbizar," he comments instead, but Gandalf shakes his head.

"Let the dead be remembered when there is joy also, Thorin. Do not begrudge them that."

Thorin concedes his point with a nod. Then, looking about their al-

cove to make sure no one is near enough to overhear or watch the proceedings, he takes a step closer, one hand rooting around in the folds of his clothing.

“There is one more thing I wish to speak of,” he says quietly and stretches out his hand.

Gandalf takes the small velvet bag from his palm with an eyebrow raised in curiosity, but no hesitation. The golden ring with the Durin blue jewel tumbles out into his palm and Thorin averts his eyes from its shine.

“Ah,” Gandalf murmurs. “I had wondered.”

For a moment he studies the ring with a detached, assessing gaze, then he looks back up at Thorin.

“What do you wish me to do with this? It belongs to you by right.”

Thorin grits his teeth. “And I do not want it. Nor do I want anyone else to risk falling under its spell. Keep it safe.” He pauses. “And if I, or any of my line, ever ask for it, return it *as long as their reason seems valid*. I trust you in this, Tharkûn. Do not abuse that trust.”

Gandalf studies him a little while longer, something oddly like respect glinting in his eyes, and then, just to make Thorin’s day any stranger, he *bows*. “I understand – you have my word, King Thorin.”

They part – for now – with amicable nods.

*

Thorin finds Frerin laughing and drinking at a table with Balin, Dwalin, Óin and Glóin. Darla is nowhere to be seen, but that is hardly surprising, pregnant and still grieving as she is. He makes a mental note to look in on her later.

For a moment a hush falls over the group as Thorin nears, and belatedly he realizes that he must look somewhat unfamiliar in all his fineries and the heavy crown.

Then again, people always used to hush when he entered a room, especially when it had been loud and boisterous to begin with, though whether because of his status or his general grumpiness he isn’t sure.

(When Thorin finally found the right round green door – he would be prepared to swear that there were at least a hundred of them in this hobbit settlement alone – with no small amount of frustration already bubbling at the back of his mind for having taken so bloody long, the first thing he heard were laughing voices, loud and carefree. It might just be his imagination, but he thought he could hear Fili and Kili’s voices specifically, still so young the both of them. Still unburdened.

He sighed to himself. Thorin knew enough of the world to realize that by the end of this journey, his nephews wouldn’t be the same dwarves, that foolhardy yet endearing naivety probably lost forever.

He also knew that the moment he knocked on that door, whatever cheer resided in this hobbit burrow would fizzle out and die as surely as a flame guttered when deprived of air. It had happened often enough lately, after all.

It occurred to him that the small bench behind the gate was as good a place as any other to enjoy a last peaceful smoke before their quest truly began. Let them have their laughter and their joy for a little while longer.)

And then Dwalin loudly says, “Oh look who’s decided to grace us with his presence!”

The only thing Thorin’s deciding at the moment is whether to glare at Dwalin or give him a relieved smile. He settles on the first choice – no need to strain Dwalin this early in the evening with a show of emotions.

“Some people actually have work to do instead of sitting around doing nothing,” he returns – and it’s not a lie, as new king he has a lot of schmoozing to do, however distasteful the notion.

Frerin’s grin widens. “Not doing nothing, brother mine. Can’t you see we’re all busy drinking?”

The whole table breaks out into guffaws, the happy, relaxed atmosphere enough to even make Thorin join in. *After* cuffing Frerin over the head lightly.

“Where’s Dís?” he asks around a handful of peanuts.

Frerin rolls his eyes. “She got another one of those ravens. She *still* thinks she’s being subtle about it, too.”

Thorin grins to himself, pleased for more than one reason.

“What’s got a dwarf to do to get a pint of ale over here?” he asks next, bumping Frerin along on the bench so he can sit more comfortably.

Immediately three tankards appear in front of him.

Thorin raises his brow. “Well, that was easier than expected.”

“Everything for our king,” Frerin murmurs and if it weren’t for his shit-eating grin Thorin might almost think he’s serious.

“*And* now you’ve got to drink it all,” Dwalin puts in from across the table, a challenging smirk on his face.

Thorin narrows his eyes at him – that smug smirk certainly should be wiped off his face – and finds that even after more than two hundred years he’s still quite capable of making really moronic decisions when it comes to drinking. And trying to beat Dwalin.

Three tankards lately everything is comfortably fuzzy, the dwarf ale expectedly strong, and he doesn’t actually remember much after the sixth one (nor does he remember how exactly he came to drink the sixth tankard, or the fourth or fifth come to think of it), just flashes of Frerin’s laugh, Dwalin’s deep rumble, Balin’s mellowed sighs, Óin’s overly loud voice, and Glóin’s burbs. He also vaguely seems to remember Dís calling him a big idiot – while taking the seventh pint from him – but that might well be his subconscious.

The headache he wakes up with the next morning, however, certainly isn’t imaginary, more’s the pity.

Some kind soul has left a pitcher of clear, cool water next to his bed – and a washcloth, which is probably supposed to be a hint. He suspects Dís, who for all her toughness, has never actually tried to deny her soft spot for both her brothers. He downs most of the water and then goes for a full bath, since he does smell somewhat rank.

Slowly the fog in his mind clears and reality returns with the sober-

ing sight of the crown sitting on his nightstand when he exits the bathing chamber.

He stands there, just staring at it, that tangible proof, for long moments until a knock at the door allows his eyes to slide away and refocus somewhere else, though a distant sense of shame for his behaviour remains. He knows what comes next, what he'll have to do on a day to day basis without much rest, staring at an artefact that, in the end, isn't any less meaningless than most other objects isn't going to make anything easier.

Thorin opens the door to find Balin looking slightly regretfully. He doesn't sigh, doesn't grumble, just straightens and throws on a cloak for the chillier parts of the mountain.

Do not let it be said that Thorin, son of Thráin, does not heed his duty when it calls.

Chapter 17

Thorin is busy trying to find a reason why he *really* couldn't be doing paperwork at the moment – one that doesn't include the complaint that he's been doing far too much of it already the past week and even he realizes that he needs a Mahal-forsaken *break*, which would, in fact, be the truth – when Dís enters his new study.

“I wish to return to the Blue Mountains,” she says without preamble, shoulders squared and eyes resolute.

Thorin looks up from the mound of paperwork on his desk. He doesn't even pretend surprise, but he *does* take care not to show his secret joy at her announcement. After a moment of deliberation he sets down his quill as well, lacing his fingers together as he gives her his whole attention. “I suppose this has something to do with the letters you keep receiving.”

She opens her mouth, then closes it again. “How do you know about that?!”

“I'm your older brother, Dís, I'm *supposed* to know these things.” He blithely ignores her glare.

“When do you want to depart?”

Her shocked look is well worth the effort of keeping his amused smile under wraps.

“You're serious?” she finally asks, squinting at Thorin as if checking for signs of a concussion, or perhaps mental instability.

“Quite serious. I only ask that you will bring him back to Erebor to marry and live here. I wouldn't want you to live so far away, mizimith.”

The smile that breaks out on her face is radiant. “As if I could leave

you alone for that long, Thorin. Erebor would collapse.”

He makes a face. “Don’t go crushing my fragile ego, *namad*.”

“Your ego is about as fragile as I am,” she scoffs. “Any other wishes or demands, your majesty?”

He scowls at her. She bloody well knows that he hates her calling him that.

“As a matter of fact, *yes*. I have a letter I’d like you to deliver. In person, if possible.”

She takes the envelope, curious. Looks at the addressee. An eyebrow lifts. “Picking up more strays, brother mine?”

(She and Dori get along famously, a little to Thorin’s surprise. As far as he knows they had never interacted much in the Blue Mountains, but perhaps there is something to say about the more relaxed attitude of youth. Dori especially had become *quite* uptight with the passing years, and of course blamed Nori for it – to exactly no one’s surprise. Nori had been quite proud, too.)

“What good is having a kingdom if I can’t invite a few people now and then?”

She holds up her hands placatingly. “You’ll get no argument from me on that.”

For a moment Dís studies him from, almost curiously, but then her thoughts seem to turn in a different direction and she sighs. “I assume you want me to take along some guards?”

Thorin gives her a Look. *What do you think?* Clearly, she gets the message, though her face says that she doesn’t like it.

“Take Glóin, too, if he is available. He is now our resident expert on Ered Luin.”

Not to mention his... more personal interest.

She nods, turning to go. “I’ll ask him. And Thorin?”

He looks up from the papers that commandeer his reluctant attention – he’s never been fond of the administrative side of running a kingdom; Balin is far better and more patient at this kind of thing.

His sister’s eyes are warm. “Thank you.”

Thorin smiles at her, honestly glad for her joy. “Go on,” he says, nodding toward the door. “I’m sure you want to pack.”

*

Frerin flops down on Thorin’s bed, limbs sprawling every which way.

“So little Dís is going to get married. Before either of us! What’s that all about?” He sounds quite hilariously put out by the whole thing.

“Well, she’s undoubtedly the most beautiful of the three of us. Or maybe you simply don’t appear mature enough to the ladies,” Thorin teases completely deadpan. “Besides I don’t have the time for romance.”

Frerin’s face looks like he’s caught between pouting (at the first part) and staring (due to the second one). “That’s a load of dragon dung, Thorin, and you know it.”

Actually, he’s quite sure he doesn’t. Being king, and not just one in exile, has proven almost unhealthily time-consuming.

And of course then there’s also the fact that a picture of a certain blond and blue-eyed hobbit has just bubbled up in his traitorous thoughts.

“You’re not even *looking*.” If not for the topic Frerin would sound endearingly frustrated. “How will you ever find your One if you don’t *look*?”

Thorin’s instinctive wince must’ve been visible for Frerin frowns.

“Nadad?”

Thorin only shakes his head, turning away. He can feel Frerin’s worried but also curious gaze on him, but he refuses to give an inch.

“Leave it alone, Frerin,” Thorin finally says wearily, and when he turns around again Frerin is gone.

In retrospect he really should have known better than to say something like that – or anything on the topic really – to Frerin of all people. If anyone could get it into their heads to try and match-make the king of a realm it would be Frerin.

And he proves frighteningly good at shoving ever different dwarves at Thorin with increasing transparency, first females, then after a while males too.

The latest attempt had ended with Thorin hiding in a supply closet with no thought to his dignity. If that dwarf even came near his butt one more time he would lob his hand off and no mistake! He quietly seethes, already more than fed up with these little altercations, the veiled glances he now so often receives. Every eligible bachelor and bachelorette in Erebor seems to be keen on snagging themselves a King, despite the fact that said King is *not*. Keen, that is. Or an eligible bachelor, really, in the privacy of his own mind. He and Bilbo might never have exchanged vows, or even words of deeper-lying affection, but he still knows his One. In a dwarf's mind that means as much as being taken already.

Problem is, that he can hardly tell everyone that, considering he's never met this supposed One in this life.

He doesn't want to marry, dammit – or at least not right now – but no matter how often he tells Frerin that, it simply doesn't seem to want to stick in his idiot brother's head. If anything, it seems to make him more determined.

Of course Thorin foresees that things would come to a head at some point, but the circumstances prove entirely unexpected.

After a long day of talks with the mining guild of Erebor, all Thorin wants is some peace and quiet in his rooms – what he *doesn't* want is to open the door to a strange dwarf sitting in his favourite armchair, bold as brass, a small smile barely visible in his intricate beard.

His hand has drawn a dagger before conscious thought has caught up with what his eyes are seeing just as the door thumps shut again behind him.

Sizing up the strange dwarf in front of him, Thorin consciously lets his stance relax, face falling back into neutral disinterest – but the dagger stays in his hand. No need to be foolish.

“You are in my quarters, unannounced, without invitation,” Thor-

in says, quiet cold freezing every word. “How did you get past the guards?”

The dwarf only smiles, a slight edge to the expression. “I have my ways. But that’s not what I’m here to talk about.”

“There are ways to talk to me that do not include breaking into my rooms,” Thorin comments, voice no less frigid. “Ways that would make me far more amenable to listening to you.”

“But this is so much more *memorable*,” the other dwarf says and it rankles Thorin that he still sounds unconcerned.

“Certainly, if you wish to remember a night or two in the dungeons,” he snaps.

Ignoring the threat completely, the dwarf stands up and, before Thorin can do more than tighten his grip on his dagger, he dips into a sweeping bow.

“Harlan, son of Farlan, at your service, your majesty. I have a proposition for you.”

Thorin frowns. The name rings a bell. He searches his memory and almost jolts in surprise when he realizes where he’s heard the name before. Farlan is one of the members of the dwarven council in Ered Luin, and the one that Thorin has attributed the most power to as well.

Despite himself he is intrigued, though he keeps his face impassive and makes a point of keeping his dagger in his hand and in sight.

When the king doesn’t say anything, Harlan continues, “Rumours have reached even Belegost that the still spouseless King under the Mountain is searching for the right dwarf.”

Thorin almost growls. He *knows* that Frerin only means well, but this is going too far. The last thing he needs is for dwarves from all over Middle-earth to come to his doorstep – especially not the type of dwarf who would come after hearing such a rumour. A dwarf who wants to bag a King.

He doesn’t stop his lips from curling in distaste.

“I’m afraid that you have travelled here in vain, Master Harlan. I

happen to be quite content with my situation as it is.”

Harlan raises an eyebrow. “Not even if the proposal includes the full backing of the Council of Belegost and an offer of free shipments of what our mountains can offer? It would be a good match.”

Fury rises and Thorin has to release a long breath to keep himself from snapping. Their *nerve* to think that he would jump at the chance to get himself married to a ‘good prospect’.

“I will not marry for political gain,” he says, his voice clipped in an effort to keep it calm, and unwavering in firm conviction. “Every dwarf should understand that.”

Harlan’s eyes narrow. “And what if you never meet your One?”

Thorin *refuses* to flinch, despite the painful skip of his heart at the mere thought that Bilbo would somehow be denied to him in this life.

“Then I will be alone,” he says, almost surprised at the steadiness of his voice – perhaps experience does dull the hurt, sometimes. “But I will not suffer a loveless marriage, not when Erebor stands strong and my family unbroken.”

Just for a moment Harlan’s face twists into something ugly at the clear rejection, but when he speaks his voice is cool and level. A true politician.

“You might want to take the good of Erebor into account while making selfish decisions.”

Thorin is prepared for the stab of pain, the glinting image of that accursed stone that accompany the other dwarf’s words and does not react outwardly.

“It’s a shame, Harlan, son of Farlan, that you chose to approach me this way. I do believe we could have got along far better in other circumstances.”

And with fewer poisoned words aimed against him.

“Guards!”

Harlan blanches ever so slightly – his mask and composure finally slipping – and his eyes widen in apprehension when it is Dwalin, hulking unstoppable Dwalin, who answers Thorin’s call.

Thorin gives the other dwarf a last cold look and turns to Dwalin.

“Dwalin, please escort this *gentledwarf* to his lodgings. And find out which guard he bribed to get in here.”

Perhaps he takes a little bit too much enjoyment from *not* ordering Dwalin to put his axe down, but he feels he is entitled to a small amount of pettiness now and then. Harlan certainly shouldn’t have expected any different, breaking into a king’s quarters as he did – Thorin is being lenient, if anything.

A few minutes later he finds Frerin in his rooms, quiet for once as he sits on his bed, reading.

Without a word, Thorin settled down next to his brother, their sides brushing in silent greeting.

“I need you to stop this,” he says, once Frerin has put the book away and turned towards him.

Frerin doesn’t have to ask what ‘this’ is. “Why? It might still work, you shouldn’t lose hope because you haven’t found anyone yet.”

“Because word has spread through the lands and whatever your motives, nadad, it is still a falsehood. I’m not looking to get married and I certainly don’t need dwarves breaking into my quarters in the hopes of impressing a king.”

Frerin’s eyes widen and he draws back a little. “What? Who would be stupid enough to do that?”

“Harlan, son of Farlan, apparently,” Thorin says dryly. “From the *Blue Mountains*. Truly, you’ve outdone yourself, Frerin, but I need these rumours to stop and preferably the truth to be spread instead. I don’t need any more... suitors.”

The last is said with audible distaste and draws a small chuckle from Frerin, though his expression soon turns grave again. “Are you sure?”

The smile he directs at his brother is gentle. “Yes, nadadith, I’m sure.”

“I just don’t want you to be alone,” Frerin whispers, hair falling over his face as he hangs his head.

Thorin’s hand is gentle when it grasps his brother’s chin, forcing his

head up so that their gazes can meet. "I'm not."

It's only half a lie.

He has them – for now it's enough and can continue to be enough.

*

Dearest Brother,

As promised, I'm writing to inform you that I have arrived safely in the Blue Mountains. You should probably commend Glóin for his tireless efforts to keep me out of harm's (and mischief's, that dwarf needs to loosen up a little) way. Did you know he has a sweetheart here too? Once he stopped addressing me as 'your highness' and actually managed to have a normal conversation with me he let it slip – and when I proved sympathetic he barely stopped talking about her. I daresay she's a lucky dwarrowdam to be the target of such single-minded devotion.

Vili is well and glad to see me (and just as sweet as I remember). I think you can expect him to make the return trip with me later in the year. I know you're probably grumbling that he 'better be behaving' right about now –

Thorin is.

- and I promise you nothing untoward has happened. I do know how to control myself, oh ever-suspicious-one. And so does he, though I do have to admit that he is quite the enticing dwarf.

Thorin almost spills his tea.

Now that you're finished with your spluttering fit, I do have one more thing to tell you. I've talked to those three dwarves you met the last time and was surprised to find that they're all quite nice and welcoming (nothing like you) – and you didn't tell me Bombur could cook like this! I've no doubt gained a few pounds just from eating so many delicious meals. Anyway, Bofur says that they will come to Erebor as you asked.

Bifur seems quite taken with the idea of being an ambassador and Bombur is willing, as long as he gets a kitchen and can take his family with him. I think Bofur just wants to go because you promised him free ale, but he would go where the other two go no matter what anyway.

I know you're already starting to worry about planning the wedding and everything, but I ask you to simply let it lie until we're back at least. You're already working too much as it is.

*Your loving sister,
Dís*

- And give the scamp my love.

*

The last raven's arrival from the Blue Mountain lies two months in the past when word reaches Thorin from Dale that a sizeable caravan approaches from the west.

It's all he can do not to startle the messenger by rolling his eyes at him; it's so typical for Dís to go and plan a fairly complex return trip without even informing him. She probably wants to surprise him or something the like. He does allow himself a smile at the news, however. He wouldn't lie to himself and insist that he hasn't missed his little sister at all in the months that she has been absent from Erebor.

It might not be his kingly duty to greet them at the gate, but there's nothing in this world that could stop him.

Dís looks radiant atop her pony, upright and smiling brightly, Víli at her side. If that is how content she looks coming back, Thorin is even more glad to have let her go.

"Thorin!" she cries as soon as she spots him, her smile brightening impossibly more as she all but throws herself to the ground and into Thorin's arms.

Her pony looks slightly mournful at its abandonment, but Thorin is too busy with his armful of happy sister to pity it too much.

"It's good to see you, namadith," he murmurs into her ear. "Erebor

is ever so dull without you.”

She snorts into his hair, well aware that he’s teasing her. “Ever the flatterer, brother.”

“A few months haven’t changed me that much.”

Dís pulls back, her eyes narrowing as she regards him and Thorin does his best to mentally kick himself for having let melancholy creep into his tone.

“Are you implying that I have?”

Thorin shakes his head, eyes hooded as he watches the caravan unloading behind them. “You look happier than you’ve been in a long time. Whatever the cause” – he pointedly does not look at Víli – “I’m glad for it.”

“*Oh, Thorin.*”

It’s more a sigh than a statement and when he finally does look at her, Dís’ eyes have softened.

“It’s not your fault that times have been hard these last few years. And without you and Frerin... you were there when I needed someone to lean on, someone to comfort me and show me love. Never forget that, nadad. There are only three people in the world I would do everything for. *Everything.*”

She glances at Víli then, tending to their ponies with a concentration that can only be born from trying not to get in the way, and Thorin can see it in her eyes, that spark, that love that he once felt all too briefly.

“Meeting your One is... I don’t know how to describe it, but it’s like nothing else in the world. Maybe one day you will feel it too.”

Thorin almost laughs, torn between bitterness and appreciation of the irony.

“Speaking of Ones,” he says instead, “I’ll just have a quick chat with Víli, shall I?”

He’s sure Dís is rolling her eyes behind his back, which cheers him up slightly. Seeing him approach, Víli straightens reflexively.

“Your majesty.”

Thorin keeps his face somewhat grim, despite the smile that threatens to break through. “None of that now, Víli, as I told you the last time we met. I assume you have treated my sister well and as befitting her station?”

Víli nods, still looking nervous but a little more assured than at their last meeting. “I wouldn’t dream otherwise.”

“I’m sure you *dream* plenty otherwise,” Thorin says dryly, if only to see the other splutter and turn red. “Don’t worry, I am quite aware of my sister’s beauty. Hardly a dwarf would fault you for doing so.”

For a moment Víli looks like he might implode, then he bursts out, “But she’s so much more than that!”

And then he colours when Thorin only gives him an approving – and *knowing* – look. Deciding he’d let his brother-to-be squirm enough for now, Thorin lets his face soften and a small smile appear.

“She is truly happy. I thank you for that.” He looks back to where Dís is clearly and entirely unsubtly eavesdropping on their conversation and raises his voice a little. “Welcome to Erebor, Víli, son of Vali. May it be a home to you.”

As he turns around, he can just catch Dís saying, sounding a cross between grumpy and fond, “Don’t worry, he likes to do that to new people. Be all intimidating and kingly. *Males*.”

Thorin doesn’t catch Víli’s reply, but there’s still a smile on his face.

He hasn’t seen Bifur, Bofur and Bombur yet, but there’s no reason for them to be at the front of the caravan so he doesn’t worry about it too much. He would see them soon enough, he would make sure of it.

Chapter 18



Thorin does take a certain amount of pleasure from Víli's wide-eyed gaze when he first beholds the halls of Erebor. Back, when they'd lived in Ered Luin, without ever having seen their ancient kingdom, Dís' husband had worn this barely disguised doubting look whenever either of them had reminisced about their home – not that they had done that often, the pain of losing it too raw. Back then it had set Thorin's blood boiling, the simple miner's disrespect of a splendour he had never even laid eyes on; worse his disrespect of Dís' heritage and identity, not that Víli would've seen his actions like that.

It barely needs to be said that Thorin and Víli had not always got along very well, though they were never less than civil to each other and there had been moments of joy too, no matter Víli's resentment of the duties and expectations that went with his wife's status. In his darker moments Thorin hadn't even found it in him to fault the kind-hearted dwarf for it, those moments when he let himself be weak enough to acknowledge that too much was asked of them. That they had to give too much.

But that is the past and this day he watches awe and reverence rise in Víli's eyes as he's led towards his – temporary, he'd move in with Dís soon enough but on this Thorin had put his foot down, and Dís had given in surprisingly meekly – quarters. No need to mention that Thorin has deliberately chosen a slightly longer but more scenic route to get there. Dís is too busy staring at her soon-to-be-husband to notice anyway.

Once they've reached the guest quarters he leaves them to it, as he's already late for a meeting, but his mood at least, is greatly improved.

Bofur is the one who seeks him out first, just when Thorin was about to make his own enquiries, face strangely solemn as he shows Thorin the object lying flat in his palm, glinting merrily.

"I found this, the day after your departure. Bifur and Bombur found ones too."

Thorin does his best to look uncomprehending – the surprise comes easily as he hasn't expected Bofur to connect the token to *him*, let alone confront him about it. Oh, how he has missed the straightforwardness of his old companion, now that he's so frequently surrounded by dwarves who'd rather have all their teeth pulled out than speak their mind honestly.

"It is quite pretty," Thorin acknowledges, pretending to scrutinize the token closely.

Bofur goggles at him. Even his head seems to wobble with righteous indignation. "*Pretty?* It's some of the best craftsmanship I've seen, and Bifur agrees with me." At Thorin's look he adds.

"He has quite a good eye for quality, Bifur does. Bombur usually only has an eye for food."

Thorin chuckles quietly. Food, and a beautiful dwarrowdam.

"And?"

"There was no one else I could think of who might have left it with me," Bofur says, face suddenly serious again. "Beats me why, but you're the only option. Your majesty."

Thorin glares at him. "What makes you think I want to be addressed as such when I already told you not to call me *prince?*"

"Gotta be proper," Bofur shrugs, though he's about the least proper dwarf Thorin has ever met. And quite aware of it, too, since he continues, in a tone that anyone who doesn't know him would've classed as disrespectful, "and don't think I'm not noticing you evading the question."

Sometimes Thorin wonders what Bofur would've done under a stricter lord or king.

“What if it were true?” Thorin finally asks, meeting the other’s gaze squarely.

“I would wonder why, my lord, what I could possibly have done nothing to deserve it. And I would wonder how you know us well enough to recognize our colours.”

There must be something he sees in Thorin’s face, for he continues, “I had asked myself how it could be that a prince from a foreign land could feel so *familiar* to me. But I doubt you will give me the answer.”

It’s not surprising that it’s Bofur, the one who’d thought most with his heart out of all of them in the company is the one who feels his connection with Thorin the most; Bofur has always been keen in these matters.

“No, I will not, though I can say with honesty that I don’t know much more than you do,” Thorin says, a touch weary. “However I would ask you to accept and keep the token.” A brief smile twitches at his lips. “At least they’re pretty.”

Bofur regards him silently for a while, curiosity shining from eyes brimming with questions, but in the end he only murmurs, “Aye, we will treasure them.”

Then, a little louder, “You should come to dinner sometime. Bombur’s been looking forward to cooking a proper meal for you, and I think Bifur wants to talk to you about your offer.”

Thorin smiles at him and inclines his head. “I shall make time then.”

“Only if you’ve got the time, of course,” Bofur hastily adds, suddenly looking worried. “Wouldn’t want to keep you from important business.”

“I always make time for what’s important,” Thorin rebuts firmly, and tries not to laugh at the flush that spreads over Bofur’s already fairly ruddy cheeks, out of pleasure or embarrassment he can’t tell.

“Now don’t go around complimenting lowly miners like me,” the other dwarf mumbles, looking at the ground. “People might think it weird and no mistake.”

“Erebor must be a weird place then, Master Bofur,” Thorin says

gently, but with an edge to his voice that makes it clear that he will hear no more of such thoughts. "It must be, to accommodate its peculiar king – and I must say no one has complained yet."

Bofur considers that for a moment. "In that case think we might fit right in."

Thorin smiles. "Yes, I think you might."

*

Thorin looks his sister over with a critical eye one more time, before declaring, "You look lovely, *namadith*."

Dís' pleased smile is almost shy and Thorin's gaze softens even further as he tugs one wayward strand of jet-black hair back into her elaborate hair-do. "You'll be fine," he assures her gently. "If I can live through a coronation you can manage a wedding."

Her smile at his attempt at a joke is only a little wobbly. Besides, it wasn't that much of a joke in the first place, in Thorin's not-so humble opinion – coronations are a scary business indeed.

"There's still some time before the ceremony. I thought to check up on Víli, but if you'd rather I remain here with you I will."

"No, no I'm fine," she quickly says, giving him a quick peck on the cheek. "I'd wager he needs the support more than I do right now. Besides Frerin said he'd be here soon."

That turns out to be a true estimation, as Víli is all but jittering with nerves when Thorin enters his temporary chambers.

Silently, Thorin lays a reassuring hand on his shoulder before going about tugging the other dwarf's tunics into a better shape.

"It will do these halls good to have a ceremony of celebration once more," he says casually, hoping to defuse some of the tension in Víli's large frame. Yet he cannot help his own lips turn down slightly in remembrance.

At Víli's questioning look he adds, "The last ceremony held in the throne room was my coronation. As you might imagine coronations are never only joyous occasions. Especially when they're followed by

a memorial feast for the fallen of the battle that the previous king had died in.”

Víli winces ever so slightly and nods in agreement.

With one last tug at Víli’s collar, Thorin steps back. He isn’t actually sure when he’d become unofficial clothing master of the family, but it probably has something to do with Frerin’s occasionally truly horrifying taste and Dis’ usual refusal to waste her time with the finer art of understanding clothing etiquette.

“Besides you always have the celebration after to look forward to,” Thorin says cheerfully, gratified to see some colour returning to Víli’s face.

Víli inclines his head, finally managing a small smile. “Thank you, Thorin.”

It’s the first time he’s called him by his name only and Thorin files this moment away in that little corner of treasured recollections in his mind – lately the ‘little’ corner had been growing more than it had in many years previous, but it’s not as if he’s going to complain about that.

It’s time to go, but Thorin doesn’t even have to say anything. Víli squares his shoulders, a determined look now edged onto his face – though Thorin would bet the arkenstone that that look will give way to complete and utter besottedness soon – and marches out the door, leaving Thorin to follow behind.

As it is a royal wedding, the throne room has been readied for the ceremony, with Thorin presiding over their union – and he has never appreciated the view it gives him as much before.

They look glorious, coming to a stop in front of the throne hand in hand, shining blue and golden brown, dark-haired and fair.

Víli manages to keep his discomfort at being stared at by so many people under wraps, but looks grateful when Thorin rises to perform the ceremony and all his focus shifts to Dís, whose hands he’s now both holding.

Dwarven wedding ceremonies are simple, perhaps surprisingly so

considering some of their more obscurely elaborate traditions; even a princess' one. He speaks the traditional words, voice strong and deep, and so do they. Their hands are bound with coils of intricate metal for the ceremony.

Though some couples decide to wear the outer sign of their commitment for the whole day, dwarves are practical enough to leave the choice open, not struck by flights of fancy like elves who would judge the shedding of the coils before the sunrise of the next day as a sign of ill fortune.

Thorin gestures once and a set of pulleys is set into motion, inaudible and invisible until with the softest clank a slab of stone moves and single shaft of light breaks into the throne room, alighting on the king and the couple before them. To Thorin it looks like they're bearing a halo of light, Dis'

hair glittering with crystals reflecting purest sunlight and even Víli's sparser decoration sparkling merrily – a very intentional effect, but beautiful nonetheless and he quietly thanks Mahal for the cloudless day outside.

They step forward as one and bow to their king, and Thorin inclines his head in response.

Already the official part of the day is over – and perhaps it isn't such a surprise after all that the ceremony is so short and simple when good food and uncountable casks of ale await the newly married pair after, and, perhaps more tellingly, all their guests.

He watches them go, beaming and waving, already surrounded by a gaggle of well-wishers, smiles, and then he, too, leaves the dais for the festivities.

*

Whatever elves or men or hobbits might think to the contrary, dwarves treasure their music, to the point that almost every dwarf learns to play an instrument in their youth, and no wedding would be complete without a few ballads as well as more light-hearted accompa-

niment.

Which is why it surprises Thorin to some degree to find the hall to which the invited guests have retreated devoid of music, despite the small dais on one side that are clearly meant for musicians. And then he sees Dís come towards him with a determined face and almost groans. It's not that he doesn't like playing the harp or thinks himself particularly bad at it, but she could at least have warned him that she wants him to play at her wedding.

Dis has barely had the time to open her mouth, blue eyes wide and round in that expression of hopeful innocence that Thorin has always known Kíli had got from his mother, no matter how much she protested, before Thorin points out, "It's your *meragel*, namad. There are those who are more proficient in playing this instrument than I, should you not wish for the sweetest music only to accompany this joyful hour?"

"But they're not *you*, brother," Dis points out, unnecessarily gently. "Besides you're more than good enough. Now stop stalling and start playing."

He isn't about to deny her this – or anything really – not on this day, and Dís well knows it, so he only gives her an exaggerated bow and moves towards the stage, not in the least surprised to find his own silver harp waiting for him at the side.

He sets aside his crown and his heavy coat and picks up the instrument, making sure it's strings are as finely tuned as they can be before he strikes the first chord. Since he's had no time to prepare a piece specifically for this occasion, he settles on an old love ballad, or as close to a love ballad as dwarves ever get since their songs tend to end in tragedy and bloodshed no matter its original topic. It's one of these ballads that everybody knows and that means that Thorin doesn't even have to sing, as no dwarf near enough to hear the music can stop themselves from joining in, age-old words flowing from many throats in easy harmony.

He pauses for a moment after the last note has faded away, and

then he sets his fingers to the strings once more and plays something he hasn't played in a long, long time and only for his little sister does he play it now. Only two dwarves in the room would know the significance of the almost simple yet beautifully haunting lullaby he plays, but two is enough. He catches sight of Dís' face as he plays, standing stock-still in the light of a torch not far from the stage and the silent tear that he sees rolling down her cheek almost makes him lose his place in the music.

The last note of their mother's favourite lullaby dances in the air and for a single moment silence descends, even those unaware of the piece's significance somehow cognizant of its emotional value. Thorin inclines his head and puts his harp aside, and just as the foot-stamping and whistling applause starts to sound, he finds himself with an armful of sister, clinging to him with all her might.

"Thank you, lukhudûn," she whispers, voice a little wet, but there's joy there also. It's as close as she will ever come to calling him his true name where others might hear. "Thank you for remembering."

Remembering for us both.

*

He finds Darla, who had promised to drop by for a short time despite her recent labour, near the food, which isn't entirely unexpected.

(Very, very faintly he remembers his mother moaning about constant hunger and eating about twice as much as usual during and for a time after her pregnancy with Dís – it had been a *very* bad time for trying to sneak food from her plate.)

He had hoped to be able to be there for her again this time, but just when word had reached him that the birth was nearing, an urgent messenger had demanded his attention and Dís and Frerin had gone in his stead. When he'd finally been able to extricate himself from matters of state – only barely keeping his ire in check as the 'urgent' message could clearly have waited an hour or two –

Darla had already been asleep, wearied from her long labour.

“How is he doing?” Thorin asks, looking at the securely wrapped bundle in Darla’s arms.

She smiles down at her new-born son. “Just fine. We named him Ori.”

He smiles in approval, though hardly surprised. She doesn’t even hesitate in offering him the bundle and Thorin’s heart lightens even more as he carefully rests him near his heart.

He looks down at the small dwarfling snuggling contentedly into his blankets and murmurs, “A fine name indeed.”

With a small pang of regret he hands Ori back to his mother. “Where’s Dori then? Did he run off?”

“As if he would,” she snorts. “I gave him leave. He *is* old enough by now to manage this crowd alone. It’s not as if there’s any danger here, except perhaps concerning the acquisition of a spectacular hangover.”

Thorin tries to imagine Dori with a hangover for a few seconds, then gives up. The statement simply doesn’t compute. As if on cue, Ori wakes up and begins to wail. Shooting him an apologetic look which he returns with a nod, Darla wanders off, presumably to find somewhere quiet to calm Ori down again.

Seeing a gaggle of dwarves and dwarrowdams shooting him not so subtle looks, Thorin hastily retreats to an abandoned bench in the corner – one of the first things one has to learn as a prince is how to walk quickly without *seeming* to walk quickly, a very handy skill indeed.

Dís has perhaps had one too many celebratory ales already, not that he begrudges her it, as she all but falls into Thorin’s side when she plops down next to him on the bench.

His mouth curling into a fond smile Thorin stretches out an arm to steady her.

“Why are you hiding back here?” she asks, her voice lilting ever so slightly as she leans into his arm.

“Too much attention.”

She raises a brow. “Well, you *are* the king.”

“Today, I’m not,” he corrects, one hand carding through her hair

soothingly. "This is your day, namadith, yours and your One's."

They both turn to look at Víli, who looks a lot more comfortable now that not everyone's attention is on him. The large tankard in his hand probably helped too, and the presence of Bofur and Bifur next to him. It can do wonders to have a few familiar faces around you when everything else is alien.

They remain silent for a while longer, Dís' eyes having gone misty while watching her husband.

Finally she asks quietly, her voice oddly vulnerable. "Do you approve?"

"Isn't it a little late to be asking that?" he asks dryly, but sobers when she turns her head away in obvious distress. One gentle hand draws her gaze back to him.

"Namad, look at me. I do approve. Víli is a fine dwarf."

He is glad to feel her relaxing against him once more, and adds, "Besides if I truly did object I would've said something before now."

Víli chooses this moment to laugh heartily at something Bofur has said, making Thorin look up.

It's good to see him so carefree and relaxed, glowing with happiness at the day's events.

When he looks down again he finds her all but sleeping on his shoulder – a sight which, as amusing as it is, is perhaps not quite what this night calls for.

(It is one of the worst kept secrets of the family that Dís tends to get really tired after a few pints, when she drinks at all. The reason why it's the *worst* kept secret probably has something to do with the fact that Frerin finds it hilarious.)

"I don't think Víli would be too happy if you fall asleep now."

Dís only grumbles quietly, unconcerned. "That's what he gets for abandoning me to all these courtiers while he has fun with his friends."

Thorin fights back a snort. "I should probably have warned Víli that his wife carries a grudge like nobody's business."

Dís only laughs quietly in reply.

Thorin has half expected to find Frerin sitting in front of the dark fire-place when he returns to his rooms late into the night. Though his brother is not giving to brooding as other members of their family are – and Thorin knows full well he numbers among those who are – but that doesn't exclude him from ever doing so; and it only makes the contrast to his usual sunny self and the sadness it kindles in Thorin's heart at seeing it all the greater.

"Why did you do it?" Frerin whispers, not even looking at his brother. "*Amad's song*. In front of all those people."

"You know why," Thorin says heavily, his heart aching at the pain in his brother's voice. Frerin is far too good at hiding away any negative feelings most of the time, to the point that sometimes even Thorin forgets the layers of hurt lying underneath.

"No I don't!" Frerin hisses with sudden venom. "I don't understand why you would –"

"Because she doesn't remember."

The quiet words stop Frerin cold, and he deflates as quickly as his ire had come.

Thorin's voice is unforgiving despite his gentler gaze holding Frerin's eyes. "You and I, we at least have our memories. Dís was too young, they're slipping away from her and there's no pain quite like losing the last piece of a loved one as your memory forsakes you." His lips twist into a sad smile. "Music has a way of reaching what's long buried."

Frerin nods mutely – he too had memories cascading through his mind at hearing those bittersweet notes.

"It's partly my fault," Thorin continues quietly. "I could not bear to play her song for a long time, not even in private. But it's her meragel, brother and I would see her happy this day, so I gave her the one thing no one else could have."

A breath of air leaves Frerin's mouth with an audible rush and he slumps even farther into his chair. "Yes, of course. If it made her hap-

py... I'm sorry, Thor, I wasn't thinking clearly."

"And I don't fault you for it, Frerin." Thorin sinks down into the chair next to his brother, sighing quietly. "If I'd known she wanted me to play I would've told you beforehand."

Frerin's lips curl up, and unconsciously, Thorin finally relaxes completely.

"Sometimes you can be really thick, nadad," Frerin half-snorts, rolling his eyes. "Of course she wanted you to play. She *always* wants you to play and sing."

Now that he thinks about it, Frerin does have a point. Dís loves his singing, always has, asking for a song or lullaby whenever she was upset – and, he isn't ashamed to admit, he always indulged her wishes.

With that in mind he begins to sing, not a ballad or lullaby, but a drinking song, as bawdy as they come, and he is rewarded by Frerin's startled, brilliant smile.

Chapter 19



Thorin watches Erebor grow stronger around him. He watches Dís and Víli fall ever more in love, happy as only those who've found their true partner can be. He watches Frerin steady a little, though still his old carefree self, now tempered slightly with the wisdom of growing years and tries not to remember that the first Frerin never even lived to see half as many years. He watches Dwalin become the warrior he was born to be and remain the stout, loyal friend Thorin has always known. He watches Balin being Balin – wise, clever, a cunning glint in his eye – and is glad. He watches Ori grow up, and Nori, and encourages Dori as he finally decides on a mastery and approaches one of the best tailors of the mountain for an apprenticeship. He watches the Ur-family settle and thrive in their new home – a miner, a toymaker and a chef – watches Óin drive forward the study of medicine more than any other and Glóin happily settle into his role of temporary liaison with Ered Luin, the blush of love also on *his* face. He watches Girion's son bloom into adulthood lordship and receives letters from reaches of Middle-earth that he had never thought in his wildest dreams he would be corresponding with.

But he also watches the world around them grow ever so slightly darker. He watches Girion grow ever older, distinguished age making way for a frightening senility. He watches the ice in Thranduil's face grow bolder on the few occasions they would meet, as his own forest begins to betray him. He watches more lines appear on Gandalf's brow, sees his shoulders bend a little bit more each time he visits Erebor and already short visits grow ever briefer.

And always he's waiting for the storm.

Thorin tries to blink the grit away from his eyes to be able to properly focus on Dís, kneeling next to his bed. If there weren't such an anxious expression on her face he would be inclined to feel annoyed at having his sleep interrupted in such an abrupt manner, but as it is he only slides down to sit next to her on the floor.

"What's wrong, namad?" he murmurs, expecting her to lean her head on his shoulder as she is wont to when upset, but she shifts to fully face him instead. There's something struggling behind her eyes, indecision clear on her face.

And suddenly Dís blurts, "I am bearing a child in my womb," and Thorin feels like he's just run into a stone wall.

For a moment he does nothing but breathe, blood thundering in his ears and through his body.

Fili. His little lion.

"Dís," he breathes, hands reaching out to her almost desperately, needing her touch to ground him.

She falls into his arms and he buries his face in her hair, unheeding of the wetness on his cheeks. Finally his family is on its way to being complete again. He dares not describe the feeling tearing through his mind, turbulent and uncheckable, a wild flow of relief and joy and gratefulness threatening to spill over – words would do it no justice.

"Oh namad, such joyful news I have not heard for an age."

She looks up at him from the safety of his arms, eyes glistening with moisture in the dim light. "Truly?"

"Can you not see the truth in my eyes?" he asks in turn, the gentle, rumbling conviction of stone. "I would not lie about such a thing, namaduh."

She does stare into his eyes for a long moment, though less for any doubt on her part, he thinks, but rather for the happiness that must show in his eyes – that doesn't happen to often and Dís is well aware of it.

Then she suddenly sniffs, and before his brow has time to furry in

worry, she murmurs, rather plaintively, “How am I going to tell Víli?”

Thorin stares down at her. “You told me before you told *your own One*?”

“I may have panicked, just a little bit?” Dís mumbles, a blush stealing over her face.

He barely suppresses a snort. “You may indeed have.”

“It’s not every day that one finds out one is to be a mother,” Dís grumbles, sounding slightly defensive. “And, nadad, it is you who has always looked after me. It is only right that you should know first.”

He can’t help the warmth that spreads though him at her words, though he knows that this particular first should have been Víli’s by rights.

“Just don’t tell your One that, yes?” he murmurs around his pleased smile. “As for how to tell him – he will be delighted in whatever manner you decide to impart this knowledge. Simply tell him and watch him struggle for words as joy overcomes him.”

Dís grins. “Might I point out that *you* also needed more than a moment to compose yourself?”

His half-hearted attempt at a glare only makes her laugh.

In the end he does not witness that scene – and neither should he have – but rumour does reach him that Víli all but fainted, which pleases him immensely.

*

He finds Balin and Dwalin together, about to depart the mess hall. When he tells them, Balin’s smile is bright enough to light the dark.

Dwalin only grumbles, “Good on the lass,” and leaves it at that, but there’s no mistaking that his eyes have brightened several shades.

One has to know Dwalin to fully understand the range of emotion he never openly displays if he can help it, safe, of course, for irritation, anger and the like. *Those* he utilizes quite successfully.

“Give her our felicitations,” Balin puts in, one elbow conveniently landing in Dwalin’s side.

Thorin smiles at him. "Giver her your felicitations yourself, bâhal. She will surely welcome the visit."

Meanwhile Dwalin is rubbing his side with a slightly sour expression. "You'd think she would want to be left alone right now."

Apparently Dwalin, too, recalls the crankiness of pregnant dwarrowdams.

"That phase comes later, I think," Thorin informs him. "However I won't be held accountable for what she will do if you *don't* go and congratulate her in person."

Thorin can almost see Dwalin's mohawk wilting slightly. "You raise a good point. Come on Balin."

Balin only rolls his eyes at Thorin with his typical long-suffering expression, as he's dragged unceremoniously in the direction of Dís' quarters.

*

"Finally!" Darla says, voice devoid of any surprise as she counts the stitches in the delicate cloth her fingers are deftly adorning with a swirly pattern.

Thorin smiles behind his hand, one arm leaning on the table as he bends forward to look at her work.

"It's not that common an occurrence, you know," he points out and then does chuckle at her pointed look.

"Balance of probability. I've already got three, it must be someone else's turn right about now." Her face softens. "Tell Dís she is welcome to talk to me at any time. It's not always... easy for us dwarrowdams. And please convey my most heartfelt compliments."

He inclines his head. "I will do so. Thank you, Darla, it relieves me to know that my sister will have someone to talk to who has gone through this experience already."

"Think nothing of it." She smiles briefly. "Your family has done so much for me and mine already."

"Not for a reward," he says seriously, "never that."

“But you deserve one nevertheless,” she counters firmly, all but glaring at him until Thorin gives in with a nod.

He looks around the room, frowning a little as he finally notices the glaring absence of certain dwarflings. “Where is Nori? And Ori?”

Darla’s face clouds over. “Nori got into a fight – I sent him to bed with a truly impressive shiner. Ori is with him.”

That, Thorin decides, he must see, so he rises and quietly pokes his head through the door to the bedroom. His heart warms at the sight of Nori curled securely around his baby brother, both fast asleep.

For a moment he simply watches them, marvelling at the peaceful expression in Nori’s face, despite his purpled eye, then he carefully closed the door again, a smile still lingering on his face.

“Dori is still at the weavers?”

Darla nods and Thorin makes to take his leave. Before he has reached the door, however, Darla calls after him, “Thorin? Why is it not Dís bringing this news?”

He looks back at her. “She’s busy with Víli.”

Darla gives him a Look that so clearly says she isn’t convinced that he doesn’t even try to protest and only sighs. “She believes it would bring me joy to do so, and how could I argue when it is nothing but the truth?”

Darla’s gaze gentles. “As besotted as you already are with your future nephew, I hardly think you could have. He or she will certainly have an Uncle who spoils them rotten.”

“Uncles,” Thorin corrects, lips curling up at the edges. “I don’t believe for a second that Frerin isn’t going to match me step for step.”

“True.” Suddenly she grins. “I already pity Dís trying to raise a dwarfling with you two hovering around.”

Thorin makes an indignant noise of protest, but it’s a rather half-hearted one. It’s not as if he has a leg to stand on in this matter.

*

Thorin had not often visited the Weavers Guild’s hall before and it

takes him a while to find Dori in the chaos of clacking looms and colourful tapestries.

He can't resist a bit of mischief when he finally finds the young dwarf, staring at his loom with such intense concentration that he completely fails to notice Thorin's approach.

"Care to take a commission, Mister Dori?" he asks loudly, his eyes crinkling at the corner when Dori jumps almost a foot, dropping his shuttle.

"Thorin!"

"That's me," he agrees, immensely satisfied. Dori has taken to calling him 'Mister Thorin' again lately, out of some misplaced sense of propriety – it's good to know that when startled, at least, he will revert to calling him by his name again.

Once he has regained his bearing, Dori dips his head in greeting. "My apologies. I did not hear you approach."

"No harm done, none at all," Thorin tells him cheerfully, knowing full well that his behaviour is slightly abnormal, but not caring in the slightest – this day is a happy day after all.

Dori's eyebrows shoot up and he squints slightly as he regards Thorin's face. "Has something happened?"

He sounds slightly worried and Thorin only smiles broader. "I wish to commission baby clothing from you."

Dori almost drops the shuttle he's only just picked up *again*. He blinks once, then an impossibly broad smile stretches his face. "Lady Dís is bearing a child?"

"Indeed she is." Thorin pats Dori's shoulder. "And of course you're our first choice for garments."

"But I'm not that good yet!" Dori protests, reddening. "A prince shouldn't wear anything but the finest clothing!"

Thorin frowns at him. "Am I not wearing a tunic you yourself wove and stitched? Am I not the king?"

"That's different," Dori mumbles, looking at his feet. "I've known you since I was just a small dwarfling."

Thorin gives him a gentle nudge, causing Dori to look up at his face. “And it is Dís’ wish that you would know him or her from the youngest age as well. You would not be strangers. And besides, babies don’t care one whit what they’re wearing either way.”

“Only the rest of the kingdom would,” Dori grumbles, but there’s no mistaking the proud and happy glint in his eyes. “I shall do my best.”

“And I wouldn’t ask for more,” Thorin says and leaves him to it, the sound of looms clacking in accord receding with every step he takes.

*

Bifur’s workshop is alive with the sound of a saw cutting through wood and Thorin breathes the soothing smell of freshly-cut wood in deeply.

He may have regretted for a while that Bifur had turned down the offer of ‘playing official matchmaker’ – Bofur’s words – between Erebor and Ered Luin in the end, but every time he sees the dwarf hard at work in his little shop, cutting and carving with finesse and such joy in his work as only dwarves can muster, it brings a smile to his face and he finds himself glad that Bifur at least, knows himself well enough to make the right decisions.

At the sound of his footsteps Bifur looks up from the horse he’s currently working on and smiles in greeting.

“Thorin!” he calls and Thorin still feels a small twinge of gladness at finally hearing his name coming from so many of the dwarves’, who to him are most important, lips. “How are you today? My heart was gladdened to hear of the successful negotiations.”

Thorin’s own lips twist up, partly because he can never get enough of this happy, gentlemanly Bifur, for all that his slightly madder version had also wormed his way into Thorin’s heart, and partly because if there’s one *other* thing to be happy about on this day it’s that they’ve *finally* finished the trade negotiations with the dwarves of the Blue Mountains – simple negotiations for something that clearly benefits

both kingdoms should have no right to be so frustrating, nor to be drawn out for so long.

"I am quite pleased myself, my friend," he murmurs, a hint of his weariness slipping into his voice. "The first caravan will leave Erebor in but a fortnight."

Bifur squints down at the wood he's working on. "You think they would be interested in taking some toys along?"

Thorin shrugs, hardly an expert on the matter. "You would know better than I, having lived in Ered Luin for so long. If you think it's worth it for you, talk to Glóin. He's organising the schedule and goods list."

Bifur nods, and then, with a long look at Thorin's face, carefully puts the half-finished horse aside. "There's something else."

It's not exactly a question, but Thorin answers anyway, his smile widening with honest joy, "The line of Durin will soon count one more."

For a moment Bifur only stares at him and then he laughs out loud, eyes crinkling around suddenly bright eyes. Thorin is almost bowled over by the boisterous hug that follows; not that he minds.

"Expect a fair number of commissions for the little lad to come trickling in," Thorin says when Bifur has drawn back again. "I'm sure he will be spoiled to no end."

Not in the least by Thorin, as Darla pointed out and he would freely admit.

"Nothing wrong with a bit of spoiling," Bifur grunts, looking slightly absent-minded as if he's already busy designing a kingly toy for the future addition to their family. "We have too few little ones as it is. You can expect only the best of qualities for whatever your family desires."

"Any of your workings are always of spectacular quality, Bifur," Thorin says somewhat dryly.

Bifur ignores his wryness and only grins, pleased.

"Have you told Bofur and Bombur yet?"

Thorin shakes his head. "I was hoping to find them here, but as it lies you may do the honour of informing them."

"Expect there to be celebratory cake soon," Bifur grins. "Bombur has been itching to for a good reason to bake some monstrosity for months now."

Now *that* is a pleasant prospect.

*

When Thorin finally does find his way to Víli, the dwarf still looks a little shell-shocked, but there is smile on his face that doesn't seem to want to budge for anything.

Thorin settles down beside him, barely holding back his own smile at the sight of his brother-in-law staring slightly vacantly into the distance.

"Congratulations, brother," he says, nudging Víli with his shoulder in an attempt to gain his attention.

Víli turns to him, wonder shining out of his eyes with almost physical intensity. He looks at Thorin for a moment, then lets out a burst of laughter. "She told you first, didn't she?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny," Thorin replies, though the corner of his mouth twitches.

Víli snorts. "You forget, I do know Dís quite well. Something this big, she would've gone to you first."

"She did. Does it bother you?"

Víli thinks about that for a moment. "No. You've always taken care of her, even when I wasn't there for her and I will always be grateful for that. I don't begrudge you her adoration."

"I'm not sure adoration is the right word," Thorin says, blinking in surprise.

Víli's sigh sounds far too much like Balin's 'oh god the line of Durin is comprised of dunderheads'-sigh. "Of course she adores you. You're her ugmil nadad."

Thorin doesn't expect the sharp stab of pain that follows those

words – so long has he tried not to remember his last life too much, though never to forget and always to be warned, that he hasn't grieved for what was for a while now. But now the memory of a young Dís, thin and dirty, looking up at him in complete trust as he tries to find the words to tell her that there will not be food this night either, that as far as he knows there will *never* be enough food again, rises in his mind and Thorin has to steady himself not to be overwhelmed. It is one of these memories that will always stay with him, sharp and painful as the day it happened, and he knows that he will never be able to look back on that time without feeling echoes of the desperation, hopelessness and shame that had been his constant companion then.

He mentally shakes himself – a memory, it's only a memory and should not hold dominion over him now, not on this day of joy. But some of the anxiety remains.

"You will take care of him," he says, not a question, not a well-meant if completely honest threat, and yet both.

The look Víli throws him is full of indignation, but something in Thorin's face makes him pause.

"Yes, of course," he affirms quietly instead, "with my life."

Then, "It could be a she."

Thorin shrugs, his heart a little lighter. "Balance of probability."

Despite the small part of him mourns the chance to be the one to take care of Fili and Kíli the most alongside Dís this time around, he could never deny his nephews the chance to grow up with their father, *knowing* their father – to have more than a tale told by a grieving mother and a few knick-knacks to remember him by.

Thorin rises from his seat, pats Víli's shoulder. The other dwarf looks up at him, some confusion at Thorin's strange behaviour in his eyes along with still undimmed joy.

"You'll do fine."

Perhaps not the most inspiring thing he could've said, but Thorin means it, and what more of a gift could he give than that?

Chapter 20



He'd saved Frerin for last, not quite on purpose, but when he notices what he has done he is hardly surprised. He can still remember a young Frerin – not too young, but still young, he'd never been anything but young in that life – beaming at small dwarflings playing in front of him in utter brightness, his gaze so very earnest when he looked up at Thorin and said *they're so happy, nadad, do you remember being that happy?*

Thorin stands in front of Frerin's door for a while, staring at the dark stone. He had never got to see his brother's reaction to Dís' children, who should have been *his* nephews too, not only Thorin's. He had never seen him laugh in complete exuberance with a child of their family, Dís having been too young at first and then too scarred to laugh much at all.

When he finally does enter, it's to find the chambers empty. He hesitates for a moment, then turns and heads for the gates.

He finds Frerin standing upon the battlements, wind splaying his golden hair through the air, playfully tugging in its dance around the heir of Durin.

"Have you ever thought it beautiful, brother?" Frerin asks without turning around. His gaze stays riveted on the far away mountains and shimmering lake.

"I have," Thorin answers truthfully, "though not for its own beauty's sake, that is less my purview, but because it is home and home will always be beautiful."

Frerin turns to face him, eyes caught between glowing contentment and seriousness. "Sometimes I wish you would tell me what happened

to you, lukhudel.”

Thorin stays silent, but he steps forward to rest his arms on the balustrade next to Frerin’s own.

“Do not get me wrong, you are still *you*,” Frerin continues, gazing towards the horizon once more, “and I could not wish for a better dwarf to call brother, but you *did* change, without warning, and however much you tried to hide it, it was a greater change than any I’d seen before.”

“We all change,” Thorin murmurs. “I change, you change, the world changes around us. What you speak of lies long in the past, why do you speak of it now?”

Frerin’s eyes are like blue fire when he looks at Thorin. “Because now you utter statements such as this one, when before any admittance of emotions was like pulling teeth. Because you are my brother and I care about you. I wish to know the things that you never share with anyone, if only because they are meant to be shared lest they overwhelm you. Because sometimes you are too wise, too old, and too hurt and other times you are too glad for the smallest things.” His voice grows quieter, smaller. “Because you do not have to bear whatever it is alone.”

Thorin swallows hard, opens his mouth, and for a single moment he thinks he’s going to tell Frerin everything, the whole truth of his second existence. But the one moment it takes for the words to form and find their way to his tongue is enough for doubts to settle in, and for all his old fears to return. His reasons for not telling anyone haven’t changed, after all, though he feels the time nearing when it would be the right thing to confide in them.

Now, however, up on the gates of Erebor, his kingdom, the sun shining in his eyes and hair, his brother happy beside him without the memories that sometimes still plague Thorin, he only says, “Dís is expecting a child.”

Frerin’s eyes widen almost comically. “You’re joking.”

“No,” Thorin replies simply, letting the smile back onto his face.

“There will truly soon be a nephew for you to dote on.”

Frerin’s face as realization slowly sinks in is everything Thorin has ever imagined of this moment and yet more, the dawning joy sharper, more *real* – not even a dream can ever be so clear as to capture such height of emotion.

“Blessing,” Frerin finally whispers, voice almost hoarse, “we are blessed.”

And Thorin can only silently agree.

*

Thorin chances upon a rather morose looking Víli in his quest for some tea – he had been distracted enough lately to let his own emergency stock run out – and halts. A craving for what amounts to hot water with a few leaves in it isn’t more important than comforting his brother in law. If said brother in law lets him, that is.

“Ah, Thorin, what can I do for you?” Víli asks with forced cheer as he notices his approach.

Thorin almost sighs. Víli isn’t very good at pretending everything is fine when something is amiss. “You could tell me what has you in this mood, for one thing.”

Perhaps a little blunt, but he knows Víli well enough to recognize it as the best method to get him to spill whatever is bothering him.

“Dís threw me out of our rooms. Claimed that she needed some time alone,” Víli mumbles, fingers plucking nervously at the hem of his tunic.

Thorin smiles in sympathy. A pregnant Dís truly can be a hazard to everyone around her. On the other hand Thorin is fairly sure that Víli knows his wife well enough by now not to be *this* bothered by her mercurial temper swings.

“You know how Dís gets when she doesn’t get enough sleep,” he points out gently, observing how Víli chews his lower lip in an unconscious sign of indecision. “Please tell me what truly bothers you, brother, so that we may attempt to fix whatever it is.”

Víli nods once, but still avoids meeting Thorin's eyes when he says, "Tis simply that I feel somewhat useless here lately. Dís doesn't need me hovering around her every minute of the day and I have nothing much else to do in this mountain."

"Dís may not need your hovering, but she *does* need you," Thorin tells him quietly and Víli even smiles briefly.

"True. But that doesn't mean I wouldn't like to occupy the rest of my time with some useful activity. I have been a miner all my life and I would take it up again if possible."

"You are a Prince Consort now, Víli. Technically you needn't work at all," Thorin points out.

Víli raises a brow. "And you're the King, yet I've seen how much *you* work."

"You haven't by any chance been talking to Dís about this, have you?" Thorin asks a tad sourly. "She's been harping about my workload, which is *fine* if you're wondering, for years now. Besides, whoever told you that the King doesn't have to work was clearly a liar. It's just the rest of the royal family who get that benefit."

"Exactly! If you have to work I don't see why I can't. Besides I *like* working as a miner. I am a dwarf you know – working with raw stone has as much appeal as working with refined stone."

Thorin gazes at him, trying to gage how important this is to his brother in law. It's not that he has a problem with letting Víli work, but simply the fact that working in the mines always harbours risks, more so than most other pastimes that Víli could have chosen. Then again, it's hardly his fault that mining had been the main opportunity to have work in the Blue Mountains and it's not as if Thorin can actually forbid him to go. Well, he *can*, but is quite aware that that wouldn't go down well with *anyone*, and he doesn't really fancy having Dís yell at him for making her husband sad.

"As you wish, if that is what you want to do I won't stop you," he says finally, almost smiling at the look of relief on Víli's face. It's clear that the other dislikes idleness as much as Thorin. "But you have to

promise me that you will take it easy. Dís will need your support and your care.”

Víli’s grin only grows wider and he bows. “Of course. I certainly do not intend to neglect my wife.”

Thorin inclines his head in return. “I will talk to the mine supervisor so that he may find a place for you.”

He watches Víli go with a spring in his step and hopes dearly that he has made the right decision.

*

Dís grumbles slightly, her already slightly distended belly slowing her gait from her usually determined stomp, much to her ongoing frustration. Thorin, who had already witnessed his sister becoming crankier and crankier during her first pregnancy only bites back a chuckle and continues down the corridor.

“I told Frerin to meet us here,” he says, nodding at the intersection in front of them and true enough, their brother rounds the corner only moments later.

“So what’s this all about, Thorin?” he asks, looking slightly sleep-rumpled and consequently somewhat less cheerful than usual. “You were being very mysterious about this meeting even by *your* standards.”

Thorin suppresses another smile. If there’s one thing Frerin just can’t control it’s his insatiable curiosity. “Just follow me and you’ll see.”

Predictably, Frerin glares at him but he does follow, trading a questioning look with Dís as he goes.

Thorin sees her shrug out of the corner of his eye.

When it becomes clear in which direction they’re headed, Frerin’s scowl returns. “Please tell me you didn’t call us down here to look at piles of gold.”

“I didn’t call you down here to look at piles of gold,” Thorin immediately obliges. “This is more important.”

Dís' eyebrows rise. She might never have known a Thorin obsessed with gold and jewels, but it's still pretty darn unusual to hear a dwarf say something like that.

They follow him through mounds of treasure and Frerin's scowl makes way to fascination when Thorin directs them to the well-hidden entrance to the staircase leading out of the mountain.

"I never knew that was here," he comments, sounding almost suspicious, as if the stairwell had somehow magically appeared when he wasn't looking just to spite him.

"Few do," Thorin says, deadly serious. "These stairs lead to the outside, to a little dell on the mountain's flank. If there ever should be an attack on Erebor and the gates have fallen, this is where you need to go."

Their eyes dart back to him, a mix of indignation at the mere thought that they should *flee their home* and confusion visible on both their faces, but Thorin doesn't budge, doesn't let his face relax from its serious set.

"Why would we ever flee from here?" Dís finally asks what they're both clearly thinking. "What could possibly drive us to such extremes? This is *home*."

"Yes, it is," Thorin agrees quietly. "And I'm not saying that it shall ever come to pass. But I do wish for you to know of this, should the hour ever be so dire."

Frerin is still frowning, and Dís looks slightly pale at the mere thought, but they both nod their understanding.

"Good. Remember this place, that is all I ask. And do not speak to anyone of this, this is the line of Durin's secret to keep."

After all a secret is only useful as long as it is, indeed, *secret*. And this small tunnel wouldn't be suited for a large scale evacuation anyway.

Again they nod, this time with enough determination to satisfy him.

"How about some breakfast then?" he asks with some cheer returning to break the seriousness hanging over the three of them. "If we

hurry a little we can still make it to the kitchen before Bombur has his break.”

Entirely unsurprisingly the suggestion meets with enthusiastic approval.

*

Thorin is well aware that there is a talk he must have with Dís, one that he’s been putting off for a while now but he can’t stall forever, however much his heart might want to.

He waits till one comfortable evening, both of them sitting near the roaring fire, his harp in his lap still vibrating faintly from the last note that has just died away.

She opens her eyes, still relaxed from the music that had flowed through the air, focuses her gaze on him and then frowns at what she sees in his face.

“Nadad?”

He keeps quiet for a moment, one hand absently stroking the strings of his harp.

“I will not have children, Dís,” he finally says heavily, choosing to address the matter directly rather than to prevaricate. “I know it to be so. Do you realize what that will mean for the child you carry in your womb?”

She lowers her eyes, face suddenly serious, but there’s also pride in her bearing when she nods. His sweet, strong Dís, so very aware of the burden that her firstborn will carry, and yet her reaction warms his heart, so different from her quiet despair when Thorin had held Fíli and proclaimed him heir to the throne in a cold hut in the Blue Mountains. Then, being the future King had held little to no appeal; now, at least, there’s a kingdom to go with the title.

“It might not be the fate I would have chosen for him, but I’ve known for a long time that it would be a possibility,” Dís tells him quietly. “He will do you proud.”

(He knew he shouldn't listen in on this private and intimate conversation. It was between his sister and her sons and he had no right to bear witness to their parting when he was the one who was forcing them apart in the first place. But still he remained frozen to the spot, wanting, no needing to have his guilt and doubts soothed. He'd never claimed that he could not sometimes be as horribly selfish as the next dwarf.)

"You come back to me, you hear me," Dís demanded, choking a little on the words. Thorin didn't need to see her to know that there were tears in her eyes, though she was probably holding them back from falling through sheer force of will.

"We'll do our best, mum, won't we Kili?"

Thorin could easily picture Kili's furious nod. A short silence, only interrupted by rustling cloth piqued his curiosity, his mind going in overdrive when Kili said quietly, "Thank you, amad. We will treasure them."

He knew the smile that would now grace Dís' face, that mix of pride and bittersweet sadness and despair, had been the recipient of it far too many times already. Of all their line some might argue that it was Dís who suffered the most.

"Go then and make me proud. Make Thorin proud."

He moved away before the sudden lump in his throat made him do something inadvisable. They had already made him proud and he had no doubt that they would continue to do so, his precious nephews. Always had they tried so hard to please him, and usually succeeded, but that wasn't what mattered the most. They were family.

Thorin tried to remember the last time he'd told them that, had reminded them of his love, and when he came up with a blank, he could only resolve to do so as soon as possible.

The joy on their faces when he pulled them to the side shortly before picking up Balin and Dwalin was enough to make him secretly smile for days.)

"Of course he will." He kneels down in front of her and takes her

lightly trembling hand in his.

“And I promise you this, sister, I will do my utmost to protect them as long as I draw breath.”

“Them?”

He hesitates, horrified at his slip, then murmurs, “Just a feeling.”

It’s a poor excuse and he knows it, but there’s little else he can say.

“A feeling?” Dís snorts lightly. “Don’t tell me you’re taking lessons from Óin now. He’s got completely obsessed with seeing portends in everything lately.”

Thorin relaxes into the familiar teasing, though a hint of worry remains. Dís might not press the issue now, but she certainly won’t forget it – and she knows very well that Thorin puts little stock in mysticism and supposed readings of the future.

His thoughts wander to the last time talk of signs and portends had spilled his life upside down and he almost jumps at Dís’ suddenly sorrowful voice.

“You bear such a heavy burden on our shoulders, zabadûn.”

He doesn’t flinch, but it’s a near thing and he cannot help the sudden tension in his neck and the line of his shoulders.

“I don’t...”

“You didn’t have to say, I *saw*. Sometimes, when you think nobody is watching, you look sad, as if you’re lost and have lost so much.” Her voice is quiet, subdued. “I hope we make it just a little bit better. I hope we make it worth it.”

Thorin almost smiles wryly – it seems that his siblings live to prove his assumptions of their observational skills wrong lately; he is certainly being disillusioned about the worth of his acting abilities.

“Oh, mizimith,” he murmurs and gathers her close. She buries her face in his hair. “Never doubt that, you will *always* make everything worth it as long as you are happy and you can smile. You and Frerin, even Víli. And soon this little one too.”

“You’ve always been like that, brother. Giving all of yourself to others, keeping barely anything for yourself. What about *your* happiness?”

“Seeing you happy makes me happy,” he answers simply. “And I thank Mahal for Víli’s presence in your life every day.”

“It’s not only Víli, you dolt,” she corrects, punching him in the arm with enough force to make him wince. “If you know how good Víli is for me, then why have you never searched for your own One?”

Thorin is silent, face pinched, and Dís draws back a little, not relinquishing contact completely but far enough to look him in the eye. “You know who your One is, do you not?”

He avoids her gaze. There’s a reason why he’s never talked about this topic with anyone. *Bilbo* is still an assortment of memories he tries to avoid half the time and indulges in privately the other half.

“I might,” he finally croaks past the sudden tightness of his throat. “I’ve never let myself think about it. He isn’t here and I don’t know if he will ever be.”

She reads the grief in his gaze and the longing in his voice and doesn’t say anything, but she pulls him close once more and for a long while they simply breathe together, a comfort in their closeness.

When she finally moves it is to say, “I’ve never known you to give up without even trying, Thorin.

Isn’t this worth doing all you can?”

Thorin thinks of green hills, comfortable holes in the ground and peaceful lands without strife and isn’t so sure. The last time he’d ripped Bilbo away from his home and brought him into a world full of dangers a simple hobbit could never have expected. Even not counting Thorin harming him in his rage, frightening him, which he simply cannot forgive himself for despite the undeserved forgiveness given to him, Bilbo had stared death in the eye far too many times on their quest. It doesn’t matter that he’d done so with a courage and tenacity Thorin could only marvel at, not when he shouldn’t have had to face those horrors in the first place.

And Thorin is far from sure that his conscience could allow him to endanger the hobbit such once more.

No matter how often Thorin tells himself that he's already witnessed Dís giving birth without problems twice and to *stop being such a big baby*, as the lady in question would say, he simply cannot cease worrying, not when his little sister is screaming her head off in the next room. It doesn't matter that she's birthed two children before in a different life under far more difficult circumstances, he knows from bitter experience that there can *always* be complications.

He and Víli haven't had word since Óin and the midwife kicked them out of the room several hours ago.

Through the door he can barely hear some hushed whispering and then, loud and clear, "I'm the one birthing this baby and I'll bloody well scream as much as I want to!"

Thorin has to suppress a smile. That sounds just like Dís, no question there.

"Do you think it's going well?"

Víli looks, if possible, even more worried than Thorin feels, but he still musters a reassuring smile for his brother in law. "She'll be fine, brother. You know Dís, she's going to demand to be let out and about the minute she catches her breath."

Víli chuckles weakly. "That she will. Sometimes I still wonder how such a radiant dwarrowdam could choose me of all people to fall in love with."

Thorin turns to look at him sharply. He is well aware that Víli sometimes still harbours doubts as to his rightful place as part of the royal family, fearing that people won't respect him because of his common blood, but he's never said anything to Thorin himself.

"Víli, never doubt your place at Dís' side. You are not only her One but also a capable and worthy dwarf in your own right." He lets a slightly feral smile slip out. "And anyone who disagrees is more than welcome to take the issue up with me."

Víli's grin is still a little weak, but appreciative enough. "I don't think that'll be necessary. Thank you, Thorin."

“Have you decided on a name yet?” he asks, smoothly changing the subject.

As expected, Víli’s face lights up completely. “We thought Fili might suit. Dís is convinced it’s a boy.”

Thorin doesn’t permit himself more of an outlet for his nostalgia than a secret smile. “Fili. A worthy name.”

“You approve then?”

“I would’ve approved any name you could’ve chosen, Víli. Well, not an elvish one maybe.”

Víli snorts. “As if Dís would have allowed that. We don’t want to torture the poor boy for Mahal’s sake.”

“He certainly would never have lived it down,” Thorin agrees. “Especially children can be such teases. Speaking of children, where is Frerin?”

His companion pulls a face. “He decided he couldn’t stand waiting around while ‘my sister screams at everyone getting within a range of ten foot of her’ and went to the dining hall. Said we should call him when something actually happens.”

Two hours and a lost count of how often he’d already paced the antechamber later, Thorin admits that Frerin might’ve had a point.

When Óin finally sticks his head out the door, announcing, “The lad is born, healthy and strong. Dís is doing well too,” both Víli and Thorin all but deflate in relief.

Thorin nods towards the door, holding himself back from barging into the room by sheer force of will alone. “Go. Your son awaits you.”

Perhaps Víli sees some of his longing on Thorin’s face for he just smiles and beckons for Thorin to come with him. “Let’s go in together, melhekhel.”

They step through the threshold together and receive a tired but blinding smile from Dís.

Óin rather unceremoniously pushes a swathed bundle into Víli’s arms, whose face lights with joy at the first sight of the small face of his new-born son.

Thorin intends to hang back a little, let the family have a moment together, but Dís and Víli are having none of it. A firm hand pushes him towards the bed and the huddle of the proud grown family.

There is, however, one more thing it's his duty to do before they can simply celebrate. As if on cue Víli carefully hands him Fíli, none of the reluctance that had been there the last time Thorin had performed this traditional act visible on his face.

A small hand closes around Thorin's finger even though Fíli seems sound asleep as he cuddles him close to his chest.

"I dub thee *rayad*, Fíli son of Víli, gabil lukhudel, great light of all lights. May Mahal look over your life."

One more heir for the line of Durin, one more in the line of succession after Frerin and Dis, they were blessed indeed.

He bestows a kiss upon Fíli's brow and whispers quietly, just for the two of them, "I will always be there for you, ghivashith."

Thorin just catches Dís' proud smile before the door bursts open to admit Frerin, panting and mused. "What did I miss?"

"Just the birth, idiot," Dís says caustically and swats him over the head.

Thorin can't help but grin and in his arms Fíli coos and wide blue eyes open to take in the world for the first time.

Chapter 21

It is a joy to watch Fíli grow, little by little, without the burden on his shoulders that had been present in Ered Luin during their exile and always tinged all joy with bitterness. It is no less of a joy to watch Frerin fawn over the new-born dwarfling with single-minded adoration; he could oft be seen simply holding Fíli and cooing at him as the babe stares up at him with wide blue eyes fascinated with the strange apparition in front of his face, to the point where one might wonder who the real dwarfling in the situation is. It's not an uncommon occurrence for Thorin to be accosted by an annoyed Dís in search of her son, who'd been mysteriously whisked away only to be found in Frerin's quarters burbling happily an hour later. No matter how often Dís scolds him for it, Frerin stays entirely unrepentant and equally unwilling to hand the dwarfling back over, claiming his 'hogging rights' as an uncle.

The first time that specific claim is made, Thorin looks at him sideways and points out rather dryly, "I'm his uncle as well, you know."

"Ah, but you're the responsible uncle – *I* am the *fun* uncle," Frerin retorts blithely and receives a pillow in his face for his cheek, far too smug about his logic to duck in time.

If Thorin makes it a point afterwards to play with Fíli as much as possible – not that he'd not done that before, but he is not about to be outdone by Frerin – no one mentions it, though he has the sneaking suspicion that somewhere Mahal is laughing at him.

*

Dís pokes her head through the door to Thorin's rooms. "Can you take Fíli for a bit?"

Thorin's smile is all but reflexive. Fili is yet in the stage at which he mostly sleeps and eats – well, and pees and other unpleasant things, but Thorin rather tries to avoid those occasions – making it rather easy to look after him as long as one is willing to play cuddle-toy.

“Of course,” he says and accepts the wrapped bundle of little dwarfling, quickly slipping the sling of cloth over his head so that Fili would rest securely against his chest.

He always makes time for family now, no matter how pressing the issues he's currently engaged with; that at least he has learned.

Fili, who had been moving around restlessly inside his blanket immediately quiets once in Thorin's arms and he likes to imagine that it's because he somehow recognises him as Thorin, as *safety*, not because he's a more comfortable heater to cling to.

He settles down at the small writing table next to the bed that's already all but bending under the weight of all the books and piles of parchment that litter its surface, and tries to review some of the mining reports he's supposed to talk about in the next council session, but he keeps being distracted by Fili who has apparently now decided that he doesn't want to go to sleep right this moment after all and has taken up his favourite pastime – chewing on Thorin's braids. It's not that he really minds, though hair is special to dwarves he's more than happy to indulge Fili's apparent fascination – and just vain enough to like the attention paid to his hair, which he himself is rather proud of – but it does make it difficult to concentrate when the dwarfling keeps tugging at the strands.

Fili has finally settled down somewhat, yawning widely as Thorin's braid slips out of his grasp, when a knock sounds on the door.

Suppressing the urge to growl in frustration, Thorin rises to answer, for a raised voice would surely wake the little one again.

“Speak quietly,” he murmurs to the startled messenger waiting outside. Hardened dwarven guards often have a certain wide-eyed look around him these days, now that he occasionally runs around with a baby in his arms.

“Your scout has returned, your majesty,” the dwarf reports, quietly enough that Thorin doesn’t have to glare at him.

There is only one dwarf he could be speaking about; Galin, the Nori of his generation, who Thorin had sent on a highly confidential scouting mission months ago.

This is not a matter that can wait.

“Very well, tell him to wait for me in my study,” he instructs and watches with some amusement as the guard tries to clomp away in his heavy boots without making too much noise.

Still smiling, Thorin quietly tells the sleeping dwarfling in his arms, “Looks like you’ll be coming with me, little one.”

Technically he could look for someone else to take Fili for a while – Frerin would certainly drop everything the second he came knocking – but he would rather not let Galin wait and Fili is unlikely to make a problem in the next half hour. He might also possibly be rather reluctant to let go of his little mizim, but that’s another matter entirely.

Galin bows respectfully at his entrance, looking completely unfazed by Fili’s presence. Though he does seem to avoid looking at the slumbering dwarfling directly.

“Report,” Thorin says once he’s settled down behind his desk. He knows Galin well enough not to bother with greetings or flippancies; the other dwarf likes his neatly structured life.

He watches the spy closely, looking for any signs of upset or urgency – and a little to his surprise he does find barely noticeable stress lines around his eyes.

“You were right to send me, your majesty,” Galin immediately says, sounding profoundly unhappy at his own pronouncement. “The Gundabad orcs are stirring, warg riders patrol the plains and the only crossings of the rivers Langwell and Greylin. They are gathering, though for what I wasn’t able to ascertain. I don’t think they’re ready yet, but we need to be prepared for a big push from the north. And things aren’t looking much better in the south. The Greenwood has grown darker, there are rumours of some of Thranduil’s elves falling

in the woods to the south, where the old fortress lies.”

Fíli moves suddenly, as if sensing the darkening mood, and one small hand grabs a bit of Thorin’s tunic. He relaxes a little almost instinctively.

Galin pauses, closing his eyes for a moment. “Something big is going to happen, is my wager. Not soon, perhaps, but I would think still in our life-time, perhaps a few decades, my king.”

It doesn’t come as a surprise exactly, considering his last life, but Thorin still has trouble hiding his dismay. Any, admittedly slightly foolish, hope that perhaps Erebor would be spared major conflict this time around recedes into complete improbability with these news; Azog had been killed, yes. But there is always Bolg still to worry about – that and whatever had had Gandalf so worked up when he’d left them at the edge of Mirkwood. Now Thorin curses himself for not having pushed for more information from the wizard, but he’d had other matters in his mind then, like for example somehow getting through a dark, elf-infested forest, and been, if not content, placated by Gandalf’s evasive words. If only he hadn’t fallen before they could’ve had a talk about Gandalf’s business in the south, if only... but now, there is no worth in going down this road, even only in thought – he did fall, and now he doesn’t know and he’ll have to live with it, will have to battle his own worry for everything that could potentially befall his loved ones.

Finally, he does give in to the urge to sigh out loud. “Thank you, Galin. You’ve certainly earned your pay *and* some rest.”

Thorin doesn’t miss Galin’s minute hesitation before turning around and moving toward the door, so he calls, “Rest assured, I will make certain that Erebor is as ready as we can be.”

Galin halts, and nods once, something not quite like gratitude shining in his eyes. Only when the door has closed behind him does Thorin realize that it had been *trust*. Galin trusts his king, trusts *Thorin* to lead them through whatever lay ahead. It’s a sobering thought as much as it is a bolstering one.

Fíli makes a quiet, content sound, some drool slipping out of the corner of his mouth and suddenly Thorin acutely feels the warmth of his little nephew resting right above his heart, sinking deep into his bones and lighting a fire in his veins – a far more sedate and steady fire than what had burned inside him for so long.

*

Frerin is splayed all over Thorin's bed, limbs akimbo, little Fíli resting comfortably on his chest.

Dís is sitting by the fire with Víli, by all appearances enjoying her short reprieve from looking after the dwarling, all but wrapped up in each other. Thorin takes some care not to look too closely at what exactly they're doing – he might like Víli, but some things an older brother simply cannot let pass.

It takes him a few minutes to realize that Frerin is watching him watching his sister and her husband, but when he does he raises his brows in silent query.

"The worry lines on your face are getting deeper again, brother," Frerin murmurs in reply, and Thorin is quite sure it's meant only half-teasing, if that.

Thorin's brows draw up in thought as he regards his brother who looks back at him calmly but with a hint of steel in his eyes, weighing his options.

"I have received some troubling news," he finally decides to say – there is really no reason for him to leave his siblings in the dark about the potential trouble ahead. "I sent a trusted spy on a long journey several moons ago and he has returned with information that orcs and goblins are stirring in their holes."

At the suddenly alarmed looks of three pairs of eyes suddenly focused on him, only Fíli sleeping on oblivious and content, he raises his hands, placating. "There is no immediate danger, as far as Galin could ascertain they aren't ready for a big push, nor will they be any time soon." His face grows grim. "However, we have to be prepared for

there to *be* one in the future.”

Dís shifts uneasily on her chair and Víli puts a hand on her arm. Thorin conjures up what he hopes is a reassuring smile, but before he can say anything else Frerin asks, “Why not attack before they are ready? We could catch them unawares.”

Thorin’s head whips around and he almost recoils from the hardness in his brother’s expression, the cold calculation.

“The idea has some merit,” he has to admit, voice only slightly raspy from repressed words, “but would you want to risk more of the lives of our people than have already been lost? Inside Erebor we are protected, and there are allies close by for us to call on.” Thorin’s eyes meet Frerin’s gaze and hold it, utterly serious. “I *fear* war, nadad, and I will not seek it out unless as a last resort.”

Frerin’s face softens and he nods. “I know, Thorin. I did not mean to doubt you.”

Thorin snorts. “It’s your job to doubt me, that’s what *baruf* is for.”

Both Frerin and Dis grin at that – after all there’ve already been uncountable instances in which they had done exactly that.

“I will make certain that our warriors are well-trained and our army does not dwindle,” Thorin continues, this time clearly addressing all three of them. “Erebor’s food stores can be built up over the next few years. We’ll be fine.”

If not for a few too many experiences in his last life he might even completely believe it himself, but his family looks reassured, and for now that’s all that matters. It’s important that they know of the danger, but it’s equally important that they don’t have to live in fear every day – and if a little lie accomplishes that, Thorin has no qualms of utilizing it, whatever that makes him. A liar he supposes, if one out of firm necessity. To keep his loved ones sound in body and mind, that is his goal above all.

As if on cue, Fíli decides to wake up at this exact moment and starts wailing, startling Frerin enough to almost drop him. Her sharp eyes having noticed Frerin’s barely concealed jerk, Dis clucks and moves

over to collect her son, not in the least moved by Frerin's attempts at inciting her pity with making impossibly wide, innocent eyes.

"Get your own," she grumbles, prying Fíli out of Frerin's clutching hands. "Thorin at least knows when to give him back."

Thorin throws Frerin a smug look, but Frerin only sticks his tongue out at him when Dís isn't looking.

There's *definitely* not only one dwarfling in the room.

*

In the biggest ironic twist of all time, Fíli's first word is 'apple', uttered when his mother is gesticulating wildly with one, about to throw it at Víli's head for some minor offense, and everyone looks either ecstatic about him finally having brought forth something more coherent than babbling and slightly disappointed that it wasn't something more along the lines of 'mama' or 'dada'; except for Thorin who is sitting in a corner and about to be sick from desperately trying to keep his laughter from erupting.

*

Thorin is just stepping out of the bath in his chambers after a long and satisfying workout in the training salles – after all it doesn't do to get rusty from pushing papers around all day, as Dwalin keeps informing him rather maliciously in his opinion – when the door bangs open with enough force that he almost drops the towel around his hips in surprise.

"Have you seen Fíli, Thorin?" Dís doesn't sound frantic exactly, but definitely like she's nearing a somewhat unstable state of mind.

"No, I just got back from the training grounds," he replies, frowning. "Why? Is something the matter?"

"I can't find Fíli," she half shouts at him and his heart immediately sinks, the good feeling left by the workout evaporating as fast as steam from a boiling kettle disappearing into thin air.

Remain calm. It's not like this has never happened before, nor

should he immediately assume the worst.

“When did you last see him?” he asks calmly, hoping that his even voice will give Dís something to hold onto. He reaches for his shirt and pants and pulls them on, heedless of Dis still standing a few meters away – it’s not as if she hasn’t seen it all before and few dwarves are squeamish about nudity.

She takes a deep breath, eyes fixed on his face as if searching for strength. “We were at the market. I set him down, just for a minute to pay a vendor and when I looked back down he was gone.”

Thorin has to resist the urge to bury his face in his hands – of course it has to be the *market* of all places, there’s hardly a harder place to search for a small dwarfling. Fili had started to toddle some time ago, then taken his first steps only a few weeks back, which meant that he could now, theoretically, be anywhere inside a reasonable radius for his small legs to carry him.

Now it’s his turn to take a few calming breaths. “Why were you even at the market, Dís? Your maid brings you everything you need, doesn’t she?”

“Because I needed to get out!” Dis cries defensively, high spots of colour appearing on her cheeks. “You all seem to think that now that I’ve birthed a baby I’m not capable of doing anything anymore. I need to breathe some air from outside my room *some* time at least, brother.”

Thorin immediately feels guilty, both for not having seen the signs of his sister going slightly stir-crazy before now and for having all but accused her for a perfectly understandable urge. In Ered Luin there had been no choice but to go on as normal as soon after the birth as she’d regained her strength, but he chides himself for immediately sub-consciously having assumed that that must mean that she wouldn’t want to do that much still now that she has the choice.

“I’m sorry, *namad*,” he says quietly, drawing her towards him until their foreheads rested against each other. “I didn’t mean to accuse you of anything – and believe me, I have never believed you incapable of looking after yourself and managing your own affairs.” His lips twitch

slightly. “Far from it actually. I’m sure that if you were running Erebor everything would go much more smoothly.”

That gets even Dís to smile, her anger visibly diffusing.

“Come, let’s go search for your errant son,” he murmurs.

She nods, and her eyes even twinkle a little bit when she says, “He’s Víli’s son too.”

“And I’m sure it’s all his fault,” Thorin agrees with a laugh and guides her out the door.

On the way to the market grimness descends once more, and Thorin is helpless to stop it. They stand at the edge of the colourful square, gazes sweeping over the many dwarves and even a handful of men milling about.

“We need to split up,” Thorin finally says, his voice heavy. “It will be nigh impossible to find him in this chaos.”

Dís nods tightly and moves off the left without another word, clearly refusing to spend any more time deliberating instead of searching for her son. If he didn’t understand her feelings half so well Thorin would’ve sighed – at least a meeting place would’ve been useful to establish before rushing off.

He searches for almost half an hour, pushing through throngs of dwarves with muttered apologies that get more and more terse as time passes, then decides to make his way out of the market itself and onto one of the balconies in the hopes of getting a better overview.

“Thorin!”

Dori’s shout has his head snapping around fast enough to produce an audible pop.

“Thank Mahal,” he breathes, heartbeat finally calming down as he spots the dwarfling being led by Dori’s firm hand.

Dori is smiling fondly as he hands Fíli into Thorin’s waiting arms, patting the young heir on the head one last time. “See, I told you your Uncle would be looking for you.”

Fíli only nods into Thorin’s tunic, clinging to him with all his strength – not that Thorin has any objection to that, his own urge to

hang onto the dwarfling and never let go again almost physical in its intensity.

Seeing the questions brimming in Thorin's eyes, Dori explains, "I found him wandering around the market. The poor tyke was half in hysterics."

"I just wanted to play with Ori," Fili snuffles. "I didn't mean to get lost."

And just like that all of Thorin's anger at the dwarfling's disobedience that had caused them so much worry evaporates in the face of Fili's choked up voice and widened eyes. He almost sighs – Dís and Frerin had been right, he really *is* a push over.

"Ori is busy, mizimith, he's learning how to be a scribe."

Fili looks up at him with pitiful eyes. "Why can't I learn with him? I want to play with him!"

"You're still very young, little one," Thorin tells him gently, a smile tugging at his lips. Already this Fili is showing the same thirst for learning Thorin remembers from him. "Only yesterday you wanted to become a warrior."

Fili immediately brightens. "I do! I want to be like Mister Dwalin!"

Thorin barely holds back a slight growl – what *is* it about Dwalin that makes all youngsters look at him with starry-eyed adoration when they should be scared out of their wits?

"I'm sure you will be with time," Thorin assures him, then continues before Fili's pout can be used to full effect. "And I'm sure Ori will be happy to play with you now and then, *if* you let him know in advance. No running away again, are we clear on that?"

Fili looks up at him at his stern tone and nods seriously. "'m sorry, nadadaz'amad."

Thorin smiles at him. "Apology accepted. Now let us find your mother and soothe her worry. Say thank you to Mister Dori."

"Thank you, Mister Dori," Fili immediately repeats and gives the older dwarf a smile so bright that Thorin can *see* him melt in his boots.

"It was no trouble," Dori replies with a light bow. "I am simply glad

to have been of service.”

Thorin nods at him, silently conveying his own thanks, before taking his leave. Dís would, quite understandably, not appreciate him lingering without informing her that Fíli had been found safe and sound.

Safe and sound.

Chapter 22



Thorin stares at his most trusted advisor and friend. It's been a long day and all he can do is hope that he's somehow misheard Balin's words. Partial deafness has never sounded appealing before.

"What?"

"One of the eastern mineshafts has collapsed," Balin repeats, face drawn and aged. "Nine are dead... one of them is Víli."

No more words will come to his frozen tongue and he falls back into his chair heavily, glad that it's Balin bringing him word of this tragedy. Balin, in front of whom he can at least show weakness, doesn't have to pretend that this news doesn't cut him to the bone.

Víli. Bright affable Víli dead once more, leaving his wife, his son, and his unborn son to fend for themselves. The worst thing is that Thorin doesn't even have to imagine what this will do to their family – to *Dís*. Fíli is yet too young to fully grieve, Kíli will never know his father – and that, too, Thorin had wished to avert, but *Dís*... *Dís* has just lost her One.

He remembers all too well.

Thorin closes his eyes, wishing not for the first time that life would just be easier, happier, that tragedy wouldn't haunt the line of Durin no matter what he tried to do to stop it.

Balin, no doubt sensing Thorin's need to be alone right now, leaves quietly without another word, without a reminder of his duties, or a word about the funeral that needs to be planned. Even kings are allowed to grieve.

The door falls shut behind Balin and Thorin buries his face in his hands.

Once more he has failed to protect those he loves from grief. It isn't hard to understand that all these deaths he didn't prevent are due to things beyond his control, beyond his influence – not even the King of Erebor can stop stone from rumbling and breaking – but that doesn't make it any easier to accept that Víli is just as dead as he was eighty years ago.

Or that Kíli will never know his father, like he had not in another life in the Blue Mountains. That Fili spends some of his first precious years grieving for a father, whose memory will fade from him with time until he remains as nothing more than a half-forgotten shadow. That Dís is once more robbed of the chance of a long fulfilled life at the side of her beloved.

Sometimes he wonders bitterly why he was sent back in the first place when there always seem to be fates that refuse to let themselves be changed by him. He usually remembers again after a time that his people now live in the mountain denied to them for so long before, that he has done his duty as a king at least. But not his duty as a son, a brother, and an uncle.

He sits like this, quietly lost in his own failings for a long while, time ticking away somewhere that he cannot spare the energy to worry about. Another knock on the door rouses him from his stupor and when Balin enters once more, this time with Fili in his wake, clarity finally reasserts itself.

“He asks for you,” Balin says quietly and Thorin doesn't have to think about rising and gathering his little nephew in his arms. Fíli is trembling, he notices almost detachedly, and draws him even closer.

“What about Dís?” Thorin asks, keeping his voice low. “How fares my sister?”

Worry and grief are emotions that he'd hoped to spare Balin this time around, but there they are, carved deeply into his face once more. “She's in her rooms, but she refuses to see anyone. She wouldn't even answer to Fíli.”

So that's what has got Fíli so upset. Though he was surely told

about the death of his father, Thorin knows from experience that for a dwarfling so young the concept remains abstract – Fíli had asked when Víli would be coming back for months after his father’s death the last time – and would not truly sink in for a while yet, but a mother’s rejection... it almost makes Thorin angry at Dís, but he knows too well what grief can do to a person to think that she actually meant to reject her son. She simply isn’t in her right mind to care for anyone else at the moment.

“I’ll take care of him,” Thorin reassures Balin, looking at him over the top of Fíli’s head. “We should give her some time.”

Balin nods silently, though he looks a little doubtful, and Thorin resists the urge to close his eyes once more and slump back into his chair – he has to be strong for Fíli now. His nephew’s little face is pressed into his chest, as if to escape from everything around him, and all Thorin can do is to draw him even closer, to offer what warmth and comfort he may.

Some time turns out to be several days and counting. With every day Thorin’s unease climbs.

Frerin’s face, too, is drawn with sorrow but at least he isn’t hiding from the world, instead electing to help Thorin take care of Fíli, who is still confused and hurt.

Dís has shut herself in her rooms, refusing to come out and refusing to let anyone in. When Thorin finally loses his patience – the fear of what they might find if they waited any longer growing with every minute – and has another key made for the door, he is almost too afraid to enter.

Her rooms are dark, no fire burning in the hearth, nor a single lamp illuminating anything beyond the pale stripe of light falling through the window. If this weren’t one of the rooms of the royal family, built with a window to the outside, Thorin is sure not even that much light would penetrate the darkness.

“Dís?” he calls, carefully stepping around furniture and discarded clothes. His sister had always been a neat person, certainly neater than

Frerin, but right now the mess on the floor would rival anything that his brother could've cooked up in his own rooms. There are shards and pieces of wood strewn on the floor, too, ripped apart and shattered in fits of grieving rage and Thorin mourns for his sister's gentler spirit.

No one answers his call.

When he finally spots the figure lying motionless on her bed, his heart seems to stop for a moment and he can barely notices his legs moving, rushing to her side.

He wants to sigh in relief when he is finally close enough to see her breast falling and rising slowly with each breath, but the expression on her face stops him dead in his tracks.

She looks like what he had seen himself look like in the mirror in the aftermath of Azanulbizar once, empty and broken and oh-so shattered.

"Dís," he repeats quietly, one hand gently brushing her cold arm. "Oh my mizimith, I'm so sorry."

For the longest time she doesn't react, so long that he half begins to believe that she had not heard him, too lost in her own mind.

"Go away, Thorin."

It's little more than a coarse whisper, but still he brightens up a little at the sign of life. There's no way that he will leave her like this, unattended for even a second longer.

So he simply says, "Make me."

Dís' glare may only be a shadow of its usual ferocity, but a lesser dwarf might have shrunk away from it regardless. Thorin, however, is no lesser dwarf – besides he's quite aware that someone who hasn't eaten for days and probably not drunk much more is no match for him.

Considering her glare, Dís is aware of that inconvenient fact as well.

"I brought some food," he tells her, wafting some of the meal's aroma towards her.

She turns her head away. "I'm not hungry."

“Dís, you *need* to eat, you’re wasting away.”

“What does it matter?” Still, she doesn’t face him. “He’s dead. Víli is dead.”

Thorin represses a growl deep in his throat. Couldn’t she see what she is doing to her remaining family? “And you are not. There are many people, including your son and Frerin and I who would rather you didn’t starve yourself to death out of grief.”

Only silence meets his words, and Thorin’s usually so tight rein on his emotions frays in the face of building despair at her apathy, at her willingness to leave them all if only to cling to her grief. Her tears are soundless.

(He knows, she is not the only one guilty of that thinking, but his own failings should never be visited upon *her*.)

“You’ve shut yourself away from reality!” Thorin cries, determined to get through layers and layers of pain and isolation, but she only stares at him with blank eyes. “Your child cries for you and you ignore him! Your unborn child is moving in your belly and you ignore him too!”

“It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters.”

Dís voice sounds nothing but hollow. It’s a tone Thorin recognizes and Mahal take his beard if he hasn’t sounded like that himself a few times, but he’s *not* going to let his baby sister give up. Not now, not ever.

“You have to live, *namad*, you have to live for your son,” he implores, for while he is occasionally above begging for his own sake, he will certainly do it for Fíli’s. “Do you wish for Fíli to grow up an orphan with his two uncles? Do you wish to leave me and Frerin as the last of our house? You’re allowed to grieve, Dís, but don’t let this loss consume you.”

“What do you know of loss?” she screams, her tear-stained face a mask of grief and rage. If he hadn’t witnessed her outburst once before he would’ve staggered under the onslaught of her emotions.

And yet... the last time she had not accused him of *this* at least, far

too cognizant of the fact that it was as useless a question as they come.

“What do I know of loss?” he says quietly, his eyes burning. “What do *I* know of loss? I’ve seen my home burned, my family slaughtered, the remains of our people brought low. I’ve seen myself descend into madness and come out again bereft of more lives, more *precious lives* than I could care to count. I’ve led those who trusted me into ruin. *I’ve lost everything*, Dís.”

He turns away, all fury drained, feeling the weight of his three-hundred years. “Don’t tell me I don’t know anything of loss.”

The raw pain and honesty in his voice is enough to bring her out of the storm she had been drowning in.

Still, she does not meet his eyes, but her quiet regret gives him hope. “I’m sorry.”

He sighs. “I know. I am too.”

She doesn’t ask him what he meant. How he could possibly have lived through what he has recounted. He isn’t sure whether that’s because she doesn’t want to know, or understands that it would hurt him more to ask than to keep silent, but he is grateful nonetheless.

But he knows she will not forget, either.

The following day Dís ventures out of her rooms for the first time since Víli’s death and cries into Fíli’s golden hair until all her tears are spent.

*

The less he remembers the day of the funeral the better.

*

He lies in his bed and stares blankly at the ceiling stretching far above him, hair in disarray, limbs too heavy to move and mind descended into a blackness he’d hoped lay behind him now.

Two days ago now had he witnessed Dís break apart in front of a crystal coffin, had seen the fear in Fíli’s eyes as he watched his mother sob her heart out, had recognized the bleakness in Frerin’s gaze as his

own. After the ceremony, he had known that he should comfort his family, but instead he had turned away, his burden too great. How can he help others if he cannot even help himself?

So now he is here in his room, hardly having moved for two days, hasn't eaten, has barely slept and not even the knowledge that he's being a fool is enough to get him moving.

Not for the first time a knock sounds on the door – so far he has successfully ignored them all, but this time the pounding on his door doesn't let up despite his stubborn refusal to move or acknowledge whoever it is in any way.

“Open the door, brother, or I'll break it down!”

Ah, Frerin again, then. He must have got fed up with Thorin's hiding. He lies still for another few moments, detachedly listening to the continued hammering on the door, then he finally raises his voice. “The door isn't locked.”

His voice comes out as more of a croak than anything else, but Frerin must've heard him for there's a slightly sheepish ‘*ab*’ before the door creaks open. Thorin had *wanted* to lock the door, but then the image of little Fíli standing in front of the cold stone, wishing to see his uncle but barred by a lock had pushed itself to the forefront of his mind. It hadn't happened, of course, now that Dís is looking after her son once more and battles her grief that way, but he couldn't have born even the possibility of it happening. None of the others who had knocked had even thought of simply turning the handle and pushing the door open – either automatically assuming it to be locked, or too respectful of his privacy – and not yet worried enough about him to force the issue – to barge in without permission. Though Frerin probably would have at some point.

His brother looks frazzled and tired but there's also an anger burning inside him – one that Thorin knows is directed at him, for doing this to himself when he should be grieving with his family and finding comfort in that.

“Why?” Frerin demands, not even bothering to beat around the

bush in the least.

Thorin stares back at him blankly.

“Why do you blame yourself, nadad? There is nothing you could’ve done.” His stare is as harsh as his words. “And don’t tell me you aren’t. I recognize the signs by now.”

Thorin’s voice is only bleak. “I knew there was a risk, and yet I sat back and did nothing. And now he’s dead and Dís will never be the same.”

“You could not have *known*,” Frerin insists, some of his anger draining away in the face of Thorin’s despair. “This is not your fault. No one except you yourself thinks that.”

Thorin almost smiles humourlessly at the irony. Could he really not have known?

(They had always known that the mines here in the Blue Mountains weren’t as stable as they should be, but they had no choice – if the dwarven colony, a mix of Erebolean refugees and those few that had dwelt there before, were to survive through harsh winters and the hostility from their neighbours they’d come to expect they had to mine. The mine was their main income.

So Thorin had said nothing when Vili returned there day after day, working to secure their future. Had ignored the possibility of anything happening to the free-hearted dwarf because there was nothing he could do about it and only thinking about Vili’s smile being extinguished forever made something ache deep in his chest. They might have their differences, but that didn’t mean Thorin didn’t care for him. And he certainly cared for Dís and Fili and Fili’s yet unborn sibling’s well-being.

When the news was brought by a dust and soot-streaked Bofur, his hat trembling ever so slightly in his grip, the world seemed to crash down around them for the third time in their lives. Thorin would never forget the look of utter horror and heartbreak on his sister’s face, nor the scream that tore from her throat, nor the tears dripping down her face unheeded.)

When he finally raises his eyes to Frerin's gaze, his brother is staring at him, some unnamed emotion passing over his face, as if he's read some of what Thorin is thinking on his face.

"I don't understand," he murmurs and the pain and helplessness in his voice makes Thorin physically flinch. "How can you truly *believe* that you should've known? You're not all-powerful."

A bitter laugh bursts from Thorin's lips. "No, I'm not. That much I should know by now."

"*Why?*" Frerin's expression is as open and vulnerable and *desperate* as Thorin has ever seen it when he pleads, "Thorin, lukhudel, I ask only this of you, *help me understand.*"

Something shifts inside him at those words, a great burden not lifting, but moving to the side just a little to create an opening – an opening through which the time has come to pour the truth forth. There's still fear, so much of it, almost enough to make him regret this instant choice, but he forges on through it. He can feel that it is time. Or perhaps he feels that if he doesn't speak now he will let himself be crushed by his own memories.

So he meets Frerin's gaze squarely, unable to banish his fear and sadness entirely from his gaze yet not caring – not now when he is about to lay himself completely bare. "You will not think of me the same after this."

Frerin is already shaking his head in vehement denial before the last word has left his mouth. "I could not, undad. *I could not.* You're my Thorin, our Thorin, and you will always be."

Thorin wants so every badly to believe him, but he simply can't. He doesn't know what Frerin is imagining he's going to tell him, but it's certainly not anywhere close to the truth – the truth being far more terrible.

He lets his gaze fall to his hands, scarred and strong, watches his fingers twist the fur of his blankets over and over again as if they don't belong to him.

"Sit down," he finally says heavily. "This is a long story, and not one

to tell lightly or quickly.”

He expects Frerin to draw one of the chairs scattered throughout the room closer, but instead he climbs onto the bed without hesitation, making no mention of the smell that must surely hang about Thorin after days of neglecting himself as he tucks himself into Thorin’s side.

“I’m willing to listen,” he says quietly. “And I promise you this, brother – I will not judge you for whatever it is.”

Yes, you will.

Where to begin?

“Do you remember the day that I told you that Dís was pregnant the first time?”

He waits for Frerin’s nod and continues to choose his words with utter care. “Do you remember standing upon the battlements and telling me that I’d changed? Asking me what happened to your brother, many decades ago, to turn him into a dwarf old before his time?” His lips twitch up into the driest, most humourless smile even he has ever managed. “That would be because I’m *not*. I’m not the same dwarf you knew ninety-four years ago. I haven’t been for a long while.”

Frerin’s voice is little more than a whisper. “What do you mean?”

Thorin raises his eyes. Frerin looks caught somewhere between dread and disbelief, his eyes unbelievably blue with emotion.

“I mean that I’ve already lived my life once, from birth to death, and when I had expected to wake up in the halls of our fathers, I found myself back here instead, an old soul in a young body. All my memories were still there, but it was like none of them had ever happened past the age I found myself at once more.”

“How can this be?” Frerin chokes out, shock paling his features. “Not even our legends tell of such a thing.”

“It does seem to be fairly unprecedented.” There’s some grim humour there that he’d found along the way, just enough to keep him sane.

But then he looks at Frerin and his heart all but freezes in his chest at the emotions he can read in his gaze – emotions he had never before

seen in his brother's eyes while directed at him. There's fear there, but also a spark of distrust and wariness now that the shock of the first revelation abates. It breaks Thorin's heart.

He turns away, unable to watch the love drain out of his beloved brother's eyes.

"Who are you then?" Frerin's voice is steady, almost too much so. "Who are you if not the brother I have always known?"

Thorin hasn't felt the need to cry with such intensity in a very long time, voice hoarse and shaking when he asks, "Do you want the whole wretched tale then? Every death I've ever witnessed, all the destruction I've seen, every mistake I've made? We'll be here for a long while then."

He blinks once or twice, trying to banish the images rising in his mind at the same time as holding damning wetness at bay. And then suddenly there's a hand on his shoulder and one in his hair and Frerin close enough to touch as he breathes, "Will you tell me, if I ask? Will you share your story and yourself?"

Thorin looks up into Frerin's eyes and, yes, there's still fear and weariness lurking there, but the distrust – the distrust is gone, replaced by tentative warmth and he can breathe a little easier. "I already have," he murmurs, "I've shared everything I am with you for ninety-odd years, nadad. The rest is not important, I'm still the same as I've been for most of your life."

"But it's still a burden you bear," Frerin says, with no question in his words, only stark fact. "I do not think" – he swallows once – "I do not think I could love you less for this. No one could have faked the love you bear for us for so many years."

"And I never would have," Thorin promises fiercely. "This might be my second life, but I was Thorin then too, and I loved all my family and those around me."

For a moment Frerin leans in even closer, resting their heads against each other, and that most of all reassures Thorin that not all is lost in their relationship.

"Tell me," Frerin commands softly.

Thorin takes a look at his determined face and nods. In much more detail than his account to Gandalf had included, he speaks now, of his thoughts and feelings as well as a dry recounting of the facts. For hours he talks, of dragons, of homeless wanderings, of hunger and despair, of battles, of loss so crippling it would've crushed a weaker dwarf, of the struggles of a king in exile to keep his people alive, of moments of joy, of beloved nephews and a sister who kept him sane, and memories of a brother. He talks of a foolhardy quest, fuelled more by impossible hope and dreams than reality, of twelve loyal dwarves and one hobbit.

At the mention of Bilbo, Frerin's eyes fly up to Thorin's, wide in realization. "Is that why?"

Thorin dips his head, torn between smiling and weeping. "Yes."

"Oh," Frerin breathes. "I'm so sorry, undad. Had I known..."

Thorin musters up a smile for him. "All is forgiven, indad. You couldn't have known."

And then comes the hardest part, when he finally speaks of his greatest failing, of the last days before his death and the ending of their line. He cannot look at Frerin as he recounts his madness and all that befell them after, as he speaks of Fili and Kili's demise in a choked whisper.

Later he doesn't remember Frerin drawing him close in silent comfort, nor his brother's own tears that fall from half-closed eyes.

"And then I died," he finally says, not lingering on his own last hours, when death had seemed welcome enough. "Instead of going to the Halls of our Fathers, I woke up here, on the day that Smaug came, an old dwarf in a young body."

He turns to Frerin then, eyes desperate. "Do you see now? Do you see why I feel guilty? I knew how Vili had died the last time, and when, too, and *I did nothing*. I've failed you all once again."

"And what should you have done?" Frerin asks him harshly. "Forbidden him to do what he loved and incurred his resentment for it? Controlled all our lives to the point where we could hardly set a foot outside our quarters without it being your fault that we stumbled and

bruised our heads? That's not how it works, Thorin."

"But I knew," Thorin whispers, and that's really all there is to it. He can almost feel Frerin's gaze burn into him, though devoid of the accusation he almost wishes there to be in it. Not even his brother can convince him that he's not at fault for anything in this.

Apparently Frerin realizes that too, for he changes track, and after a moment of silence says quietly, sadly, "You need to grieve for him, Thorin, *properly* grieve. It doesn't sound like you had much of a chance to do that... last time. You need to let go."

And finally the tears start falling.

He cries for Vili, the good dwarf that had been claimed by Mandos far too early once more, but he also cries for what was and for what he fears to still come.

He cries for a long time and Frerin remains at his side, a calm rock in the storm.

"You aren't angry then?" Thorin finally asks when his tears have run their course, his voice more timid than he can remember it being for a long while.

Frerin's lop-sided smile seems somewhere caught between compassion and ire.

"Oh, I'm angry at you all right. *Why* did you never talk about this? Did you not trust us enough? *Almost a century*, Thorin."

Thorin refuses to meet his eyes. "I was afraid, as you well know. How does one tell one's loved ones that one isn't who they always thought one to be?"

Of course Frerin has no answer.

"You will have to tell Dís. And the others too," Frerin finally murmurs, steel in his voice though still not unkindly, and Thorin winces.

"Can you imagine the risk? I've kept this secret for many reasons, not least that I simply know *too much*."

Frerin stares at him, mouth half-open. "Do you truly think any of them would betray your secret?"

Of course he doesn't. If he did... well, he would have stopped fight-

ing long ago.

"It would only take a small slip in the wrong place at the wrong time, Frerin. Could you imagine what the forces of evil would do with the knowledge hidden in my mind? The devastation that would follow?"

"They are your *friends*, Thorin. Whatever risk there is, they deserve to know."

"And to what end?" he asks bitterly. "To look at me like you did, as if I suddenly were a stranger, someone not to be trusted?"

Frerin looks at him, pain and vulnerability shining from his eyes. "I did not."

"You did." Thorin's voice is hardly louder than a whisper, weighted with too much emotion to contain.

"But not now! Can you see any of that now?"

Frerin's hands are gripping his shoulders so tightly that he knows he'll have bruises tomorrow, but Thorin doesn't care. "No, not now," he says quietly, "but even that small moment, I could hardly bear. To see such on more faces than yours..." He shudders. "And can you truly tell me that they will all take it as much in stride as you have?"

Frerin's face falls as he searches for words. Finally he says, "I will not force you to tell anyone, safe for Dís for she, the most out of all those who care for you, deserves to know. But know this, Thorin, not so heartless are any of your friends that they would abandon you for this."

"Perhaps not, and yet, for now, I cannot bear the risk," Thorin says heavily, and finds relief in Frerin's nod against his shoulder.

"There is no rush," his brother murmurs. "And I shall stand beside you for however long you need me."

And finally, Thorin can breathe easier again, secure in the knowledge that this revelation hasn't torn their bond asunder completely as he'd feared many a sleepless night. He is not naïve enough to think that everything will go back to normal now, many talks still await him and whatever Frerin says he *must* look at Thorin differently now, but

at last he lets himself hope that perhaps they would grow stronger from this – not fall apart.

Chapter 23

The next day Frerin, who'd refused to leave Thorin's side all night – a fact he is secretly pathetically grateful for – looks at him with worry in his eyes and asks, "Are you sure you don't want me to come with you? Dís has been a little... unstable lately."

He almost snorts. *Unstable* barely covers first her hunger strike, then her fluctuating between an incessant drive to *do* something and barely moving at all, weighted down by her grief. That it's only too understandable only makes it harder to witness.

"I'm sure," Thorin sighs, for what feels like the tenth time. "But I would appreciate it if you stayed nearby, just in case you hear screams."

Or in case I end up having a breakdown. Or both.

Frerin nods immediately, clearly understanding what Thorin is actually asking – after all neither of them truly believes that Dís would ever do anything that would make Thorin so much as raise his voice in trepidation.

Five minutes later Thorin stands in front of Dís' door, cursing himself nine times to the forges of Mahal. How could charging head-first towards a hulking orc be so much easier than this? He notices his hands trembling ever so slightly and curls his fingers into a tighter fist. He knocks.

"Come in!" Dís voice comes, muffled through the stone.

With a last deep breath, he enters.

Dís turns her head towards him from where she sits close to the fire, still pale and garbed in grey, their colour of mourning – the colour of the stone dwarves believe their slain folk return to. She opens her mouth.

"I need to talk to you about something," Thorin rushes out before his courage can desert him. "Something about myself."

Dis looks up from the cup in her hands, searches his face for a moment. "You have finally decided to tell me then."

Thorin frowns, thrown. "Tell you what?"

"That you're Durin reborn, of course."

Thorin's mouth falls open entirely of its own volition his mind far too busy coming to a temporary standstill to interfere. "*What?*"

"Did you think no one would notice?" Dis' lips twitch in something that might almost be amusement. "Admittedly it was Balin who first realized why your behaviour might've changed, how you had suddenly grown wiser and how you knew all these things you shouldn't. Remember what you said to me, *I've lost everything*. If you bear all their memories... I cannot imagine the horror you must have witnessed." The firelight reflects in her eyes. "Khazad-dûm burning."

Thorin swallows hard, at a complete loss what to do as he stares at his sister, and then, for one of the first times in his life, he simply turns around and flees.

"She thinks I'm Durin reborn," he all but shouts at Frerin as soon as the door has closed behind him. "*Durin reborn*, Frerin. Why would she think *that?*"

Frerin blinks at him, half out of his chair at Thorin's frenzied entrance. And then he starts laughing.

"Mahal, Thorin. Your *face*. You'd think she accused you of loving elves more than yur own kin." When Thorin only continues to look slightly panicked, he sobers. "Think about it, nadad. It makes sense in a way, doesn't it? She clearly noticed, like I did, that your behaviour was a little bit off, that you were suddenly wiser and more knowledgeable. The legend of Durin provides a rather neat explanation for it all and you *do* fit all the criteria. There hasn't been a Durin for a long time now and times are growing darker." His lips twitch. "It's certainly more plausible than you living *twice*."

"But I'm about the least likely of our line to be the reincarnation of

Durin!" Thorin bursts out. "Have you not listened to a word of what I told you yesterday?"

"I have," Frerin says, a reprimand hidden in his words and sudden steel in his eyes. "And that is exactly what makes me think that you would be suitable. You lived through trying and dark times, Thorin, and through it all you led your people with courage and a will do to the right thing by your family and those looking up to you that defied darkness and evil. It was through *your* actions that our home was reclaimed and the orcs defeated, and though you may have stumbled on the way, there was always goodness in your heart. Would it be so hard to imagine Mahal choosing you for these great deeds?"

Thorin blinks once or twice, then rallies, "The fact remains, that he *hasn't*, and now Dís thinks I'm something I'm *not*. And she's not the only one – she mentioned Balin as well. What am I supposed to *do*?"

"You could just, you know, *tell her the truth*," Frerin offers dryly.

Thorin's eyes meet his brother's gaze, heavy with foreboding and a deep weariness. "Have you stopped to consider what that might do to her, nadad? Dís is unstable at the moment already, as is only understandable, how do you think she would react to hearing of her sons' far too early death? The *manner* of their death?" His hand brushes over the token hidden deep within his tunic and he whispers, more to himself than to the dwarf standing only meters from him, "Her precious sons."

Understanding lights in Frerin's eyes and he swallows hard. "Then don't tell her that bit, but do tell her the truth of your circumstances."

Thorin's gaze snaps up from where it had drifted to the ground. "You wish me to *lie* to her? After everything I have already done to her?"

"So far you have not done anything to her, nadad, safe keeping this from her," Frerin reminds him, almost unbearably gently, and Thorin shakes himself out of far-off memories that encroach on the present once more. He had spent years working to separate memories of his former life from his current reality, but with his confession to Frerin

all that he had so painstakingly buried had come to the fore once more, leaving him floundering in recollection.

Frerin's dark eyes are watching him, waiting to see some sign of his understanding before he continues. "And it wouldn't be lying, Thorin. You are telling her the truth, just not all of it." His tone is almost pleading. "I truly believe she must know, and not only to prevent a rift from forming between us, the two who know and the one who doesn't."

Thorin swallows, the image only all too clear. Frerin by his side, suddenly with greater understanding of him, and Dís looking on, wondering where she had gone wrong to lose both her brothers.

"Yes, I believe you're right," Thorin murmurs, his heart heavy. "And yet I fear that it will do harm, keeping back specific details of my former life. Dís is not stupid, nor is she gullible."

"More harm than telling her that in a life you have lived her sons died on a bloody battlefield barely come of age, when she has just lost her One?" Frerin asks, somewhat sharply.

Perhaps. And yet Thorin knows that he will not tell her, would not have the strength to tell her, to *hurt* her like that, not now, and possible not ever, and when he turns to go his heart is not light, but at least determined.

Dís is waiting for his return, no surprise lighting her face at his entrance, nor at the way he shuffles his feet just slightly, in imitation of the sheepish dwarfling from decades ago.

Before she can even so much as open her mouth, he says, quick but determined, "I am not Durin reborn."

Her eyebrows rise, a measure of shock finally invading her features. "You're not?" Her forehead knits together in suspicious grooves. "Do not try to fool me, brother dear, I would not advise it."

"I am not," he repeats, voice quiet but unwavering. "What you have perceived is not the lives of old Durins awoken in my mind, but something even more unbelievable. I am Thorin, *and only Thorin*, but I have lived my life twice. It was not Khazad-dûm I saw pillaged and

burnt, but Erebor. Not dwarves long gone whose loss I mourn, but those dearest to me.”

Colour has fled Dís’ cheeks, her voice strained when she asks, “But how can that be? What does that even *mean*?”

“How indeed?” Thorin chuckles humourlessly. “I’m afraid that I am no wiser in this than you are.

All I can say is that I lived my life, died, and then woke up again here, in this time, an old soul in a young body, with memories in my head that had not yet come to pass.”

The silence that follows is oppressive enough that Thorin imagines he can feel the tension crackling in the air where it meets his skin, almost a tingle – and through it all Dís’ eyes are fixed on his face, as if searching for deceit.

And then she says, “Yes, that would also make sense.”

Thorin stares at her. Her features are calm – too calm for Thorin’s liking, who had expected erupting emotions, anger, betrayal, shock, *something* more than this cold façade without cracks.

“When?” Dís asks, voice still eerily placid.

He almost shouts at her to *show* something. This is not a Dís he knows how to deal with (and, horribly, a voice in the back of his mind whispers *that’s what she would’ve been like if you had returned to her with the news of her sons’ deaths*). But shouting never accomplishes anything, unless it’s on the battlefield or training grounds, so he forces himself to take a deep breath and simply answer her, helpless. “The day the dragon attacked.”

Dís’ gaze goes inward, and he shivers slightly in relief not to have that unnerving gaze focused on himself anymore.

“I remember that night,” she says quietly, and *finally* the calm in her voice is disturbed by the softness of reminiscence. “The scream you woke up with. I never quite believed it was only because of a bad dream.”

Thorin continues to stare at her and finally blurts, “... You are very calm.”

“And why shouldn’t I be?” Dís asks, an edge to her voice that finally belies the mask of serenity.

“Oh, perhaps because you have just found out that your older brother has been keeping a secret from you for most of your life, and is not who you always thought he is?”

A shaft of sunlight falls through the window, illuminating Dís from behind, softening the lines on her face where it can reach, and her dark hair gleams almost joyfully. “Do not get me wrong, Thorin, I’m anything but happy that you didn’t trust me with this information before,” she says, unconsciously echoing Frerin’s statement from the day before, “but I have always known that you are... different. No dwarf that young should have had the bearing you did.” The corners of her lips rise teasingly. “Not even a crown prince.”

Thorin draws himself up in mock-indignation. “I’ll have you know that we crown princes are the very picture of decorum from the moment we first draw breath.”

They stand silently for a while.

“Do you not want to know more?” Thorin asks quietly, when he cannot hold the question in for any longer. “Frerin immediately clamoured for all the details...”

“I am not Frerin, and of late I have come to understand reluctance in talking about painful memories.” He opens his mouth, but she cuts him off before a sound leaves his throat. “Don’t give me that, nadedad, I know that there is pain hidden in those memories of your past life. And one day we will sit together and talk about all the things we daren’t voice now.”

He is grieved to see that stark sorrow has found its way back into her eyes.

“But not today.” Her voice grows quieter. “I do not think I could bear to talk of more loss and grief right now. I cannot escape that weakness.”

“Not weakness,” he says gently, and finally steps forward, drawing her into his arms. “To know one’s limits and thus avoid unnecessary

pain is not weakness. Mahal knows I could use some of your good sense in this.”

The slightly watery chuckle he receives is definitely worth making fun of himself with a slightly uncomfortable truth.

Safe in the circle of his arms, Dís looks up at him with eyes that glisten with unshed tears and yet are soft, not damning despite the words that follow.

“Thorin, *why* did you not save Víli? If you lived your life before, you must have some notion, some knowledge...”

He had never heard his sister’s voice like this, quietly pleading and desperately bleak at the same time.

Were there true accusation in her eyes or voice, he is sure it would have broken him, but this... it is a question torn from her, a question that needed asking but she still, after everything she has heard, *does not seem to blame him*.

He can only marvel.

“It is true, I know many things, and I do *not* hold myself blameless in Víli’s demise,” he finally settles on saying, then hesitates. “This is something I’ve struggled with since the beginning. What can I hold myself accountable for and what is beyond my control? And what blame *should* I lay on my shoulders? So many things have changes already.”

Some of his inner turmoil must’ve shown in his eyes, for Dís wraps her arms even tighter around him. “I have faith that you always do everything you can. That’s who you are.”

“I wish I shared that faith,” he murmurs into her hair, quiet enough that they can both pretend she didn’t hear it, for what is there to reply to that?

Hours later he turns to go, both their minds exhausted to a breaking point, but his hand has barely brushed the door’s handle when Dís calls his name once more. He turns around and almost staggers to see a small smile on her face.

“You could still be Durin reborn. You have that air about you.”

His lips twitch in answer to the joke that he is sure will accompany them for years to come, but his answer is serious, to rest all suspicions once and for all. “There are no memories of Durins from long ago in my mind, Dís. I’m afraid I am, and will always be, only me.”

Dís voice is almost inaudibly soft. “And I am grateful for that, *nadad*. We want none other.”

And for the first time in several days Thorin feels like he can breathe completely freely, no fear or worry constricting his chest for precious moments.

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It only takes a couple of days for Dís to realize that she can now *ask* the questions that have been burning on her mind for a while – and to reach some revelations.

*

“Is that why you weren’t even surprised when I told you of my pregnancies?!”

Thorin looks up from his book.

“Yes.”

*

“Is that how you knew Víli was my One?”

He sighs. “*Yes*.”

*

“Does that mean you know who Óin keeps running off into the shadows with to snog?”

“Dís!”

*

“That *must* mean you know who your One is. I knew you were being far too recalcitrant on the subject!”

“...”

If only his blockhead of a brother wasn't half-dying of laughter in the corner.

"Shut *up*, Frerin!"

*

She never touches on any topic that she knows or can guess would be painful, never asks after anyone's manner or time of death, not even her own. Thorin isn't sure whether to be grateful or even more worried for her.

At least, as the life in her grows and Frerin commandeers more and more of her attention again, Dis' cheeks regain some of their colour and a small spark returns to her eyes – nowhere near as bright as he knows it can be, but it's a start he can cling to.

For himself, surprisingly, not much changes. He has feared revealing his secret for so long, imagining ever darker scenarios of what his life could become after, that their acceptance of it almost comes as a shock. Certainly, there are moments he catches them watching him, a measure of apprehension in their gazes, but there is always also warmth lingering there. And for the first time, perhaps, he decides not to worry about it. Too much.

Chapter 24



This time it is Fíli who is waiting in front of The Door with Thorin, while Óin and a midwife are busy helping Dís through the arduous process of expelling another babe from her womb. Frerin is still in Dale, meeting with Girion's grandson on Thorin's behalf; they hadn't expected labour to start for a few days yet, and though Thorin has sent a messenger it's doubtful whether he can make it back in time. It seems his brother is destined to miss the birth of both his nephews.

Balin and Dwalin had been there earlier, ostensibly to give him a 'very urgent report', but Thorin isn't stupid enough not to realize that they were checking up on him. The thought is warming, even though it had just been the other day that Frerin had berated him for *still* not having told them the truth about his two lives.

For Fíli's sake Thorin had not started pacing the minute that news of the approaching birth had reached him, instead having settled down against the wall, an agitated Fíli on his lap.

"What's happening? Why is ma screaming?" the dwarfling asks, voice wobbling and eyes bright with worry.

It had occurred to Thorin that maybe Fíli shouldn't be listening to his mother's pain, but he had neither wanted to leave the still small dwarfling with anyone else, nor had he been prepared to be farther away from Dís than absolutely necessary – he might not be of much use, standing vigil in front of a door but it still makes him feel better and he hopes that Dís, too, takes a little heart knowing that he is close and ready to support her whenever necessary.

"Your mother is having your little brother," he tells Fíli quietly, drawing him a little closer. The dwarfling isn't yet trembling, but he

burrows into Thorin's arms gratefully nonetheless.

Small white teeth worry Fíli's lower lip – a habit that it had taken them almost fifty years to dissuade him from – and he looks up at Thorin with wide eyes when he asks, faintly accusatory, “But she is *screaming*. You said this would be a happy day, Uncle.”

It's been five years and Thorin's heart still warms every time Fíli calls him that. It's funny how much one can miss a simple address.

“Birth is a harsh thing for any dwarrowdam,” Thorin explains seriously, “but in the end it is always worth it. After all you first saw the light of day this way too.”

He pokes Fíli lightly in the stomach, making the dwarfling squirm slightly and then giggle outright when Thorin's fingers begin to dance all over his tummy and sides.

“No tickling, Uncle Thorin!” Fíli gasps between attempts to wriggle free. “'s not fair!”

Several minutes later Fíli is both thoroughly out of breath and thoroughly distracted, which is exactly what Thorin was going for.

And then finally Óin pokes his head out of the door and Thorin has pushed past him with Fíli in his wake before the healer can say a word.

Dís looks – she looks tired but *happy*, and emotion far too rare lately, with a small bundle in her arms. When she sees them she shifts, revealing the puckered face of new-born Kíli and it's all Thorin can do not to jump forward.

Fíli, meanwhile, is staring at his mother, wide-eyed.

“This is your little brother, Fíli,” Dís says, voice raspy, but again, there's a lightness to it Thorin has sorely missed.

“Why's he so still?” Fíli asks after a moment's thought.

Dis smiles at him. “He's tired, just like me. I promise you'll get to know him later on, inùdoy.”

Fíli takes another look at the bundle and nods solemnly. Thorin wants to take a step forward and ask to hold Kíli, if only for a minute, like he had Fíli just after his birth, but despite her happiness there's a banked kind of desperation in the way Dís clutches at her second son,

so he holds his peace.

Her eyes flicker to Fíli in silent question.

“Will you take Fíli outside for a moment?” Thorin quietly asks Óin, for once remembering to be thankful for the absence of the ear trumpet – and thus the need to shout anything one wants Óin to hear.

Óin nods at him, taking Fíli’s hand. When the dwarfling seems to want to dig his heels in, the older dwarf leans down and whispers something in his ear that has Fíli straightening and leaving with him without further protest.

He wonders what Óin has said for a moment, then decides he’d probably rather not know and returns his attention to his tired sister and his new born nephew, cradled in her arms.

A tiny tuft of dark hair adorns the infants otherwise shiny head and Thorin is just about to gently poke at it when wide brown eyes open, blinking up at him curiously. He hadn’t thought that he could fall in love with the same person twice, but that is certainly what his heart has just decided to do. A tiny pudgy hand reaches up with a very quiet coo and the rest of him melts as well. No matter where or what timeline, Kíli is always destined to be a little heartbreaker.

“I want to name him Kíli, after his father and brother,” Dís whispers, her voice as tired as her eyes.

“Is that... is that the name he had in your other life?”

“Dís,” he says as gently as he can, “do not concern yourself with what was or wasn’t in that life, it has no bearing on the here and now, and it certainly shouldn’t influence your decisions.” He lets a smile slip onto his face. “Though in this case, the question is moot for that is indeed the name I know this little rascal by. Some things, I’ve come to see, are simply meant to be.”

It’s worth it for the smile that lights up her face, and the contented sound that emerges from Kíli’s mouth as she clutches him tighter to her chest.

He bows over them once more and for the second time he utters these words, heavy and unyielding, “I dub thee *nûrayad*, Kíli, son of

Víli, son of Dís, hôfuk kurûdaz, joy of hearts. May Mahal watch over you and protect you.”

Kili’s only answer is a sleepy gurgle.

Both he and Dís look about ready to fall asleep from exhaustion, so he brushes a kiss on both their foreheads and starts to rise. Before he can step away from the bed, Dís’ hand darts up and her grip on his sleeve is surprisingly strong.

“Come back tomorrow morning?” she asks quietly to not disturb Kili, his breathing already even in slumber.

He wonders a little at her sudden vulnerability, but doesn’t hesitate to answer, doesn’t have to *think* about his answer. “Of course, namad. I’m not going anywhere.”

*

Thorin has just made it back to his quarters, now bone-tired himself after hours of tension and anxiety, when a tentative knock sounds on the door. For a very short moment of weakness Thorin imagines ignoring it, though he knows he will not – a king does not have the luxury of a time entirely his own, any issue could be too important to simply ignore. That is also the reason why he doesn’t employ servants to wait on him all hours of the day and night; he’d rather take care of matters on his own and be left alone for it.

So he sighs and trudges to the door, enquiry as to the problem already on his lips. He stops short when it is *Dori* he finds himself facing in the doorway, a big bundle of cloth in his arms and looking slightly nervous.

One look at the other’s slightly frazzled appearance tells him that this is going to take a few minutes at least.

“Come in, Dori,” he says, somehow finding a small smile below all the tiredness. “You look like you could use a cup of tea.”

“If it’s no trouble,” Dori mumbles, letting himself gently be pushed into one of the soft armchairs.

No sooner has the younger dwarf a cup of tea in his hands and tak-

ing a steady sip, than he begins unfolding the bundle of cloth he'd brought with him and Thorin's breath catches.

A kaleidoscope of colours is revealed to his eye, delicate stitching on dark blue cloth – the colour of their house.

"I finished it after the announcement of the prince's name today," Dori says quietly, staring down at the work of his hands.

And indeed, along the branching family tree, there is, in golden letters like all the other names, the word *Kili* to be found, right next to Fili where it belongs. And there's still room, too, next to him and Frein.

Thorin raises his gaze from the cloth to meet Dori's worried eyes, and breathes, "This is beautiful, Dori. You are very talented."

And it is – there are a few slight inconsistencies in the weave, but especially for one who's been studying their craft for less than a decade it truly is a masterfully crafted piece.

Dori blushes with pride, worry and nervousness finally falling away. "I made it for the Lady Dís and the young princes. Would you give it to them with my congratulations?"

"Why don't you do it yourself?" Thorin asks, eyebrow raised. "I'm sure Dís would love another visitor and it is the work of *your* hands."

"I'd rather not," Dori says quietly, stretching out the tapestry for Thorin to take.

He hesitates for a moment, then accepts the cloth. He'd have to have a talk with Dori about taking credit for his work sometime soon. Most dwarves lean in the other direction, bragging and boasting of their creations to no end rather than keeping silent, but Dori has always been a gentler soul than most.

Thorin's eyes narrow as he studies the other's face. What he guesses to be the young dwarf's lingering feeling that he would be intruding whenever Thorin's family is concerned, would also need to be addressed, but now is not the time.

"I thank you for this gift, Dori Rison," he says formally. "I will make sure it reaches my sister."

He doesn't mention that Dís would very likely go and seek Dori out to thank him personally – Dori would just have to deal with that when she shows up.

Dori just nods and sketches a bow. But he hesitates on the way out. “And Thorin? Could you possibly talk to Nori?”

Now that had rather come out of the blue. Thorin frowns. “What about?”

“I'm not sure,” Dori shrugs, though Thorin gets the feeling that he might not be being entirely truthful in this. “Just a feeling.”

He inclines his head. “As soon as I can spare the time.”

“Thank you,” Dori says simply, and Thorin is sure he doesn't imagine the relief all but pouring out of his voice.

The door quietly closes behind the other dwarf, leaving Thorin to frown pensively to himself. If Dori had gone so far as to tell Thorin about it, he must be fairly concerned about his brother.

Considering what he knows about another older Nori, he has a fair idea what this is about – by all accounts Nori had started young.

He'd have to visit Darla and her family soon – normally the prospect would cheer him up, especially now that his private time keeps getting less and less and he sees them far rarer than he would like, but there had been something in Dori's voice that puts him on edge and his sleep is disturbed that night.

*

The issue of Nori is still on his mind the next morning, but he puts it aside for the moment, intent on seeing how Dís and Kíli are doing. And Fíli too; the dwarfling had been quiet most of the day before, safe for the moment of intense curiosity when seeing his little brother for the first time – too quiet perhaps.

As it happens, he's pre-empted, for Fíli pads into his room unannounced just as he's slipping on his boots.

“Fíli?” he asks, looking up startled. “Is something wrong mizimith?”

The dwarfling sniffs quietly but keeps silent, so Thorin does the

only thing he can think of and slides to the floor, opening his arms. Only a breath later a small figure crashes into him with enough force to rock him backwards.

“Shhh,” he murmurs, worry climbing. “It’s alright mizimith, I’m here.”

“Amad is being really quiet, Uncle Thorin,” Fíli snuffles into his shirt. “All she does is hold onto Kíli.”

Thorin runs his larger hand through Fíli’s shock of blond hair in soothing motions. “That’s normal, Fíli. Kíli is really small so he needs a lot of care right now, just like you did when you were just a wee babe. It doesn’t mean that your amad has forgotten about you.”

“No?”

“No,” Thorin repeats firmly. He tightens his arms a little around the dwarfling. “No one could ever forget about you.”

Fíli’s snuffles have subsided, but he still keeps his head buried in Thorin’s chest.

“Is that all that’s bothering you?” Thorin murmurs, gently extending his arms to look Fíli in the eye. The dwarfling squirms a little, mouth stubbornly closed, but Thorin only keeps staring at him calmly.

“Do you think Kíli will like me?” Fíli finally asks, voice heartbreakingly small.

And for once Thorin is glad to be able to say, with complete honesty and conviction, “Yes, little one, I *know* he will.”

*

Fíli has already run back to his mother’s quarters, but Thorin follows at a more sedate pace, tapestry under one arm and box of brand-new toys that Bifur had insisted on shoving into his hands before he could protest in the other. Shifting the box’s weight a little, he grumbles under his breath about cowardly dwarves who didn’t manage to deliver their beautiful gifts in person.

He pauses in the doorway, taking in the picture before him.

Dís is lying on the bed, much as expected after Óin had shouted at her for about half an hour in the morning when she had tried to get up, and Frerin hovers near. But what really captures his attention is the two dwarflings. Fili is holding Kíli with what looks to be some effort and a face that's both enraptured and terrified.

Thorin hadn't been able to pinpoint this precise moment in his last life, but he's fairly certain that this is the moment that Fili completely and irrevocably starts loving his younger brother, beginning the many years of inseparability.

Thorin doesn't mind one jot.

"Have you bought out Erebor's toy stores?" a voice asks from behind him and only years of being used to Frerin's attempts to sneak up on him prevent him from jumping.

"You're just sour you missed the birth *again*," Thorin teases, pushing the box of toys into Frerin's chest.

Frerin looks slightly grumpy at the reminder. "If you didn't insist on having them early every time, Dís, I might've actually been there. And you!" He points one finger accusingly at Thorin. "You should stop foisting your diplomatic duties off on me!"

Thorin raises a brow. "Excuse me for being too busy with my kingly duties already to do everything else as *well*."

Frerin opens his mouth, but Dís stops the bickering. "Shut up you two. I don't think I'd have been able to withstand two older brothers hovering anyway." She lifts her chin imperiously. "Now, Thorin, do you want to tell me what all this is?"

Thorin looks down at the tapestry still in his arms. "Gifts from anonymous well-wishers," he says dryly. "Dori and Bifur send their regards."

"And why couldn't they do that in person?"

Thorin sighs. "They thought they would be intruding, or some such nonsense. You can go yell at them later when Óin lets you off bed rest."

Now it's Dís turn to look grumpy. "I'll be lucky if that happens in

the next ten years.”

But her eyes light up when Thorin starts unrolling Dori’s gift.

“Is that a tapestry? I’ve always wanted one to hang above the fireplace.”

“It is indeed,” Thorin confirms softly and spreads it over the end of Dís’ bed like a quilt.

For a moment her gaze lingers on the branch next to her name, the spot that will forever be inhabited by Víli and when she looks up again her eyes glint with a sheen of tears but her smile is real.

“My family,” she whispers, her voice slightly choked.

“Our family,” Thorin agrees as quietly and next to him Frerin nods with enough force to rattle the toys in their box.

And then the moment is ruined by Fili shouting something about Kíli being about to be dropped because he’s wriggling so much and they all jump into action. Or maybe that’s exactly what the moment called for.

*

Thorin is on his way to get something to eat for lunch when Dwalin snags him by the back of his tunic and drags him to the training courts. His wince isn’t only literal – he’s quite aware that Dwalin’s reasons are more manifold than simply ‘Thorin needs to train more because he’s getting out of shape and is going to get his ass kicked the next time he ends up in combat’, though that’s certainly part of it. He may also maybe, have avoided him and Balin just a little bit over the last few weeks. Part of it is simply him being incredibly busy, but he’s also painfully aware that he needs to tell them both about his *situation* and soon (if only to stop Frerin from glaring at him meaningfully) and being the mature dwarf that he is, his response has been to avoid running into them to avoid having to fess up. To put it in simple terms, though of course things are never quite that straightforward.

Dwalin has apparently cottoned on to this, though he probably doesn’t know why, and deals with it the usual way – giving Thorin

such a brutal workout that he can hardly see straight after. Normally whatever issue there had been is resolved after that, but today Dwalin adds another whopper.

Having beaten Thorin black and blue and exhausted him entirely, he then shoves him into the corner where Balin is waiting with something of a glower on his usually placid face. Dwalin is completely unfazed by the betrayed look Thorin shoots him – this is far too sneaky for his usually so straightforward friend.

“Now,” Balin begins, and Thorin tries not to notice how well and truly they’ve cornered him, Balin sitting next to him and Dwalin hulking in his line of escape, “care to tell us what’s going on with you, Thorin? My brother and I are heartily sick of your avoidance.”

“I *have* been busy,” Thorin mumbles.

There’s no less steel in Balin’s eyes when he snaps, “And if that’s the whole reason why neither of us have seen you for more than a few minutes for weeks than I give you my word that we’ll drop this immediately and leave you to your duties.”

Thorin doesn’t even need to think about it to know that he can’t lie to his friends, especially since he’d never intended to let this go for so long in the first place – and though he would’ve preferred having this talk while he isn’t hurting in numerous places and dripping sweat, the training hall is empty at least, affording them the privacy he needs.

“Before you rip my head off for what I’m about to tell you, understand that I’ve only ever told Frerin and Dís.” His lips twitch wryly. “And that was a few weeks ago only, after... after Víli’s funeral.”

He takes a deep breath, ignoring the way in which Balin’s eyes have finally softened a little when he comprehends the timing, and says, in low measured tones that belie his urge to just blurt it all out, “I’m not quite who you think I am. I’m Thorin, yes, but I’m living my life for a second time.”

Apparently his explanation is getting shorter and shorter every time he does this.

Two pairs of eyebrows shoot up into hairlines of varying meagre-

ness. It's not hard to guess what their question is.

"I don't know how or why, I just know that I lived a life, died, and woke up again in my younger body the day that the dragon came."

Silence descends and he's fairly certain that whatever the two had expected, *this* is not it.

"Ah, so that's why Dís started smirking the last time I brought up my theory about Durin," Balin finally says, a little flatly. Truth be told, he looks a little shell-shocked, not that Thorin can blame him.

Dwalin on the other hand, only narrows his eyes. "And you didn't tell us this before, why?"

"I had my reasons." At Dwalin's glower, he adds, if slightly reluctantly, "I felt that I couldn't risk it. I wasn't *ready*. I didn't want anything to change." His own gaze grows fiercer and before Balin can open his mouth he snaps, "And don't tell me nothing is going to change. Since I've told Frerin and Dís I can't even count the number of times they've looked at me and I knew that they were wondering whether something had happened in my last life, whether I knew something about what was going to happen now. They know I haven't told them everything and that is always standing between us, unspoken but still damning."

Now Balin just looks pained. "Things will change, yes, things always change when there is a new development. But whatever else we're still your family, Thorin. And though I wish you'd told us earlier, I am grateful you've done so now."

The sincerity in his voice is what convinces Thorin he truly means what he's just said and something in his chest loosens, letting him take a deeper breath.

And then Dwalin says, "And you have our love, murkhûn, as you ever do."

Suddenly it's all Thorin can do to swallow past the lump in his throat and not do something embarrassing like start crying. Dwalin would never let him live that down.

Instead he bows deeply to both of them and murmurs, voice heavy

and clogged, “Thank you, my friends.”

*

With Dí's sleeping – she's doing that a lot at the moment and if Óin hadn't said that it's completely normal for a dwarrowdam after a child-birth Thorin would be worried by now – and Frerin off somewhere with Fíli, probably causing some mischief or other, Thorin is on baby duty. Not that he minds. Though fairly energetic for such a small tyke, Kíli is surprisingly well-behaved, despite his tendency in later years to get into even more trouble than Frerin had ever managed.

If asked, Thorin would probably admit fairly freely that going about his duties with Kíli stuck to his chest in a sling is quickly becoming one of his favourite things. It certainly makes dealing with paper-work more interesting and the warmth spreading from the small body helps alleviate the tension that impending council meetings never fail to raise.

What Thorin hadn't been aware of until this visit to Darla, is Kíli's calming effect on other distraught dwarves.

Darla is knitting when he enters, something that looks vaguely like a knitted version of Bofur's head but he knows well enough by now not to ask, and Ori is sitting in a corner, head bent over some parchment, his quill scribbling furiously.

Something glints near his lapel and Thorin smiles. It warms him to see Ori wearing his token like a badge, half hidden behind a fold of cloth but there nonetheless. Even if the young dwarf barely looks up from his parchment and mutters a greeting before being absorbed in his studies once more.

He talks with Darla for a while – and lets her coo at Kíli, which is, after all, to be expected – but is distracted throughout and not surprised when she finally demands, “Whatever's got you in such a tizzy, just go deal with it.”

Thorin grimaces apologetically, but she waves him off.

“Is Nori here?” he asks, deciding to stop beating around the bush.

She shakes her head. “No, but my guess is that you can find him in his secret ‘lair’.”

He raises a brow and she rolls her eyes in response. “Don’t worry about it, he’s currently fancying himself the next spymaster or some such.”

Thorin has to suppress a laugh. Who knew?

Ten minutes later he’s crawling through a hole barely large enough to allow him entry, careful not to hit any rocks with Kíli, and comes face to face with a startled Nori, sitting on the floor of his little hide-out.

“Hello, Nori,” he says pleasantly. “Mind if we join you?”

Nori looks a little suspicious but scoots over to allow Thorin to sit down comfortably readily enough and there’s curiosity in his gaze when he looks at Kíli, half asleep on Thorin’s chest.

“Where did you find that?” Thorin asks nodding towards the sapphire Nori had been playing with before his entrance, the young dwarf’s movements not quick enough to hide it from Thorin’s gaze.

He resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose when Nori avoids his gaze.

“Around,” he mumbles, one hand worrying the fringe of his tunic as the other squeezes the stone tighter.

Now Thorin does sigh. “Did you take it from someone?” he asks bluntly, hoping that a younger Nori would react better to straightforwardness just like the older he’d known.

“No!” Nori immediately protests. “I found it near the mines. It must have fallen down a cart.”

Thorin continues to look at him steadily, no accusation in his gaze but he doesn’t back down either. tDori wouldn’t have send him to talk to Nori if nothing was going on, and the dwarf’s earlier reaction had all but confirmed it.

“I may have... taken some other things though.” Nori’s voice is small, but now he *is* looking at Thorin and there’s something fierce in his gaze.

And then Kíli yawns, a sound that can only be classified as cute even by the most battle-hardened dwarf and the tension is broken.

“Nori,” Thorin says softly, keeping his tone light, “you know that stealing is wrong.”

Nori nods, somehow managing to look both defiant and miserable at the same time.

“Then why do you do it?” he asks, honestly curious.

The young dwarf chews on his lip for a moment then says quietly, “I can’t really stop myself. I see something and I reach out and I forget all about not being supposed to do it. And sometimes I don’t even notice that I took something until after when I find it in my pocket.”

Thorin sits back on his haunches, both relieved to hear that and worried. It explains a whole lot about older Nori’s defiant bitterness in the face of his brother’s disapproval, that much is for sure. He doubts Nori ever admitted this to Dori.

“Do you remember who you took these items from?”

Nori shrugs. “Some of them.”

“You will give those you can remember back to their owners,” Thorin tells him firmly, steel in his voice. “I don’t care how you do it, sneak them back if you want, but you will do it. Do you understand me?”

Nori nods.

“As for the future...” Thorin thinks for a moment. “You will need to learn how to control the urge and that certainly will not happen on its own. There are two things I would propose we do,” Thorin says, careful to keep Nori included in the decision. “One is that I will take you to meet someone who has, shall we say, similar inclinations and that you talk to him. And the second one is that in the meantime, I want you to make a test of skill out of this. Taking can be easy sometimes, but can you put it *back* as well, without being caught?”

Nori’s face lights up. Thorin isn’t surprised that half of it is the challenge, the knowledge that he *could*. And returning what he lifts from people before they notice it was even missing would make it a whole new challenge.

And Galin will be so happy to have a little protégé once he returns from his current journey. Of course Thorin will have to put up with the dwarf's grumbling, but Nori has a way of sneaking into people's hearts and he's sure Galin would be no exception.

"Does that sound fair?" Thorin asks, and relaxes when Nori nods, with a lot more enthusiasm than before.

"And Nori? Stealing *can* be a useful skill when developed properly – and not used to harm other good people."

He winks and has to smile at Nori's astonished face. Of course he'd have to keep a look out for the young dwarf, just to make sure he truly is using his skills for a better end, but he's hopeful that he's laid the groundwork for Nori to become an *honest* thief at least.

And then they both cuddle an appreciative Kíli for a while because even the most manly of dwarves could never resist a baby dwarfling.

*

Three weeks later Thorin is in the much-hated process of changing Kíli's nappies – Dís had all but thrown the baby at him claiming she could not possibly deal with this again so soon – when a raven flutters onto the balcony of his quarters.

Immediately on alert as only the most important missives are directed directly to his rooms, Thorin goes to fetch the piece of parchment attached to the raven's leg.

He stares at the three words for a moment, then explodes into action, the parchment crumpled in his hand.

You were right

An hour later ravens are carrying urgent messages to Thranduil of Mirkwood and Baran of Dale.

Chapter 25



King Thranduil of Mirkwood sweeps into Dale's Hall of Lords with his customary icy expression and a silver coat that moves slightly even in the absence of movement or wind.

Thorin is too busy being relieved that he'd actually come so promptly on Thorin's word alone to mind the dramatics too much.

(Though he can't say he blames Baran on his left for quietly rolling his eyes. He is not as close to Girion's grandson as he'd been to Girion, the demands on his time now that he's king and his family is growing too dire to leave much time for socialising in Dale, but they can still find a few things in common – and a certain long-suffering attitude when it comes to their neighbouring elven king is certainly one of them.)

"You have called me here on urgent business," Thranduil states coolly, "so get on with it. I do not have all day."

Thorin bites back a knee-jerk frustrated retort. This is too important for his temper to get in the way, a lesson that has been hard-earned but now well-learned.

"What *t* so important that you insisted on meeting so soon?" Baran joins in – he's a good lad, for the most part, but sadly lacks Girion's patience. It doesn't help that he looks like he just tumbled out of bed, thought that at least would account for his grumpiness.

"This is," Thorin says curtly and throws the latest parchment a raven had brought onto the table. Galin has certainly been busy for the last year.

Thranduil bends over it, examining the familiar lines of a map of the region east of the Misty Mountains with his head tilted in curiosi-

ty.

“The red dots?” he finally asks, looking up at Thorin.

“Companies of orcs, about hundred to each dot,” he replies promptly, not bothering to hide the grim set of his mouth.

There are a *lot* of red dots – and even a static map such as this makes it clear that they’re congregating on Erebor.

Baran, who’d finally moved over at hearing the note of consternation in the elven king’s voice, swears.

“My spies estimate that we have a fortnight at the least, perhaps two, before they are ready for attack,” Thorin says quietly, taking care to meet Thranduil and Baran’s gazes in turn. “The forces of Erebor alone can perhaps stem the tide for a while, but Dale lies widely unprotected. Will Dale and the Greenwood stand with us against our common foe?”

For a moment silence reigns, and Thorin all but holds his breath. This is what he’s been working towards for many decades now, building bridges towards his kingdom’s neighbours in the hopes that they would be allies when the day came that would determine all their fates.

This day. This moment.

“You are right,” Baran finally says heavily, his brow crinkled with worry, “Dale would be overrun by an army this size. If Erebor shall give us shelter, we will fight with you, King Thorin.”

Thorin inclines his head in gratitude for this first step taken. “The mountain is large enough to house your people for a short time, though we shall need all the food provisions you can carry. Our gates will protect you.”

Baran, in turn, bows shallowly, acknowledging their treaty, and then they both turn towards Thranduil, whose gaze looks to be far away. At their scrutiny, something in his eyes sharpens again, and he asks, “And what would you ask of the Greenwood, King Under the Mountain? This is not our fight.”

Thorin raises a brow. “Is it not? The Greenwood may not lie directly next to Erebor, but surely your kingdom would be affected by the

entire region being taken over by orcs?” He gentles his voice with conscious effort. Being too brash and coarse now would get him nowhere, that much he knows about the elf’s character. “Erebor considers itself an ally to you and your people and should you ever call for us we shall answer. If you do not fight with us now, it is likely that Erebor will fall.” He smiles, a grim sharp thing that could cut through stone. “Oh, we would not make it easy, certainly. We can hide behind our walls for a long time, but in the end, their army will starve us out. We do not have the numbers to oppose the troops Bolg has amassed. Erebor *cannot* survive alone.”

Heavy silence descends in the wake of this stark truth. If Thranduil declined his help and the help of the elves now, Thorin would have to evacuate as many dwarves as is safe before the army draws too near. A few more could escape through the hidden door, though not so many to draw the attention of the orcs. He could probably save the rest of his family, if it comes to that, but Thorin knows that he himself would perish together with the mountain that is his home. He will not abandon it a second time.

When he looks up again, Thranduil is watching him with a peculiar expression on his normally smooth face, as if he’s surprised, even puzzled, at something he has glimpsed on Thorin’s face.

“You remind me of someone I knew once, long ages ago, a great king of old,” he says quietly, and abruptly his eyes sharpen once more. “If there is a way that the help of the woodelves may stem the tide we will stand beside you, son of stone.” His lips tilt, almost a smile. “Such is the respect you’ve earned.”

All air leaves Thorin’s body in a rush, leaving him almost heady with the feeling of relief. The battle is not nearly won, but now they have a fighting chance.

“*But,*” Thranduil continues and Thorin’s eyes dart back to his calm face, “I will not foolishly risk the lives of my warriors. If you cannot present a battle strategy that has chances of success you will be alone in this fight.”

Thorin refuses to give in to the urge to swallow like a nervous dwarfling. “We are vastly outnumbered. Our only chance lies in disorganising the enemy and distracting them for long enough to mount a surprise counter attack *after* they’ve taken the valley.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Baran asks, hand resting on the hilt of his sword – perhaps unconsciously, but certainly symbolic enough.

“Bolg.” Thorin taps at the large red triangle on the map. “He is what holds this army together. If we can distract him for long enough his army will lose its structure.”

“There is no way that we can catch Bolg’s attention for long enough to halt his entire army,” Thranduil says sharply.

Thorin opens his mouth, then closes it again because that is exactly the flaw in his plan and he can already see Thranduil shutting down, preparing to stop believing in their possible cooperation.

The thought strikes with the force of lightning, and before he can think better of it Thorin blurts, “The arkenstone could.”

And Thranduil *stops*, simply stops, all movement arrested as he stares at Thorin.

And then, slowly, he says, “Explain.”

Two hours later Baran takes his leave to start organising the evacuation of Dale into the mountain, leaving Thranduil and Thorin sitting at the long table alone.

The elf king slowly shakes his head. “I’ve lived a long life, but this? Either you will get us all killed, King Thorin, or this battle will be remembered in the histories of this land for centuries to come.”

“Call me Thorin, one ruler to another,” Thorin says impulsively. He is well aware that he will probably never like Thranduil, but the offer feels right now that they stand upon the brink of destruction side by side – either succeeding together or dying in flames, also together.

The look of disbelief that makes way to a slow smile, the first Thorin has ever seen on Thranduil’s face, is almost like a revelation to behold. And for a short while Thorin can even forget how impossible

this moment had seemed only a few years ago.

*

Thorin stands above the gate, watching rows and rows of men and women pass into the mountain, all bearing as much food as they can carry. Dís and Frerin flank him on either side, silent ever since he'd broken the news of impending war.

Down below an elderly man stumbles and is quickly helped by another to move on.

"Are you certain this is a good idea?" Frerin asks, his eyes hooded. "If the elf doesn't show up..."

"Thranduil will come," he says with a surety that surprises even himself.

Frerin snorts, but offers no further comment, apparently trusting Thorin's assessment.

"Do you think it will work?"

Dís eyes are wide and worried. She'd been the least shocked by Thorin's plan out of all who'd heard it – a small number of people indeed – but even she has doubts. He can sympathise. He has doubts himself.

"We can only hope," he thus says, truthful rather than comforting. "And even if it does, there will be an outcry. We will have to be prepared."

Dís smiles dryly. "If we all make it through this war alive, I will gladly squabble with the council on your behalf."

"Perhaps not just the council," Thorin corrects and his smile is sad.

Below them, the last stragglers are making it through the gates. He would have to leave soon, to meet with Baran and talk about where to quarter his people, and how to ration the food, but he allows himself another moment of looking out from his kingdom, despite the dark clouds gathering on the horizon, the strength of his siblings on either side.

He runs into Bifur and Bofur on the way to the war room and only barely stops himself from doing a double-take because they're kitted out for war, but Bifur's distinctive boar spear is missing and Bofur is carrying an *axe*. He's not quite sure why the sudden difference in their weapon choice is what strikes him such after so many years of differing experiences but for some reason it just looks *wrong*.

And then an idea strikes and he halts so abruptly that Dwalin almost runs into him, glued to his side as he has been ever since Thorin's grim announcement of Bolg's approach.

"Go get the Ri family and bring them to the royal quarters, please," he tells his friend quietly and though Dwalin looks like he wants to protest against leaving Thorin alone, the look Thorin gives him must be enough to convince him of the importance of the order.

Dwalin leaves and Thorin turns to Bofur and Bifur.

"I have a request to make of you, and Bombur too, if he will," he says solemnly, earning himself curious stares. "The princess Dís is in the royal quarters with the two young princes. There are guards, of course, but I would fight easier to know that there are those of sound mind and heart that I know well who guard my family."

Bofur's face does something complicated between shock and disbelief. "Why would you ask us to do that? We're not the best of fighters, we haven't even been properly trained!"

Thorin smiles a little. "Sometimes it's not skill but determination and drive that makes the difference."

Bifur tilts his head curiously, his eyes narrowing at Thorin and neither of them look like they're about to grant his wish.

He sighs. "All right, so I have other reasons, but now is not the time – they await me in the war room. I promise I shall tell you everything after the battle." He softens his gaze and drops his voice. "It is my wish that you do this, though I will not order either of you or your brother to do so.

It is important to me."

And finally they nod, Bifur first and then Bofur after getting elbowed by his cousin.

“Then we shall do our utmost to protect your kin, as every dwarf in Erebor would,” Bifur says solemnly.

As they turn around to head back into the opposite direction, Thorin smiles.

After all, what better time to reunite a company than in the face of such danger? Óin could not be spared and Glóin had insisted on fighting along with Dwalin and Balin at Thorin’s back, but it’s a start. And the battle is large enough on his mind that he doesn’t also worry about just having promised to explain his circumstances to the rest of his old company, whether they realized it or not.

*

Thorin doesn’t let himself linger on goodbyes, they bring little solace and he is determined for it not to be the last time he sees Dís and Fíli and Kíli. A quick kiss on the forehead and hug is all he takes the time for, before emotion can choke what focus he has and he is grateful for Frerin, Balin and Dwalin’s silent support at his back as he walks back to the parapets.

(He is also grateful for the presence of Fíli and Kíli, who are the only reason that his sister is not about to go into battle with them, though he would never tell her that. Her freedom to choose to stand and fight is her own, however much Thorin would like to shelter her forever, and much like Frerin now, he fears that one day she will ignore his heart’s wish and take up arms for the good of all. But for now, her sons need her more.)

Now he stands on the walls of Erebor once more, the wind playing with his hair as he looks down on the approaching black mass of Bolg’s army. All along the stone balustrade elven archers are hidden, with orders to stay under cover until the moment is right. The rest of Thranduil’s army, together with a contingent of Erebolean dwarves and most of the men from Dale are lying in wait all around the valley

the foul creatures are now pouring into.

Thorin's mouth stretches into a grim smile. Thank the Maker for the orcs' single-minded thirst for battle and revenge. Any sane army would've given their surroundings more than a cursory check.

There is a watchful tension in the air all around him, prickling against his skin. Whenever he moves the slightest bit, the weight in his cloak reminds him of the precious jewel hidden there, and he wonders, not for the first time, whether his plan has any hope of succeeding. Is he placing too much faith in the arkenstone's ability to captivate the minds of those who lay eye on it for the first time? Surely Bolg would be affected by greed like so many others...

Beside him Frerin shifts slightly, giving him a warning look tinged with worry. Thorin's heart warms. They're in too public a place for his brother to offer overt comfort, but his gaze speaks as clearly as any word could. *Are you alright?* Thorin shrugs slightly, but nods, knowing that Frerin would understand. They've long passed the time when Thorin would try to keep all worry and fear hidden from his siblings.

Silently the defenders watch the valley fill up with black bodies, like an unstoppable tide. Thorin doesn't need Frerin elbowing him to spot Bolg in the middle of his army, seated atop a huge black warg. When at last the first ranks of orcs come to a halt, a scant stone's throw away from Erebor's gates, only Bolg keeps moving, pushing a way through his army. Not quite to the front, Thorin notes with a measure of black amusement, but close *enough*.

A few steps bring him to the next ballista, manned by their best shots and he hands them the precious bundle afore concealed in his coat. They know what to do.

Bolg halts and Thorin says, just loud enough to be heard, "Now."

Battlefields are all about noise, an inescapable din permeating every moment spent in fight, and yet it seems that there is a collective pause in breath as the glittering stone flies and flies and elves, men, orcs and dwarves alike have fixed their eyes on its trajectory.

The ballista's aim is true and Bolg stretches out his hand, catching

the stone at the end of its momentum.

The silence is broken by his laugh. For a moment it's the only thing that Thorin can hear, it rings in his ears as it echoes from stone walls, filled with malice and triumph.

"Are you so desperate already, *King*, that you throw your trinkets at us?" Bolg laughs, and suddenly all noise returns with a rush, the hoarse jeering of orcs mingling with Bolg's dark mirth.

And still, the orc's leader is distracted and Thorin can finally command himself to move. He turns to the red-headed leader of the elves on the parapet and nods.

"Leithio I philinn!" she calls, voice clear and bright in the darkness, and as one the elven archers stand, letting loose volley after volley of arrows into the unsuspecting ranks of the orcs lingering closest to the gate, just like Erebor's defences fire.

Scores of the dark creatures fall before the great gates have even swung open, releasing Erebor's army waiting within. At the same time Thranduil and Baran blow their horns and fall upon the opposing army from behind.

Thorin turns on his heel, knowing that Frerin and his guards, including the self-appointed ones, would follow. He'd been less than happy that his plan depended on him being up on the battlements rather than leading the charge in the valley, but it had been unavoidable.

His hand grips Orcrist's handle tightly as they hurry towards the gates. He's all too aware that he is leading loved ones into battle once more, despite his longing to never have to do that again, but this time there would've been no holding Frerin back, and he is aware enough to know that he'd never be able to order Dwalin and Balin away from his side.

They wade into the battle as a tight unit, and around them other dwarves cheer for their king when he passes. Morale is the main reason any king fights and takes the risk of orphaning a kingdom – though clearly no dwarven king would ever sit out a battle regardless of risk,

not unless he were already in his dotage (and even then, chances would be he'd still rather die heroically on the battlefield).

Thorin has already lost track of the time spent hewing through orcs and wargs alike when their little group gets separated by an organised charge, despite their best intentions. They must've cut quite the swath through the ranks of orcs for Thorin to find himself fighting alone and nearer to the elves than his own dwarven warriors.

He doesn't see Bolg fall, doesn't know who did the deed, but he doesn't care. He would have once, would have wanted the satisfaction of seeing the last that links Azog to this earth die. He has learned now that it makes no difference.

The orcs are disorganised now, some fleeing as soon as they realise their leader's death, some blindly charging against their foes and more often than not meeting their end on the sharp end of various weapons.

Just when Thorin is about to take a breath in relief, a warg bears down on him, its rider swinging a wicked scimitar and it's all Thorin can do not to lose his head right then and there. When Orcrist finally sinks into the warg's maw and beheads the orc in the next strike, Thorin can't deny his tiredness anymore. He looks up into the sky, for the moment free of foes around him, and looks at the sun as it shines in the sky, finally visible again. There are no more hordes of black bats and clouds veiling the battlefield.

Something heavy collides with his head out of nowhere and he barely has time to be surprised before he falls.

*

Perhaps it's the almost unnatural silence that finally drags him back to consciousness, or the stench of blood and torn flesh all around him.

Thorin's eyes open again to a darkening sky, and his surprise at still being alive comes as a warm heady feeling that drives back the pain throbbing in his limbs for a while. It's the uncomfortable weight on his legs and belly that finally spurs him into action, for all that it seems easier to just keep lying still.

He almost laughs when he realises how similar this is to what happened to Bilbo the last time Thorin had seen a fight like this in front of the gates of Erebor. Knocked out by a rock, left for dead, unseen beneath genuinely dead bodies.

It takes him long minutes to shift the orc's carcass off from his midsection. His head throbs painfully with every movement, the feel of dried blood all along his face attesting to the head-wound. With a last shove the orc topples to the side and he has to take a moment to breathe through the pain. None of his injuries are serious as far as he can tell – and he's got *good* at telling – but he'd rather not take any chances anyway.

Breathing slightly evened out once more, Thorin contemplates the next step: getting up. His head gives a particularly nasty throb at the thought. Unfortunately it *is* a rather crucial step in operation 'get back to family and make sure Erebor is still standing', as he's clearly been lying here for a while without having been found and he can hardly rely on them suddenly wising up to his predicament. Whoever 'they' would be in this scenario – at this point he'd even take elves seeing him in such a vulnerable state over dragging himself across the battlefield.

Typically, no elves appear. It's long been Thorin's estimation that the buggers only turn up when he *doesn't* want them to.

Out of other options, Thorin grits his teeth and levels himself up to his knees, takes a breather and then pushes off a big orc's body to wobble to his feet. By the time he is completely vertical his head is spinning enough to force him to hold completely still to avoid throwing up the meagre contents of his stomach. He almost sighs, but thinks better of making any unneeded notion.

This is going to be unpleasant.

When he finally reaches the assembly of tents to the side of the battlefield, his feet dragging more than stepping as his head continues to hurt like nobody's business, Thorin is about ready to collapse for a week, but the thought of Dís and Frerin thinking him dead and grieving spurs him on.

Aiming for the biggest tent in the hopes that he would find them there – and they better not be in the mountain because there’s no way he’s going to make it there without further injury – Thorin stumbles around slightly haphazard piles of supplies and pallets full of wounded men, elves and even dwarves. He is deaf to the excited murmuring in his wake, mind solely focused on making it to the figures of his siblings he can now see in the distance, bend over an improvised table.

All air leaves him in a rush of dizzying relief that trivialises the way his head is already spinning.

Without even consciously realising, half of him had expected to find Frerin’s corpse, like the last time he had led his brother into battle and into death, and to seem him alive and breathing, haggard and bloody but *alive* is perhaps the greatest gift he has yet experienced.

He nears, and from behind he can see the defeated slump of both their shoulders, a coiled tension that he knows all too well, and Thorin is selfishly glad that their backs are turned to him so he doesn’t have to see the pain and devastation on their faces.

“And here I thought you’d at least wait to see a body before starting to mourn me,” Thorin says, and it’s neither funny nor tactful, but Frerin and Dís spin around, their faces lighting up with a joy and relief that almost makes him stagger.

“Thorin!” Frerin exclaims, at the same time that Dís shouts, “Don’t you ever do that to us again!” and two bodies barrel into his. Thorin’s vision swims at the sudden motion, but he doesn’t *care*, only holds them closer and breathes through the pain with newfound ease.

When his siblings finally step back, their eyes roaming over him as if searching for hidden life-threatening injuries, he lets them, despite the part of him that wants to protest that he’s fine. He understands the need to make sure of that themselves, with their own eyes.

Frerin pales slightly at what’s no doubt a fair amount of blood clotting Thorin’s hair and decorating his face, but he manages a small smirk. “Someone finally bashed you over that thick head of yours, huh? What did you say to annoy them?”

“I don’t recall insulting the sky recently,” Thorin says, face innocent, “and that’s definitely where that rock came from. There might possibly have been some angry orcs involved too.”

Dís scowls at him. He has the distinct impression that were it not for his head wound, she would be hitting him right now – she has never been too fond of his and Frerin’s tendency to make fun of all the dangerous situations they find themselves in.

Instead her revenge takes a more subtle form.

“You, dear brother, are going to the healers *right now*.” She smiles sweetly. “Óin was most perturbed when...” She swallows. “When no one could find you.”

He ignores the little hitch in her voice, for her sake. Now is not the time for soul-baring, out here in the moment with strangers’ ears listening.

Thorin suppresses a sigh. If Óin was already worried, that probably means he will try and keep him in the healers’ care indefinitely.

But Frerin and Dís are solid weights on either side of his weary steps and he isn’t in that much of a hurry to face the storm of unflattering words that his actions no doubt have unleashed, so he goes quietly enough. It certainly has nothing to do with the fact that his vision keeps alternatively swimming and going dark, nor with his current pain levels.

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He doesn’t sleep for a week, but certainly long enough, and when he finally opens his eyes again, the tent Óin had stuffed him in in lieu of having to make the trek back to the mountain, is filled with people.

Thorin squints slightly in the dim light, gratified to note that his head is feeling much better. Does no one have any work they should be doing?

Dís is the first to note his return to wakefulness and she swivels in her chair next to Thorin’s cot so fast she almost falls off.

“Thorin!”

He winces. So perhaps his head hasn't *quite* recovered yet.

As soon as she catches sight of the pain flashing across his face, Dís looks guilty. "I'm sorry, nadad," she says, much more quietly. "It's just good to see you awake."

Thorin smiles at her, ignoring the way the motion pulls at healing skin near his hairline. "You are a welcome sight to wake up to, nama-dith."

Then he coughs, not having expected his throat to be that dry, and Frerin pushes a mug of water into his hands, even as he rolls his eyes at Thorin's blatant sentimentalism.

"You never used to be such a sweet talker, Thor," he grumbles, but his eyes sparkle happily, and Thorin takes a moment to drag himself far enough up to *very* gently bump their heads together.

Then he turns to face the rest of his tent, taking stock of his silent watchers. Dwalin and Balin are both present, and he can just catch the back of Glóin as he exits the tent, presumably to fetch Óin.

Surprisingly, his eyes also find Nain, snoring lightly in one corner of the tent. Though he'd known the older dwarf since his childhood and trusted him well, Nain doesn't usually make it a habit to mother him.

He raises his eyebrows in Nain's direction and Balin's face clouds over.

"The council isn't happy right now," he says quietly. "They wanted someone to come and test whether you're still..."

"– sane?" Thorin finishes his sentence wryly.

Balin nods unhappily, and Thorin doesn't miss the way his siblings and Dwalin trade significant glances. He shudders to think what the three of them could get up to if they wanted to make the council members' lives difficult.

"Nain volunteered. I think he thought that you would mind his presence the least."

Thorin nods in acknowledgement. He *is* grateful that it isn't one of the more abrasive council members, though he's certainly going to give them a piece of mind about this invasion of his privacy soon enough.

They're allowed to worry, yes, but he *is* still king and he will certainly not let them run all over his wishes just because he threw a priceless heirloom into a battle to save all their lives.

He pauses mentally. It *does* sound a bit batty in retrospect, but he'd been certain that it would distract Bolg, and thus Bolg's armies, long enough to mount a surprise attack – and he had needed something to convince Thranduil to aid them.

"What is the situation then, apart from our ever-delightful council?"

Slightly surprisingly it is Frerin who speaks up. "The men are in the process of moving back into Dale. The orcs didn't bother destroying anything, so they're all fairly happy. Their wounded will remain in this camp until they can be moved. Thranduil has offered to remain here with some of his army and his healers until the worst is over. Most of his warriors have already left again."

Thorin's eyebrows rise despite himself. "You've been busy."

"Someone had to keep everyone calm and happy," Frerin shrugs, unusually subdued. "At the time we still thought you were... you know."

Thorin's face softens. He's all too familiar with the concept of throwing oneself into work when otherwise grief would paralyse.

"Thank you, nadad. I'm sure you did well in my stead." He glances around. "Considering that the camp still seems to be standing I would certainly say so."

Frerin pulls a face at him but refrains from teasing back. That too Thorin can relate to. They would probably all be a bit careful around him for a while to come, too cognizant of the fact that they nearly lost him. That he could be gone instead of sitting right across from them, warm and alive.

Half an hour later he revises that opinion.

"If I hear any more jokes about me having the hardest skull in existence I *am* going to kill someone!"

When he finally makes it back to Erebor a few hours and lots of grumbling from Óin later, Thorin immediately makes a beeline for the royal quarters, intent on seeing with his own two eyes that his other loved ones are safe and sound. He's left Dís and Frerin in charge down there, which should give him at least a few hours to unwind.

The first thing he finds is a sword almost sticking in his nose, and a cry of "Bifur! That's *Thorin*!"

The sword is retracted to reveal Bifur's unapologetic face. "Your majesty."

"Bifur." He inclines his head. "I applaud you for your dedication to your assigned task."

Bofur's head pops up next to his cousin. "It's been a pleasure. Your wee ones are a delight."

And indeed, a little blur attacks his legs almost as soon as he's properly stepped into the room.

"Uncle! We missed you!" Fíli shouts at a volume that makes Thorin wince slightly, but he obediently bends to pick his nephew up.

He doesn't bother correcting Bofur's labelling of them being 'his', far too warmed by the sentiment.

"I missed you too, mizimith. What have you been up to while I've been away?"

Fíli immediately starts wriggling and once he's let him slip back to the floor tugs at his hand.

"Mister Bifur showed me how to carve wood. I made a fish!"

Thorin lets himself be dragged towards the corner with the toys gladly enough, though he does raise his eyebrow at Bifur, who shrugs, unrepentant.

"He knew something was wrong," the other dwarf explains quietly. "It was as good a method to keep him busy as any."

Thorin wants to continue to look disapproving, but gives it up as a lost cause. "As long as you didn't let him near any really sharp knives."

Now Bifur does look slightly insulted. "Of course not!"

Thorin shoots him an apologetic smile, then bends down next to Fíli. His nephew fishes out a block of wood out of a pile of toys and holds it up with a proud smile.

“Look, Uncle Thorin. I named him Blue.”

When he squints a little closer Thorin can indeed make out a blue tint to the wood and wonders what expensive material Bifur had let his nephew use. But Fíli looks happy, and so puts the matter out of his mind and instead takes the ‘fish’ presented him.

It doesn’t look much like a fish, beyond the fact that it has a fin, but he smiles dutifully and says, “It looks wonderful, Fíli. You did good work.”

The first rule of any parent: always compliment your little ones’ artistic creations, no matter how misshapen.

Fíli beams at him.

“Where’s your brother then?”

Fíli’s smile becomes impossibly wider. Kíli is still a new addition to all their lives, but Fíli clearly hasn’t tired of his baby brother yet.

“He’s napping with Darla and Nori and Ori in the other room,” he says. “And Dori and Bombur went to get some food.”

He would have to thank them all later, but for now he lets them rest and settles down with Fíli in his lap, Bofur and Bifur still acting as unofficial guards. There would be time later for explanations and gratitude.

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Thorin can’t even say he’s surprised to catch sight of the tall, grey-robed figure near the elf king’s tent.

“Are you incapable of not being late, wizard?” Thorin snaps, though his tone of voice is mitigated by the smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. Late or not, it is good to see Gandalf and to know that at least one other mostly sane person can help him deal with the mess of negotiations and funerals that are hanging over his head.

(He will not admit to certain fondness of the grumpy old man to

anyone other than himself yet, however.)

He is determined not to let Gandalf slip away again before he can actually be helpful for once.

“A wizard is never late,” Gandalf informs him rather pompously, but his lips are twitching tellingly.

“Well, the battle is certainly over,” Thorin fires back. “I don’t suppose you’ll help me keep Thranduil and Baran happy?”

Gandalf gives him a small, ironic bow. “I shall endeavour to do my best. But first tell me, Thorin, how do you fare these days?”

Thorin never thought he would one day find the wizard’s piercing gaze almost comforting.

“Erebor thrives, for now.” There’s no small hint of pride in his voice – this duty, at least, he has managed to stay true to so far. “Though this battle has been long in coming. I have hope that we will have peace for a while now that Gundabad is emptied and its army defeated.”

“I did not ask about Erebor, nor about your current political situation,” Gandalf murmurs, his brows drawing together. “I am well aware of these facts already. How do *you* fare? None could say your path is an easy one to walk.”

Thorin shoots him a dry look. “I think most people are actually not too aware of that fact.”

Gandalf only waits him out, seeing it as the stalling tactic it very probably is (Thorin hasn’t quite made up his mind yet – after all, infuriatingly, talking to the wizard usually does end up making him feel better).

“I told them,” he finally says, measured and controlled, and he’s very proud that he’s avoided blurting it out unceremoniously like the last time.

Gandalf’s eyes flare in surprise, but then he smiles. “That is good news... yes, good news indeed.

Who did you tell?”

“So far Frerin and Dís and Balin and Dwalin, but I promised some others answers after the battle.”

He hesitates. "It was not originally my intention to do so, after Vili's death I... I *broke*. I told Frerin. And then Dís came with that ridiculous theory that I'm Durin reborn and I had to tell her.

Balin and Dwalin cornered me and demanded answers not too long after and I figured I might as well tell them as well."

Gandalf's smile widens. "You have loyal friends. Consider yourself lucky."

"I do," Thorin says quietly. "Every day."

"Then all is well. And remember, you may call on me any time you wish."

A pause.

"I might not come, depending on the importance of my business at the time, but there is always the option."

Thorin smiles in response. "Do not worry, I have no expectation of tearing you away from your wizardly calling. Besides, you seem to know far more things than I do and would probably realise I need help before I."

"I will not deny that I know many things, and certainly more than you do" – Thorin snorts, but Gandalf blithely ignores him – "but I do not know everything, Thorin, son of Thráin, much as it pains me to say this."

Thorin raises his brows. "Are you saying that you sometimes need the help even of us short-lived mortals?"

"Yes," Gandalf says, suddenly completely serious. "And gladly do I always take it. I may be old but I am not senile, nor too proud to accept help."

And then he leans very demonstratively onto his staff, and Thorin can't help but start laughing, Gandalf's mirth joining his not long after.

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It is three days after the battle and one day after Thorin woke from his healing sleep and Thorin is about ready to tear his hair out in frus-

tration.

“What do you mean no one can find the arkenstone?” he half-snaps, barely keeping a lid on his growing tenseness.

Balin, far too used to his temper, only stares back at him calmly. “Exactly what you think it means, Thorin. We’ve searched most of the battle-field now and there’s no trace of it anywhere. It certainly isn’t to be found near where Bolg fell.”

Thorin resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose, takes a deep breath and then reconsiders and does it anyway. He’s still prone to headaches, even days after receiving his head wound, but he’s fairly certain this particular one has nothing to do with his recent injury.

“That means that someone has already found it and we don’t *know* about it,” he grits out.

Balin nods glumly.

It’s not that Thorin particularly cares about the bloody thing, not after everything it’s cost him, directly and indirectly, but even he has to admit to its value as a symbol. Not to mention that reclaiming it would hopefully stop the council from shouting at him about the whole issue.

“Assuming that no straggling orc ran off with it” – he hopes not, since that would probably mean that they’d never see the jewel again – “and that no dwarf would be so disloyal as to claim the King’s Jewel for themselves” – a fair assumption, and yet not; it is true that Thorin would trust about ninety-eight percent of his subjects not to do that, but there are always a few who are corruptible – “that leaves the men and the elves. Has there been any witness to unusual activity in their camps?”

“Not that we are aware of.” Balin shrugs. “But you can never tell with elves.”

His headache intensifies. “Balin,” he grits out, “are you trying to tell me that I need to meet with Thranduil and somehow manage to politely ask whether an elf made off with the arkenstone when it is perfectly possible that they have nothing to do with it, *all without offend-*

ing him?"

Balin scratches his beard, looking slightly apologetic. "Basically, yes."

"And here I thought the fighting would be the hard part."

An hour later he stands in Thranduil's tent, trying very hard not to fidget as the elf king stares at him.

"Are you accusing me of stealing your precious stone?" Thranduil's face hasn't changed, but his tone has fallen to frigid levels that send shivers crawling down Thorin's spine.

"Of course not, your majesty," he says, and then decides openness is the only way to salvage this mess. "I'm not so stupid to wish to antagonise allies who have just aided Erebor in survival. I simply have to ask, for I have a whole council prophesising doom for having thrown away the symbol of my reign and I'd really rather they all shut up."

Thranduil does not outwardly relax, but the air around them warms again, some of the oppressiveness vanishing.

"I see. You need this jewel back then?"

Thorin shrugs deliberately carelessly. "Were it only my decision I would be happy for it to remain lost, with all the trouble it has brought, but it is not. So yes, reclaiming the arkenstone is currently on my priority list."

Thranduil's gaze sharpens, one eyebrow curving upwards. "You are the king, are you not? You could simply decree for the search to be over and no one could challenge you."

"I *could*, yes, but we both know kingship is neither that easy nor that solitary." He smiles dryly. "Or at least it isn't when one has not had centuries already to show one's trustworthiness as a ruler. I am young still, King Thranduil, and there are those with power who believe me too young and inexperienced. With times as they are, I cannot afford dissent of any kind inside Erebor."

"Well spoken, King Thorin," Thranduil concedes, after a moment of contemplation, and Thorin does not miss the sudden use of his title. "What you seek is indeed here."

He rises, all controlled grace that used to make Thorin grit his teeth and sneer automatically and returns with a bundle wrapped in dark cloth. He slowly pulls back the cover, revealing the glimmering shine of the arkenstone, its facets throwing off multi-coloured light even in the dimly lit tent.

It is only for a fleeting second, but Thorin catches a glimpse of conflict passing over Thranduil's face, a minute tightening of his fingers around the arkenstone before he stretches out his long arm and drops the stone onto the table in front of Thorin.

It doesn't seem like much, but he comes away from that meeting with the feeling that he's just witnessed something far deeper and far more important than he realised at the time.

Chapter 26



Thorin signs the last letter with an exhausted but pleased flourish and pushes the parchment away, adding to the pile already obscuring most of his desk space.

So far he's written reasonably detailed letters both to Lord Elrond and Lady Galadriel, informing them of recent happenstances, and is now contemplating adding the Steward of Gondor and the King of Rohan to the list as a courtesy, though he's yet to meet either of them.

Not all of the papers are missives; a fair number are written complaints about various things, though the topics vary only along the lines of his unorthodox use of the arkenstone (never mind that it's back and safe and *saved all their lives*), a mining rights dispute, the arkenstone issue, an impending shortage of flour, and the arkenstone debate. Suffice to say that Thorin is getting rather tired of reading the word 'arkenstone', let alone the various complaints of councilmen and elder citizens regarding Thorin's denouncing of tradition and 'shocking callousness'.

Those he'd left alone for now. He'd already announced his lack of regret for his actions in the throne room, before many of his subjects and he'd meant it when he said *'No stone will ever be worth the life of any of my subjects, warriors and thinkers alike, and any soul who contests that claim may step forward now and explain how their conscience lets them believe otherwise'*.

His people had cheered at that, and there'd even be one or two shame-faced letters from councillors apologizing for their rash words, but mostly the complaints had kept coming. Sometimes Thorin feels entirely too close to despairing over the minds of some dwarves.

A light knock on the door interrupts his increasingly grim brooding and he looks up from the ink swirling innocently in the pot to find Dís sticking her head through the door.

“They’re all here,” she says softly and Thorin can tell that she’s worried for him just by the way she tilts her head as she studies his no-doubt slightly haggard face. “I put Fíli and Kíli to bed in the next room, they need the rest. And they’re too young to understand now anyway.”

“Maybe,” he says, but doesn’t contest her decision to leave them out of this. She is their mother and in this he will always defer to her. He has no particular wish for them to know this early in their lives, though after today he will refuse to treat it as a secret among those he loves and trusts.

When he still makes no move to rise from his chair, Dís expression clouds over slightly. She takes a step into the room and closes the door behind her.

“You don’t have to do this now, nadad, you know that,” she says firmly, but Thorin only sighs wearily. He has to do it some time, so why not now?

“You’re still tired and those leafbags on the council won’t leave you alone,” she continues, undeterred, her hand landing on Thorin’s shoulder gently. “I know we pushed you, almost demanded that you tell them as soon as possible, but it is still your choice and in the end another day or two won’t matter.”

He shakes his head. “I’m tired of...”

Being afraid of this. The truth hanging over my head.

The line of Dís’ mouth softens, and she nods as she promises, “We’ll be right by your side.”

*

It shouldn’t have felt so surreal. Finally all of his old company is gathered in one room and all Thorin can do for several minutes is to stare at them.

Óin and Glóin are sitting near the window, both looking far too tired and slightly confused. Thorin had asked them to come without explaining why, only giving them some vague reassurance that it wasn't anything to be concerned about. (Possibly a lie.) Maybe he should've given them time to recover from post-battle exhaustion, but now that he's finally made up his mind to tell them, he suddenly finds himself with the urge to do it as soon as possible.

Dori has a firm eye on Nori, next to Darla and Ori, but his face speaks not of suspicion or worry for once, but rather of a puzzled kind of acceptance. He certainly has enough experience with Thorin's occasionally odd ways to not worry too much about the current gathering.

Bombur and Bofur look the most uneasy, clearly entirely stumped as to why they're in the royal chambers together with a group of other dwarves they've only met in passing at best, and they settle down on some chairs near the empty fireplace only reluctantly. Bifur on the other hand seems to be humming to himself tonelessly and looks entirely at ease as he stuffs himself a pipe.

Dwalin hulks near the door, still wound up from the recent battle and unwilling to trust even the safety of the mountain. Balin occasionally sends him exasperated glances, which he steadfastly ignores. They, of course, know what this is about, and that Balin is comfortable enough to all but slouch in Thorin's high armchair is relieving. Balin has a good eye for character and his prediction of someone's reaction tends to be accurate enough that Thorin trusts his judgement entirely. If Balin thought one of the people in this room would react badly to Thorin's announcement, he'd already have spoken up.

Letting his gaze stray over the assembled dwarves once more, Thorin is tempted to revise his opinion. Perhaps it *should* feel this unreal. After all it has been a long, long time, a different lifetime since he has last seen his old companions like this.

Well, not entirely like this, clearly. Fili and Kíli are rather smaller (and absent), everyone else is younger and there's Darla sitting with Ori and Nori and Dori. And beyond that, the *dynamic* is different, both be-

tween him and them, and in between the others, and in retrospect he is unsure of how he could have thought otherwise even for a moment; this is a group of different people after all.

He's mostly made his peace with that.

After all, he firmly believes that in their *hearts* they haven't changed.

Thorin starts ever so slightly when someone pokes him from behind.

He turns to face Dís – of course it was Dís – who hisses, “Get on with it. The poor chaps are all confused.”

She probably has a point in that this is not the best time to be wool-gathering. Thorin clears his throat, ignoring the fact that everyone is already looking at him anyway, and says, “You’re probably wondering why I called all of you here –”

Someone snorts. It's probably Dwalin.

Undeterred he continues, “ – and I apologize for the abrupt manner.” He takes a deep breath. “The truth is, there's something I've pondered sharing with you for a while now and recent... events have convinced me that it's the right thing to do, regardless of my conflicted feelings on the matter.”

He allows himself a wry smile. “And yes, I do realize that I could've waited until a little longer after the battle, but I find that the joy of being alive and Erebor still standing proud and unbroken is enough to make wish to say this now.” Thorin's gaze flicks over to Bofur and Bombur. “I promise that you'll be free to go once I'm through with my story, and if it is your wish I shall not bother you again.”

Bofur's eyes narrow once he realizes the words are mostly meant for him, but he nods once, signalling his understanding. Bombur only looks vaguely uncomfortable.

Redirecting his attention to the whole group, Thorin takes a deep breath and searches for the right words. He's done this three times now, and still he has no idea how to best explain the mystery that is his second life – it's important that he gets this *right*, especially in front of people whose loyalties and love he cannot be quite as sure of as his sib-

lings' and Balin and Dwalin's.

"You've probably all noticed that I act... strangely at times," Thorin starts, determinedly fixing his gaze somewhere just above Dori's right ear, as he's the one who happens to occupy the space closest to Thorin's line of sight. "A few of you know this already, but I've called you here because in another life, you were my most loyal, dearest companions. And when I say another life... I mean it literally. I lived my life, from birth to death and then I woke up again, here in this time, on the day that Smaug came. That's how I knew how to kill the cursed worm. After all these years you deserve to know this truth."

Dead silence meets his words and Thorin can count himself lucky that he's the king of a whole lot of dwarves and used to being stared at because otherwise he's quite sure he'd be shrivelling in onto himself like those dried plum things that Bilbo used to rhapsodize about when he was feeling particularly morose about the lack of decent food on their bothersome quest.

And then Bofur begins to laugh.

"You had me going there for a minute," he splutters, face growing red with mirth. "I didn't know you were a dwarf of humour, your majesty."

No muscle in Thorin's face twitches and Bofur sobers abruptly.

"No, seriously, I want some of what you've been drinking." He looks around the circle of dwarves helplessly, perhaps trying to find supporters. "There's no way we were ever companions to a *king*, second life or not."

Next to him Bombur nods in agreement, eyes still wide with shock. Clearly he doesn't believe Thorin either.

Bofur keeps muttering under his breath, only the odd word loud enough to catch and he clearly has forgotten, if only for a moment, that he's in the presence of his king who he's now insulting by calling him a 'crazy nutter'.

Normally Thorin would be thrilled at the lack of deference. Right now it only makes him feel vaguely sick to hear someone so dear to

him deny his words so vigorously.

He forces himself to look at the others, searching for signs of similar doubt in their faces, and meets Darla's gaze for a moment. She looks pale, but her mouth is set in a thin, stubborn line and she goes right back to glaring at Bofur again.

"Enough!" she thunders, and Bofur's mouth snaps shut with an audible click. "Calm down, all of you, and let Thorin explain what he means." Her glare sharpens another fraction and next to her Dori is nodding along to her words furiously, jaw set stubbornly despite his own struggle to accept Thorin's words. Dori is one of the most pragmatic, reality-bound dwarves Thorin knows – it must be hard for him to hear and believe a claim so outlandish.

"I've never known him to lie or be so callous as to make a joke like this so *heed him*."

Thorin is pretty sure Dís mutters something along the lines of *thank Mahal* behind him, but he's too relieved to pay much attention.

When Darla turns back to him – and he can hardly believe she got so worked up on his behalf – and gives him a nod, bearing as regal as his own on a good day, he returns a small but grateful smile.

Everyone is looking at him – he's going to complain to some of his tutors later, who had assured him that once he's mastered speaking in front of a whole kingdom nothing could make him nervous anymore, what rubbish – and he takes a deep breath.

"Lady Darla is correct. I do not joke, as several people in this room could testify that I have no sense of humour whatsoever" – Frerin snorts tellingly from his corner – "this really has happened to me." He clenches his hands to hide the ever so slight tremor running through them and continues. "At first I did not want to believe my own senses. How could I be alive when I'd just died? How could I be in Erebor as I remembered it from my youth, more than a hundred years ago? I thought I must be dreaming, or going mad. I had never heard of the like happening before, after all. And then I found out that it was the day that Smaug would attack, the day I'd lived through once already

and lost everything to and it didn't matter anymore. I had to do what I could to stop our home's destruction for a second time." He shrugs lightly, almost helplessly. "After that I stopped thinking about it, mostly. It's your choice whether you accept my story as there's no proof I can give beyond my words."

He bows his head before them and sits down next to Dís, who scoots a little closer offering warmth and reassurance. Thorin leans into her just a little bit, too tired to try and put up a strong front.

It's Bifur who speaks up first, unflappable. "Tell us more. Why are we important then?"

Thorin smiles faintly. "A reasonable question with a long answer. Are you sure you want to hear my life's story now? I will do my best to abridge it, but" – and here he can't help but look at Bofur and Bombur – "I would not force anyone to hear it."

Dissenting mutterings erupt all around him and Frerin grumbles, "Oh just get on with it, brother. They all want to hear."

So he does, haltingly at first and then with more and more confidence as he outlines the main events of his first life, starting from the sack of Erebor and their trials in exile. He watches their eyes grow wider and fill with wonder when he reaches their quest and then darken at its bitter end.

Silence descends after his last word faded into the air. Thorin's hands are clenched so tight that his nails have left red marks in his palms and it takes all his self-control to keep breathing evenly as his companions mull over his words.

The last person Thorin expects to speak first is Ori, and yet it is the small dwarf who pipes up, "Is that why you gave us those tokens?"

He holds up his hand, the small token shining in his mittened fingers. Thorin is suitably proud that Ori only shrinks into himself a little bit when everyone's attention focuses on him. A general fumble follows, as various dwarves root around in pockets and bring out their own tokens and Thorin's heart cannot help but swell when he realizes that every single one of them is carrying it on their person, even scepti-

cal Bofur and Bombur.

“Yes, Ori,” he acknowledges quietly. “Yes, I made them in remembrance of what we once shared, though I am now the only one who remembers it. I needed something to... remind me.” Unbelievably he finds a small, fond smile tugging at his lips. “They deserved to be honoured. And so do you.”

He sees them gaze at their token with new appreciation, a knowledge gained of the trinkets’ true worth and purpose.

And then Nori announces loudly, just as he tucks his token away safely in one of the many pockets hidden on his person, “Mine’s the prettiest”, only to wince as Ori elbows him sharply. The pain does nothing to wipe the self-satisfied look from Nori’s face as all around him dwarves begin to laugh, the heavy atmosphere lightening into shared mirth.

There’s not been a moment when Nori has resembled his other, grown up, self more than when he turns slightly and winks at Thorin in reply to his grateful smile.

Thorin lets them chatter among themselves for a moment, lets them come to terms with all that he’s told them and turns his thoughts inwards. There’re things he hasn’t revealed yet, among them his greatest failing. He knows that now would be the best time to confess everything, once and for all, but the same fear that had kept him from talking to his siblings about this for so long now makes him hesitate. Will they still look at him the same way after that, with love and devotion?

A tap on his arm brings him back to his surroundings.

“I noticed that I wasn’t anywhere to be found in your tale,” Darla says quietly beside him, one eye on her sons, far enough away not to overhear. “Will you tell me?”

He looks down at her, heart heavy. “I never met you in that last life and your sons rarely talked about their family. As far as I know you died when Ori was still very young, leaving Dori to take care of him.”

“And Nori?” she asks, eyes shrewd.

“Nori ran wild for a long time, resenting his older brother for trying to keep him under control.” Thorin’s lips twitch lightly in remembered amusement. “He was a thief, Darla, and one of the best. I do believe he gave poor Dwalin a lot of grief in his time. You should’ve seen his face when I told him Nori would join our quest.”

Darla studies his face, eyes sad. “You have some good memories too, then. Much of what you told us was dark and full of grief.”

“Much of it was,” Thorin agrees baldly. “And that has led me to make many mistakes. It took me many years to accept my guilt for long enough to realize that not all of it belonged placed on my shoulders, that circumstances also had a role to play. Still, they are my mistakes and my responsibility.”

“There’s very little, I think, that these dwarves would not forgive you for, Thorin,” she says quietly and Thorin almost laughs, darkly amused. “You should not fear their reaction.”

“You and Balin, you always know exactly what to say.” It’s not a true complaint, they’re just bloody *annoying* at times. “But you’re right – fear has never been my ally.”

And with that he stands, immediately commanding the attention of the rest of the room.

“There is one more thing I have to tell you,” he says, almost overly loud in the quietened room and ignores his heart’s frantic beating in his chest. “Some of you were in Erebor during the last years of Thrór’s reign, witnessed some of his descent into madness.” He pauses, pushes painful memories away. “The gold-sickness, or at least susceptibility to it. Well, it runs in the family. And I succumbed to it once and betrayed you all. There’s no guarantee that I will not fall to it once more in this life, though I’ve taken all measures I could conceive of against that coming to pass.”

Grave silence meets his words, the playful atmosphere of before lost in the gravity of his confession. Nonetheless he forges ahead. “I understand if you wish to turn your back on me now. I will not stop you from doing so, not after what I’ve done. It was a long time ago, but

some things may never be forgiven. I *know* that.”

It takes all his courage to meet each of their gazes in turn, questioning, puzzled, and worried in turn before he quietly adds, “Make of that what you will.”

And then he jumps in surprise when Óin turns to his brother and conversationally says, “He’s a bit of a knobhead, isn’t he?”

All around the room heads nod.

“A right pillock really,” Glóin mutters.

“A moron,” Darla helpfully puts in, all but glaring at Thorin, who wonders what in Smaug’s cursed name is happening. “To think that we would care about that.”

When his eyebrows lift in surprise, she only rolls her eyes. “You can’t have honestly thought we would judge you on something you haven’t even *done*, for all accounts and purposes.”

His face must clearly convey the answer to that, for she sighs and walks over to pat his arm. “Silly dwarf.”

“Told you,” Frerin comments out of the corner of his mouth, unperturbed when Thorin turns to glare at him. “We all trust you, you big lunkhead.”

Again, heads nod all around the circle, some a bit more embarrassed than others.

“You are the one who made sure that mum did well and looked after all of us,” Ori says, voice determined above the general murmuring. “Without the customers you brought with your royal approval of her clothes we wouldn’t be doing half as well.”

When all his family turns to stare at him in surprise, he adds, only a little defensively, “What? I may be young but I’m not blind and you’ve all heard the story of how mum met the prince of the realm the first time.”

“You appointed me royal healer,” Óin puts in from where he’s decided to hunker back down in an armchair now that all the tense bits seem to be over with.

“And me ambassador to Ered Luin,” Glóin adds, leaning against the

back of the chair. "It doesn't sound like that was my job in your other life."

And suddenly everyone seems to find things that Thorin has done to comment on, from Bombur's position in the kitchen and the Urs presence in Erebor in the first place, to Dori's apprenticeship, to that one time he came by and purchased half of Bifur's stock of carved animals and though Thorin wants to protest that Dori's apprenticeship is entirely down to Dori's own talents and had nothing to do with *him*, the general din as a whole group of dwarves finally puts puzzle pieces that have accumulated for decades into place makes it impossible for him to make himself heard. Only Nori remains quiet, but there's banked gratitude in his eyes when he looks at Thorin.

When the noise has dimmed somewhat, Glóin suddenly turns calculating eyes on Thorin. "Is *that* why you made nice with those tree-shaggers?"

Thorin winces slightly at the term, though he can hardly claim to never have used it before himself, but chooses to ignore the insult for the moment and nods.

"So that's what drove you to argue against King Thráin's plans for Khazad-dûm then," Balin says quietly, more to himself than anyone else. "I had wondered."

"Too many died the first time around," Thorin says simply. "I could not stand by and do nothing as all those mistakes were repeated."

"Smaug!" Dori blurts out and a general hush falls over the room. He looks slightly nervous to suddenly find all eyes trained on him, but soldiers on. "You killed Smaug in this world. We're all standing here, in this place, only because you killed Smaug."

Many of the faces now turned towards him hold a little too much amazement, even hero-worship for Thorin's peace of mind. It's not that he didn't do all those things, because he did do most of them, but the fact that every decent dwarf would've done so, if given half a chance. He's not deserving of this much adulation.

"I did only what I could, and with an unfair advantage as well," he

tells them quietly, trying not to wilt under the weight of their gazes. "Any dwarf would've done the same."

"I wouldn't be quite so sure of that," Dwalin speaks up, the deep rumble of his voice heavy with conviction. "You might not like it, Thorin, but you are *more* than most dwarves can claim, in many respects."

Thorin might be gaping, just a little. Coming from Dwalin...

"Are you getting sentimental in your old age?" he rallies after a moment, but his heart isn't in the joke, still too full with shocked amazement.

Behind him Dís masks a snort with an entirely unconvincing cough, but Dwalin doesn't even bother glaring at him, only shakes his mohawked head and points out, "That's Balin's job."

Balin rolls his eyes at the oft-heard dig, but nonetheless nods. "It's true enough. Not a sentimental bone in my brother's body, I can promise you that. Stands to reason he actually *means* it."

Heads nod emphatically all around.

Thorin looks at them all, united by their defence of him, and thinks *huh*. That had proven somewhat easier than expected. He has imagined this moment of course, his company acting together once more; but he never thought it would be over *him* that they would unite, at least not in this life. Warmth rushes through him, washing away lingering disbelief in a fierce tide. He spent so long telling himself that he doesn't *need* their acceptance, that *having* it strikes him as the greatest conceivable gift.

They're not the fourteen they were in another life, but they are *better*.

Chapter 27



By the time Bard's birth rolls around Thorin has almost forgotten about waiting for the event to happen. He had never been entirely sure how old Bard actually was the last time around and so has very little reference points beyond 'possibly middle-aged'. Thus, when a runner from Dale reaches the mountain – a fairly rare happenstance these days – in the middle of their weekly open court his first reaction is to worry that some evil has befallen their allies' city.

Settled on the throne in the much-dreaded full formal outfit, Thorin is in the middle of listening to a complaint from a trader just returned from a trip to the Blue Mountains when one of the guards escorts a young man into the throne room, signalling for Thorin's attention with a series of subtle hand movements.

Nevertheless Thorin lets the dwarf finish voicing his petition, which boils down to wanting official protection on longer trade journeys.

"This issue is not for me to decide alone," he replies, half caught between distraction and seriously considering the proposition. There's certainly some merit to it, but he has not the time to properly weigh the positives and negatives at the moment. "But rest assured that your petition has been heard and will be raised with the council."

The dwarf bows, looking satisfied. "Thank you, my Lord."

Once he has disappeared through the archway, Thorin stands. "Court is adjourned for the noon meal."

A number of years ago there might have been grumbling from the dwarves still waiting in line to be heard by their king, but these days very little unrest tends to arise in open court. His dwarves have got used to Thorin taking the time to see every single petitioner, and few

still fear that they will not be heard when court is disrupted unexpectedly.

The walkway clears within minutes. Despite Thorin having made rather insistent noises in favour of moving court into a slightly more private hall, somehow the tradition of holding open court in the main throne room has persisted. Most of the councillors had declared that anything else wouldn't be proper and would fail to lend Thorin's decrees the weight that the throne room ascribes to them. When Thorin had complained about it to Frerin later – entirely justifiably too; why should the king's decrees hold more or less power depending where they are uttered? – his brother had only shrugged and somewhat philosophically said, “Let them worry about it if they want, nadad. Most of what open court is about is just you looking pretty on your throne and reassuring everyone you're still alive and kicking anyway.” Needless to say Thorin hadn't been too impressed by that statement, but he'd let it drop. Frerin was right, after all – he had more important things to worry about.

Before the runner can go through all the proper rituals that come with greeting a king, Thorin makes his way to where they are waiting near the door and bids him to speak.

The runner bows, looking slightly uncomfortable to suddenly be in close proximity to Thorin, who is well aware that his current attire is chosen to impress rather than set at ease.

“My lord, I bear news from the city of Dale.”

Thorin nods. “I hope all is well?”

“All is indeed well. I am here to announce the birth of Bard, heir of our Lord Baran.”

Thorin's first reaction is relief. His second is to wonder whether he even knew that Baran and Gerlia were expecting.

“I will, of course, come and pay my respects. Please inform Lord Baran of my impending arrival.”

With another nod and a somewhat relieved look on his face, the runner scurries off.

Thorin turns to Balin, who has materialised next to him from wherever he was hiding during the petitions; the older dwarf rarely misses open court, but doesn't like to be openly involved. "Is my schedule free this afternoon?"

"I am *not* your secretary, Thorin," Balin huffs, though well aware of this old argument's status as a lost fight. "But yes, you are free as soon as open court is dealt with."

On his other side Dwalin, who always insists on lurking near the dais during open court ever since that one time a rather irate dwarf had gestured a little too forcefully with his hammer, snickers loudly.

Balin throws his brother a dirty look, then concedes with a sigh. "I will arrange matters. I suggest you go find some food. You can announce the good news before court resumes."

Four hours later, Thorin looks at the small baby swaddled in a green woollen blanket and experiences one of those moments of disconnect that have become rare over the last decades. It is hard to see the hardened warrior that once became of this infant, grim of mouth and mighty enough to slay a dragon, and perhaps he never would be in this life. Bard would certainly never earn the title Dragonslayer now, and all Valar willing he would not grow up into the harsh life he'd once had. It should be a better life, or so Thorin hopes, but looking down at the dazed eyes that had once met his, strong with sparks of righteous anger, some of his old fears return. This life is building new people, new characters to those he once knew, their old self forever lost – how could he know what they would've preferred? Harder lives do not always make happier people.

After all he's learned, Thorin knows that he still presumes much – too much perhaps.

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Still, many of his are goals achieved – his company reunited, his family safe and generally happy, peace reigning in Erebor and the lands around – and thoughts of Bilbo grow stronger and more frequent as

the years continue to pass. He's done his best not to think about the hobbit too much, concentrating on trying to keep his family from breaking apart. There had been so many immediate problems to face that it had been easier to keep his thoughts from wandering into critical territories.

It also helped that, for most of the time, Bilbo hadn't even been born yet, making any thoughts on the topic entirely academic anyway.

But Bilbo's birth has come and passed, according to his calculations, and now he finds himself beset by a confusing tangle of emotions and the deep-seated need to go see his friend now that he has finally entered Middle-earth. He is the last of his company after all, close to his heart as they all are, and Thorin finds himself quite unable to imagine a life completely without him. Even without the need for a quest to reclaim his homeland. For a long time he had resolved not to meddle in Bilbo's life, seeing as he would probably be much happier in his green, peaceful Shire, but now he finally realises that he simply won't be able to do that. He might keep telling himself that, for the sake of Bilbo's happiness, he could stay away from him, but that wouldn't make it any truer.

Nor does calling him a 'friend' only, invalidate the truth of his heart. Of his One.

Dis' words of long ago haunt him. *I've never known you to give up without even trying, Thorin. Isn't this worth doing all you can for?*

And she's right, damn her and whatever powers had decided he couldn't simply fall for a dwarf, nice and easy like everyone else.

He would see his hobbit, at least once. He just hopes he is strong enough to let him go again after that.

*

"You want to what?! You can't! You're the king!"

Thorin only barely refrains from rolling his eyes at his younger brother. "Yes, thank you, Frerin, I hadn't noticed that myself."

"But – " Frerin's voice has reached a worryingly high pitch. "But

you're the *king!*"

Thorin opens his mouth to remind him that he had, in fact, done nothing but repeat his earlier assertion, takes another look at Frerin's paling face and thinks better of it.

"You know what he means to me," he says, gentler now and Frerin's protests crumble and die before his eyes.

"That's not fair, nadad," Frerin mumbles in the plaintive tones of someone who knows they've already lost the argument.

Thorin's lips twitch. "Aren't you the one who always tells me I should stop being so uptight and cheat now and then?"

"I meant in cards!" Frerin protests, arms flailing around haplessly. "Or drinking games! Anything to make you stop losing to Dwalin all the time."

"I do *not* lose to Dwalin all the time."

Frerin's gaze has finally regained some of his normal surety – or at least the usual unimpressed glint has returned. "Keep telling yourself that, Thor."

Silence falls between them, only broken by the sound of the sole of Frerin's boot fidgeting on the stone floor. Thorin almost sighs. He'd expected some measure of resistance from his brother, but he'd really hoped he would take it better than *this*.

Thorin takes one more look at Frerin's frazzled appearance, the near panic in his eyes, and asks, "Is your quarrel with this truly that I shouldn't be allowed to do *one* thing for myself in decades of service to this kingdom – or are you simply afraid of taking my place during my absence?"

Frerin's expression says it all.

"Nadad," he sighs, consciously choosing this form of address, foregoing the usual nadadith – a moniker that Frerin alternately hates and loves – "it's only temporary. I'll be back within months.

And you will have Erebor's best advisors at your side."

"But that's exactly the problem!" Frerin cries. "What if it's *not* temporary? Thorin, you want to journey *alone*, you refuse to let us tell

anyone else where you're going, and you won't even say *when* exactly we're supposed to expect you back!"

If Thorin remembers correctly, nothing much had happened in this year the last time around; the orcs had been quiet, as had all other beasts, and no great upheavals of any kind had taken place. If he didn't do anything particularly stupid or got himself mauled by a wolf he would be fine.

"I'll be *fine*, Frerin. There hasn't been any serious orc activity in months – " He ignores Frerin's muttered 'that just means they're planning something' and continues, " – and besides I have a feeling I won't be alone."

Frerin raises his brows in question.

"Gandalf," Thorin says simply.

"*Tharkûn*? What does this have to do with the wizard?"

Thorin snorts. Now that's one question usually pertinent to Gandalf's activities. "Nothing, but I doubt that will stop him. He's taken a bit of an interest in me." Understatement. "And he's the one who was responsible for our meeting in my last lifetime." Stepping forward, he lays a hand on his brother's shoulder. "I mean this in the best way possible, brother, but Erebor is not ready for you to rule yet. Gandalf is surprisingly pragmatic for someone who's not a dwarf. He won't let any harm come to me."

Judging by Frerin's scowl he isn't much comforted, but despite Thorin's own – many – misgivings, he believes this experience will be beneficial for his younger brother. Frerin has had much the same education as Thorin, though perhaps not as driven, as his status as a prince not directly in line for the throne afforded him some leniency that Thorin had never been granted, but should something happen to Thorin, the burden of kingship *would* fall on his shoulders. A few months of practice wouldn't hurt – especially since Thorin has no intention whatsoever of not coming back.

"Frerin, this is not up for debate. I've arranged matters so that I'll be leaving within the week."

At Frerin's horrified look, he raises a brow. "Dís was ecstatic when I told her."

And that she had been. His little sister has taken it upon herself to stop Thorin from 'working himself into an early return to the stone' – which, frankly, he thinks is quite ridiculous; there are many things that may kill him and paperwork or council meetings most decidedly are not on the lengthy list – and she's made her opinion that Thorin should have the right to take some time off now and then quite clear, no matter that he's the King. When he'd announced his intention to leave Erebor to take care of some 'personal business' – that she'd immediately interpreted correctly as 'Bilbo Baggins' anyway – she couldn't have been happier.

"Always knew Dís was a nutter," Frerin mutters rebelliously, but the fight has left his posture.

"Just try and be back as soon as possible and in one piece, you understand? And don't blame me when the kingdom is in shambles by the time you return."

Thorin lightly thunks their foreheads together. "You'll do just fine, Frerin. Just don't panic, and go to Balin if there's a problem."

"Are you trying to get rid of Balin?" Frerin gives him an unimpressed look. "Because that seems to be a likely outcome of this plan."

"It won't be *that* bad. Besides I've already warned him. He was most... enthusiastic."

Now it's Frerin's turn to snort. The reaction isn't entirely unwarranted; when Thorin had told him, Balin's face had gone through a rather complicated range of emotions beginning and ending at long-suffering despair. To his credit, he did not, however, try to talk Thorin out of it, only patted his shoulder lightly and promised to do his best to keep the kingdom from falling into ruin in its king's absence. Thorin strongly suspects that Balin, unlike Frerin, understands perfectly well that part of the reason Thorin is going is that he wants to test what would happen were he not available to lead Erebor in the future. It's not that he *plans* on dying or anything of the sort, but he'd

rather not have everyone else be caught wrong-footed if it does happen.

Oblivious of Thorin's rather grim musings, Frerin says quietly, uncharacteristically hesitant, "You do remember that he will be... small? Younger than you ever knew him."

Thorin's face remains still as stone. "I am aware."

"And that you won't... won't be able to treat him as your heart might yearn to?"

Spoken even more reluctantly, in the face of Thorin's icy glare.

"*I am aware.* I would never do that to him. He needs to grow up like one of his own." His lips twist. "You have my word that I will not meddle, brother."

Beyond hoping to save his parents in order to afford him the happy childhood Bilbo has always deserved that is.

Abruptly his ire fades to barely concealed sorrow.

"I just, I *need* to see him, at least once. If only to convince my heart that he is safe. That he's still *there*. Surely you understand that, n-dad?"

"I understand," Frerin says softly, patting Thorin's shoulder. Quieter. "I understand. Go with my blessing then."

Thorin doesn't let himself linger on goodbyes. After all, he'll be returning in only a few months' time.

*

Thorin's trusty pony Blackmane (now the third to bear that name) is clomping steadily on the road along the river past Lake-town towards Mirkwood – or Greenwood as he should probably call it, but the memory of vile darkness proves difficult to lodge still – by the time the sound of hurried hoof-beats signals another arrival.

Thorin can't help but feel a *little* smug that he had been right.

"You're early," Gandalf huffs, glittering eyes glaring at Thorin from under the brim of his hat.

Thorin smiles. "It appears you don't get challenged enough these

days, wizard.” He raises a brow and pointedly looks at the other’s packed saddle-bags and patiently waiting horse. “And you seem to become less subtle about your meddling every time we meet.”

“Well, subtlety seems superfluous when you already know I’m coming,” Gandalf grumbles, sounding ever so slightly put out.

Thorin only smiles.

“Will you be accompanying me all the way?”

Gandalf harrumphs, but Thorin would swear to the twitch of his mouth signalling more amusement than anything else. “That remains to be seen. The roads have been quiet as of late, but the King of Erebor should hardly gallivant around the countryside alone.”

Thorin just about manages to stop himself from pointing out that if anyone is going to be *gallivanting* it’s going to be Gandalf. “How fortunate that you are here then.”

Gandalf almost looks startled for a moment and then a burst of deep laughter splits the air. There is something so unrestrainedly joyful about the sound that Thorin’s heart warms quite despite himself. Even he would admit that it seems to be rather a pity that the wizard doesn’t laugh more often.

Gandalf’s eyes soften, a gentle smile replacing exuberance on his lips. “There is not always much to laugh at in this world we live in, Thorin Oakenshield, but I do find those rare moments to be worthy of treasuring.”

He inclines his head towards Thorin, tapping the brim of his omnipresent tattered hat.

So far Thorin has barely considered the journey to the Shire itself, mind focussed entirely on what would happen once they reach their destination, but suddenly he finds himself almost looking forward to it. Gandalf may just prove to be rather more amiable company than the last time.

“Come, my friend,” the wizard says as if reading his mind, and gathers the reins of his horse. “The road awaits.”

As they set off, hooves clattering on the shoddily paved road, Thor-

in thinks he can hear Gandalf mutter quietly to himself, "Fortunate indeed."

*

The Greenwood is still somewhat green, at least – definitely not as murky and dark as it had been when the company had attempted to pass through – but Thorin and Gandalf stick to the path in unspoken agreement, cautious eyes roaming around them. Thorin can't say he misses the spiders much. Nor Thranduil's hospitality. No matter their current cautious amicability, some things are hard to endure and even harder to forget.

They encounter not a single elf on their long trek through the forest, though whether because he now keeps company with Gandalf the Grey or because of the tentatively strengthening alliance between elves and dwarves he does not know.

Still, Thorin's spirits lift considerably when they finally reach the edge of the forest. Gandalf has been quiet for the last few days, seeming deep in thought and Thorin saw no reason to disturb his reverie. He steps out of the wood, leading Blackmane behind him and breathes in the clearer air freely. Say what you want about dwarves and rock and underground caves, their homes are always well-ventilated and no dwarf would prefer the green mustiness of a dense forest to open air.

That night, as they camp near the Old Ford across the river Anduin, Gandalf finally breaks his silence for longer sentences than terse instructions.

"Of all that you have told me of your experience, there is perhaps one thing that has worried me the most, yet I could not tell you why," he begins, taking a long draught from his pipe.

Thorin looks up from his nightly inspection of his weapons arsenal. "Only one? You are doing better than I am, in that case."

Gandalf ignores him expertly. "You told me that Bilbo found a ring in the caverns under the Misty Mountains, a plain gold thing that he kept hidden until circumstances were dire enough to force him to re-

veal its existence.” He paused, fiddling with his pipe. “A ring, that had the power to make its wearer invisible.”

Ah, so there’s another ulterior motive for Gandalf’s accompanying him. Thorin really should’ve expected that, considering the wizard never seems to have less than a few of those when going anywhere. In this case, he doesn’t mind overmuch. Thorin isn’t certain why Gandalf didn’t want to broach this topic in Erebor, but he doesn’t feel as slighted on behalf of his home as he once might have. Caution is something he is intimately familiar with at this point.

Thorin nods slowly, unsure where this is going. “That is what he said to me in the elven dungeons. Is it such an unlikely thing?”

“At first I did not think so, save for a muted warning my heart gave me,” Gandalf says, sounding uncommonly frustrated. “In later years I tried to recall if I had heard tales of such a ring – magical trinkets of limited power are, after all, not unheard of and yet little surfaced in my research. Finally I went to Lord Elrond to ask for his wisdom in the matter. He shared my concerns, though he too could no lay his finger on what caused such worry.”

Thorin’s calm has sharpened into tension crackling down his spine. Something in Gandalf’s tone sets his teeth on edge. “And?”

Gandalf shrugs. “Nothing. There is no evidence and we are still not certain how much your past experience applies to this life. I don’t suppose you remember anything else useful about it?”

Thorin shakes his head. “Bilbo seemed reluctant to talk of it and at the time I had other things on my mind. He certainly never mentioned it again.” He fixes Gandalf with a serious gaze, willing the wizard to listen. “In my experience, while the course of the future isn’t set to repeat my last life here, the great events that influence the way of our times still find a way to come to pass, however much I try to avert them. Many things are beyond my influence.”

Gandalf frowns but remains quiet. Thorin watches him for a while, then shrugs to himself (*wizards*) and settles down to sleep.

Gandalf doesn’t bring the topic up again in the following weeks of

travel, and if sometimes his gaze turns to even farther reaches of the world, unseen to any but those of higher power, Thorin is unsure whether it is connected to this or simply one of the things a wizard with a lot on his mind *does*.

Instead they talk. They talk about, well, they talk about hobbits most of all. Thorin has long suspected that Gandalf harbours something of a weakness for the folk of peaceful halflings – *not half of anything, thank you very much*, Bilbo's voice echoes in his mind – but only now does he realise that Gandalf looks on them with something akin to *longing*. It has never occurred to him before that perhaps Gandalf yearns for a home lost to him for the time being just as much, if not more with the weight of centuries behind it, as Thorin used to in his last life. The Shire with its calm green hills, comfortable homes and agreeable if slightly odd inhabitants, with its peace and innocence, is a novelty in Middle-Earth this day and age. Especially the latter. Peace could be found, if somewhat grudgingly on a dwarf's part, in most elven settlements, perhaps even some cities of men as well. But innocence... innocence has long been lost for most places.

In silent concordance they avoid grimmer topics and do not speak of politics and statecraft and war. If Thorin feels weary of it, now in his third century on this earth, how tired must one of the immortals of old be? Neither of them will shy from their duties, but even they should be allowed some peace occasionally; as long as the world will allow them before attempting to upend on their heads once again.

Their journey onwards is largely uneventful and whether that is because some higher being has taken pity on them or out of sheer luck, Thorin certainly isn't going to complain.

Chapter 28



The storm catches them just as they've started their descent from the high pass, snow-flakes riding on the icy gusts of wind, tangling with their hair and clothes.

Dwarves may be hardy folk, but Thorin would rather have avoided weather this extreme – and though Gandalf somehow avoids ever looking truly miserable, this is the closest he's come in all their acquaintance, ice crusting in his beard despite the hat drawn low over his face. They've long had to dismount and are leading their weary pony and horse behind them in an attempt to ease the animals' passage.

"We must seek shelter!"

Thorin is fairly tempted to roll his eyes. *You don't say.*

"Do you *see* any around here?"

Silently, Gandalf points to the south west, along the stream of the Bruinen.

His heart sinks. "You've got to be kidding me!"

"Would you rather freeze out here?" Gandalf asks, no doubt sending him a glare, even if it's invisible under the brim of his hat. "I'd rather not allow your obstinacy to take your life, considering that I promised your brother I'd bring you back alive. He may have mentioned an array of unfortunate deaths that would find me if I let you get killed. Even by your own stupidity and stubbornness."

Thorin swallows a groan. Leave it to Frerin to threaten a wizard of unknown power. And he'd *really* hoped to avoid Rivendell and the coolly judging gaze of Lord Elrond this time around, but it appears fate has other ideas.

Behind him Blackmane (the third) nickers mournfully.

“Fine,” he grumbles, taking a moment to stroke his poor loyal pony’s silky snout. “But there better be meat this time.”

Not that Gandalf would know what he’s talking about.

“I’ve always found Lord Elrond’s hospitality to be most accommodating,” Gandalf states, sounding slightly non-plussed.

“Well, you haven’t been there with a band of rowdy dwarves yet,” Thorin mumbles, words mostly obscured by the fact that he’s trying to spit out a bit of snow. He grimaces. He’s never been very fond of snow. The Blue Mountains had seen far too much of it each winter.

Gandalf halts for a moment. “Yes,” he says thoughtfully, “I can see how that might have been a problem.”

Thorin pushes past him, still feeling like growling at the wizard and the world at large. “Let’s go then. If we have to beg for the hospitality of elves I would rather be warm sooner rather than later.”

“Very sensible,” Gandalf agrees, his voice serious, but Thorin can see his beard twitching traitorously and only just swallows another growl.

He is tired enough that the remaining journey falls away in huge chunks, as if they cover distance in leaps and bounds instead of constantly trudging through ever-deepening snow. On the positive side that means that he’s not only (mostly) too tired to brood further upon going to Rivendell against his will *again*, but also not of a mind to be rude or make trouble when they’re greeted by an elf at the bridge.

He only listens half-heartedly to Gandalf exchanging some murmured words with the guard, too busy leaning on his small axe with most of his weight. He doesn’t even really notice another elf leading Blackmane and Gandalf’s horse away, hopefully to a warm stable with fresh hay. Mahal knows the animals deserve a treat after all they’ve put them through.

But then, miraculously, there’s a dry room and a bed and for once he stops thinking altogether, quite happily pushing back the issue of elves, and Lord Elrond in particular, to deal with the following day.

There is no hint of warning before the collision. Damn elves for being so silent on their feet anyway.

Thorin, his hair and face dripping water, as well as the front of his tunic, glares up at the two elves – identical elves, oh Mahal, there are *twin* elves? – standing in front of him with a now almost empty bucket and rather baffled expressions.

Vexation rising – those are his only spare tunics, damn it! And now they're as wet as the rest of his gear; at least Gandalf hadn't seen the incident, he would never have heard the end of it – Thorin draws himself up, calling upon his innate presence to verbally flatten the elves, no matter that they're almost twice as tall as he.

“What is the meaning of this?” he demands to know, searching for any and all hints of malice or Schadenfreude in the two beings before him.

A little to his surprise he finds none.

The right one, closes his mouth with an audible snap, almost looking sheepish. “Would you believe us if we said we only wanted to water some plants?”

“If you had it in mind to *drown* them perhaps,” Thorin snorts.

Dark eyebrows rise in identical expressions of surprise.

“We had not expected a dwarf to be knowledgeable in any matters of greenery.”

Bilbo had loved to talk about his garden. One night in Mirkwood, when the air around them had seemed especially dark and dank, the hobbit had spent hours simply talking about his plants and their care until his voice had grown hoarse and he'd finally succumbed to a fitful slumber. Thorin had been content to listen to him, despite his general apathy towards the subject. Sadly, he cannot say that he remembers all of what Bilbo had talked about that night, but the fact that house plants needed careful watering instead of a deluge seems to have stuck in his memory as a basic fact of plant-care.

Thorin clears his throat, aware that he's been silent a little too long. “Then see it proven, Master Elf, that dwarves too may be possessed of

more layers than just the one you see with the naked eye.”

The elves exchange a look, then bow as one.

“A lesson well earned, Master Dwarf,” the left one says, a smile dimpling his youthful face, untouched by time. Who knows whether they’re actually youths or not; Thorin certainly can’t say.

“But we’re forgetting our manners, brother.” He bows. “I am El-ladan, and this is my brother Elrohir.”

He bows his head in return. “I am Thorin.” He isn’t quite sure whether their non-reaction means that they already knew who he is, that they don’t know what he represents, or that they don’t care either way. Something pings his memory, a frown forming on his face. “You are Lord Elrond’s sons?”

Why in Mahal’s name would Elrond’s sons run around their home with a bucket of water?

Identical grins meet his query. “Indeed we are. Quite flattering to think that the King of Erebor recognizes our names.”

Well, that answers that question. He raises a brow. “I would assume that the study of the other ruling families of Middle-earth is a common thing to find in the upbringing of a prince.”

“Of course, we meant no disrespect,” Elrohir – at least he thinks it’s that one – assures him. A short pause follows. “Though, might I suggest you change your attire to something less... wet?”

Thorin grits his teeth. “I would if you hadn’t just dumped water all over my only dry tunic.”

In truth, he had all but forgotten about his drenched clothes, rather preoccupied by the fact that he’s talking to elves, needs to be civil to said elves – and finds it much less harrowing to do just that than he would have expected. It’s slightly unsettling, but these two are almost easy to talk to. They also seem inordinately cheerful, a far cry from the stuffy and stiff behaviour he’s come to expect from their kind.

“I think we can assist with that. In fact, considering this whole dilemma is due to our overenthusiastic watering plans, it is our duty to do so.”

“Nothing elvish?” Thorin asks suspiciously.

“Well, we could perhaps find some child’s clothing in your size,” one of them starts, and then they laugh at his growl. “No, no, Master Dwarf. We shall find something suitable for you.”

Still feeling somewhat dubious, Thorin follows the two elves – in the opposite direction of where he’d been headed.

Half an hour later, he is well and truly late to dinner, but at least he’s wearing dry clothes again. And they’re *dwarven* clothes.

Fingering the heavily embroidered hem of the midnight-blue tunics, Thorin looks up at Elladan and Elrohir, who are both studying him intently. “These are very well made.”

If he doesn’t miss his guess – and in these matters dwarves rarely do – the embroidering is done in real gold and silver thread, even a very thin line of mithril running along the collar.

They exchange a look, heavy with meaning, but neither explains what the garments are doing in one of the guest rooms in Rivendell, hanging all but forgotten at the back of a closet, or to whom they had once belonged.

“We should head to the dining hall,” Elrohir, he thinks, says instead. “Father and Gandalf will wonder where we are.”

Shrugging, Thorin follows them out of the room, deciding to worry about clothes later; his stomach is already rumbling something fierce.

“I didn’t know you were coming to dinner as well,” he comments casually, “considering that you were dragging a bucket of water through the halls not so long ago.”

Much to his amusement – and, yes, also glee – Thorin sees at least one pair of ears redden the tiniest bit.

“I suppose he’s going to want the whole story, muindor,” Elladan sighs dramatically to his brother, and proceeds to tell Thorin the tale of two *completely innocent* little elflings who’d been cruelly tricked by a certain Lord Glorfindel and had carried on a prank war of enduring quality and length since then.

Thorin almost forgets to feel horrified that he’s biting back laughter

as they regale him with tales of a few of their best attempts to make Glorfindel's life a little less comfortable – and a lot stickier, wetter, or more colourful respectively.

Though a bucket of water above the door is pretty much the oldest trick in the book – Thorin should know, what with Frerin, Fíli and Kíli as permanent fixtures in his life. When he points that out to the brothers, however, they only grimace.

“We *know*, but we’re desperate,” Elrohir moans. “Desperate I tell you. Glorfindel just doesn’t want to admit defeat and we’re running out of ideas.”

Thorin shakes his head. For all that they’re probably hundreds of years old, neither of them seems to have outgrown the ‘Fíli and Kíli disaster age’ as he’d named it, when they’d already been too mischievous by far but hadn’t yet developed a healthy respect for the consequences of their pranks.

He’s so preoccupied with his reminiscing – a young Kíli drawing on Dwalin’s head with charcoal is a personal favourite of his – that he almost misses the hush that falls over the dining hall at their entrance.

Many of the assembled elves look actively surprised, not an easy feat to achieve. Lord Elrond seems stuck somewhere between shock and ire. Gandalf – probably to no one’s surprise – looks amused.

Thorin bites back the question whether something is the matter in favour of the more dramatic sweeping bow. “Thorin, son of Thráin at your service,” he says gravely and unfailingly polite, if only to see more shocked expressions around the table.

If being polite to elves always had this quite satisfying effect, he doubts their people would have so much trouble interacting in a civil manner.

Gandalf’s chuckle finally breaks the silence. “And here I thought hobbits were the only creatures possessed of the ability to continually surprise me,” he says, sounding quite delighted, though Thorin is fairly certain that the wizard knows he mostly did it for the reaction, not to actually be overly polite.

“Welcome, Thorin, King Under the Mountain,” Elrond finally returns his greeting, face schooled back into impassivity.

Then he turns to his companions and even Thorin has to admit to being somewhat impressed by the glare he levels on his two wayward sons.

“Would someone care to explain to me not only your tardiness, but also the fact that Thorin Dragonslayer is wearing what once belonged to Durin IV?”

Thorin draws in a breath in surprise. Durin IV? He is wearing the tunic of *Durin IV*?

Elladan and Elrohir exchange a glance, entirely uncowed. “After a little accident King Thorin was in need of a change of clothes. We decided that it was time these were worn again.”

Elrond gazes at the three of them for a long while, his eyes distant. Not a voice is heard in the full hall and even Gandalf holds his peace.

“You may be right,” Elrond finally says gravely. “Come and sit, so the meal may begin.”

Behind him Thorin hears twin sighs of relief and has to suppress a smile. He has been accorded a seat between Elrond himself and Gandalf, an honour if he is any judge. The twins, meanwhile, settle down in between a dour looking black-haired elf and a blonde elf whose wicked smile shines as brightly as his hair. Thorin would bet his title that this is the infamous Glorfindel, especially when he catches sight of the put upon expression on Elrohir’s face when the blonde elf leans over to whisper something in his ear.

Elrond’s voice interrupts his perusal of the dinner table.

“I do hope my impudent sons have not bothered you overmuch?”

Thorin turns back to his host and finally finds an expression on the aged being’s face that he can sympathise with: exasperated affection – common to all those who ever had a hand in bringing up little trouble-makers.

He smiles and inclines his head. “They afforded me every courtesy, Lord Elrond. They are a credit to you and your house.”

Elrond's eyebrows twitch in disbelieving surprise.

"Did they indeed?"

On his other side Gandalf attempts to smother snort in his wine goblet. The twins, probably due to that blasted good hearing of theirs, turn as one and shoot their father identical grins.

Elrond sighs.

Against all expectations, Thorin finds himself starting to enjoy dinner.

"How came belongings of Durin IV to be here, in Rivendell?" he asks his host once he's relaxed enough to open his mouth again. The wine buzzing warmly through his veins also helps, even if it is a bit too sweet and not particularly potent.

Elrond turns his inscrutable gaze on Thorin, and it takes all he has not to fidget. Where the Lady Galadriel had been ethereally otherworldly, and thus unsettling, there had been a warmth to her that this Lord of elves either does not possess or hides very well. Or perhaps, does not trust Thorin enough to reveal.

He is almost surprised when Elrond answers the question, without a hint of hesitation.

"King Durin IV was the one who led the dwarves of Khazad-dûm into battle alongside elves and men in the Last Alliance, when Sauron was finally defeated." His gaze grew distant, haunted. "Some things cannot be endured without bonds forming, and he stood by my side when Gil-galad fell, and when Elendil was struck down and he never wavered." His lips twitch into an almost-smile. "Unlikely as it may sound in the times we live in now, he was always a welcome guest in Imladris."

"A friendship of elf and dwarf," Thorin muses quietly. "Unlikely indeed."

And yet he recalls the words of Lady Galadriel, about Celebrimbor and Narvi, and her offer of a resting place to his people slain in battle in Azanulbizar. Even Thranduil is easier to bear this time around, though Thorin would hardly call *him* a friend.

On his other side, a rather thoughtful frown has appeared on Gandalf's weathered face. Thorin trades a concerned look with Elrond – in his experience that looks heralds trouble, and lots of it. Not that Gandalf would ever admit to anything.

Elrond's eyebrows are about to make a perfect v on his forehead and Thorin, seeing his chance, leans closer and whispers, "That's his meddling face. Do you have any quick escape routes?"

Then he internally awards himself a lot of points for having coaxed a short but true laugh from the dour elf.

Gandalf looks like he's caught square between smugness and indignation, the latter winning out when Elrond replies, somewhat louder, "I'm afraid you are correct, Lord Thorin. Minor wars have been started by that face."

Anyone watching would've said that the smirks appearing on the elf and dwarf lords' faces looked worryingly identical when Gandalf harumphs and with an entirely fake air of innocence proclaims, "I would never."

Then the wizard too breaks out in a smile at the peals of laughter emanating from the twins.

The first course is exchanged for a bowl of soup, elves pattering around on silent feet as they clear used dishes.

"I admit to some surprise at seeing you travelling alone, King Thorin," Elrond comments, the slight emphasis on *king* not lost on the dwarf. "If I only so much as wish to ride to the nearest city I am beleaguered by those who would not leave me to do so alone."

"Travelling with a wizard is hardly travelling alone," Thorin replies, resting his spoon against his bowl of soup. Normally he isn't much one for watery versions of food, but this one has a surprisingly strong meaty flavour that he can appreciate. Especially since surreptitious looks around the table have found most other diner's bowls to include rather greener mixtures. "But I do take your point. For some it is enough that I am their King, and if I wish to travel alone that is my business. For the others... I may have left a few days earlier than antici-

pated.”

And oh would Dwalin be angry at him for it. Thorin can probably look forward to a barely passive-aggressive sound trashing in the practice courts immediately upon his return. He doesn't regret it; he sleeps easier knowing that his most trusted friend is guarding his family back in Erebor.

“You snuck out?” Gandalf asks, mirth colouring his voice.

Thorin raises a haughty eyebrow. “Kings do not *sneak*. Besides I am not looking for trouble. I don't need a whole entourage complicating the journey.”

It's not as if he's going to tell an elf lord that, no matter what prudence might suggest, this is a journey he has to make alone. Going to meet his One from another life, he cannot stand the thought of anyone else witnessing... well, any of it really. Gandalf doesn't count, for many reasons, chief among them that without him Thorin Oakenshield would never have met Bilbo Baggins, gentlehobbit.

He bristles slightly at Gandalf's sudden look of compassionate comprehension, though Thorin is unsure whether the wizard has entirely understood his reasons or simply thinks this is a problem of his mindset still being stuck at 'travelling pauper prince' rather than 'actual king of Erebor'.

Elrond on the other hand, still looks amused, which Thorin rather prefers to Gandalf's understanding. Then those grey eyes fix on his and he changes his mind. Not even Gandalf's eyes seem that old, and Thorin is almost certain that the wizard is far older than the elf. Elrond, he finally realizes, probably understands far more than he lets on.

The thought isn't exactly reassuring.

*

They do end up staying for another day, ostensibly to afford their steeds a chance to recover from their exertions, but Thorin is fairly certain Gandalf is mostly trying to prove a point.

Imladris is... not like he remembers. In his last life he had paid little heed to the atmosphere of this elvish place, too focused on his quest, on his duty, to notice the peace that suffuses every breath of air, every healthy leaf, every trickle of water. Once he would've bristled at deep down liking this place, at the unfairness of all that the elves seem to be easily gifted with where the dwarves have to toil and bleed for their own.

Then he finds the library and his mind spirals out of control. *Go back to your books and your armchair and your garden.* Increasingly he catches himself imagining Bilbo here and tries not to feel bitter at the realisation that his hobbit clearly would've fit better here, in this quiet place of studiousness and peace, than in Erebor. He still remembers Bilbo's awed smile at his first glimpse of this elven home, and the reverend looks everything garnered once they'd been admitted inside. The quiet contemplation of cosy corners and sinfully soft beds. Even then, he'd paid more attention to their burglar than he'd have liked to admit – even to himself.

Yes, Bilbo would've fit in this place.

He leaves the library in something of a worse mood, and makes his way outside in an attempt to escape more reminders of their differences.

He's left Orcrist in his room – a sign of trust that only a few years ago would've been impossible, though of course he still carries a number of knives on his person (he's willing to compromise, not a fool) – but the sound of blades crashing into each other nonetheless attracts him toward a hidden training field some way removed from the main house. Somehow he really isn't surprised to find Elladan and Elrohir and the blond elf he's guessed to be the much-lamented Glorfindel as the source of the noise.

It looks like the twins are attempting to double-team the elf lord and Thorin only has to watch for a few seconds to realize why. They all move with the sure grace of seasoned fighters, but where the twins are certainly more than competent, the blond elf *dances*.

The combatants must've noticed his presence, for simultaneously all three blades retract with identical flourishes, disappearing into sheaths not a moment later.

With a flick of Glorfindel's head, Elladan and Elrohir depart, for once silently, but not without throwing Thorin a smile. It's somewhat a mystery to him why, but they seem to have taken a shine to him (possibly because he hadn't ratted them out to their father for their prank gone wrong – now and then Thorin had let Kíli or Fíli get away with some minor misdemeanour as well, and they'd adored him all the more for it). Thorin watches, equally quiet, while the elf inspects his sword, only sliding it into its sheath when he has assured himself that not a scratch is to be found on the gleaming blade.

Silver-blue eyes focus on Thorin.

"So you are the one who now bears Ecthelion's sword."

Thorin tilts his head. "What is it to you?"

A strand of blond hair falls across deep eyes, unmoved by the playful wind. "Ecthelion was my friend. When he fell in the defence of our beloved city, one of so many..." The elf shakes his head, subsiding.

"I did not know. I'm sorry." Thorin hesitates. "Do you wish for his sword? It was given to me once, by one who I felt at the time had the right to bestow it, but your claim is true and honourable and though dearly would I regret parting from it, I am not one to withhold items of such significance to those who would treasure them."

At this Glorfindel finally does look surprised, and a small grateful smile unfurls on his lips.

"Orcrest would do little good in my hands, safe as a reminder of times and griefs long past. Ecthelion would have wanted it to be *used* not admired only."

"Are you certain?" Thorin asks quietly, mind flashing back to the tokens he had bestowed many years past. "Sometimes we need these reminders, and there is no shame in that."

In one smooth move Glorfindel drops to one knee in front of the dwarf. Their eyes are now level, the other's glinting with a slight sheen

of wetness but still lit by an inner fire Thorin recognizes. Thorin stares at him, blinking stupidly. He cannot remember any elf ever having done this for him.

“You are not wrong about that, Lord Thorin, but still I am certain,” Glorfindel murmurs, not heeding the dirt now staining his raiment. “May it serve you well in the battles to come.” Sadness passes over his noble features. “Manwë knows you are probably going to need it.”

He rises, inclines his golden head and disappears into the trees before Thorin has found words to answer.

*

The next morning, for all Thorin’s newfound and only a little grudging appreciation, he isn’t sorry at all to prepare to leave.

He’d half expected to sneak out with the first light, unnoticed by most, but a small gathering of elves greets him and Gandalf in the open court.

Glorfindel steps forward first, inclining his head to Thorin even as he extends his hands. In his upturned palms there lays a dagger, slightly curved in an intricately crafted sheath.

“As a mate for Orcrist,” the elf states quietly.

Thorin hesitates. “Are you certain you wish to gift me this? I would not ask you to.”

Glorfindel smiles thinly, his eyes solemn. “I am certain. You will need it more than I.”

“Then I thank you, for your generous gift,” Thorin says formally, and takes the dagger. Two quick movements strap it to his belt, where Orcrist would hang if he didn’t carry the sword on his back.

Elrond stands, quietly solemn, next to his sons. “King Thorin, this house shall be open to you for the rest of your life. Let it not be said that the elves have grown too rigid in their beliefs to change.” A small smile flashes over his face, gone as fast as it has appeared, and he inclines his head. “Not often am I prone to making this offer to strangers, Thorin, son of Thráin. Use it, if you are ever in need.”

Thorin inclines his head in return. "I thank you, Lord of this house, in the name of my line." He hesitates, brushing a hand over Blackmane's nose. "I shall make no promises, for times are darkening and I know not which I can hold and which I may not, but Erebor's ears will be open to your messages."

Elrond tilts his head slightly, gaze intensifying as he studies Thorin. Then he nods, as if satisfied that Thorin has passed some test he wasn't even aware of. "You will do, indeed. One in a position such as yours we have not seen in a long time."

Thorin all but groans. "Don't tell me you can see into my soul or some such thing as well."

Elves.

"No, I cannot," Elrond says with a small smile. "I am simply in contact with the Lady Galadriel and she seemed to deem it important that I know."

His features harden into severity once more, only the old, old eyes betraying deep emotion. "I am however, somewhat prescient. You may not be the reincarnation of Durin, Thorin Dragonslayer, but the challenges awaiting you will not be the lesser for it."

Thorin shivers despite the warm air around them, turning away quickly to escape those too sad, too *knowing* eyes.

As they pass the bridge over the river Bruinen, Gandalf turns to him, a twinkle in his eye.

"Don't even start," Thorin growls, and nudges his pony to go faster.

Chapter 29

By the time they reach Bree, Thorin has determined beyond the shadow of a doubt that the Fell Winter indeed earns its name. It is only November and Thorin can already feel the frigid cold bite deep into his bones despite having left the mountains far behind now; the last time he'd been truly warm had been in Rivendell.

A sense of restless unease has plagued him for the last day and shows no signs of abating once they enter the town.

"I don't think we should linger here," he murmurs quietly to Gandalf, fidgeting with the reins of his pony.

Gandalf turns sharp eyes on him. "Why ever not?"

"I'm being called forward," he answers simply. Gandalf knows most of his reasons for travelling to the Shire at such an odd time of the year. "Bilbo never told me the exact date that misfortune befell him, but I feel it cannot be long now. I will not be *too late*."

Surprisingly Gandalf nods without further argument. "We shall make haste then, Thorin Dragonslayer."

Thorin is too preoccupied to glare at Gandalf for the use of the epithet he has never grown comfortable with. Even decades later he still feels that way, since he didn't have anything to do with Smaug's demise the first time around – and only killed the beast in this life because of knowledge he shouldn't have had. That title is not his to bear.

From Bree it doesn't take them long to reach the borders of the Shire, and then the green fields beyond – though there is precious little green to be seen at the moment.

Thorin shivers. This landscape of frost and withered trees looks little like the Shire he remembers, nature's safe haven for the gentle folk

that dwell there.

The moment Thorin hears a child's terrified scream echo weakly on the wind he moves. Somehow he knows, beyond a doubt, that this is Bilbo screaming, *his* hobbit. He can hear Gandalf hurrying after him, but pays him no mind, fiercely focused on his mission.

He bursts into a clearing full of wolves and releases a quiet breath of relief. A small hobbit, *Bilbo*, is clinging to a branch up in a tree at the far side. A female hobbit he assumes to be his mother guards the trunk with a sharpened stick and a wild, desperate energy. Right at this moment, she is very much alive. Thorin intends to make sure that it stays that way – and what Thorin intends he does.

Not much later dead wolves litter the clearing, powdery white snow sprinkled with red and Thorin nods at Gandalf in shared gratitude. For such an old man the wizard is still as good with a sword as he remembers, Glamdring dancing easily in his hands.

He slowly moves toward the hobbit lass, who's leaning against the tree trunk in obvious exhaustion. He doesn't want to startle her. There's still the fierce burning will of a mother defending her child flickering in her gaze and the last thing he wants is to provoke an attack because she identifies him as a threat.

Ignoring Bilbo's wide-eyed gaze from above for the moment, Thorin kneels down in the cold snow a few feet away from Belladonna and meets her gaze firmly, now on a level, his sword back in its sheath, his hands held loosely open and unthreatening.

"It's all right," he murmurs, ignoring the wetness seeping into his clothes, the icy wind on his face, ignoring everything but the frightened, yet resolute face in front of him. "I'm not going to hurt you. My name is Thorin. I'm a dwarf from Erebor, far in the east."

Slowly the wild expression on her face eases and Thorin shuffles a little closer until he can gently pry her fingers loose from their death grip around her make-shift weapon.

"The wolves are dead. There are no more of the beasts," he says and finally she lets go completely.

He's there to catch her when she falls.

"Bilbo," she whispers, her eyes already closing. There's blood on her dress. "My Bilbo..."

"He is unharmed," Thorin tries to reassure her, but her face has already gone slack in unconsciousness.

Carefully Thorin hands her over to Gandalf, who is looking on with a worried crease on his brow, and stands up, casting his gaze upward.

Bilbo hasn't moved, still clinging to his branch, his gaze fixed on the proceedings below him. He is, Thorin thinks, surprisingly calm.

"What's wrong with mama?" he asks quietly and Thorin starts a little at how high and young his voice sounds.

Of course he sounds young. He isn't even fully grown, he isn't your Bilbo yet. And then, ruthlessly, He might never be your Bilbo.

"She'll be fine," Thorin says, hoping dearly that he isn't speaking a lie. "We need to get you both to shelter. Do you think you can show us where you live?"

Bilbo nods, shifting a little on his branch, and Thorin suddenly remembers Bilbo's dislike of heights.

("What's wrong with climbing mountains?"

"There's nothing wrong with it, as long as it's a small mountain. I've been known to climb a few hills in my time. But the higher up you get, the longer the fall. Besides we don't have mountains in the Shire; any hobbit can tell you that we value good, muddy earth under our feet."

"I won't let you fall.")

"I'll catch you," Thorin says without thought.

He doesn't truly expect Bilbo to simply jump, no further questions asked, doesn't even know why he's offered when the young hobbit could just as well have climbed down the same way he'd climbed up.

Bilbo's warm weight in his arms loosens something within Thorin and when he looks into his friend's eyes he finds blinding trust that Thorin could never have expected, that makes his heart pound in his

chest and halts his breath.

*

Bag End looks much like Thorin remembers it, plus one very worried, flustered, squeaky hobbit even if he does bear a strong resemblance to Bilbo in his somewhat later years.

Bungo, as he must be Bilbo's father, takes one look at Gandalf, carrying Belladonna's dwarfed form in his cloaked arms, and Thorin, leading Bilbo by one hand – or being led as it is – and trips all over himself to both open the door and inquire who exactly *they* are supposed to be.

They keep their introductions short, mindful of Belladonna's currently weakened state and Thorin finds – a little to his surprise, considering how Bilbo had always talked about his father and his hobbitly proverbs – that Bungo has something of a practical nature.

Perhaps seeing the thought on Thorin's face, the hobbit smiles dryly as he helps divest his wife of her coat to see whether she has any injuries.

"Considering that my wife is a Took and known adventurer by hobbit standards, I've had to adapt, Master Dwarf."

When Gandalf kicks them both out so he can tend to Belladonna in peace, 'without all these people hovering over his shoulder', Bungo wordlessly leads Thorin into the kitchen and begins the time-honoured tradition of brewing tea when stressed.

Thorin looks on for a while, but his curiosity doesn't let itself be squashed. "Why were they even outside in such dangerous weather?"

"Belladonna's sister took sick, they were trying to reach her with supplies." Bungo shakes his head, his hands going through the motions of pouring tea with practised surety, despite the trembling fingers he can't quite hide. "My Bella never has been one to sit by while others are in need, even though I begged her not to go out in this weather with all these wolves around. Bilbo, of course, snuck out after her; never could get that boy to sit still for long. And when they were

late coming back... I feared the worst. If you hadn't arrived I would've gone after them."

So that is how both of Bilbo's parents had died on the same day, one setting out to help her sister, the other rushing after to protect his wife, leaving Bilbo traumatized and alone.

Bungo sits down opposite him, pushing a cup filled with hot tea across the table. He looks tired and worn and there is concern in his eyes when he looks at the dwarf sitting in his home. "I saw the way you looked at him, Master Thorin. You care for my Bilbo, though how this has come to pass when you've only known him for a few hours is beyond me."

Thorin sits quietly, fingers tracing the rim of his tea cup with absent-minded appreciation for its warmth. If there is anyone who deserves to know his story it's Bilbo's parents, the parents of the being he has come to hold close to his heart, the one whom he ripped from his comfortable life and threw into the darkness and danger of a dwarf's world.

"I knew him once, a fully grown hobbit, brave and kind," he murmurs, gaze still fixed on this liquid sloshing lazily beneath his finger-tips. "You see, I have lived two lives, one to the end, and this one still only beginning."

He expects confusion, certainly some measure of incredulity, but Bungo only blinks once. "I would say stranger things have happened, but to my knowledge they haven't. Yet the world is big and we hobbits only understand our little corner of it. Do you have a reason to lie to me, Master Dwarf?"

Thorin holds his gaze, open and honest. "No I do not, Mister Baggins. And I'm not lying. You've seen yourself the great affection I hold for your son."

"Then I will accept your word." Bungo smiles, an ironic twist of his lips, completely self-aware. "Belladonna always said that those not from the Shire believe us to be naïve and too quick to trust."

Thorin's answering smile holds no more humour than Bungo's

had. "I believed that too, once, but your son proved me summarily, even spectacularly one might say, wrong on that account. If there's anything I've learned it's not to underestimate a hobbit."

"You'll fit right in then," Bungo snorts. "Though, truth be told, many of the Shire's inhabitants really do tend towards the naïve and slightly stupid."

Thorin stifles a grin. "And here I thought hobbits were always unfailingly polite."

"You tell that to Bilbo," Bungo snorts. "The last time we ran across the Sackville-Bagginses he called Lobelia a hag."

Thorin had never meet Lobelia Sackville-Baggins but if Bilbo called her that he is quite sure it must be accurate. "A discerning child, I see."

Bungo chuckles, such fondness lacing the sound that Thorin's heart constricts. Sometimes he forgets what the love of a parent is like.

The hobbit stands, a warm distraction at Thorin's side.

"Come, Master Dwarf. Let's get you settled."

*

The next morning Thorin stands in his comfortable guest room, looking at the armour laid out on the bed and the tunics beside it. He's seen Bungo's slight shock and distaste at seeing the dwarf wear armour in his home, as if it were an insult, that perhaps he thinks it's not safe even here. A part of him even agrees with the hobbit; there is no danger in Bag End, and yet a greater part of him has been cautious for so long that his armour has become something like a second skin to him – he doesn't even notice wearing it and feels naked when he's not. That is the dwarvish way. And if his long life has taught him anything is that it's never prudent to let his guard down.

He slips his armour back on with only minimal regret. However, he does hesitate when reaching for his tunic, gaze straying to his bag.

When leaving Rivendell he'd carefully packed away his rather unexpected acquisition of a priceless shirt steeped in history, unwilling to risk wearing it during their journey.

“Promise me you will wear it with honour and not lock it away safely where only few eyes can see,” Elrond had said. “Clothes are made to be worn and this tunic has waited for century to shine again.”

Mind made up, Thorin reaches towards the shimmering blue cloth decisively.

Ten minutes later, he’s beginning to regret his choice – no screaming orcs have jumped on him, Bag End is quiet and peaceful as ever, but he finds the shocked stares of all three hobbits when he enters Belladonna’s room to check on her wellbeing no less uncomfortable.

Thorin is trying to resist the burgeoning urge to tug at his tunic nervously when Belladonna gathers up her jaw from the floor and says, “Those are fine garments, Master Dwarf.”

“Please call me Thorin, Mistress Belladonna.” He hesitates for a moment, then decides on slightly tempered truth. “I am... a noble of high standing in Erebor, my home.”

Belladonna’s sharp eyes bore into his. Clearly, she is much recovered – only a slight paleness of her features still tells of her injury. “What, then, brings you to the humble Shire?”

“Word came to me that the Shire was in danger,” he says carefully, “and that aid was needed quickly.”

It’s not precisely a lie, though vague enough to be nigh useless as explanations go. Unfortunately, Belladonna seems to agree.

“Then why did you come alone?”

He sighs and foregoes pointing out that Gandalf the Grey invited himself along and he was thus hardly alone. At the rate he’s going she’s probably going to want to throw him out in less than ten minutes. Possibly for shifty behaviour, which he can’t even deny. “Personal involvement, milady.” He forestalls her protest with a raised hand. “And I will gladly tell you all the details you wish for when you are rested. You require sleep and quiet to recuperate.”

It’s clear she isn’t particularly enthused about it, but she is smart enough to acknowledge his point. Belladonna gives him a curt nod, and promises with a stern glance to resume the interrogation at a later

point. Thorin is hard pressed not to smile, rather used to people being very persistent to get him to spill all his secrets (Dís), unwind a bit (Frerin and Dís), do his paperwork (Balin), or all of the above.

*

Gandalf announces his intention to leave two days after their arrival, to everyone's dismay and no one's surprise.

"Could you not stay a little while longer, Mister Gandalf?" Bungo asks, though his resigned expression says he already knows the answer.

"There are other matters that need tending to and" – his eyes twinkle merrily in Thorin's direction – "I leave you in good hands."

Three pairs of hobbit eyes fix on Thorin, who tries not to let his disquiet show. Public court is easier than this kind of scrutiny and there're *hundreds* of people there – on slow days.

"I have already promised to protect you," he says, inclining his head. "My sword is yours."

That seems to amuse Bungo.

"Can't say I've ever had someone's sword offered to me before," Bungo observes cheerfully. He glances sideways at his wife. "So that's settled then?"

"All the subtlety of a brick," Belladonna mutters, but she is smiling, and her decision is clear when she glances over at Bilbo, who looks to be entirely over the moon at the possibility of Thorin staying.

The young one's grin widens when Thorin winks at him, touched.

Belladonna rolls her eyes at them both. "Considering you seem to have been adopted by my son and husband already, Mister Thorin, I shall forego being stubborn." An unsettling amount of awareness lurks in her eyes as she adds, "And the backing of Gandalf the Grey is not easily given."

Gandalf lightly clears his throat. "Indeed." Rising from his seat – carefully, as to avoid bumping into the ceiling – he smiles at all of them. "Farewell, my friends. Stay vigilant in this long winter."

He sweeps out without further fanfare, and Thorin is still working

through his curiosity about where the wizard was heading in such a hurry, when Bilbo leaned closer and whispered conspiratorially, "Gandalf is always coming and going real quick. Mama says he might as well be a bird cause he never settles down anywhere long."

Thorin nods solemnly. "That may well be true." Mahal knows Gandalf is secretive enough about – well, everything.

Bilbo scrunches up his nose in deep thought. "But if he is a bird, why doesn't he lay eggs, Mister Thorin?"

Thorin only just avoids splattering tea all over the well-shined table. "Er, maybe he doesn't want to? It's probably hard work, laying eggs, and Gandalf's very busy."

Bilbo appears to give that some more thought, then nods, seemingly satisfied with that explanation.

When Thorin looks up again, Bungo and Belladonna are both watching them, the former with amusement, the latter with puzzlement.

*

Once Gandalf has vouched for him, the tension in the otherwise comfortable Hobbit hole eases, and while Belladonna keeps ambushing him with questions early in the morning before he's properly woken up, most of the lingering suspicion has gone.

A week into his stay, Thorin deems the time to be right for a deed planned many years ago.

Securely wrapped bundle in hand, he goes in search of Bungo. Seven days have been enough to guess the hobbit's whereabouts at specific times of the day with amusing accuracy, and Thorin finds Bilbo's father in his study with a mug of tea as expected.

Thorin bids the hobbit a good morning, noting the curious gaze fixed on the bundle. It is strange – from Bilbo's tales about his parents Thorin had always assumed Belladonna would be the one to cope better with strangers, but Bungo has warmed to the dwarf in his home rather more than she has. He suspects that Belladonna, who has seen

more of the world outside the Shire than most hobbits, has learned the lesson of caution well; it's a reassuring thought.

Once he has Bungo's full attention, tea forgotten on a stool, Thorin carefully unwraps the bundle. Bungo gasps audibly when the elegant pommel is revealed, glinting in the firelight.

"This is Sting," Thorin says, the sheathed blade in his palms. "I wish you to have it, in case you ever find yourself in peril."

Bungo's expression was torn between wonderment and disquiet. "Bilbo bore this sword didn't he?"

At this point Thorin refuses to be surprised by the insightfulness of hobbits. "Yes."

Bungo's eyebrows keep climbing up his forehead. "I've never used anything larger than a kitchen knife in my life."

"Nor had he, but he became proficient enough at it." Thorin smiles swiftly. "Though no one would've called him a born warrior. I will show you some basics while I'm here."

Bungo still doesn't look convinced, but after another look at Thorin's serious face he stops arguing.

"I will teach Belladonna too, if she wishes to learn."

Bungo snorts. "Of course she will, and I daresay she'll be a sight better at it than I'd ever be too."

When the hobbit finally takes the sword from Thorin's outstretched hand, there is discomfort on his face even as his eyes roam over the elegant blade.

"I'm not asking you to fight, Bungo Baggins," Thorin says gently. "Think of it as a precaution, nothing more."

Bungo looks up, the same determined graveness in his eyes that Thorin had glimpsed when they'd burst into Bag End with the injured Belladonna, and nods.

*

Evening story-time becomes something of a tradition while Thorin resides as a guest in Bag End. Bilbo's insatiable curiosity and enthusi-

asm for stories of all kinds make it easy to forget sometimes that he is still so young and not, in fact, the Bilbo Thorin knows so well.

Dwarves, and everything concerning dwarves, has become Bilbo's favourite subject, much to Thorin's amusement, and he finds himself telling the young hobbit many a story that no ears outside their race have heard before.

He simply cannot stop himself; after the quest to reclaim Erebor Bilbo had been all but an honorary dwarf in Thorin's eyes – once they had cleared from his sickness – and as long as the hobbit keeps the lore he is entrusted with to himself, Thorin would not hesitate to fight anyone who dared speak against his having divulged such information to an outsider. Not that he intends to let anyone know he had for *quite* a long while, if at all.

Tonight he has decided on the dwarves' creation tale, not necessarily by design, for all that it's one of their most informative stories if one bothered to listen to its connotations and consequences.

"Once upon a time when Middle-earth was still new and the elves and men yet slept," Thorin begins, Bilbo listening attentively as is his wont, "Mahal decided, in his wish to see his creation bring joy to others as well as himself, to create his own children and fashioned the seven fathers of the dwarves from stone. But he held not the power of bequeathing true life in his hands and the dwarves would only move and breathe when his thoughts and mind lay on them. When The One learned of Mahal's deed, he was angry for he had not given him leave to seek to create his own children and made to destroy the seven dwarves. But they shrank away from his blow in fear and he took pity on them, decreeing that they, too, shall live but only wake after the elves, the first-born, walk the earth and only as his adopted children. And strife would always be between their races."

Thorin falls silent. It's an age-old hurt for every dwarf, the knowledge that they are considered only second to Eru's true children; yet in Mahal they have a devoted father, one they adore above all. And perhaps that then isn't so bad.

Bilbo considers that for a moment, teeth chewing on his lower lip in unconscious earnestness. "That doesn't seem fair."

Thorin has to hide a smile. "No, it doesn't. And yet, it's the way the Maker's Maker has decreed it to be, so it is thus."

"But you're a dwarf, and you're as good as any man or elf," Bilbo points out stubbornly and Thorin's heart warms. Bilbo had always had that ability, once he'd let the hobbit in past his automatic distrust – to completely blind-side him with his affectionate honesty.

"And I'm glad you think so," Thorin murmurs. "For all that it's our history, it is also only a tale. You should always make up your own mind, and not blindly accept the opinions of others. Some elves would tell you that, indeed, we dwarves are not to be considered as equal, that we are cold as stone and don't feel. Not all, but some."

That seems to confuse Bilbo. "But one only has to look at your eyes to see that you care!"

Thorin has to swallow past a sudden lump in his throat. That Bilbo as a young child should already know him better than many a person who's known him for years...

"Not all people do that, young one. Some just take one look and decide that they know all there is to know about you."

"I hope I never meet people like that," Bilbo says resolutely, wrinkling his nose.

Thorin smiles at him, smoothing down the covers around Bilbo's form. "I hope so, too. And now it's time for you to sleep."

For once Bilbo doesn't protest that he isn't tired yet, face still creased in thought. He does, however, let go of Thorin's hand only reluctantly.

He gently closes the door behind himself.

"You're good with him, you know," a voice says and he turns around to see Belladonna regarding him, something wistful in her eyes. She's still a little pale, but her wound has healed nicely; if they didn't need to ration food so much she would already be fully fit again.

He smiles a little-lopsidedly. "Well, he's a special young one."

"I know." She, too, smiles briefly. "Though I'm sure all parents are convinced that their children are special. And still, I fear his path lies far away from the Shire."

He regards her solemnly. "Not all the world is a bad place, Mistress Belladonna, and there are many wonders to see as well as horrors. Some people simply aren't made for staying in the same place forever, never seeing more than the same few roads, the same trees, the same homes."

"I know that too. I did use to travel far more than a normal hobbit ever would," she says. "And yet I cannot help but wish that my child should be content here, where it's safe and he shall know only natural loss."

Of course Thorin knows that premature loss had managed to find Bilbo here in the Shire as well, but he's not so cruel as to tell her that.

"That, too, is a feeling all parents share," he finally replies, old guilt, buried deep beneath a new future, stirring. "I took my nephews whom I loved as my own onto a long and dangerous journey and it only brought me grief. And yet forbidding them to come would not have been the right step either. The time to let go always comes, however much we wish to delay it."

"That's a rather bleak outlook on life," she comments, neither judging nor misunderstanding.

He sometimes wonders if his eyes reflect how haunted he often-times feels as Bilbo had claimed.

"One can only live through so much death without losing something more than people in the process." He gives her a small bow. "Good night, Mistress Belladonna."

It has already become a habit to cheerfully ignore her reflexive protestation that he should call her Bella; it is not yet the time for such familiarity.

Later, he lies in the soft bed, staring at the low ceiling, and in his mind's eye Bilbo's wide smile, full of happiness and innocence flashes past. This he can cling to, when doubting that he's doing the right

thing; His older Bilbo had never smiled like that.

Chapter 30



Belladonna finally corners him three weeks into his stay, her eyes sharp and watchful.

“Bungo told me your story. That you believe you’re living your life a second time and that you know Bilbo from the last.”

Thorin nods, brows smoothing into seriousness. “It is true.”

“My husband was willing to take your word on it, but –”

“- some more detail might be appreciated,” he finishes for her. He smiles slightly. “He was being kind.”

She nods her head. “I can’t afford such kindness when it comes to my son.”

He doesn’t try to hide his bittersweet smile. “I would not expect any different.”

Belladonna sits down in the free armchair and motions for him to resume smoking from the pipe that he’s neglected to pay attention to since her entrance.

“Tell me of your Bilbo.”

So he does, and it is both one of the hardest and one of the easiest things he’s ever done. It is easy to talk of Bilbo, the single person who’s on his mind the most often though in body far away. To recall their late-night conversations, the stubborn tilt to his head when they argued about which direction to turn, the adorable little nose-scrunching he did when deep in thought or worried. It is so easy, indeed, that there is a very real danger for him to lose himself in memories of a time not yet passed, that *would* never pass now. Whatever the future may bring, there will be no quest for Erebor, that much he now knows without doubt.

Belladonna listens to him, smiling and grieved in turns whenever she recognises her Bilbo in his absurd tale. When he finally runs out of words, there is only one question she asks.

“Why are you here – in the Shire – now? After all this time?”

Thorin sighs, gaze following a puff of smoke as it greets the ceiling like an old friend. “Bilbo, for all that we spoke, never said much about his past and family. When I met him, he lived alone in this very hobbit hole. It took me a while, to get to know him well enough to notice, but... he was lonely, and hiding it from the world. In that regard he thrived on our journey – dwarves form close bonds.” He paused, wrenching his mind away from cloying darkness and spying, milky eyes. “What I did find out, after a lot of subtle digging, was that his parents had been dead for a long time, and that he’d been alone since then.”

Belladonna’s expression has frozen, terror and denial warring, but she motions him to continue.

“He never outright said, but I pieced together that you hadn’t passed away naturally, and he mentioned a ‘Fell Winter’ once, though he refused to speak further on the subject. I added the two columns together and found that I had a loadbearing structure. When I woke up again in my younger body your death was one of the things I vowed to change – and I did.”

Her face is bleached of all colour. “I would’ve died in that clearing?”

He inclined his head. “Yes.”

“And Bungo?”

“I assumed so.”

“Oh, my poor darling Bilbo,” she whispers, and in the low light tears glitter in her eyes. “That we should leave him so.”

“You are here for him now,” Thorin says gently. “I hope that he shall be the happier for it.”

Instead of the thanks he’s half expecting, Belladonna turns to him, features hardened once more.

“What are your intentions towards my son?” she asks bluntly, the

fire in her eyes promising retribution if his answer displeases her.

"I wish to spare him the grief our acquaintance brought him in my last life. That is all."

Belladonna's eyes are hard as flint. "And yet you admit that you love him."

"There was never anything between us," he says quietly, blinking away emotions he doesn't want to face right now. "There was no time, and even if there had been... We are very different people, Mistress Belladonna. I don't think he would've been happy."

His smile is strained yet true. "I have no intentions towards your son, for all that still holds true. If, in a few decades, he seeks me out on his own, I would not, *could* not, turn him away, but that is the only way anything would ever happen between us."

She regards him for a moment longer, something like pity glimmering in her eyes for the first time, then she nods. "I believe you. Thank you... Thorin."

He returns the gesture, ignoring the way his heart is beating painfully against his ribcage.

Halfway out the door, she turns back to him. "I never thanked you for saving my life," she murmurs, smile fleeting. "You have my gratitude, and that of my family."

Then she is gone.

*

When Thorin finally drags himself out of the living room, he runs into Bilbo, whose slightly shifty expression takes on a more worried cast as he spies the dwarf's weariness.

"You look tired, Mr. Thorin."

Thorin stops in his tracks. The voice is too high, has little of his Bilbo's mannerism and intonation, though the sound quality is the same. It jars, now that his head is still swirling with memories from long past, reminds him to wrench his mind back to the present with a firmer hand.

“Your mother loves you very much, little one,” he says, both in answer to the question and not.

Little Bilbo nods solemnly. “All mamas are supposed to,” he opines sagely, his first statement already forgotten.

A smile tugs at Thorin’s mouth despite his tiredness. “Tis true. Now, why were you tiptoeing through the hallways then, like a little troublemaker?”

Bilbo’s nose scrunches up. “Am not a troublemaker.” He leans closer, prompting Thorin to lower his head so that the child can whisper in his ear. “I want cookies.”

Thorin raises an eyebrow. “And what does that have to do you with your sneaking around?”

“The secret jar, of course,” Bilbo replies, as if it was the most self-evident thing in the world. “Mum and dad think I don’t know about it, but I do ‘cause I saw them putting the jar away once.”

A small hand suddenly tugs on Thorin’s scarred one. “Come on. You can help – you’re tall!”

Only to hobbits, Thorin barely stops himself from pointing out, while entirely helpless not to let himself be gently dragged towards the kitchen. Bilbo is clearly emboldened by his new partner in crime, and Thorin would be loath to destroy such little moments of joy in these dark times.

Once arrived in the warmly lit kitchen, Bilbo points a little finger to the top of the cupboard. “It’s really high up because I’m small.”

“So you are, little one.” Thorin crosses his broad arms, looking down at the mischievous hobbit next to him. “What do I get for my cooperation then?”

Bilbo’s nose twitches in surprise. Clearly he hadn’t expected his dwarf to start negotiating. Then his face lights up. “You get a cookie too!”

Thorin only just suppresses a guffaw. “In that case, how could I resist,” he says solemnly, and reaches for the jar.

When Bungo finds them later and takes in the guiltily pleased ex-

pression on Thorin's face, and the chocolate smeared around Bilbo's smiling mouth, he only shakes his head.

"The little rascal has already wrapped you around his finger."

Bilbo nods happily, accidentally elbowing Thorin in the stomach when he leans forward. "That's why Mister Thorin is my favourite dwarf, da."

"I don't doubt it," Bungo says wryly, surveying the crumbs that are all that remains of the last cookies in the 'secret' jar.

*

Not two days after their adventure in the kitchen, the almost unnatural silence of snow laden fields is split by the shrill blaring of horns.

Belladonna's face pales as she looks up from the trousers she's mending. "Those are the horns of Buckland. They only sound when the Shire is deemed to be in great danger."

Thorin's hand reflexively reaches towards where Orcrist leaning against his chair, but he catches himself before drawing the blade. The danger is not yet near.

"How much of a defence does your country have?" he asks, urgency lending his voice a harshness he cannot eradicate.

"There are the rangers, but they hardly know how to use weapons. Some of the Tooks can shoot bows." Belladonna shakes her head. "We've never needed to be able to fight, Thorin. We have next to no defence – any fight will cost many lives."

Thorin's gaze flickers over to Bilbo, sitting in his father's arms, small face scrunched up in worry.

"Then I must go," he says. "I am considered a skilled warrior even among my people, and dwarves take joy in feats of strength."

Belladonna meets his gaze evenly, shoulders squared despite her fright. "Can your pony carry two?"

"It doesn't need to," Thorin replies, eyebrows arching upwards.

Her mouth is set in the same stubborn line Bilbo so often showed. "You will need someone to vouch for you, lest the others start shoot-

ing at all strangers.”

Behind his wife, Bungo lowers his head, eyes flashing with fear and pride in equal measure. Then he sets Bilbo down on the armchair and leaves the room. Out of pure habit, Thorin goes over and ruffles the little hobbit’s hair, all too aware of Belladonna’s eyes on him as he tries not to let worry about her, about this family, exceed his control. It is perhaps well that Bungo returns only a moment later, stiff with his own worry but no less determined for it. In the hobbit’s hands rests Sting, too far away yet from their foes to glow – but it might, though the thought of orcs in *the Shire* is almost too alien to contemplate; more wolves seem more likely.

It seems Bungo has accepted the inevitable earlier than Thorin did. Or perhaps he simply knows his wife well enough to realise she would not budge, where Thorin still wasted time fighting the end result.

Belladonna doesn’t even hesitate before grasping the sheathed sword and the belt from Bungo’s hands.

With another inaudible sigh, Thorin resigns himself to his fate. Who is he to forbid a determined woman from entering a battle-field? Dís would already have cuffed him around the head for his reticence.

“Very well,” he says. “Blackmane shall bear us both.”

*

The Shire lies under a cloak of biting cold. Blackmane the Third stomps through perfunctorily shovelled gangways in the snow, driven to speed by Thorin’s urging. He can only hope that they won’t arrive too late. Hours have passed since the horn call already.

Belladonna is held securely between Thorin’s arms as he holds the reins. He can feel the small tremors wrecking her body, but does her the courtesy not to mention them. Suddenly he misses Gandalf, who always seems to know what to say, especially to hobbits, and for a moment he wonders whether the old wizard knew what was in store for the Shire. Then he quickly rejects the thought – Gandalf may be many things, but he wouldn’t abandon his friends unless the need was dire,

no matter what Thorin had once thought on that long, dark journey through Mirkwood. He rather hopes that there isn't a dire need now. All the lands, not only Erebor, could do with some peace and quiet.

By the time they reach the frozen river, Belladonna is shivering.

"Where to from here?" he asks quietly, doing his best to tighten his arms to offer some more warmth.

"If there's still time before the danger is acute," she replies between chattering teeth, "then they would convene at Brandy hall. It's across the river."

Thorin nods and urges the pony back to a trot.

As it happens, they don't need to cross the river, as a large gaggle of hobbits is convened at the closer end of the Brandywine bridge, staring in amazement as Thorin guides the pony towards them.

He's mildly impressed by the speed at which a dozen arrowheads point in his direction, though he doubts any of them would actually loosen an arrow without the adrenaline of defence.

They halt a few meters away from the group, and Thorin lets Belladonna slide to the ground on stiff legs to address the tallest of the hobbit lads gathered, who appears to be the leader.

"He's with me, Isembold. We heard the horns, and he says he can help."

Isembold stares at her for a moment longer then turns to Thorin. "Why did you bring Belladonna? This is no place for her!"

Thorin snorts. Having dismounted, he's only a head or so taller than the hobbit. "I didn't bring her any more than the pony did. I just gave up arguing against her choice."

"Brother."

Thorin knows that tone of voice. It's the exact same one Bilbo always used to employ when he was getting really annoyed by the stubbornness of dwarves – never mind that that was copper calling iron a metal. Apparently Isembold, who, now that Thorin takes a closer look, does have the same nose and high forehead as Belladonna, knows it too, for he takes one more look at the determined set of Belladonna's

mouth and sighs in agreement. It seems it's not just hapless dwarves who have to bow to her wishes.

"Very well, Master Dwarf. How can you help us?"

Thorin bites back a smile. If he is to fight with these hobbits he can't allow himself to look condescending to them, for all that the question has a very obvious answer.

"I can fight, Master Isembold," he says evenly. "I have trained as a warrior since birth. My sword is at your service."

Isembold's wide eyes take in the length of Orcrist on Thorin's back, and he swallows nervously. Were it not for Belladonna tapping her foot impatiently next to the two, fear and suspicion might have elongated the meeting unnecessarily, but Isembold only nods, and his voice sounds almost normal when he says, "Then we are glad to have you, Master Dwarf."

Thorin nods in return, then hands the reins to his pony to one of the hobbit lads.

"How much time do we have?"

"They'll be here by noon meal. The sentries reported a pack of fifteen wolves and big beasts at that."

Thorin exhales, some of the tension leaving his body. They can deal with fifteen. Probably.

They've got thirty archers, and even if they're lousy shots that should give them the necessary time. He casts an eye over the fidgety group of hobbits, realising that none of them really seem to know what to do with Isembold's information, at the same time as a distant howl splits the silence.

They're running out of time to mount a proper defence, and Isembold's still not given any orders.

"All right," Thorin says briskly, and the look of relief on Isembold's face is enough to reassure him that he's making the right choice in taking charge, "group one, build a line on this side of the river. I'll wait with you. Once the wolves are in range, loosen your arrows, all of you, but *only* if you think you have a shot. There's no sense in wasting ar-

rows.”

He gazes at the shuffling group of hobbits, but at least most of them look determined enough.

“Hopefully that will shrink their numbers. When the wolves are about seventy feet away, you retreat. I will cover your retreat in a way that will hopefully keep them occupied long enough for you to form another line and assist me.” He grins. “At this point, please only those who are sure they’re not going to hit *me* fire.”

He turns to group two, the five hobbits who’d been pointed out as the best shots. “I want you to form a line behind those trees,” he says, pointing away from the river. “When the first group retreats past you, catch the wolves in your crossfire.” Thorin shifts his gaze to the remaining hobbit, steel underlying every word. “Belladonna, you go with them – if it looks like we’ll be overwhelmed, you *run*.”

She nods sharply. Thorin hadn’t expected her to argue with him – she is stubborn, not stupid – but it’s a relief to be heard nevertheless.

The hobbits disperse. The sound of howls grows closer and soon after lithe shadows travel towards him atop the snow. It’s a large pack, perhaps the remnants of several packs banded together.

50 yards. 40 yards. At 30 yards, the more experienced archers begin to fire. The first salvo of shots takes down two of the beasts, halted in mid-leap, jaws snapping on pained jowls.

“Keep firing!” Thorin shouts, his hand steady on Orcrist’s grip. Three more wolves fall before he calls the retreat. He follows for a few paces, until they’re about even with the reserve archers, then stops and turns to face the oncoming pack.

Six of the ten remaining wolves are now circling around him, growling and snapping. Those aren’t awful odds, though Thorin would be happier with someone – say, Dwalin with his war hammer – guarding his back, but he can handle them. Wolves aren’t strategic opponents in the usual sense, and anyway, he doesn’t have any intention of dying here.

It’s over within seconds. Orcrist bites deep into the chest of the first

wolf that jumps, arrows fell four more. Thorin frees his sword just in time to whirl around and sink his blade into the last wolf's shoulder. The precious second it takes to free Orcrist, however, is enough for the wolf to swipe its claws at Thorin, growling high and sharp. A line of fiery pain erupts on his arm just as his blade is free and a quick swipe takes off the wolf's head. It dies without even a wheeze and silence falls.

The disturbed snow settles in the time it takes his group of warriors to make their cautious way back to him. Their faces are white, remembered shock and adrenaline only slowly making way for reddening relief and the flush of victory. He can see equal parts awe and wariness directed at him, the slightest stirrings of revulsion at his bloodied sword and bloodied hair, and Thorin has to remind himself that these are *not warriors*. They haven't stood facing an oncoming army and survived the tide of battle. They haven't raised swords, axes, hammers to crush their enemies. They haven't *had* to fight.

He will bear their horror in exchange for their safety, but he will not forget it.

Ignoring his forbidding glare, Belladonna crouches down near one of the slain wolves, her pale hand white against the dark fur.

"They're half starved," she whispers.

Thorin, who generally doesn't waste any thought past 'this creature is attacking me, I'm gonna kill it before it kills me', stares at her.

"They were going to kill us," he points out. "Would you rather we hadn't prevented that?"

Her eyes flash. "Of course not, but I can still be sad that hunger drove them to attack people who they'd normally stay well away from."

Thorin feels his mien softening at her familiar stubbornness. "They're predators, Belladonna. As far as they're able, they would've known the risk."

"Yes," she says, and falls silent. While there's still pity colouring her eyes, perhaps Thorin isn't the only one who remembers Bilbo's pale

and frightened face as watched his mother nearly be torn apart by sharp fangs.

*

Blackmane looks ready to buck against the hold of the young hobbit leading his reins, eyes rolling wildly. The stench of wolf hangs in the air still and the smell of his own blood trickling slowly down his arm probably isn't helping. Stroking a soothing hand over the pony's muzzle and neck, Thorin murmurs quietly, a strong and steady presence. Slowly Blackmane calms under his hands, and he wonders quietly whether it is a mistake for dwarves to never keep their own livestock. It's not in their nature, the traditionalists would say, to care for cattle and horses beyond the demands of practicality, but there is a loyalty to be found in these animals, a trust more pure than some that grows between people.

Perhaps it is just another of the things that the Blue Mountains had changed for the dwarves of Erebor.

He turns back to Belladonna, who'd watched him with vacantly worried eyes that keep flitting back to the nearest wolf corpse.

"I fear what would've happened without you there," she says quietly when he steps closer, Blackmane a warm presence at his back.

He gives her worry the consideration that is its due, takes his time to answer.

"You would've been all right. Perhaps not without more grief, but you would've handled it." He smiles at her. "Hobbits are astoundingly resourceful for such unassuming beings."

She cocks her head, puzzlement chasing surprise across her features. "Where does your faith in us hobbits come from? We are such ordinary folk to any observer."

"Gandalf, I expect." Thorin frowns at the truth in his statement. "It always comes down to him in one manner or another."

Suspiciously so, really, but then Gandalf has always been somehow... other, and Thorin has made his peace with that.

Belladonna still looks worried, but tiredness is equally destructive to worry as it is to steadiness.

“Come,” he says gently, “It’s a long ride back to Bag End and I need to get this arm patched up.”

She takes his hand without another word.

Chapter 31

By the time the snows finally show first signs of melting, Thorin has grown restless. It's not their slowly running out of food, Thorin an additional strain on Bag End's pantry, or the three hobbits' increasing frustration and jitteriness at being stuck inside without greens and sunlight that's at fault. He can cope with those things, remembers how to ration his food from harsh winters in the Blue Mountains, and a group of dwarves stuck outside in a forest can get far crabbier than these mild mannered hobbits – no, the problem lies with him.

Belladonna had asked him, a few days after the wolves' attack, why he hadn't offered to teach them more about defending themselves. Weapons, strategy, tactics. What if they were attacked again? Briefly, he'd thought to lie to her, but then the truth had come out of his mouth instead.

There are two outcomes of training your people in warfare that I can see. Either you don't learn because you're hobbits and you're not build for war. That's not a bad thing – you simply lack the ruthlessness required to learn how to best kill another being, and I do believe your home is the better for it. Or you do learn, and in a few years you have hobbits who are warriors, who know to fight despite their peaceful nature. Do you think it will make them happy? The more you use weapons that kill, the easier it becomes. It might make these lands safer, for a little while, but you have to understand that you currently live in peace because you are peaceful – and because you are protected. Gandalf has seen to that. Hold your innocence close a while longer, Belladonna.

He'd seen a frightened realisation pass through her eyes, a hint of the shadow that most other lands and people know far more intimate-

ly. She hadn't asked him again, and it had become just one more thing that made him realise –

He doesn't belong here. Thorin, son of Thráin, called Oakenshield and Dragonslayer, does not belong in the Shire and a small part of him wonders whether he has not already tainted these lands with his actions.

The gratitude on the Thain's face when he'd thanked Thorin for his assistance with the wolves does some to dispel that thought.

"Anything we have, Master Dwarf, if you ask it is yours. You saved lives today, and we can't thank you enough."

"I have no need for more possessions, Thain of the Shire. I only ask that you treat dwarves passing through your lands with a little less suspicion and a little more of the kindness I now know you are capable of, unless they give you grief."

But it is not enough. When the clouds of doubt and sentimentality recede, he is left with this: he does not belong here, in this land of peace and kindness. In Bilbo's home.

It takes time after that realisation for regret to mute and acceptance to grow. He can only be grateful that he's left mindless anger at the injustices of life behind him, or he would fear what marks his dark moods of old could leave upon this house.

It helps that deep in his heart the tug for home becomes stronger with every day. He doesn't like being away from Erebor for too long. Perhaps it's a reaction to having been forced from the mountain for long years and years before or maybe it's just the feeling of *home* he craves, but there's an ache he feels deep to his bones whenever he's gone. A longing for the mountains even Bilbo's presence cannot dispel.

The most sobering realisation comes a little while later, one night as he reads to the little hobbit tucked securely in bed. His love for Bilbo, strong and warm as the first day he found it in himself, is for the Bilbo who will never be. Oh, this Bilbo too is his One, will perhaps some day grow into a hobbit whose shadow Thorin can recognise, but he fell in

love with the Bilbo he knew then, who lived through their quest. Who shared those experiences – experiences which now will never happen.

You can make new experiences, a voice that sounds more like Dís than his own, whispers in his mind, but he knows it will never be the same.

In the bed, Bilbo has fallen asleep, lulled by the soft dwarfish voice reading from a book of bedside tales. Now and then a small snuffle escapes his sleeping lips, and Thorin can't help but smile as his gaze follows the curve of Bilbo's nose up to his closed eyes and tousled hair.

No, it wouldn't be the same, but perhaps he will, one day, get the chance to see whether it would be *better*.

*

Saying goodbye to Bilbo is perhaps not the hardest thing he has ever done, but it comes very close and leaves him with the dark feeling that if his life had been anything other than it was it would've been. The worst thing is that Bilbo *understands*. Even at this young age he'd never expected their curious and wonderful visitor to stay around indefinitely.

As with all fantastical events a little hobbit could conceive of, he would be a transient visitor like a leaf born hither and thither on a strong wind.

When Thorin had sat down with him in front of the fire, eyes solemn and voice grave, to explain that he would be leaving them soon, Bilbo had nodded his small head, curls bouncing. His wide eyes had betrayed no surprise, though no small amount of sadness, which both heartened and pained Thorin. He doesn't know whether he would have been able to live with seeing no reaction at all to his leaving, but this somewhat shameful sense of relief is overshadowed by his regret at hurting Bilbo – no matter how needful.

(He's done enough of that for more than a lifetime already.)

"Will you come back one day?" Bilbo had asked, his voice as young and his face, and Thorin's heart had ached.

“Perhaps, if Mahal wills it,” he had said, but deep in his mind not believed it.

Bilbo had kept looking at him, a picture of wide-eyes and trust. “If you’re not coming back, then I’ll come visit you in Erabor!”

Thorin’s lips had twitched at the bungled pronunciation, before his brain caught up with his ears.

Bilbo coming to Erebor without the quest driving his footsteps? He doesn’t know why this option had never occurred to him before.

“You will always be welcome in my halls,” he’d sworn, with equal trepidation and wonderment. “But grow up first, eh, little one?”

And he’d ruffled Bilbo’s hair, eliciting a giggle.

Now, looking back at Bag End under the little hill, pausing just a moment before letting dawn take him and Blackmane away, he wonders whether he’s invited doom upon Bilbo’s head by not dissuading him from even entertaining that notion. A hobbit travelling across Middle-earth to visit a dwarf?

It’d be unheard of.

(Then again, the small token tucked in Bilbo’s hand as he’s sleeping, freely given by a dwarf to a hobbit to remember a time long past and a promise tendered, cannot claim to be any less outlandish. Yet even now its vibrant green stone shines in the dark.)

*

Thorin makes it past the Weathertop before Gandalf catches up to him.

“I don’t need an escort,” he grumbles. “I’m perfectly capable of looking after myself you know.”

“Of course,” Gandalf agrees, his meek tone doing nothing to hide the amused twitch of his lips. “I merely find myself travelling in the same direction.”

Thorin sighs in defeat. He’s grown mature enough in recent years to realise that his easy capitulation has a great deal to do with the fact that having some company on this long journey would ease it considerably

– and Gandalf being rather more entertaining than one would expect, when not in one of his dour phases – but that doesn't mean he's going to say it. Gandalf is smug enough as it is.

"I am starting to wonder about this world, in which escorting a single dwarf is the most pressing of your errands," he says, nudging Blackmane back into motion. "But as usual, you will do as you will."

Gandalf's eyes twinkle. "That I will indeed. And you forget – perhaps I too desire the occasional respite and find your company refreshing."

It is an unexpectedly touching comment. For all that Gandalf talks a lot, he rarely speaks so candidly of his own emotions, and Thorin had not thought that his feelings of friendship were returned so easily.

He understands the topic to be closed however, when Gandalf pulls out his pipe, rummaging in his robes for matches.

"Via Rivendell?" he asks.

Gandalf's bushy eyebrows twitch. "I must not deceive you this time then? Or lead us into a blizzard?"

"The blizzard was *not* happenstance?!"

"Oh no, it was," Gandalf says cheerfully. "But convenient nonetheless."

Thorin growls something under his breath that he would later vociferously deny to bear any resemblance to *stone-mad wizards*.

Gandalf only hums in a distantly self-satisfied way and leads them farther along the Great East Road.

*

For the first time, on approach to Rivendell, Thorin can actually appreciate the skill that went into building this place. He's not a fan of the elvish tendency towards smooth curves and green everywhere, but the way Rivendell is nestled into the valley, merging with the stone of the mountains around it is still a sight to behold. It's quieter than Erebor's majesty and pure rock-beauty, not hewn from stone itself, yet it looks like it belongs next to the stone.

Next to him Gandalf sighs a little. Not reverently – Thorin doesn’t think the wizard does reverently – but with the quiet contentment of one coming home. Or close enough to it.

He throws a sidelong glance at Thorin, as if half-expecting him to turn tail and run. “Ready?”

“I even have a spare tunic now,” Thorin answers dryly by way of agreement.

It turns out the spare tunic isn’t necessary. Lord Elrond himself greets them in the first courtyard, courtly and polite as Thorin remembers him. Not as icy as Thranduil, yet distant, with occasional flashes of a wry humour tempered by long experience. This time, at least, Thorin deigns to be more than grudgingly polite, though he does wonder in the privacy of his mind whether he should be worried about the way various elves seem to actually *be growing on him*. Mahal save him.

“Is Lord Glorfindel in residence?” he asks on the way to supper. “He promised me a rematch should I pass through Rivendell again.”

Elrond’s lips twitch in what looks suspiciously close to amusement and Thorin only just bites back a scowl. “Alas, the Lord Glorfindel is out on patrol, and he took the twins with him in an effort to allow us others some peace and quiet. I shall convey your interest to him.”

Thorin grunts, feeling the tips of his ears colour. He did not mean to be quite so... obvious. At least Gandalf, for once, foregoes making his amusement at Thorin’s mellowing temperament known.

Dinner is filling while still meatless as usual, and Thorin excuses himself for a smoke after. He has the strong suspicion that Gandalf and Lord Elrond have things to discuss without him. He has just finished enjoying a leisurely smoke when muffled noise attracts his curiosity and he goes in search of its origin.

A group of rangers is milling in the courtyard, worn and battered and almost grey-faced with exhaustion. Their leaders is slumped against a wall, arm around a dark-haired woman with noble features.

“They’re Arathorn and Gilraen, chieftains of the Dunedain,” a

quiet voice says behind him, and Thorin turns to look at Lord Elrond. "They come here for refuge sometimes, when the woods grow particularly dangerous for a season."

Thorin turns back to the courtyard as Lord Elrond steps up to the balustrade next to him.

"I didn't know there were elves with such arrangements with men."

He doesn't say that the Woodland elves he knows best seem unlikely to show such kindness. He may get along better with Thranduil now, but the elven king looks out for his people foremost and is unashamed of it.

Lord Elrond's lips quirk as if he can guess the direction of Thorin's thoughts. "Some of us still remember the days of the Last Alliance, and the allies we found in men those days."

Below, the chieftain's head is bent over Gilraen's, their noses almost touching, and suddenly Thorin has to look away. Such moments of intimacy should not be observed by strangers. Lord Elrond sighs and his expression grows troubled, a distant look in his eyes.

"I have some gift of foresight, King Thorin, and lately much of what I see centres around their son, who is not yet even born." Something dark moves across the elf's brow. "A man who might one day unite the race of men again under a strong banner, when the shadows grow darkest."

Thorin doesn't say anything. To him it seems that calling foresight a 'gift' is more than generous, and he dislikes imagining knowing such things about the lives of those surrounding him. There's nothing but pity for the child with such expectations on his life.

"Don't make him bear too much of the fate of his people," Thorin finally says quietly.

Next to him Elrond shifts in a gentle sussuration of robes and there is grief in his eyes when he says, "I fear little choice will be left to us."

Despite the words, Thorin feels his comment has been heeded and he inclines his head before retreating.

Gandalf is waiting for him when he reaches his room, perhaps hav-

ing sensed Thorin's preoccupation in his uncanny way of knowing the movements of everyone around him.

"You wish to move on?"

At Thorin's nod the wizard looks troubled. "The rangers need aid. Yet I have promised to deliver you safely back to Erebor."

"They need your help more than I do, it seems to me," Thorin says slowly, but the words don't seem to appease Gandalf. He mulls over the options for a moment. "How about this: you accompany me over the mountains, for that is the most dangerous stretch of the journey that yet remains, and then return here. It will cost you no more than a fortnight and the men look to be in dire need of rest at any rate."

"That would be acceptable," Gandalf says, and Thorin can't quite fault him for the note of surprise in his voice. He didn't use to be much for compromise after all, and even less for admitting a wish for help.

"Then we will leave at dawn."

*

No matter how often Thorin's eyes drink in the sight of the gates of Erebor – his *home* – looming above him, the thrill never quite wears off. During times when home had become an unattainable dream, a luxury half-forgotten, he had dreamed of standing in this very spot with not a care for orcs, dragons, or other beasts.

Now that he can enter and leave Erebor unhindered whenever he wishes to, it still remains a treasured moment, one he always takes while to appreciate.

("So this is Erebor."

"Indeed it is, Fili."

"It's... even bigger than I imagined."

"Wait until you see the inside. This mountain is the pride of our people for a good reason."

"Will we? Will we see the inside and have the time to appreciate it?"

“I wish I could answer that question without making a liar out of myself. But only to have seen these gates once more, the statues guarding them, the stone beneath our feet... Perhaps one day you’ll be able to call Erebor your home too.”)

The Lonely Mountain grows larger and larger in his field of vision and Thorin only just stops himself from urging Blackmane into a trot. He’d given short thought to swinging by Dale on his way back as he’d just missed the celebration for Prince Bard’s 15th birthday, but after so long on the road he longs for a good meal, his family, and some rest, not necessarily in that order. The niggling feeling that he really shouldn’t have left his kingdom for this long, especially for such a selfish reason helps quicken his steps after dropping off Blackmane at the small cluster of stables halfway between Dale and the gates of Erebor.

Thorin knows exactly when he’s come close enough to be recognised by the clear sounds of silver trumpets rising from the balustrade, proclaiming the return of their king. The smaller pedestrian gate inlaid in the great gate is already wide open when Thorin reaches it and a whole slew of guards are standing to attention on the other side. He almost grimaces at the realisation that he’s become woefully unused to this level of ceremony directed at him while in the Shire. Granted, he hadn’t told anyone that he’s a king so that the possibility couldn’t even arise.

Well, he’s bound to get used to it again soon.

Dís catches him on his way to his quarters, heavy cloak flapping in her wake.

“Thorin!” She smiles at him, wide and reassuringly unburdened. “It’s about time, nadad.”

“It’s good to be home, namad,” he says, and means it.

She looks him over, gaze as critical as ever. “You look half-starved.”

He sighs. Trust her to notice. “Food was a bit tight, but I’m nowhere near half-starved, Dís.”

Dís doesn’t look convinced, but doesn’t press the issue. Knowing

his sister she's probably already plotting to feed him up again over the next few weeks – by force, if necessary (which it's not; Thorin likes food as much as the next dwarf, after all).

“Is your business concluded then?”

Thorin knows his smile must appear bittersweet. “It is. His life is out of my hands now.”

Her eyes narrow. “Was that the purpose of the trip then? To make sure you remain miserable?”

He almost smiles at her protectiveness. “No, namad. But he is a child now and will be for a while. And with everything I know... It must be he who makes the choice.” He pauses, gaze drifting over the grand columns of the entry hall. “I invited him to Erebor, if he ever wishes to visit.”

“Do you think that likely?”

He sighs quietly. “No. I do not. Without Gandalf meddling in all our lives I see the chances of Bilbo ever venturing out of the Shire as small.”

Without a word Dís opens her arms and Thorin leans into her touch like it's a lifeline.

“I'm sorry, undad,” she murmurs. “It seems cruel of the Maker.”

Thorin breathes into her hair, letting the scent of home fill some of the empty spaces in his heart.

“Nay,” he says softly. “There are new memories now. It'll be enough.”

He doesn't know himself if he's lying.

He pulls back, finally properly looking at his sister, and he is pleased to find that she looks happy.

A little tired around the edges – entirely understandable, given the two active dwarflings in her care – but with none of the quiet despair he'd seen on her face too often in his last life.

“How are the little rascals?”

She smiles at the unsubtle change of topic, but answers readily. “They're doing well. Missing you, of course, because you tell all the

best stories and do your best to spoil them rotten.”

He doesn’t even attempt to look innocent.

“Fíli’s starting to make noise about joining patrols,” she continues, a combination of worry and aggravation on her face. “And because Fíli’s making noise, Kíli’s making noise.”

“They are growing to be old enough,” Thorin reminds her gently. He has no wish to see his nephews in danger, but he’d rather they gather some real experience before they’re inevitably forced to fight in some battle or other.

“I *know* that.” Dís exhales explosively. “Anyway, now is not the time to discuss this, you’ve only just returned.” She grins at him. “Nadadith will be glad. Frerin does his best but he’s about to go stir crazy. I daresay he’ll be the happiest of us all to see you returned.”

Thorin snorts. “I don’t doubt it. I will come by to see your sons before I retire for the night.”

Dís nods and leaves him to it.

Frerin is, not entirely unexpectedly, waiting to ambush him in his rooms, a giant smile on his face that looks more than a little relieved.

Dusty and tired, Thorin raises his eyebrow at the crown in his brother’s hands.

“Hail, brother, thank Mahal you’ve returned. You can have this back now,” Frerin says, and all but throws the crown at Thorin. “Now you can deal with this mess.”

Thorin frowns. He’s tired from travelling and had been looking forward to a good long soak and then his luxurious bed. And maybe a slightly warmer welcome from his only brother. “What mess? As far as I can see the mountain is still standing, presumably despite your best attempts.”

“*Very* funny,” Frerin scowls. “My long list of deficiencies aside, you should talk to Farat.”

“Farat?” Thorin questions, his frown deepening.

Frerin looks unusually hesitant, shifting on his feet, one hand fiddling with his belt. “I’d rather let him explain. I didn’t understand his

reasoning anyway.”

That sounds troublingly ominous; Thorin is fairly sure that Farat, one of his more loyal council members isn’t a troublemaker, but whatever the matter, he knows his own limits well enough to realize that it would have to wait for the next day at least. He wouldn’t do any good meeting anyone in an official capacity while half-dead on his feet.

Thorin shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter right now. Come here, nadadith.”

And finally there’s Frerin’s old smile, as he jumps into Thorin’s arms, squeezing him tightly.

“Welcome back, brother,” he murmurs into Thorin’s hair.

*

The next morning, Thorin’s barely made it to his study, bleary-eyed and still tired, when a knock sounds on the door.

“Your majesty.” Farat bows deeply, a proper bow to the centimetre.

Thorin frowns. Farat has known him since he was a young dwarf, not as constant a companion as his family or even Balin and Dwalin, but still familiar enough that they usually don’t bother with titles around each other.

“Why the sudden formality, Farat?”

Farat hesitates. “I’m here as your subject, sire, not as your friend. It would be... helpful if you viewed our conversation as such.”

Thorin leans back in his seat, barely able to hide his surprise. “As you wish, Lord Farat. What is your concern?”

“I know you value honesty over politics, so I will be blunt. There’s been talk among some dwarves of leaving Erebor and joining the settlement in the Iron Hills. I’m here to petition you for your leave to lead that venture.”

This time he knows his shock shows. “Erebor is your *home*. Why would you wish to leave?”

“It is not a wish to leave, per say, as much as the belief in its necessity. The might of Erebor has grown great and you have many capable

warriors here, but I worry that we're leaving what few other settlements we dwarves have at a disadvantage."

Thorin nods for him to continue, interested despite himself. Farat had always been a shrewd politician, though the dwarf himself holds little love for the profession.

"I've come to the conclusion that strategically, we need to spread out a bit more; not much, for I'm well aware it is not the dwarven way, but a little," Farat explains. "Can you imagine what a grievous blow it would be to the people if Erebor came under an attack we couldn't repel? Help from the outside may be invaluable in such a case and Nain is struggling with a shrinking population in the Iron Hills."

I don't have to imagine.

A bitter taste grows in his mouth as Thorin continues to listen, his heart heavy with the truths being spoken. "So you propose to join Nain?"

Farat doesn't visibly relax, but Thorin can feel his relief nonetheless. "The Iron Hills are close enough to Erebor that we could come to each other's aid fairly quickly if needed."

"It's a sound plan," Thorin says after a few moments of silence, though he doesn't like to. "If you want my permission, you have it and Erebor's help, too, should you need it. I will be sad to see you go, however, old friend."

Finally Farat smiles, the twinkle Thorin had always associated with him as a child returning to his eyes. "I thank you, Thorin. I will, of course, still hold to my fealty sworn to you. I'm not leaving to establish my own kingdom or some such nonsense." He directs a pointed look at the mounds of paperwork that Frerin had left mostly untouched covering the desk between them. "Far too much work for one."

"I'm glad to hear that," Thorin says, returning his smile. He hesitates, reluctant to give voice to his fears and doubts though knowing he must. "Just tell me one thing, Farat. Is the reason for some wishing to leave Erebor that they are dissatisfied with my rule? Have I failed in my duty as a king, to the people?"

“No, Thorin, not at all!” Farat’s shock at the suggestion at least seems genuine. “A few of the warriors especially aren’t completely happy with the improved relations with the elves you’ve been pursuing, but I know of no unrest or dissatisfaction with your rule. Those who volunteered to follow me either seek more independence and a new beginning to improve their standing or they agree with my reasons and feel some measure of loyalty towards me, though nothing that would threaten you.”

Thorin exhales quietly. “Good. That’s good. Is there anything else Farat?”

He is fairly sure that Farat only shakes his head out of respect for Thorin’s still somewhat obvious weariness. “We can go over the details later, your majesty.”

Thorin nods, dismissing the dwarf lord. Only when the door has closed behind Farat does he let his head sink into his arms on the table. And here he’d thought things would get easier upon his return to the mountain, but now he has this on his plate in addition to missing Bilbo something fierce.

He had never known Bilbo as a carefree child and now that he does, leaving him had been even harder than he’d imagined.

Thorin doesn’t even notice his exhausted mind drifting off into sleep until he wakes again, a little more refreshed but with a god-awful crick in his neck.

*

Frerin is looking at him critically over the edge of his mug. “You have lost weight.”

Thorin sighs. “So Dís has already informed me. It was a harsh winter.” He chews happily on some meat. “Food was sparse.”

Crossing his arms, Frerin pins him with a focused stare. “Are you ready to tell us yet where exactly you spent the last few months?”

“Gandalf and I made it to the Shire. I stayed for a while, and then the winter made it impossible to travel safely.”

It's not the most elaborate of answers so he isn't surprised to see Frerin scowling a little. His brother harrumphs pointedly. "Well, they should've fed you more."

This time Thorin does roll his eyes. "As you see I'm eating right now, which would go a lot easier if you wouldn't keep distracting me."

Frerin is actually silent for a few moments – an outraged kind of silence that says 'well, if you insist on being like that *fine*' – but then his eyes sharpen and before Thorin can stop him he has pushed his tunics aside and bared the newest scar in Thorin's collection.

"Where did that scar come from?" Frerin immediately asks, now sounding worried. "You said you wouldn't be in any danger."

"Wolf," Thorin replies succinctly.

Frerin's face spasms with a mixture of anger and concern. "You promised you'd take care of yourself, Thorin."

Thorin holds back a snapped reply, all too aware that he had been in Frerin's situation more than once and that a loved one in danger is always more upsetting than the reverse – it's easy enough to ignore one's own danger. So he gentles his tone, subtly shifting a little closer to his brother, "And I did, nadad. I'm perfectly healthy and perfectly alive. This is nothing but a scratch."

Frerin doesn't exactly look convinced and Thorin can hardly blame him.

"Perfectly healthy except for the little fact that you look like you haven't eaten properly for weeks?"

"I'm back now," Thorin reminds him quietly. "Safe."

His brother nods a little jerkily, just as footsteps sounding from behind them herald the arrival of another dwarf.

Dís takes one look at Thorin and says, "By Mahal's beard Thorin, I really hope you're planning on eating more than *that*!"

He sighs.

*

Thorin is just about to knock on the door to Dís and her sons'

room when an almighty crash sounds from inside and he throws polite behaviour into the wind in favour of bursting through the doors, one hand already going for his sword. Rationally he is quite aware that it's virtually impossible that there truly is an intruder this deep in the mountain, but when it comes to his nephews lives he's never going to take any risks. *Never again.*

The sight that greets him is utter and complete chaos, though, on the upside, there don't seem to be any intruders – just two tousled, very energetic not-so-little-anymore-dwarflings brandishing frying pans at each other. At least they aren't using the real weapons that they're already training with, but really at 48 and 53 they should know better than start mock-fighting anywhere but in the training courts. In fact, they're really quite lucky it's Thorin who has found them, not Dís.

Judging by their sheepish faces they're quite aware of the earful their mother would give them right about now as well.

Thorin lets them stew in his silence for a little while longer before he closes the door behind him with a very final click and says, completely deadpan, "I'm gone for a few months and everyone goes to the dogs."

For a very long moment Fíli and Kíli both scrutinize him, equal looks of worry plastered all over their faces and they look so much like a pair of kicked puppies that Thorin can't hold back the smile that has been building behind his stern visage.

In his first life he'd been harsh with them at times, as he'd thought best then – worried for their future, their lives if they didn't *learn* quickly enough – though it hadn't affected their regard for him. In this life, he knows he coddles them, perhaps a little too much, but he simply can't help giving them everything he'd ever dreamed of being able to give them before their young lives had been cut short so cruelly. His open love is one of those things and when he looks at the bright smiles he receives in return, he cannot bring himself to find fault with that.

"We've missed you, Uncle."

“I’ve missed you too,” Thorin replies and draws them both in for a quick head butt. “I’m expecting full reports about what you’ve been up to while I was away.”

They grin at each other, obviously having anticipated being able to tell their uncle all about their various exploits – though he rather expects their weapons training to feature heavily in whatever story they’re going to tell him – and then Kíli nudges Fíli, and Fíli takes a deep breath before asking in a rush, “Will you tell us where you went?”

For a moment Thorin hesitates. He hadn’t planned on telling anyone other than Frerin and Dís, but Fíli and Kíli had been close friends with Bilbo and though he *rationaly* knows that that doesn’t matter right now it still feels like they have a right to know. So he leans in closer and whispers conspiratorially, “Can you keep a secret?”

The two enthusiastic nods aren’t the most reassuring things in the world, but it will have to do.

“I went to the Shire and helped the hobbits there defend against wolf attacks.”

Their eyes grow wide.

“What’s a hobbit?” Kíli asks at the same time that Fíli wants to know, “How many wargs did you slay, Uncle Thorin?”

Thorin frowns a little. “Balin hasn’t taught you about the other races yet?”

“He did, and I remember him talking about *hobbits* too,” Fíli quickly says, throwing an accusing look at Kíli, “but Kí wasn’t listening. It was the day he got his first bow.”

“Hey!” Kíli says, indignant, though whether because he thinks it isn’t true or because Fíli has told on him isn’t quite clear.

Thorin gives him a quelling look and the young dwarf subsides, though he still looks a little mutinous.

“Well then, Fíli, what do you remember about hobbits?”

Fíli draws himself up to his full height – which is still nowhere near Thorin’s but at least he towers over Kíli – and falls into the reciting tone of voice that every teacher would recognize.

“Hobbits, also called halflings because of their short stature, live in the land called the Shire far to the west. They don’t grow beards and have huge feet and they don’t know how to fight. Most of them are farmers. And it’s rumoured that they invented the pipe-weed.”

It’s clear that Fili is most impressed by that last piece of information.

Thorin nods. “That’s mostly accurate, though I can tell you that they don’t like being called halflings. I’ve known one hobbit quite well and he always insisted that he ‘isn’t half of anything’ – and I can only agree.” He fixes both his nephews with a serious stare. “As for their fighting prowess... it’s true that they do not know much of war, for their home is a peaceful one, but you should not underestimate what a hobbit can do when threatened. I saw one of their females stand up to a wolf armed only with a piece of wood.”

Fili and Kíli’s eyes go even rounder. “Just with a stick?”

Thorin nods solemnly.

“Can you teach us that?” Kíli asks next.

Thorin shakes his head. “I’d rather you fight against wargs with real weapons, little one. See this?”

He draws his tunic aside a little to show them the new scar caused by a wolf claw. “Wolves are dangerous beasts.”

They both nod in understanding, but Fili can’t help but ask, “But can you teach us how to fight against them?”

“Now *that* I can do. We’ll incorporate it in your usual training sessions. It’s about time your training got a little more diverse.”

Before they can get too excited at the prospect, however, Thorin says, “You should clean up here. I know for a fact that Dís was heading this way earlier.”

Thorin suppresses an amused smile at the way they immediately spring into frantic action. And then he makes himself scarce for a while – he isn’t stupid and would rather not have Dís find out that he didn’t even really reprehend her sons for making such a mess.

Thorin isn't exactly surprised to find himself cornered by most of his erstwhile company on his third day back, but to say that he expected it would also be a lie. What's definitely not a surprise is Dwalin being at the front, with an almighty glower. In truth, Thorin had been somewhat wary not to have caught his friend's ire yet, so it's almost reassuring to see it being unleashed now.

"Talk," his friend demands brusquely.

Thorin raises his hands in supplication. "Calm down, Dwalin. What is the matter with you?"

"What's the matter? What's the matter he asks?" Thorin frowns, realising that he may have underestimated Dwalin's ire. "You left without a word to anyone, that's the matter! You were gone for months and no one even knew where!"

Thorin sighs. "It was necessary."

Dwalin looks like he's about to explode. Balin, in an effort to head off the imminent eruption, interrupts. "Why, Thorin? We feel that we have earned the right to know."

Thorin slumps a little. Balin has always been very good at making one feel guilty with a few words.

"Because you'd have tried to stop me. Or accompany me."

"Damn right we would have!" Glóin pipes up. "The King of Erebor can't just go gallivanting around the countryside without an escort!" Realising just how close he's coming to scolding his king, Glóin's face colours. "Begging your pardon, your majesty."

"I already told you to call me Thorin," Thorin sighs. "And this errand was something I had to do alone. It was both important and personal."

"Important enough to risk being caught on the road alone?" Dwalin asks darkly.

"Yes," Thorin replies simply and with the weight of conviction colouring his voice.

"Of all the hard-headed, stubborn –" Dwalin's words taper off into

angry muttering.

“What Dwalin is trying to say,” Bofur puts in, “is that we all feel that after what you told us it seemed wrong not to know where you were at least. You could’ve simply ordered us to stay behind and we would’ve obeyed. At least we’d have known.”

It warms his heart to see their regard – almost as it had been during their quest – but on this he will hold firm. “You might not have, Bofur,” he points out, “but Dwalin quite certainly would’ve snuck out after me and then I’d never have got rid of him again.”

“Thanks for that,” Dwalin grumbles, which is very much not a denial, possibly because Thorin is entirely accurate in his assessment.

Thorin looks at the group of dwarves assembled in front of him and knows that they do deserve better.

“Next time I will inform you first,” he promises quietly. “Though I don’t expect another such errand to be necessary.”

Balin smiles at him and pats his shoulder once. “Glad to hear it, lad-die.”

Dwalin’s still looking suspicious, but he too nods – Thorin has never lied to him after all – and the others fall in line after that.

“Hey,” Bofur says, a dangerous twinkle in his eyes, “have you had a welcome back feast yet?”

Enthusiastic approval meets his suggestion, and even if Thorin had been inclined to veto the idea, he certainly would’ve been swept along by the patented dwarven ‘use any excuse to drink and feast’ ethos. Even if he really just wants to sleep some more before dealing with the mountain of paperwork on his desk.

Chapter 32



The headache caused by this foul week shows little sign of abating. Especially not when Frerin enters Thorin's study with an uncommonly serious expression on his face, just after Thorin has gone over the preliminary plans of the settlement in the Iron Hills with Farat.

Thorin eyes him warily, keeping his peace as Frerin shuffles about in front of the desk for a while. His brother is fiddling with his belt buckle, and when he finally starts to speak everything comes out in a rush, "I've been thinking of leaving Erebor for a while. Travel."

Thorin stares at him.

"I've always wanted to see more of Middle-Earth," Frerin continues, looking even more nervous at Thorin's continued silence.

Thorin opens his mouth, then shuts it again. He has never even considered that Frerin might want to... Of course it had never been a possibility in his last life. For many years now Frerin has been able to surprise his older brother left and right, much to Thorin's delight. *This* however, Thorin had neither expected nor does he welcome the notion – the thought of letting Frerin go from his sight for so long is enough to make his heart sink right through his toes and into the roots of the mountain.

Thorin regards him carefully, first in an attempt to buy himself time, then because there's something to Frerin's stance. There's nervousness in his brother's bearing, yes, but beneath it all Thorin can find is determination. "You've already made up your mind haven't you?"

Frerin shrugs, scratching at his beard. "I've been thinking about it for a while."

"I wouldn't like to see you go," Thorin says carefully, selfishly.

Frerin's brows draw together, a mirror image of Thorin's own mulish expression, and in it he recognises a dwarf who has buried his pickaxe into stone and won't budge.

"You know as well as I do that I'm virtually useless here, Thorin. Let me go out into the world, perhaps I will find my calling there."

Thorin has never heard Frerin sound so serious and that alone would convince him that his brother is sincere in wishing this.

"I do not wish for you to go, nadad," he says quietly, "but if you truly believe this to be your path I won't stop you. Just please promise me to return occasionally that we may know you're well."

Frerin's grin is tinged with his usual humour. "I think I can manage that."

"Be careful. We've lost so many already."

Frerin nods and then draws Thorin into a rough hug. "You take care too, Thorin. I don't want to return to find that someone has assassinated you."

He raises a brow. "Why would someone want to assassinate me?"

"I don't know," Frerin grins, "but it *is* you we're talking about here..."

Thorin sighs, a long-suffering sound long perfected. "Hilarious."

Frerin is already nearly out the door when he calls, "Oh and Frerin? *You* can tell Dís and Fíli and Kíli that you're leaving."

Frerin's groan can probably be heard in half the mountain. "You're a cruel, cruel dwarf, brother."

But Thorin only sighs, the familiar spark of amusement at his brother's antics absent. "I may let you go, Frerin, because it is your choice and I would not hold you here against your will, but that does not mean that I am happy about it. Telling Dís is only what you deserve for the worry you'll put us through."

"You're hardly one to talk, Thor," Frerin points out dryly, but his expression has sobered. "I *have* thought about this at length, I promise. It is the right thing to do."

Thorin regards him for a moment, no little stunned at the depth

of conviction he finds lurking behind Frerin's eyes. Perhaps this is the right thing for him – never before has his brother thrown his full being behind an idea to this extent, save for protecting his kin, and that, to a dwarf, is as intrinsic as breathing, and if this is what it takes for Frerin to find that passion? Thorin won't stand in the way.

"I understand," he murmurs and Frerin relaxes into a smile again. "We'll hold a feast for your departure tomorrow, if you can wait that long."

"Of course, melhekel."

Thorin waves his hands, fond. "Now shoo. I've got work to do."

*

Dís... doesn't take it well. Oh, she nods and smiles and *doesn't* punch Frerin when he tells her, but something goes still in her expression in a way they haven't seen since Víli's death. After which, incidentally, she became even more protective of her close family than your average dwarf or, say, a mother bear protecting her cubs. Now Frerin is proposing to remove himself from under her watchful eye and Dís hasn't had two lives to learn how to let go like Thorin.

An overblown streak of protectiveness *has* always run in the line of Durin.

Fíli and Kíli aren't exactly happy either to wave their 'fun' uncle goodbye, but their eyes at least shine in shared excitement for the many adventures Frerin is bound to have on the road. Thorin foresees a few months of increasingly insistent wheedling for a trip of their own, but he doubts Dís will budge – certainly not until she's got more used to Frerin's absence.

It takes about a week until Thorin judges her ready to talk to him. When he searches her out in her quarters, he finds Dís sitting in front of a mirror, fiddling with the braids that denote her status as a princess of Durin's line.

"Namad," he greets quietly.

She acknowledges him with a tired nod, only accentuated by the

dark shadows under her eyes.

"You haven't been to many meals," Thorin says, careful to keep his tone neutral. "We're worried about you."

"I haven't been hungry." Her gaze drops to her fidgeting fingers. "All I can think of is Frerin teasing me about being a picky eater when I was young. Oh Thorin, how could you let him go? *How?*"

The anguish in her voice is near tangible and Thorin has to hold back a wince.

"Perhaps I have finally learned not to try and dictate everyone's lives," he observes mildly, but anger is still sparkling from Dís' eyes, so he puts all levity aside.

"He wanted to," Thorin says simply. "We both know he hasn't felt comfortable since I wintered in the Shire, and if leaving is what he needs to find himself? I cannot stand in his way, as King *or* brother." He looks at his little sister fondly for a moment. "How much did you yell at him?"

She smiled, watery. "A lot. It's just... after Víli it was all I could do to cling to this family and stay afloat. And then there was... your story, Thorin, it was so *dark*."

Thorin stays silent for a few long moments, eyes fixed on the wall. Then he says quietly, "I never wanted to tell you, or anyone really. I knew it would just lead to unnecessary pain and doubt. But you wouldn't stop asking, wouldn't stop *noticing* things, and I was damaging myself with my silence, too torn between past and present to give you all the care you deserve." He stretches out a hand towards her, a silent plea. "So I told you. But I never meant for it to make you fear, *namadith*."

Perhaps it shouldn't still be a relief after all these years when she takes his hand in her smaller one, solid and real, but Thorin is grateful nonetheless.

"Did you ever regret having this second life?" Dís asks, her eyes boring into Thorin's, demanding nothing but honesty.

"No," he says without hesitation. "I have wished for many things in

my lives, some more impossible than others, but I have never wished I hadn't woken up again." He smiles at her, with all the love he feels. "Seeing you and Frerin again alone would have made it worthwhile."

Dís chokes back a sob, and then she's sitting next to him, leaning into his shoulder as if searching for warmth. He puts his arm around her and draws her close.

"Do you think Frerin will come back?"

He sighs into her silken hair. "I don't know, namadith, I can only hope. Our brother is strong and smart, he will do his best to survive."

She nods against his shoulder, not reassured perhaps, but calmer, and they stay leaning against each other until Dís finally succumbs to much-needed slumber. Thorin draws a blanket over her still form and kisses her brow before leaving her in peace. The worst of the wound that their brother's leaving has opened has been drained.

*

With Dís asleep, Thorin sets out in search of Balin, determined to settle the next item on his agenda. He finds his old friend in the library – not much of a surprise – with Ori – a little bit of a surprise, but then Thorin dimly remembers the young dwarf having been studying to become a scribe at the time of the Quest and puts his surprise aside. Balin takes one look at the set of Thorin's face and sends Ori away with a smile and a pat on the shoulder that Thorin echoes. Dori and Nori aren't the only ones with a soft spot for the shy dwarfling.

Thorin sinks into the chair that Ori abandoned with a quiet sigh.

"Dís?" Balin queries, eyes glittering knowingly.

Thorin nods. "She sleeps now."

"Good. We were all getting a little worried. I wonder whether Frerin quite thought this plan of his through."

"I think he did," Thorin admits quietly. "He may be a bit brash sometimes, but Frerin knows how big a decision this is."

Balin inclines his head, accepting Thorin's opinion on the subject. Before his advisor can say anything else, Thorin continues, "Can you

arrange for me to be away for a week in a few days, Balin?"

Balin raises a bushy white brow. "The Council usually deals with requests like this from the King."

"The Council would've said no," Thorin points out through gritted teeth. "They're still upset with me for leaving for such a long time when I went to the Shire."

Balin makes a noise that coming from any other dwarf would've been a snort. "Dwarves do have a long memory." He regards Thorin with serious eyes. "Is this because of Frerin?"

To Balin, Thorin has always been predictable, so he doesn't even try to deny it. "I want to take the boys out for a trip." He scratches his head just below where the crown rests, a nervous habit that's been coming on for years now. He hates the heavy Raven crown that he's required to wear for any official events. It's heavy and sits on his head like a vice, and that's disregarding the less than pleasant memories he still associated with the damned thing. Even when he wears the lighter one that was made specifically for him, he often experiences a phantom itch. "I'm not spending enough time with them."

Balin, equally as predictable as Thorin, softens. "You're a good uncle to them, Thorin. They understand that as the King your time is limited."

Thorin sighs and lets his hand drop back to the desk. "And I *am* grateful, but that doesn't make it right. They're my blood, Balin."

He can see the exact moment when Balin gives in, an almost noiseless sigh escaping the other dwarf.

"Very well then. I will sort out your affairs for a week."

Thorin is around the desk in three quick strides and grasps Balin's arm like they used to all the time. Their foreheads touch in a gentler tap than the imitation of two boulders crashing together that Balin and Dwalin usually execute, but he knows his smile and the warmth in his voice will tell Balin all that he needs to know.

"Thank you, bāhāl."

Balin pats his arm. "Don't think on it, laddie. The princes will be

thrilled to spend more time with you.”

*

Breaking the news to Fíli and Kíli leads to predictable but still heart-warming broad beams and excited babbling.

“We won’t go very far from Erebor,” Thorin warns, but the tide of enthusiasm can’t be stemmed at this point.

“Are we going to go to Dale – ” Kíli begins,

“ – or north or south – ” Fíli continues,

“ – or west?” Kíli finishes, the whole exchange a seamless flow of words between the two brothers.

Thorin can’t help but chuckle. “We’ll go into the woods along the northern slope.”

Kíli’s beam, impossibly, gets wider. “Will there be hunting? Can I bring my bow?”

“And fishing?” Fíli chimes in. “And gathering berries?”

“Yes, we can hunt and fish, and yes you should bring your bow Kíli,” Thorin answered patiently. “I don’t think most berries are in season, Fíli, but we’ll do our best.”

Fíli has an incurable sweet tooth, especially for the blueberries that grow on the slopes in early autumn, and not even Kíli’s teasing that he might as well be an *elf* with such preferences has dissuaded him so far.

It takes him a while to persuade the two balls of energy to go to bed at the usual time – it was a bit of a strategic error to make this announcement just before bed time, Thorin now realises – but once they’re both fast asleep Thorin is free to start making arrangements for their trip.

Thorin catches Kíli alone first, when Fíli is out gathering wood for their small fire.

“Why didn’t you tell Frerin to stay?” Kíli asks, before Thorin can even broach the subject.

He smiles ruefully – neither of his nephews lacks the smartness to

realise why he suddenly made time for this little expedition now.

“It wasn’t my right.”

“You’re the *King*.”

Thorin’s lip curls wryly. “And yet I do not dictate my every subject’s movement. As a brother, I could plead with him not to go, but I wouldn’t deny him his heart’s wish.”

“But *we’re* here,” Kíli says, a lost note echoing in his voice.

“Family is the most important thing a dwarf can have,” Thorin nods, leaning closer. “But it isn’t always enough. Frerin never found his craft, and while he loves us all very much, he needs to find *himself* before he can return for good.”

Kíli chews on his lower lip, thinking this through. “But he *will* return?”

Thorin opens his mouth to utter an emphatic *yes*, and hesitates. “I think his heart will eventually lead him home, yes,” he finally murmurs. *If he’s still alive to follow it.* Thorin knows better than most how dangerous the roads are, and will become. The shadow would not spare Frerin, a lone dwarf in the wilderness of Middle-earth. He can only hope. “But when, or under what circumstances I cannot say. It might be a long time from now.”

Kíli nods, messy braids swinging. After a moment he says, “It hit Fíli harder than me, I think.”

“I’ll talk to Fíli as well,” Thorin agrees. Kíli knows his brother better than anyone else in the world – if he says Fíli is sorrowing, then it is a certainty. Dís once commented that she found it strange that Thorin had gravitated towards Kíli, the young carefree one, and Frerin towards Fíli, the older calmer one, but it had always made perfect sense to Thorin. He adores both his nephews equally, but Fíli doesn’t need him to amplify his already sometimes startling severity, much like Kíli doesn’t need Frerin encouraging him to be even more mischievous. This way, balance is found.

Thorin comes back to himself to find Kíli gazing at him with serious eyes, head cocked, but then the moment passes and a smile flits over

his nephews face as he suddenly changes the topic with the startling alacrity of youth. "I can't wait till you'll let me go on adventures."

Thorin wonders where he went so wrong to have made adventures sound like something one should aspire to, instead of the occasional necessity to be avoided. They've never served the dwarves well, have adventures.

"Wait till you're old enough to grow a real beard, hmm, little one?" he says lightly, brushing Kíli's sparsely bristled cheek with a gentle knuckle.

Kíli giggles, squirming away from his touch. "It won't ever be as long as yours, Uncle."

Thorin thinks of the decades he spent with a beard almost shorn to the skin, and only shrugs. For a long time he didn't know how long his beard might grow, for it had never been given the chance in his last life. Now, he has found, that the thick hair on his chin with its rare streaks of silver lighting the black tends towards a low middling length as far as dwarf beards go – respectable, certainly, but not magnificent by any means – and he is entirely happy for it, no matter how undwarfish the notion. It had been hard enough to get used to a beard of actual weight, one as full and long as Glóin's would've proved impractical.

"I wouldn't be so sure about that, azyungal," he finally says. "Though certainly, if you continue to specialise in archery you might never grow a beard a like Uncle Balin."

"I hadn't thought of that," Kíli murmurs, faintly startled.

Thorin smiles, poking at Kíli's cheek once more. "Well, it hasn't been a concern yet. You have some time yet to decide."

With a nimble scoot Kíli moves close enough to lean against Thorin's side, a warm weight against the evening's chill. "But you'll be there, Uncle, right? You won't leave like Uncle Frerin?"

Thorin tugs him closer with his free arm, until Kíli rests comfortable below his shoulder. "I'll be there," he swears quietly, looks at the earth to send his promise into the very rock of the land, and then, after only a heartbeat's worth of hesitation, looks up into the sky and sends

his promise to the stars too.

*

They spent the next few days pleasantly engaged trawling the woods for game, playfighting and telling stories far into the night. They even find some early forest strawberries, much to Fíli's delight.

Kíli is off hunting game for their evening meal, leaving Thorin free to look engage Fíli in conversation.

"You're almost grown, my little lion," is what comes out, impossibly fond – and he realises that perhaps he's feeling a bit more maudlin than usual.

Fíli looks up from where he's stoking the fire, looking surprised and pleased all at once. Thorin doesn't always call him that, but he knows that his older nephew adores the endearment whenever it does pass his lips.

"Not quite yet, Uncle," he returns. Where most young dwarrows are impatient to grow up, Fíli seems content to let time pass in its usual manners – Thorin certainly wasn't as wise at his age.

"And I'm quite selfishly glad for it," Thorin admits. "Soon enough you'll be clamouring to leave too, and that's always hard. Your mother, too, appreciates your presence more than she can say."

Fíli nods, a gleam of gold in dusk. "Do you know why Uncle Frerin wanted to leave? It didn't have anything to do with us, did it?"

"No, of course not," Thorin immediately says, startled that Fíli would even entertain such a ridiculous notion. "You know Frerin adores you. No, if anything I pushed him into leaving, if accidentally." He pauses, sorting through his thoughts. "I think being pushed into kingship for a while disturbed him more than I realised at the time. He was very unhappy in those months, and he fears having to do it again. And your uncle hasn't found his craft yet, to soothe his heart when he's upset, nor has he found his One."

"But wouldn't his One be in Erebor?" Fíli asks, eyes wide.

Thorin shakes his head. "Not necessarily. As you know, mine isn't.

Besides I think that is only a secondary motivation for Frerin. I just meant that there's no One here to keep him at home. As much as we all love him, it's not quite the same."

Fíli's face pulls into a dubious frown, but he is young yet, probably still has years before he meets his own One if his heart is so inclined. He'll understand one day.

Later, wrapped into bedrolls, Fíli whispers from his right while Kíli continues to snore peacefully on his right, "Do you think adad would be proud of me?"

Thorin smiles up into the dark sky lit by stars. "I know he would, little lion. I certainly am."

On their last morning Thorin is woken by enthusiastic hands shaking his shoulder where it peeks out of his bedroll.

"Wake up, Uncle Thorin! We need to get going!"

Thorin futilely attempts to rub the sleepiness from his eyes – the first rays of sunlight have barely even crested the Misty Mountains – and grumbles, "Why the sudden hurry?"

"We need to be back for dinner!" Kíli tells him loudly. "Bombur invited us, or have you forgotten? And he makes the best food!"

Thorin had, in fact, forgotten Bombur's invitation for a group meal when they returned.

"Knowing Bombur he probably invited the whole company," he says, mostly to himself, but Fíli and Kíli beam in agreement.

"Don't worry Uncle, Bombur always makes enough food for everyone!"

That Thorin can't argue with, and so he lets himself be dragged along behind his two whirlwinds of a nephew and prepares himself for an evening of chatter and warm feelings.

*

He is standing on the ramparts, quiet safe for a few guards standing at either end at a respectful distance, looking out over the valley and

the great gate with a stiff breeze ruffling his braids when a squeaky sort of noise draws his gaze to the pillar near the steps. A young dwarf meets his gaze, frozen in mid-step and looking entirely mortified. He looks vaguely familiar, stocky and red-haired and sporting a fairly sizeable beard already, something familiar about his nose and eyes.

Thorin draws in a startled breath when he places the lad as Glóin's son, Gimli.

A stab of shame crawls behind his eyes – he's been neglectful, so focused on his company of old that he'd entirely failed to take notice of the new generation growing into fine dwarrows. He has little more than one or two hazy memories of a young fire-topped dwarfling in Ered Luin, begging to be allowed to come on the quest. The Gimli he sees now is young and confident and clearly not a dwarfling anymore. He's also looking at Thorin with an unwarranted amount of awe shining from his eyes.

In this life he has caught the occasional glimpse of Glóin and Gimhala's son, but he'd often been away in the Blue Mountains with his parents, following Glóin's capacity as an ambassador. He dimly remembers something about promising axemanship but little more.

"Well met, Gimli Gloinul," Thorin says, with just the right amount of graveness not to sound forbidding but still lend the proceedings a sense of gravity.

"Melekh," Gimli returns, almost shy, and he bows deep enough that Thorin can't help but wince in sympathy for the young dwarf's back.

"What has brought you to the ramparts today?"

Gimli looks startled, as if he expected Thorin to greet him and then not make any effort at conversation. "I like the open air sometimes," he says hesitantly, no doubt aware that it's a bit of an undwarvish answer.

Thorin nods, eyes flickering back over the long valley gently sloping down towards the Long Lake. "You are quite used to travelling, are you not?"

"Yes, my lord."

“There’s no shame in it,” Thorin says, rather gently. “Tell me, how does your apprenticeship to the axe fare?”

A bright smile spreads over Gimli’s face, filled with an enthusiasm barely matched in intensity by the firebrand of hair atop his head, and Thorin listens to his stories of training and admiration of Mister Dwalin’s skill with gladness.

Thus Gimli, son of Glóin, all of 50 years old, presents Thorin with another lesson he should’ve learned long ago (though he feels that his unique situation excuses some of his stubbornness in this) – the past may be instructive in shaping the future, but it is still the future one must look to first and foremost. It has taken many years and many doubts, but Thorin can finally see an Erebor that shines bright enough to weather even the grimmest darkness that fate may have in store.

Epilogue



It has been pointed out to him by several individuals (Gandalf, Balin, Frerin, Darla, and Gandalf *again*) that perhaps he should make plans to come clean about his strange fate – if not now, then as a precaution for the future.

Thorin takes their point, and starts writing down everything he remembers from his first life that hasn't come to pass yet. It would be a help, he hopes, if something were to happen to him. He does not, however, plan to tell any more people about his first life than already know. Several *elves* know for Mahal's sake.

He can already hear the whispers of *Twice-born* replacing *Dragonslayer* and it would be in no way more palatable. He reasons that everyone who needs to know does – or at least he has told Gandalf all the details he can remember and if there's anyone Thorin would trust beside himself to set the future right, the old wizard is certainly near the top of the list of candidates.

Perhaps he's just tired of people poking into his private business. Still, the pile of parchments filled with his tale grows thicker and thicker, and when he finally hands the bundle to Dís, she takes one look at the first page and gasps quietly. She sets it aside gently and without a word embraces him with all the strength of a dwarrowdam who spends as much time in the forges as she does in the training yards.

"If only we all had your bravery, nadad," she whispers, and draws back to pierce his soul with blue-crystal eyes. "This tale will pass into legend one day, mark my words."

By Mahal, Thorin hopes not. He's got all the notoriety he could possibly need and more already. But then no one's ever asked him if he *wanted* to be talked about, so there isn't much he can do about it ei-

ther way. So he hugs her back and for a few precious seconds manages to set the future aside.

Darla is the first to slip away, quiet and peaceful in the night, an old dwarrowdam. Few eyes are dry when they consign her to the stone, and not even Dori objects when Nori gets Ori rip-roaring drunk that evening and they all end up blubbering in each other's arms in shared grief.

Thorin watches them with a quiet tangle of sorrow settling behind his heart and he can't help but think that this is the beginning of the end. He has done his best to keep them all safe with his knowledge, but some things even hard-won wisdom cannot halt. Ultimately, he is as powerless as everyone else against the promise of death that their Maker has laid on all dwarves.

Taking slow sips of the single tankard of ale he's been nursing for the evening, Thorin's mind wanders.

Orcs are still amassing. The year of their quest grows closer, and more and more often he finds himself wondering if the battle at its end would still take place, even with Erebor strong and the dragon long defeated.

Very occasionally a raven arrives with small pieces of parchment filled with Frerin's barely legible scrawl, reassuring them of his continued state of living. Apparently he has run into some rangers of the north in Tharbad, and is enjoying their company immensely. Even more occasionally Frerin finds his way back to the mountain, usually leaving again a few months later. They get used to that too, are glad even for the short visits. It seems that Thorin's little brother has found his craft after all, and if travelling to far off places is what he wishes, no one will stand in his way.

(More concerning is that Frerin seems to have run into the sons of Elrond when making his way through Eriador, and appears to have got

on with them smashingly. Even the notion of those three trouble makers in one place makes Thorin's head spin.)

The latest missive from Rivendell corroborates the story. There has always been some measure of communication between most realms (*politics*), but these days Lord Elrond deems it necessary to inform Thorin – with all the long-suffering forbearance of a parent – of the current tally in his sons' prank war with Glorfindel, and the Lady Galadriel regularly assures him that the last resting place of the dwarves fallen in the Battle of Azanulbizar is still peaceful and untouched.

Thorin can't say that he minds the change. The letters are certainly more interesting to read now, and even Thranduil's missives sound less dismissive and cold than they used to.

Bard, now a grown man, tall and dark-haired and steel-eyed, comes on his first official visit to the mountain, less dour than Thorin has ever known him before. *Unofficially* he's visited several times already (and got into more than one scrap with Kíli over their respective archery prowess) and doesn't have to pretend not to be intimidated by the glittery splendour that is Erebor when it flourishes.

Not long after, Legolas Thranduillion arranges a state visit, ostensibly to talk about existing trade agreements between the mountain and the Greenwood (which, Thorin can't help but point out in the privacy of his own mind, is starting to look more and more like Mirkwood these days), but Thorin gets the impression that the Prince is somewhat curious about Erebor and dwarves in general – a curiosity that wasn't sated on his few, shorter previous visits. Thorin is one of the few unsurprised when they find Legolas buried under a troupe of dwarflings a week into his stay. (Then again, he's had some forewarning now, that elves have a fondness for the young that rivals the dwarves' own.)

Much like Frerin Gandalf flits in and out of their lives in what the

wizard adamantly refuses to call ‘checking up’ on Erebor and Thorin half irritably, half fondly calls ‘making certain that his meddling is bearing fruit’.

“You have come a long way,” Gandalf remarks on one of these visits, puffing on his pipe contentedly. After a day of meetings, Thorin had suggested a retreat to the little hollow that guards the secret door, and Gandalf had acquiesced readily.

The wizard is looking at the newly paved road towards Dale, not at Thorin, but he feels dissected nonetheless. He wants to bristle – whilst Gandalf may be the person whom he told the most about his last life, even he was not there and should not judge quite so readily.

In the end Thorin only sighs. “Life has a way of shooin’ us all along.”

Gandalf raises a bushy eyebrow. “And yet from what you told me it seems you were never very inclined to let yourself be shooed.”

“Even the rock is worn away by a trickle of water, in time,” he says, and Gandalf laughs, for even the wise cannot argue with that.

Thorin Dragonslayer, once Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain is exactly 195 years old in this life when Bilbo Baggins appears at the gates of his kingdom with a wizard in tow, a shy smile on his face, a ring hidden in his pocket next to a token shining with green fire, and the promise of a shifting future.

*

Don't say

'We've come now to the end'

White shores are calling

You and I will meet again

Appendix

Khuzdul translation

adad - father

amad - mother

azaghâl - warrior

bâhâl - befriender

baruf - family gabil

lukhudel - great light of (all) lights

ghivashith - treasure that is young

bôfuk kurûdaz - joy of hearts (cobbled together by me)

indad - lesser brother

inûdoy - son

kurdîth - (the) hearts that are young

khuzd - dwarf

lukhudel - light of (all) lights

lukhudûn - light-man

melbekhel - king of (all) kings

meragel - feast of (all) feasts

mizimîth - jewel that is young, pl.mizimîth

murkhûn - literally 'shield-man', meant as shield-brother with the added pun of Oakenshield

nadad - brother

nadadaz'amad - uncle (literally: brother of mother)

nâbûn - point-man

namad - sister

namadith - little sister

nidoy - boy

nûrayad - second heir

rayad - heir

udad - greater father

umgil - old

undad - greater brother

zabadûn - lord man

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